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The University of Southern Mississippi

HATCHERY OF TONGUES

by

Michael Bassett

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

May 2004

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HATCHERY OF TONGUES

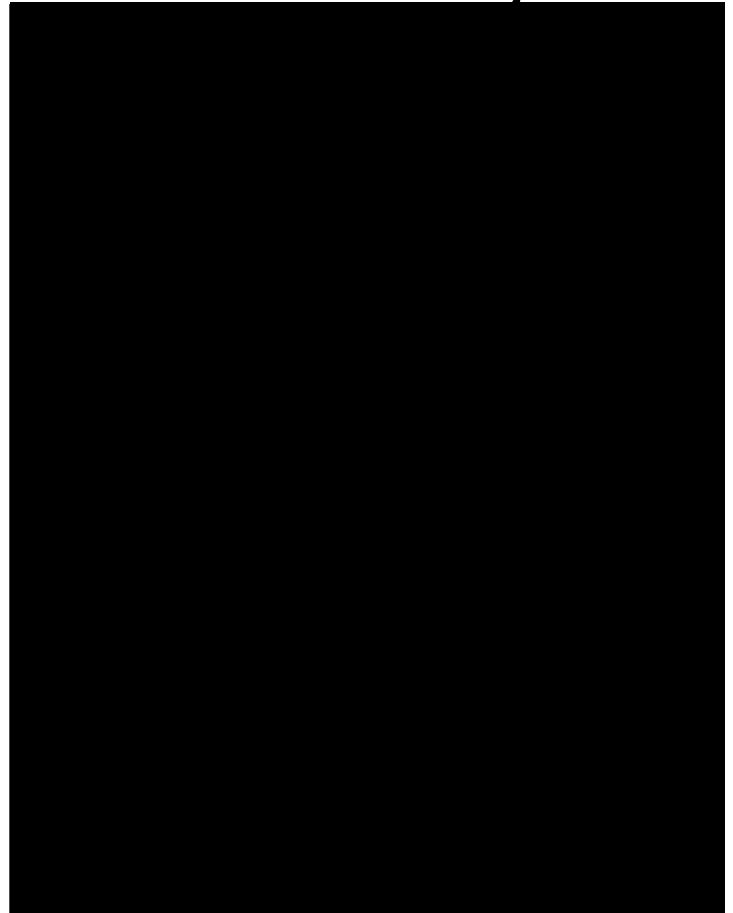
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ABSTRACT

Hatchery of Tongues

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Hatchery of Tongues is a collection of poems accompanied by a critical introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

When my brother was three he ate a cricket. My father caught him not in the act but discovered the legs hanging on his lips. The first thing I remember writing was a story in which my brother ate not a real cricket but an alien and dangerous creature disguised as a cricket. In this story my brother's cleverness averts disaster in that he eats the monstrosity before it can morph into its terrible form.

My father read me the *Gilgamesh* Epic as a bedtime story. I was most interested in Humbaba, the monster the gods had set as guardian to the cedar forest. I began to write descriptions of my own guardian monsters. Always the challenge was to come up with new features and more outlandish attributes. I discovered Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Norton's *Baleful Beasts and Eerie Creatures*, *The Bestiary* to Tolkien's *World*, *The Compendium of Godzilla and other Japanese Movie Monsters*, and various Illustrated Guides to Greek Mythology. These were the inspiration for more attempts at devising and cataloguing new creatures. They were also the start of an unending captivation. Later I was enamored with Borges *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Thomas Wright's *History of Caricature and Grotesque*, Max Ernst's novel in collage, *Une Semaine De Bonte*, Arp's *Mustache Hat*, Bacon's *Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. But the underlying fascination was unchanged. I continue to regard unusual forms, physical excesses, and radical transformations as master keys to significance.

During the same time as my character sketches of imaginary creatures or shortly thereafter, I also began writing didactic verse. This mode culminated in many meditations on time, though I also recall a piece on the meaning of Easter, and instructional guides on how to appreciate everything from grandparents to rocks. The instinct in my poetry

toward associative exploration developed into an interest in how poetic language can engage philosophy.

