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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE SON'S RETURN

by

Gary Charles Wilkens

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

THE SON'S RETURN

by Gary Charles Wilkens

May 2010

This dissertation is a collection of poems accompanied by a critical preface.



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2010



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## INTRODUCTION

These poems are about the life and thoughts of a semi-autobiographical character, known only as The Son. He is a male of about my age and race and make up, and the shape of his life follows in many particulars the shape of mine. Not everything he thinks and feels is what I think and feel, as he frequently tries things out that neither of us would ultimately accept. The influence of Jungian psychology on these poems is profound, as will be clear later, and the Son is in some ways my Shadow. Tellingly, Jung saw the Shadow as both the seat of dark urges and of creativity, and the story of the Son is presented as *his* poetic reflections on his experiences, rather than as straight narrative.

These poems detail his upbringing, his relationships to women, the death of a male friend, and his final reflections. A salient fact about the Son, and perhaps the major theme of the volume, aside from autobiography, is that he perceives his life as having been crucially influenced, in ways good and bad, by women, from his mother to lovers to female friends to women he has only heard of or imagined. Thus, a major theme of the book is the relationship between men and women: what interactions they have, how they influence each other, and what understanding of the other each can achieve. Along the way, the Son deals with death and faces his fate, and tries to do both as a “man.”

The poems at hand were written over the course of many years, and for most of that period I did not know that I was writing about a single specific character who was a reflection of myself. This explains why no “The Son” is mentioned in the text outside of the titles, unlike how “Henry” frequently appears in the *Dream Songs*. I do not, however, believe that the Son is an ad hoc creation made up to organize a volume of disparate poems. He is rather a realization of what I did not notice before. For the longest time I was convinced that my poems were not at all personal. It turns out that here and there I

was writing personal poems, and *The Son's Return* is simply the collection and loosely narrative arrangement of them. Also, the poems diverge in how they treat their story: some are the Son speaking, some are narrated or imagined by him, some include a form of him, others do not. The Son, like his creator, is a poet, and these poems are collaborations between us. He is myself, slanted.

The title was inspired by “Return of the Son of Nothing,” the third of three working titles for the song that become “Echoes,” on the Pink Floyd album *Meddle*, released in 1971. While the song was being collectively written by the band, its stages were first called “Nothing,” then “Son of Nothing,” and finally “Return of the Son of Nothing.” The title is suited to my character because a very important fact about him is that he is a *son*: the relationship between him and his mother and the lasting effects it has on him are the center of the book. The book is his *return* because slowly, painfully, he reconciles to the losses in his life and returns to being himself, returns to a sense of origin or belonging. Thus, the book is the return of a son of nothing to being the son of something, or at least the promise of being such.

The Son is not Gary Charles Wilkens. While the parallels between our lives are many and important, there are many differences. For example, I am still happily married, whereas the Son is not. Perhaps I am trying to get the benefits of a poetic alter ego, while avoiding the pitfalls, but here again I follow my mentor John Berryman. The story of the Son is divided into four sections, each with title and subtitle, which are mostly functional.

“False Start” records the poverty, neglect and difficult maternal relationship of the Son’s early to middle childhood. Its emphasis is on the conflicting feelings he has about his mother: love of her as a mother coupled with shame and anger at her alcoholism, neglect and promiscuity. These are dealt with most directly in “Edit the Sad Parts.” A

positive figure of motherhood is treated in “Grandmother,” which deals with his great-grandmother, but she passes away long before he reaches adulthood. For the second time a mother figure leaves him, and as the poems imply, no real father figure was ever present. Also featured in this section are his earliest experiences with romantic and sexual love. The last important aspect of these poems is the son’s search for masculinity and a male role model, seen in his portrayal of Dan, his mother’s other men, and the man who abandons his naked pictures in the poem of that title.

As the first section establishes that women will be of central importance in the Son’s life, “Anima” explores his relationship to them as he gets older, his late teens and twenties. In Jungian psychology, the “anima” is a man’s inner feminine personality, and the poems in this section chart the development of the Son’s understanding of and feelings towards women, which were already complicated by his childhood. From “Cello Maker’s Wife” to “Autumn Songs” he is in love, and the relationship is happy. In “Joaquin’s Guitar” through “Take Your Passion and Make it Happen,” the Son sees women on their own terms, rather than as purely romantic or sexual targets. From “The Five Senses” to “Love Light” his relationship is rocky yet still passionate. From “Desperate Man Blues” to “Poem on a Line by Rilke,” the relationship comes to an unpleasant but mutual end, leaving the son bitter. He has a less idealized view of women’s character, which he perhaps realizes is his own fault. He is not literally in the pen for murder, but feels like it.

In “Mister Death Meets His Brown-Eyed Boy” an old male friend of the Son’s commits suicide, which the Son in his usual way imagines and describes. The Son goes to his funeral, and when he returns he is thinking once again about what it means to be male. The fourth section, “The Son Sees It All Laid Out,” is the least narrative of the

parts, and represents the Son's reflections and a sort of consolidation of and coming to terms with his memories. The Son's thoughts move from the world to others and slowly back to himself. He finally reflects on the dubious male role models he met when living with his mother as a young teen in a Salvation Army Shelter, and in the final poem the Son reaches something of a reconciliation with the memory of his mother.

There are three principle poetic sources for this collection: William Carlos Williams, John Berryman, and Philip Larkin. Each has in his own way shaped the prosody and/or mindset of these poems. Many of these poems are in a Williamsesque free verse: short, free lines, centered on image and brief metaphor, and lyric narrative in structure. John Berryman's biggest influence on these poems comes from his creation of a poetic alter ego in Henry from the *Dream Songs*, and also from his adaptations of traditional forms. Philip Larkin's influence is felt in those poems characterized by tight construction and/or a biting wit.

In Williams' poem "The Young Housewife" he depicts himself, or some male figure, observing or imagining he observes a young woman in her house as he drives by. The tone is partly gentle, and partly menacing:

AT ten A.M. the young housewife  
moves about in negligee behind  
the wooden walls of her husband's house.

I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in

stray ends of hair, and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf. (1-9)

Something of the tone and movement of this poem are captured in my poem “Naked Pictures,” in which children (probably boys) discover pictures of naked women from men’s magazines in the creek of a local park, and imagine the circumstances under which they got there:

We didn’t know who had tossed  
their fantasies to the water, let long legs  
leisurely sink to the smooth bed rocks.  
We imagined an older man with a mustache,  
caught by his girlfriend smuggling boobs.

He stood on the swinging bridge, letting  
dollops of pink flesh splash into the current,  
his eye kissing dark mystery triangles  
*goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.*

In both poems sexuality is approached obliquely, across a gap the speaker cannot, should not cross. In both poems the female is distant, hidden, behind some male power, though in mine the female has asserted herself and put limits of her own on sexuality. The girlfriend and the women in the pictures are both sexually inaccessible, at least in part, to the man, who is himself a figment of the imagination of a young male. The style of these poems is very similar, employing free verse, short lines, and careful line breaks: we both tend to break between noun clauses and verb clauses, as in his “housewife / moves” and my “legs / leisurely sink.” Breaking the line this way pushes the reader’s eye on the next

line because our trained habit when reading is to seek grammatical completeness, and when we don't see it on one line we are *driven* onto the next one to complete the phrase. Both poems tell a very brief story while remaining personal expressions, or lyric narratives. In both theme and style, I am a close disciple of Williams.

Though I often follow Williams in form, I frequently follow Berryman in voice. My poem "Grandmother" is one of the closest approaches in the volume to the Son speaking directly, albeit in this case to his deceased grandmother, who, in the frequent absences of his mother when he was young, helped significantly to raise him. His voice here takes much, I think, from Berryman's Henry, though the Son has no friend to helpfully admonish him:

When you died I didn't go crazy  
as I had convinced myself I would.  
Your burdened body thick and white  
in the eternal sunshine of hospital  
rooms, the implacable violet  
of flowers, my Marmaduke get-  
well card. Stomach cancer like  
an evil Pac-Man was eating  
you inside out, and still your love  
was like a vice on my chest.

Compare to Berryman's Dream Song 29:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart  
so heavy, if he had a hundred years  
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time



Henry could not make good.

Starts again always in Henry's ears

the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime. (1-6)

Though my language is plainer and more straightforward, my speaker's loss more specific, both speakers are weary and heavy-hearted, burdened by loss. Both are beyond tears. Berryman adapted the sonnet form, and like him I frequently change the shape or intent of forms, as in my "Razorback Mobile Home Park," wherein the skeltonic form is used to create a dissonance between the light, bouncy rhythm and the horrific subject matter. I do not imitate Berryman's specific use of form, but I do adapt forms in my own ways, inspired by his alterations.

In other poems, however, I stay very close to the form, the best examples being my Dan Trilogy of two sestinas and a tritina. In these poems I am following most closely Philip Larkin, who used tight forms and rhyme to devastating effect, as in his very famous "This Be the Verse":

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you. (1-4)

I don't employ Larkin's iambic tetrameter and alternating rhyme, but I do use strict hendecasyllabics and the sestina form in "Edit the Sad Parts":

*Texas Sam's* was the home bar for all the sad

losers and sad loser lovers in the state.

It was in Oklahoma, Sam was from Maine.

He was never one to let things bother him,

and had won *Sam's* in a bet like Han Solo.

He drank whenever he had time to spare, oh

about every day. For women like Sparrow

Meadowlark, *Sam's* was a refuge less sad

than home. She was raising four young kids solo,

aside from boyfriends and money from the state.

Dan was a father, but she didn't tell him.

This poem can be seen as my elaboration on how your mum and dad (or lack thereof) fuck you up. I find that tight form lends itself well to cutting wit and humor, and you see these in both my poems and his. Humor with a strong undertone of sorrow and an appreciation for the power of strict form are what I take from Larkin.

I have no discipline. I have no set time to write, no specific place to be in or certain materials I need to have when I write, other than almost always writing solely on a computer. I am not a heavy or frequent reviser, and do not make special efforts to keep old drafts. That said, I do keep what I write in a very large Word file on my computer, which contains most of the poems I have written since 1998, as I do not delete final drafts. I have no rituals or habits involving writing that I can think of, as my poems usually come to me unbidden and at very random times. Very often I have gotten up after midnight to write a poem that has come to me, and they usually come as one to three lines, which I record however I can (the most unusual place was the inside of a box of Arby's french fries).

When I get lines I immediately try to finish the complete poem, and often the rest of it quickly follows. I usually do the heaviest editing then, looking for tightness of lines,

economy of expression, and possible sentimentality. I also ask the poem what form, if any, it wants to be in. I believe that poems suggest their forms, and that certain types of inspiration are best written into forms. I speak specifically of poems with personal or difficult subject matter, which would be difficult to write without the discipline imposed by the requirements of form. When I write about my mother's leaving or other painful memories, I prefer to use the sestina form, because its length, complexity and difficulty act as oven mitts for the hot subject matter. When the subject is happier and freer, as in a poem about love or sex, free verse captures the mood better. I usually make such decisions soon after I have written the basic text of the poem, and then adjust it accordingly. My process then is let a poem set for a quite a while before changing it, and sometimes only do so in response to suggestions given in workshop or many years later, as my style and aesthetics have changed.

## I. FALSE START

## Recollections of Childhood

Paper plates and plastic forks  
can eat the pork and beans for you.  
You won't be needed.  
If you get a hotdog give it  
to the Kool-Aid.

The girl's bike is ok alone.  
There are other kids  
in the trailer park to ride it.  
You don't have to worry  
about the stray cats.

If you go missing  
it will be no great loss.  
Your mother may even  
stay home one more night.

When the kids play in twilight  
they won't miss you.  
The gnats will give them  
the usual race as the sun  
melts into the black trees.

## Naked Pictures

In the neighborhood creek  
we'd find them, sodden sex torn  
from *Playboy* or *Hustler*, littering  
the concrete chunks and car parts  
like forsaken wedding rice.

We didn't know who had tossed  
their fantasies to the water, let long legs  
leisurely sink to the smooth bed rocks.  
We imagined an man with a mustache,  
caught by his girlfriend smuggling boobs.