The poems in this collection proceed from my early and abiding love for monsters and philosophy. The poets I have found most seminal fall into two camps: first, there are the humorous and transgressive explorers of the wonderful follies of human psychology, poets like Charles Harper Webb, Stephen Dobyns, and Tony Hoagland. The second and perhaps stronger influence comes from those poets like Charles Simic, Novica Tadic, and Zbigniew Herbert, who invest all objects of consciousness with a brutal burden of history and also endow them with a liberating mythic depth. My poems like “Woman Shoots Boil on Her Foot” emerge from the first tradition. Those like “Itinerant Face” and “Belts” come out of the second, while “Essentials of Chance” and “In the Bones of His Hands, His Soul” are hybrids.

These poems span more than eight years. I do not know what continuity there is in their author over that span of time. I often cite as a mantra Lee Smith’s assertion, “We get so various as we get older. I have been so many people.” I think I can claim, however, that the undercurrent running throughout the poems is the attempt to speak with authority about the terrible and beautiful condition which is the inheritance of imagination. These poems are the folk riddles, language collages, reconfigured fantastic icons, reconstituted dream songs, bestiaries and monstrous prophecies of one who is philosophically “crucified in awe between chance and necessity” (Simic 18).

This tension between what could be and what must be is illustrated in the poem, “Ecce Puer.” The poem plays with the relationship between high art, classicism and pop culture pastiche, but the central focus is with otherness and transformation. The poem

uses the imagery of sinister cocoons and atomic brains to confront the reader with the difficulty of feeling at home in an existence threatened by both possibility and necessity, an existence in which, “Anything/ may become something else./But there is a point past which/ metamorphosis cannot be reversed.”

I am not the first poet to be preoccupied with monsters. In pointing to poetry’s conceptual and bodily components, Ezra Pound refers to poems as Centaurs. In his essay “The Little Venus of the Eskimos,” Charles Simic treats his early interest in reading about mythical beings like the Sciapodes, Cerberus, the Manticora, which he later recognized as resembling the surrealist creations of Exquisite Corpse (13). Simic goes on to explore the aesthetic consequences of such beings and their relationship to the ambiguous nature of works of literature or art. “These visual oxymorons of ancient bestiaries [. . .] are the earliest examples of the collaboration of dream and intellect for the sake of putting appearances into doubt” (14). Poems, like monsters, are hybrids which disrupt classification.

The etymology of “monster” highlights two key Latin word origin: *monere*, meaning to warn and *monstrare*, meaning to show. Traditionally, the aberrant and bizarre have been omens of impending change. Often such portents have been used in public discourse to exhort or condemn. Similarly, monstrosities work in my poems as occasions to admonish, comfort, tease, and explore. They are the messengers and messages which we must fear and love.

The monstrous transformations inherent in language are explicitly engaged in the poem, “The Current Point of Evolution,” which suggests the richness of linguistic and imaginative play and the insistence but impotence of discursive logic.

Here systems of grammar take on Mutant
Shapes and wriggle their speckled
Tentacles. Linguistic theories dance,
While logic plays choreographer,
Flexing his trapezius and shouting,
“Mean something.” (Lines 8-13)

The poem uses the conceit of the speaker falling into his own mouth to dramatize how language struggles against its own constraints. The same concern is expressed in the poem “Aphorisms of One Who Calls Himself Legion Because He Is Many,” in which the speaker claims that “We are engaged in a struggle with language. Words are our only weapons.”

In “Monstrance,” the admonition is not just about the limitations of language but of perception and interpretation. The poem enjoins readers to “Peek through a slit in time’s belly/ back to the beginning/ before daydreams, in the dawn/ of paradox, when is and not/ were still on speaking terms” (Lines 1-5). The poem displays the monster, confronting readers with perceptual and interpretive challenges. The “it” is that which is always beyond the categories of our imagining because it is the ground of their being. As such, it demands our reverence and dread, balancing, “on the tip of its snout,/ the universe like a small bird.”

The poem “Temptation Reconsidered After Conflating the Legends of Saint Anthony and Saint Bernard” treats the need to express and contain desire, which leads to confections and distortions in memory and perception. The poem’s final question is rhetorical; the speaker knows that he has conflated the testing of one Saint’s sexual purity with another’s demonic assault. But the speaker also knows that in an ahistorical sense the conflation is true. From human longing, the menagerie of our monsters springs “Bat-winged, goat-faced, spiny tailed, troll-nosed, death-bristled, hard-horned, fanged and

howling.”