He stood on the swinging bridge, letting  
dollops of pink flesh splash into the current,  
his eye kissing dark mystery triangles  
*goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.*

## Ugly Girl

Being ugly myself I was paired  
by social laws of the fifth grade  
with the ugliest girl, and soon  
word was we were lovers. She  
had gray hair, and some skin  
disease that put flaky blotches  
on her face. Other than that  
she wasn't unattractive. Neither  
was I, save for running to fat.

I don't know her name, I'll call  
her Rosamunde. Rosamunde  
and I got on alright. She was  
a huge fan of sliding, and every  
day we'd be chased by the popular  
kids til they got bored, or girls would  
tease her about kissing me or guys  
would choose me for flag and make  
it tackle. Rosamunde and I met  
by the slide and we'd go down  
over and over, laughing. She was

patient, Rosamunde was. She would  
stay until the bell if I did not show,  
and if they were harder on me than  
usual she'd approach and make them  
leave to avoid her. Sometimes I could  
return the favor with the girls. Rosamunde  
looked at me and we knew. We ran fast  
back to that tall silver slide and down  
and down we'd go, til that damn bell rang.

## Razorback Mobile Home Park

The trailer had one window in back,  
a black square never open a crack.  
On a sunny day after playing  
I listened to what you were saying  
to your mother, your girl's voice squeaking.

Then there was no more speaking  
as she threw you by your hair  
around the room, your legs bare,  
singing with the belt's loud snap  
as you begged under the strap,  
but it goes on, slap and squeal,

and I hope that finally she'll  
cut off your giving flesh and silence  
the window's dark eloquence.



## The Poet's Mother and a Kerosene Heater

A small victory, having a heater  
on a December night in the hallway  
between our rooms, made even sweeter  
coming free from the Salvation Army.

Bending over the wick, kids in her face,  
she stares at the match. I stand in my room,  
silent as she moves and fire finds its place.  
A suck of air, her arms cook in the boom.

Skin burning and bubbling she pushes the  
kids out of the hot slap. They yell, it's over  
and her blisters fill with water like fat gems.  
Sitting on her ass on the floor, the stove

still glowing red. She cries and looks at me.  
I cannot, hard as I try, remember  
what I did to help her, to sap the sting.  
It was one of many nights in December.

## Canned Heat

Led Zeppelin quaking his old speakers, Dan  
 stomps the gas pedal and swallows the pill.  
 He isn't sorry. Only punks are sorry.  
 Dan is determined. He puts no store by luck.  
 Fully aware that when the time comes they'd nail  
 his nuts to a fender, he steels himself so

he doesn't piss his leather pants. He'd drank so  
 much Sterno he doesn't know his name is "Dan"—  
 it isn't, just made up when trying to nail  
 this chick at *Texas Sam's*. Being on the pill,  
 she'd decided Dan was the best lay her luck  
 would get her. Afterwards, she wasn't sorry.

Dan is on the run from a bunch of sorry  
 bastards who had *not* been lucky with him, so  
 his wheels lick up asphalt. Having had no luck  
 calling in favors, there was no choice for Dan  
 but to drive, making his fists into pillows.  
 His mind runs like a faucet but can not nail

down the cause of his woe. It hit like a nail-  
 gun: Dan loved to lose. Truth grins, not sorry.  
 Weeping, he welcomes the whispers of the pill.  
 Playing marbles as a kid or buying so  
 much Dotcom stock in 99, loss was for Dan  
 what the blood jet was for Plath, his Lady Luck.

He stays on the highway, a damn loser's luck,  
 preventing little failures only to nail  
 you with the big ones. Like shoving a fourth dan  
 in judo. Like not saying you were sorry  
 for leaving. Like taking cash from mobsters so  
 you can pay other mobsters. He grabs his pill

box and rattles a few more of the red pills  
 into his throat. He thinks this is his lucky  
 night: alone under a black sky strewn with so  
 many stars, none of whom wanted to nail  
 his nuts. Cold, glinty, nothing to be sorry  
 about, stars were pretty much the anti-Dan.

Dan swears at them as he sizzles with pills.

Of all the sorry goddamn worthless luck.  
Nailed to his losing, Dan drives so forth and so—

## Edit the Sad Parts

*Texas Sam's* was the home bar for all the sad losers and sad loser lovers in the state. It was in Oklahoma, Sam was from Maine. He was never one to let things bother him, and had won *Sam's* in a bet like Han Solo. He drank whenever he had time to spare, oh

about every day. For women like Sparrow Meadowlark, *Sam's* was a refuge less sad than home. She was raising four young kids solo, aside from boyfriends and money from the state. Dan was a father, but she didn't tell him. Forgetting her kids for a night was her main

reason for coming here, and reason to remain. She drank liquor and no eye was on Sparrow. If a man hit on her she would give to him what he wanted in the back of his truck. Sad afterwards, he'd offer her money. To state her point she'd refuse and go back to solo

drinking. She didn't always come home solo. Sometimes she had a drunk man in tow, his main purpose being loud orgasms. In this state she avoided her teen son, who closed Sparrow's door. He kept the kids, feeding them from a sad bag of chips. In the morning she would tell him

that that had been really the last time, tell him she'd come back and be Mom, sail life's ship solo. He would listen, watching her face as the sad lines formed. That night she would be at *Sam's*, main-lining Wild Turkey. Her son didn't tell Sparrow about the call by the woman from the State

Office of Child Welfare. He overstated how often his mother was at home— to him it was about loyalty. He believed Sparrow every time. When the food got so low they ate mayonaise, he stole from her, mainly change, to buy hotdogs. Boiling, they looked so sad.

Sad, Sparrow thought about leaving the state.

Maintaining her seat, she thought about him.  
So *low* were the lights in *Sam*'s, thought Sparrow.

## Drifters Bar and Grill

Like a lovely assistant looking  
for a magician, Elizabeth sits  
at every stool in the bar, her eyes

scanning hatted, beer-sunk faces that eye  
her back. She mashes down her blonde-looking  
hair. Men nod at each other, til one sits

by her side, whiskey-fumed. Slowly he sets  
a rough hand on her thigh. She knows these eyes.  
Every night in the bar they do the looking.

Looking for lost things, she sets her hands and eyes.

## Grandmother

When you died I didn't go crazy  
as I had convinced myself I would.  
Your burdened body thick and white  
in the perpetual sunlight of hospital  
rooms, the implacable violet  
of flowers, my Marmaduke get-  
well card. Stomach cancer like  
an evil Pac-Man was eating  
you inside out, and still your love  
was like a vice on my chest.

The mother of my mother's mother  
in reality, but all I had known  
of "mother," raising me on oat-  
meal and Mellow Yellow  
and a sandbox. I was there for you  
almost to the end, having to go  
back to the foster home in Arkansas.  
I got the phone call in the afternoon  
and remembered chopping the snake  
in your driveway. "Can you kill  
him?" you asked. "Yes, I can."

## II. ANIMA



## The Cello Maker's Wife

I know her inner places intimately  
though I have never seen her.  
She has a strong yet supple neck  
and a deep clear voice.  
I hear the way she moans  
when he goes into her,  
I feel her hip's exact curve.  
When I play my instrument  
I see the stars over the Aegean  
her beauty affords the couple.

## Unbeautiful Lovers

What unbeautiful lovers teach of love  
is to cherish presence, the only gold  
being the light of the other  
in the cold chamber. *Alone*  
is midnight frost upon the window,  
melting when the shape of love  
asks for entry. Open the way  
and lay your head in imperfect hands.

## Black Forest Love Poem

I've been spending long hours  
in her arms, resting like a stone  
at the bottom of a stream,

finding out what is meant by  
this much-maligned thing  
called love, taking the time

to re-learn the silence we heard  
when black pines built temples  
under the feather moon.

## Love Poetry

I watch you sew the hole  
under the arm  
of my Marilyn Monroe t-shirt,

moving the needle back and forth,  
pressing between thumb  
and forefinger the frayed black cloth

until the rift is mended, checking  
how it looks, lamenting the bumps  
at the ends of the stitch,

and when you are done, folding  
it neatly and placing it in my suitcase.

## Orpheus and Eurydice

I've never known why  
they didn't walk side-by-side,  
her gray hand in his,  
the lyre left with some inmate  
of the place to provide  
background music for the trip,  
pausing for her unsure steps,  
a harmony of foot taps  
echoing in sulfuric darkness.

In the daybreak of the cave's mouth  
they could have issued forth  
like twin larks.

## Autumn Songs

*her*

Grass waves in the field,  
the moon rolls down heaven's path.  
Swallows nod in sleep.

Here in your muscular hands  
I am aware of nature's pulse.

*him*

The fields wave their grass,  
star paths toss the marble ball.  
Slumber keeps swallows.

My hands tremble with the heat  
of your rising and falling breasts.

## Joaquin's Guitar

The Moors have a passion  
for the color blue—  
this afternoon by the sea  
I watched a bundled lady  
picking over garbage  
for a bit of blue rag.  
She plucked one piece  
then snatched another.  
Holding them to the sun  
she tossed the first away.  
When she had found  
the fading-dream blue  
she sought, she went  
singing on her way.

## 480 Pound Woman Dies After Six Years On Couch

I am bigger inside. I contain nations and lands:  
one country where every woman rides through life  
on a couch carried by multiple collared men,  
she like a dish whose table they wait.

Elsewhere a Hercynian forest stretches,  
peopled by men who ride lady lions—  
the lions are fast, and can fly, singing  
triumphal songs in seven languages at once.

Deep within me masked men stand at the source  
of a black water spring, slowly beating their hands  
to their hearts. Each man is wrapped in chains,  
and on every link an initial of my name.



## 82 mph on the NY State Thruway

In an '86 Camry she escapes the city,  
for a day and forever, the quiet carousels,  
the rain and the rain. The psychiatric hospital  
on the hill outside town. Empty factories.  
Broken windows, broken hearts,  
bowed and heaving trees.  
The road itself wants out.

Letting it go under puddles of cloud  
she is for a stretch of highway  
a Blackfoot warrior woman  
riding her stolen stallion bareback  
through golden buffalo grass,  
their two long manes flying back  
and mingling with the wind.

A beautiful thing, while it lasts,  
this shining wild horse.

## Take Your Passion and Make It Happen

We couldn't believe our eyes—it was Jennifer Beals,  
selling dining room sets to the assembled wives.  
She offered those women amazing deals!

“This chair has leather made from baby seals,  
that table comes with a free set of Ginsu knives.”  
We couldn't believe our eyes: it was Jennifer Beals.

She looked worn down and old in her high heels,  
but she worked hard to re-furnish their lives.  
She offered those women amazing deals!

Jennifer had lines not even good makeup conceals.  
We wondered how a fallen dancer survives.  
We couldn't believe our eyes, but it was Jennifer Beals.

The women weren't buying, despite her appeals.  
In this business, not even a Flashdancer thrives.  
But she offered those women amazing deals!

The women turned and left Jennifer spinning her wheels.  
But with a quick leap and a high kick her spirit revived.  
We *could* believe our eyes, for it was Jennifer Beals,  
and she offered those women amazing deals!

## The Five Senses

## Him, Leaving

If I'm quiet I apologize,  
if I stare too long I'm sorry.  
I'm trying to store away your limbs,  
the curve of your back. I'll need them  
for the nights (sure to follow) of wanting  
your body under train station lights.  
I'll need them when brittle leaves  
scrape by and dry branches heave.

## Her, Staying Behind

Keep staring. Stare as long as you want,  
but let me grip your hand  
so tight I can feel the pressure  
long after you're gone,  
feel the blood in you course.  
It's with my body that I want you,  
your smell on my breasts and thighs,  
our leaves spread in the hothouse night.

## Him, During the Journey

In the approaching storm head I imagine  
your eyes—dark, spreading. Your breath  
humming after midnight in a dream,  
your sigh when you wake. The storm bears  
full on now, striking the walls like  
skeletal fists. Your song as you dress,  
your theft of Shasta daisy scent. Your dewy  
lips on my chest.

## Her, Waiting for the Return

The heat of your inner thigh, the pulse beating  
there. The taste of you—nutmeg,  
sea salt, cardamom? The scent when you're  
excited, the flush of deep purple. To see your arms  
again, taste your skin again, smell your hair  
once more. To wallow in you, wrap you around,  
celebrate you. Have they wilted your flower,  
changed your taste?