In explaining both his disposition toward writing and his interest in the significance of the subtle borderlands between wilderness and civilization, Loren Eiseley writes, “It takes a refugee at heart, a wistful glancer over fences, to sense this one dimensional world, but it is there. I can attest to it for I myself am such a fugitive” (4). I can sympathize strongly with Eiseley’s confession. But my attraction to thresholds and my identification with the fugitive and refugee came not through observing landscapes but imagining the bodyscape of the fantastical creature.

In the poem “Toad Man,” the title character’s physical oddity serves as a manifestation of his outsider status. Even his attempts at connection become sign posts of his difference: “he will listen if listening means staring at the welts on his flipper hands.” As a consequence of his status as a monstrosity he is a prophet. The possibility of everything and nothing is what frightens us, but it also supports and sustains us. It is the “scaloped worm of the spine.”

“Toad Man” engages psychological concerns about isolation, the past and death, along with conceptual questions about what it means to be human. The speaker of the poem both forgives and chastises the instinct to deny our lonely and bestial nature as well as our tendency toward grandiosity. “The words ‘solitary beast’ never seemed less funny.”

But if poems are monsters of language and imagination they are particularly shaped and controlled monsters. Consider the hundred-headed fish which Kapila is transformed into in Buddhist mythology. It little matters where his monkey head is in relation to his dog head or his donkey head. The allure/repulsion is in the sheer magnitude of his

surprising combinations, the volume of his monstrosity. Not so with poems. In order for its readers to achieve psychological or emotional satisfaction a poem must do more than generate a fluency of surprises and transformations.

Charles Simic asserts that the pure play of ideas and images in poetry is mostly a matter of chance:

There has never been a poet who didn't believe in a stroke of luck. What is an occasional poem but a quick convergence of unforeseen bits of language? That's what Catullus and Frank O'Hara are all about. Only literary critics do not know that poems owe everything to chance. A poet cannot will a memorable comparison. These things just pop into somebody's head. (17)

There is, however, great value in cheating chance, in manipulating the monster. I think of poems not only in terms of the above passage but as what Simic qualifies as "collaboration[s] of will and chance" (18). It is will that Juan Ramon Jimenez stresses when he writes that "Poetry is like a bird that comes in a moment of rapture from heaven into our hearts. What takes skill is knowing how to send it from our hearts back into the heavens."

The evolution of my poetry is tied to the pleasure of language as the creators of new forms and language as mediators of suffering. I believe that Ferlinghetti was right in his claim that poetic language allows us to "articulate the consciousness and the conscience of the race and see our way through our 'cosmic predicament' on earth" (81). My poetry's interest in the fantastic means to providing new vocabulary for dealing with mystery, loneliness, alienation and suffering. Tony Hoagland writes that suffering is what "everybody practices,/ but strangely few of us/ grow graceful in" (lines 45-47).

Irony, fantasy, even humor are ways in which we try to grow graceful in suffering.

The humor in my poems occasionally leans toward punch lines. Poems like “The Whole Neighborhood” and “Cassandra Syndrome” make this plain enough. I hope, however, that both the irony and the attempts at humor in these poems tap into deep fantasies.

A macabre yet tender humor is the controlling tone in the poem, “Woman Shoots Boil on Her Foot.” The poem evokes the familiarity of bizarre self-destructive behavior and the alien aspects of our ordinary motives. Through a project of imaginative empathy readers are compelled to consider the hyper-expansive possibilities of human desire. Claude Chabrol said that “Folly is infinitely more fascinating than intelligence because the intelligence has limits but folly does not.” Part of my aim in poems like “Women Shoots Boil on Her Foot” is to show not only intriguing human folly but also to represent the magic and mutating imagination which attempts to bridge possibility and understanding.

I remember reading Arp’s “The Great Unrestrained Sadist.” When I came to the lines, “The great unrestrained sadist does not deign to eat his perfumed time in extinct grass,” (312) I thought I finally understood Keats’ idea of negative capability and Wallace Stevens’ maxim that “The poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully.” The imaginative leap functions in poetry to subvert and resist easy classification, but it is not necessarily either nonsense or purely emotive. I aim to make speculative conceits, fantastical imagery and surrealistic juxtapositions work in my poems to open up not only musical or formal possibilities but cognitive associations.

In Pablo Neruda’s “Walking Around” the image “streets horrendous as crevices” (31) does more than show us a street in a way we had not thought to see it. William Burroughs maintained that “There is only one thing a writer can write about: What is in

front of his senses in the moment of writing,” (qtd. in “Negative Capability” 345). The following poems are both maps and mazes. They are monsters proclaiming what Robert Pinsky has called the transformations which “seem to precede witness, in the working of poetry and in the history of our need for poetry” (361).