## Mirror Ball

When a man responds  
to a woman's beauty  
a door in him squeaks  
open. Beyond it a mirror  
ball flings beams  
to caress her cheekbones.  
She is invited in by bag-  
piping clowns hitting  
wrong notes, juggling bears,  
a frog singing "Hello my  
honey, hello my baby,  
hello my ragtime gal!"  
and the tatter of thousands  
of typewriters. The air  
is warm and salty. If and when  
she smiles the ball supernovas.

## Express Mail

Since my heart only beats right  
when it's with you I cut  
it out and shipped it Express Mail.  
The operation, in my kitchen  
with a butter knife, was painful  
but less so than I had hoped.

The muscle lump I wrapped  
in parchment paper and stamped,  
bicycling to the post office  
on a rainy Wednesday. The post  
lady looked at me funny  
but took my money.

I don't know what happened  
to the heart after that exactly,  
but I got postcards. The heart  
in Paris, floating down the Seine,  
somewhere in the wintry Alps  
and crossing an Asian plain.  
The last one mailed from Tokyo  
in Japan.

So if my heart ever winds up  
on your door step like I intended,  
world-traveled and experienced,  
please kick it for me.

And Again and Again and Again

Two birds flutter about  
each other where bars  
of light break the woods,  
one a chickadee, one  
a dove, both with bits  
of leaf in their beaks,

touching now a wing,  
now a cheek, now  
a breast, then a tail,  
circle and fall,  
rise again towards  
the sky's blue arc.

Round and round  
go the feather-clad cages,  
shaking when union  
seems for a second  
gained, until wind  
blows them away.

They carry on,  
their circle unbreaking.

## 7pm Laundry and the Loved One Far Away

Oh laundromat metaphysical,  
laundromat washed in light,  
laundromat place of cleanness  
covered with dust.

In the laundromat of my secret  
heart I cleanse you, spin you  
like the cotton and tumble  
you dry. You white and  
fluffy again, you still warm  
in my hands.

Laundromat of all races and nations,  
everyone's need the same, met  
the same way. Laundromat whose  
ecstasy is folding and hanging.

Laundromat windows looking  
out at the rain, laundromat  
like a city on a hill. Laundromat  
of the sharp scent of longing.

## Homecoming

Your body is my home,  
and I've been a long time gone.  
Is the roof still whole and healthy,  
still reaching for the ground?  
Are the windows still fire-bright,  
still looking out a far distance?  
Are the pillars still sturdy,  
still solid and strong?  
Are there sweet smells in our  
kitchen, is the pantry still stocked?  
Is our bedroom still dark,  
our bed soft as down?  
Have you given the house a new  
coat of paint (I hope you have  
not, the old suited me fine)?  
Are the doors still stout,  
have you left me the key?  
Have you been down to the cellar,  
my old favorite place?

I see the doors *are* open,  
and that fire kindled.



## Love Light

When I am just a memory  
and you are but a thought  
let us inhabit the same mind.  
The book written about you  
will take up space on the same  
shelf as the one about me.  
My street will intersect yours.  
Your river will narrow  
to a stream in my park,  
my airline with schedule  
flights to several gates  
at your airport. Your name  
will be popular among parents  
of girl babies and mine with boys,  
we will meet and marry many  
times again for centuries. When  
creatures come from another  
star, it'll be romances about us  
they'll take back as samples  
of human literature. When  
the sun blinks out, we'll live on  
under other strange light.

## Desperate Man Blues

I have no words to put into this verse.  
There's nothing I can say. There's no sky,  
no wind, no tall grass, nothing to fly.  
Spirits and thoughts I've bid disperse.

You're right: it's about a woman.  
Gone, and everything followed her.  
You know nothing rhymes with "woman,"  
save "trueman," which I guess I wasn't.

I broke the rhyme on that last line,  
to hang a sign around the loss.  
I suppose it is time to toss  
this verse overboard and drink wine.

Still here. I am held together  
with too much tape and bobby pins  
to fall apart when I'd love to. Whether  
I can keep the syllable count... depends.

Oh yes... I was lamenting failed love.  
Her lips were like Springtime's old trick  
of rebirth. Once love came bold, thick  
as briars, berries in the beak of a dove.

Damn. I am murdering this form.  
I'll quit now, without telling you  
how it happened... it was a storm,  
leave it at that. Adieu, *adieu*.

## Diana and Actaeon

The baths of Olympus stand  
empty, fine ones of godly  
marble. Water's not running,  
towels are dry, soap's  
unslippery. Its mistress  
is off in the woods,  
a shallow place in the river  
surrounded by a clearing.

Diana cuts her feet on shore  
rocks and curses. She foreknows  
that he's passing  
this way. She lets her hair  
down, making a show of sliding  
gossamer robes  
over honeydew breasts.

She tries the water with a toe:  
lukewarm. The nymphs  
are silent and stand  
with hair in hand. She  
wades in up to her knees,  
leaving her white flanks  
sticking out of the water.  
A divine grin curls her face.

Actaeon, late coming home,  
stumbles over a root, almost  
eats sand. He picks himself  
up. He sees her nova  
whiteness, boils in his skin.  
She adds perfect teeth,  
curls a finger in her hair  
and pulls down a lip corner.

He stares. Nymphs rush in,  
throwing their long hair.  
Her face becomes a snake,  
a lean finger zapping his heart.  
He swings his head away.  
Antlers stab from his skull. Hooves,  
fur, black nose, tail. She smiles  
and takes her time dressing.

He splits, he bolts, he dashes  
into the woods. His words  
are groans, his heart blasts,  
his antlers clatter on branches.  
He hears dogs, thinks only  
of his name. Only dear bellows  
break out his narrow throat.  
He trips and falls into a ditch.

They're on him, hungry mutts  
he gave names to. They see meat.  
*Actaeon, Actaeon,*  
*Actaeon, a man, a man.*  
In his mind laughter and silk  
skin. A moment of stillness, then  
teeth snap. He raises his head, brings  
horns to bear: he's ready for them.

## The Love Goddess

Stir Rita  
your curvy smoke  
thousands of feet into the sky radioactive  
bits of lovely breasts blooming over Hiroshima streets  
Hayworth mother of bombs, big legged woman  
oh beautiful Rita why have  
you blown away all of  
our flesh the children  
who only wanted to  
be like you they  
float in vapor  
back to the sky  
a big gush of Hollywood  
returns to you oh Rita you  
were so sultry on your big black bomb

## Please Can I Have a Woman

Please can I have a woman who wears dresses.  
Please can I have a woman who knows  
her swords because she knows her man.  
Who researches baby names with scholarly care,  
who suggests the steak and red potatoes,  
who criticizes only one fault at a time,  
who knows I meant to put the toilet seat down.  
Please can I have a woman comfortable  
in her skin and cozy with compliments,  
whose idea of poetry begins and ends  
with my sonnets to her. Please can I have  
a woman who has a revisionist history of Eve  
and takes after her ancestor. Please can I have woman  
who piles on top of me like a winter blanket,  
frequently. Please can I have a woman  
who is prepared to say I am handsome,  
who crackles like a fire when my eyes eat her.  
Who waits to hear how I feel and why.  
Who folds around me like a night flower closing.

## She Informs Me

She informs me at regular intervals  
that sex and love are largely  
separate for men, different parts

of a carefully sectioned and naturally  
small brain. She informs me of this  
in bed, after love-making in the shower,

watching Leno before turning in. She  
tells me men and women have a treaty,  
an equitable trade in body parts and goods,

and that neither one should expect more.  
She told me this the night we first—  
she insisted I call it a “fuck.” She lets me

know that I am fortunate because of her  
understanding of male psychology. She lets  
me know regularly that I am happy.

## Poem On a Line by Rilke

I see you whole against the sky,  
your thousand colors, your spring  
cold and autumn sun, your dark  
and heavy clouds massing over  
snowed peaks. You in every detail  
are terrible and beautiful,  
with every stark truth laid open.  
I see your manifold petals.  
I see your beginnings in the fire,  
your end in the blizzard.  
I see you seeing me, my collection  
of old oddments and rags.  
I see you smile, see you reach  
out for me. You are impossibly  
far away.



### III. MISTER DEATH MEETS HIS BROWN-EYED BOY

## At Borders

I see it in my brightly-lit nightmares of Tulsa:  
on your last day at the bookstore you helped  
someone find a book that taught them about  
the Jewel in the Heart of the Lotus, ending up  
with them migrating to India and becoming  
a sadhu, the smoke of the chillum rising forever.

On the day before you hung yourself with cord  
you recommended to someone a CD  
that opened them to the blues and eventually  
sent them to Mississippi in search of the true  
grave of Robert Johnson and they found it.

Before death did you and your new wife part  
you gave a wink and a discount to a woman  
fresh from selling plasma for a resume book;  
the job she got with its help led to a business  
and founded an empire, employing millions.

But for yourself you could recommend nothing.  
Nothing in Self Help or Bibles kept you from  
becoming gray dust, nothing in Music made  
you stay sane for a little while to listen, none  
of the stationary prompted you to write me.

## Tulsa

The sky was not overcast.  
The plane that flew  
me in was on time,  
our friend Josh  
was there to get me,  
and we had lamb  
vindaloo for lunch.

The drive we took around town  
included the Praying Hands.  
Trees lined the streets in his  
neighborhood, his friends  
and family listened well.  
Your funeral at Unitarian Church,  
where I left the Buddhist rosary  
we once shared, was serene.  
The tears shed were cleansing.

I saw people I had not seen  
since you left. Your mother  
all but took me as her son.  
The pastor's kept her words  
brief and tasteful. Then I came up  
and wailed my fucking pain  
into your neatly poured dust.  
The Tulsa sun shone.

## Attempt at a Poem for a Dead Friend

Your beautiful body, they turned to grey  
dust and poured around a tree's base.  
I broke down then, and left soon anyhow.  
I don't know how long you were a pile  
underneath that tree. It was hot in Tulsa,  
maybe it didn't rain, maybe wind did not  
blow you too far. Eventually it rained,  
and you turned to mud. I hope you made  
it to the roots.

## Preface to an Afterlife

I like to imagine that the dead  
are neither praising nor burning but floating—  
million-hued feathers of some resplendent bird,  
nudged this way and that by breaths  
from eternity's laughter at  
the splendid joke she's played on the rest of us.

Well beyond worry, the dead dance  
in the shine of a sun unsetting,  
spinning about playing tag and laughing  
at themselves if they happen to remember  
the things that pained them so much  
back this side of the divide.

They rattle the chains of necessity  
that once bound them for rhythm,  
play bongos on the hard-backed cares  
which still sit heavy on us here.  
When I join that band I'll tell  
them how their song pained us so.

#### IV. THE SON SEES IT ALL LAID OUT

## History

*The Christian faith holds that those who are able to look on the crucifixion and live, to accept that the traumatic truth of human history is a tortured body, might just have a chance of new life.*

-Terry Eagleton

We took the ribbony body  
down from the spike and laid  
it in the rock and covered it with rock.  
I cannot speak of his wounds,  
they were rends in the earth.

He lay lightly in our hands,  
the twisted body flowing like rivers.  
They poured themselves into him  
and rotted him with their emptiness.  
He turned black as they began to shine.

The sky is just now opening the veil  
that fell when they killed him.  
I smell the olive trees and feel the wind.  
We will go into the village  
and see if the sun rises.

## Nazijäger

He returns the violin to its solid case,  
shrugs into his wool overcoat, and takes  
a last look at his books before stepping out  
into the autumn cold along the Bahnhofsweg.

This morning his daughter told him his job—  
no, *hobby*—was playing a sixty-year-old  
game of tag. He had known it was true:  
he drained history's swamps, and God  
knew there weren't many left.

He stops at a corner, rubs his gloves together.  
Tree leaves are yellow and emerald glass  
set in a scratched blue wall—he knows  
nature's mixed message: the mute rocks  
and riotous trees at Dachau.

The walking man in red light flicks to green.  
Clumps of young people pass the hunter  
with cell phones and piercings. He is satisfied  
when they don't look his way and presses on,  
ears plugged with the white noise he hears  
when faced with future things.

Before the train station he walks by a stone  
church, the trees around it a faded veil,  
its windows staring at a cemetery.  
He imagines the conversation of the dead burying  
their own, asking why he lends no hand.

At the station entrance he pauses for a woman  
pushing a baby carriage, and his eye is caught  
by a lamppost sticker: "Gib Nazis keine Chance."  
The noise becomes a street musician's violin.



## Close to the Nerve

*Hyderabad, India*

Daylight rubs its blue belly  
across the buildings where  
new girls sit in dyed robes,  
reciting letters in Hindi.

Abbas watches for a moment,  
lost in the shower of voices.  
They are all her, she is all  
of them, like motes in a moonbeam.

A pot of bread under her arm,  
she steps at last into the street.  
For an instant she is back  
in the brothel, before the raid.

Beatings always followed rapes,  
to remove any hint of pleasure.  
She heard them using the new girl,  
a tiny person no more than seven.

She dragged herself up as doors  
crashed in elsewhere. The woman found  
her hiding in soiled robes only after  
the mothers had been led away.

Abbas passed out as she was lifted,  
awakening within the blue walls  
of the school. She was taken to bathe,  
and bathed every day thereafter,

the water running red and yellow  
like a sunrise. Eventually the water  
was clear, clear and cold. Her hair  
shined black and smelled of jasmine.

A horn blast brings her to the present.  
She is near the home of her husband,  
where HIV hollows him out. They care  
for each other when the sickness is worst.

## Hamadou Dreams of Spain

Bones of men left in Sahara sands  
leave him in Morocco.  
He walks again, this time  
in long grass on Spanish hills,  
sea-drifting clouds waving  
at him in his European suit.

They had left pregnant women.  
The gardenias of Spanish  
women remind him of blood.  
But in his dream they all call  
out to his black skin.

In Mali he squatted with his family  
in the desert and the only song  
was dust. In his dream, hills flow  
with song and hearts come  
together like the rain and the sea.

His Spanish heart is a song  
of guitars and oranges,  
mosques and señoritas,  
and he wakes knowing  
history will not bear witness.

## Lui, South Sudan

In preparation for burial  
the baby girl's body  
is bathed in water given up  
by grandmothers and aunts

and swathed in her finest  
dress, the only thing white  
in the village, woven with  
the only flowers the mother

has ever held. The girl's thin  
thumbs and toes  
are tied together with gauze  
to keep her body straight.

Women who had waited  
three days to cross the bombed-out  
bridge to the hospital hold  
the stiff body in turns,

like a parcel of burnt wood.

## Indian Recycler

I am fishing fresh buffalo  
out of the river to replace  
the ones with bones  
bleaching in the sun,

sacrificed to white manhood.

I am recycling the used Indians  
piling up on reservations  
and littering trailer parks,

redeemable for a raw heart.

I am smoothing out new plains  
to cover strips of highway,  
opening tin cans of new spirits.

I see smoke signals far off  
telling me to do this.

## Black Pastoral

Red leaves sizzle in the twilight meadow,  
like passion misspent. When the sun is down  
at last everything goes, even shadow.

Overnight rain falls. Light wakes to a brown  
basin of stagnancy. The few plants still  
above the water strain hard not to drown.

Black-tufted birds land in the mud to kill  
darting bugs washed to the surface, at last  
feasting at the banquet of murder, til

men arrive with pistols in-laid with brass  
to blast them to pink mist, shots well-placed.  
The men have yellow teeth and eyes of glass,

no fear of hunting in a field defaced  
by flood, that no man wants, otherwise a waste.

## Edited for Content

He dies on a night like a bad background painting.  
We carry him to the river and set him adrift  
in the boat he'd built with his hand's last strength.  
The camera cranes up and tilts down to show  
a group shot staring across black water.

I wish it would do a close-up of his face,  
the lines burned there, the knots of his beard,  
the penniless eyes, the oil-sack skin.  
The lighting seeps from the subject,  
the last rays of his ruddy glow.

But this is a long shot, and he we loved  
drifts out of frame. Cutaways grab our faces  
in expressions rehearsed for the moment.  
Our personal themes blend with the brassy  
death note as a long fade begins.

## Love Letter from Death Row

Consider these hands, and the good they could do  
if they once again held you. Consider too that they  
killed a man, and society has ruled they must die—  
waste, perhaps, but the way of the world and love.  
Consider the work they have done in the meantime,  
letters they have written, hours they have counted,  
walls they have punched, stars they have tried to hold.  
Consider these hands and the good they could do.

## Bully Blackmun Kicks Out

I was called Bully in those days, 'cause Reginald was not much of a ring name. I was what they called a monster heel. A turnbuckle and a folding chair were my work and my wage. One night on national tv the blonde face was booked to pin me, and after a few drinks I let him. No longer scary, I was cut from the tour and farmed out to mop mats for chump companies in high school gyms. I was sitting by the lockers when the Lord stepped out of the shower, His Holiness wrapped in a towel. He said "Why Bully didn't you grab the rope and cry like Jacob?" And friends, I tossed a crunched Miller at the King of Kings. "Leave me alone Jesus unless you can get me a rematch!" He said "I offer only a rematch with eternal life for those slammed by Satan." Suddenly I saw all the foreign objects, all the steel cages, all the closed fist punches, all the blood-lusting interviews in my career and, oh my people, it was all vanity and vexation. I saw the long, slow leg drop from the masked Red Devil. I saw the Lord there in his towel, waiting to tag in for me.



## Burnt Cornfield

We've spent all week hiding from Jesus.  
 They're persistent bastards, He and his dogs.  
 We'll never know what He wants us for,  
 maybe still sour from that thing with the cross.  
 We've explained that, reimbursed Him for His trouble.  
 Some men you just can't reach.

The whole county's full of informers, all's within His reach.  
 Not a city man or farm boy who aint beholden to Jesus.  
 Wherever His souped-up Ford prowls, there's strife and trouble  
 for me and my, um, associates. Our... "reputation" dogs  
 us everywhere we run. I knew it was a bad idea to cross  
 Him. These types of men there's just no help for.

We've been Goddamned willing to compromise: Four  
 times tried to apologize, but got shot at before we could reach  
 His porch, where He sulked and muttered to Himself, cross  
 at you, me or the whole dang world. The only ones Jesus  
 will listen to are the hogs, and hell, we'd rather be fed to them dogs.  
 Ever know a man who only wanted to cause you trouble?

The whole damn thing's His fault! It was unfairness that led the Troubles!  
 We were all one happy bunch. What'd they have to do that for?  
 Some people have no sense of propriety and treat others like dogs.  
*Darnit*, when steel is plentiful why build with clay? Reach  
 down into Your blasted wisdom and find me an answer for that, Jesus!  
 We waited for it to pass, but it went on and on and a line was crossed.

So now this confounded chase will go on till he nails *us* to the cross.  
 He's so smug, in his purple robe and Sheriff's hat. Does it trouble  
 His mind that we're tailgating in the cold, we who once joined Jesus  
 at His supper table? We who once had the whole South created for  
 us? Hell, the pleas of his own laborers don't even reach  
 His ears cause He only cares for two things: His gun and His dogs.

One day there's gonna be a brawl. It'll come to a head, and just like dogs,  
 we'll roll in the dust. My whole clan and His whole clan, going at it across  
 a burnt cornfield. I guess that there's the only way this can reach  
 any end. If they want trouble, by God they'll get trouble.  
 We were first, after all, and we'll show Him what wrath is for.  
 Once the dust clears we won't be taking no more lip from Jesus.

I should be getting along now, I hear Jesus and His pack of dogs.

For nothing in the world would I want to cross His trail right now.  
The trouble with being on the run is you never reach home.

## Reading Polish Poetry

Unlike matter, the soul is solid.  
Vast spaces inhabit  
things, but spirit is a soaked  
coat pooled on the floor.  
You lug it around and it slips  
through your airy  
fingers, you drag it thudding  
out the door. Nothing can  
ever make it float.

## Reading an Anthology of Elegies, Thinking about Construction

It's all done  
with bricks. Pulled in  
on a cart, dropped  
with thud, rattling  
and clanking. Hands  
dusty, scratched,  
flecked with mud.

A mixture of sand,  
cement and water  
lines the gaps,  
places nothing  
else could fill,  
and even then  
wind whistles  
clean through.

## I, Tiresias

Blind since birth, Tiresias  
scoffs at the elites  
who tell him of power called  
“sight”—what an efficient way  
to keep him in his place!

He lives in a blind town  
with a blind wife who smells good  
and sightless kids with sweet voices.  
His drab factory produces black  
bobbles at a prodigious rate,  
funding a yearly trip to the cave.

He votes for the Blind Party  
in elections and prays in a church  
without candles. Doctors who complain  
of his functionless organs  
he suspects of being Bolsheviks.

In his dreams  
he sees blue rivers.

## My Easy Life as a White Man

When I arrive at a place  
it's my skin that opens the door.  
When I meet the people  
my skin says hi.

It's my skin that pays  
the tab when I run up the bill.  
My skin negotiates with cops  
when I speed and writes

an extra line on my vita.  
My skin found this three-  
bedroom house in the burbs,  
it even drives me

to the ballot box. My skin  
is no-nonsense, realistic  
and practical. When nuts  
need cracking, my skin is there.

Late in the night when  
I'm alone with a flickering  
candle like all men, my skin  
climbs off and goes dancing.

## Lyric

The moon fits better in the water than the sky.  
It floats at ease, the pupil of a lowered eye.

It need not shine, no one asks it to rise or set.  
On the face of the pond the white moon is just wet.

I have heard that the moon has plans to settle there,  
get married and raise little moons of heaven unaware.

## Salvation Army Donuts

At eleven I was too old to sleep  
beside my mother in the women's dorm,  
so I bunked beneath unshaven men deep  
in recovery, or discovery of whom  
the man on the cross was. They showed  
interest in the notes of my symphony.  
They talked to me about the Book, or blowed  
smoke when they weren't allowed to. With bony  
hands they told me about women, how they  
will take your money and your manhood,  
leave you on the street or in jail. They looked away  
when I took extra donuts. My mother would  
tell me to avoid them, that they were trash.  
Instead I watched as their cigs dropped ash.



## Salvation Army Men's Dorm

Jason taught me how to make a vagina  
with thumb and index finger, then a penis  
from the other index and simulate sex.  
I was reading *The Grapes of Wrath* at the time  
and falling fast in love with Rose of Sharon.  
I simulated sex with her as waters  
rose all around us. Our child was born alive  
on the face of the deep. Jason thought it dumb  
and knuckled me in the arm. But Rose and me  
clung tightly to each other, simulating  
until the black waters were over our heads.

## Salvation Army Shower

The first time I ever saw a man's penis  
was the bathroom of the Salvation Army.  
Lean as a string bean, he was toweling his  
hair. I stared at the length and tan of his body.  
The air was wet and hot. He caught me looking  
and waited, hands on his head, penis thin,  
eyes calm. It was the color of oil, hairless,  
flaccid, his balls two bored birds on a wire.  
I looked down at my underwear. He glanced  
down and grinned, wrapped the towel around  
his waist, and left. I never saw him again.

## Salvation Army Monologue

“When I was your age I got pussy two times  
a week. Three, a good week. And I worked seven  
days a week, cause I didn’t have to work for  
pussy. I busted these hands on an engine  
all day and put them in a woman at night.  
They didn’t mind, ‘cause I was sweet to ‘em. You’ve  
never got any, and I know you haven’t,  
‘cause you don’t know to sugar talk a woman  
and lead her to water. You just look and wish,  
look and wish. I could have that one right there  
right now. Women are thirsty, and you’re the drink.”

## On Seeing a Picture of His Mother

Nineteen years of replaying the scene  
of your back as you walk away  
under parking lot lampposts,  
every leaving since touched with the tone  
*Here I go and I'm not coming back.*  
You taught me to cut quickly  
all the ropes and push the zeppelin  
from the tower, to land here and there  
but never hold on long enough  
to be left like you left me.  
The rule of your last lesson  
I've carried with me, and when we meet  
in that field beyond right and wrong  
I will bury it in the deep earth.

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