I
CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

BESTIARY FOR MY TONGUES

I have a hatchery of tongues, host
of tongues, harem of tongues. Some
of my childhood tongues have been knotted
like cherry stems, by little girls.
Some have no memory, only
longing for the lick
of something wet and electric.

Others are celibate and contemplative, hung
like drying tobacco in dark barns. Experimental
tongues have traded in their taste buds
for abstract expressionism. They know
what a lemon really is.

A coven of tongues bristle
like instruments on the dentist's tray,
sting the roof of my mouth
with their prayers.

The philosophical tongue, troubled
that it has no bone, yearns for the proof
of scalding coffee and persuasive
teeth. I couldn't say how many
of my tongues hum contentedly.

They all need thinking about. Need
reminding. The fop, the renegade,
the fatuous drunk who means to get
the job done and come straight
home but always ends up slurring.

And there are those with mysterious
allegiances. Secretive,
they slither in mythologies,
moving only when I sleep.

AWAKENINGS

A woman sticking her finger into an aquarium
watches it turn into a goldfish. Her
plunging fist scuttles off
as a blue crab; her arm up to the elbow,
an electric eel.

She is a mermaid, deathless blue
back-floating, old tiara
and string of pearls.

She thinks about the bathtub
with its cracks and stains.
Thinks about the sound
of running water, her husband's voice.

She saunters up the stairs. But the tub
has burst through the plaster
and waddles down Main
on iron feet, chasing
a wet dream all its own.

THE BLACKBOARD OF HIS EYELID

He's a Chihuahua-eyed chicken boy
with hundreds of freckles
his mother swears are seeds
from the pumpkin they carved
him out of. But he knows where
babies come from. He knows the darkness
of the closet, where he listens
to his mother's crying. He learns, under
the henhouse, the weasel's way.

If he had Becky Wilson here,
he'd make her confess that she had lied
about how his parents make him drink
from the toilet and sleep
in a rabbit cage. A pale and skinny
clump of literature, always out past
the curfew of acceptance, behind
enemy lines of imagination, he plays
torturer of the inquisition,
brandishing the garden shears.

On the playground, while he practices
impossible contortions
of introspection, they bloody his nose,
hating the secrets hidden
in the scriptorium of his oddness.
They crack his sharp ribs, desperate
for the futures he reads
on the blackboard of his eyelid.
They shake from his green satchel
two dung beetles, most of a Mabel
Garden Spider, a scab from his skinned
knee, a sliver of bailing wire,
a cat's eye marble, and a quart
of Quick Start lighter fluid.

He can't stop thinking about apricots
shriveling, paint belching, tiny frogs
dripping above matches. Outside his secret
fort, sycamores yellow and cackle.

SLUGS

Sometimes when I sit on a bench
and watch people strolling by, I think
this one will die of congestive
heart failure, that one will blacken
in a mattress fire, this young mother
will end tripping on a toy ninja, that cop
choking on a peppermint stick.

When I was eleven, neighborhood boys
and I would gather slugs from our mothers'
gardens. They were vaguely beautiful
like the inside of clam shells, sunlight
in gasoline, a cobalt and ash flake sky
reflected in water. We'd meet
at the lake with our mason jars and float out
a wriggling pile on a piece of plywood.

Before long, the birds would come.
We'd stare at the diving beaks
picking slugs off one by one. Some,
dislodged by the commotion, fell—
or, as we liked to think, drowned
themselves, desperate with horror.

Rachel Smoke was the most voluptuous
of the three Smoke sisters.
After we had scraped up the \$20,
she sprinkled salt in her mouth,
cupped a fat slug in her palm,
then slowly drug it across
the edge of her bright pink tongue.
Now that would be, we
moaned, the way to go.

ITINERANT FACE

My face makes plans
to visit every town named Normal
and creates a collection schedule
for dentures lost at amusement parks.

My face travels as a burlap sack; it believes
in what grows wild. It experiments
with sullenness like a toad that's done
with being teased. In it, moments sew themselves
up like change in a miser's coat.

In the bookstore I ask my face why
it isn't smiling. "I thought you'd enjoy
Masks From Around The World," I say.
It's clearly more interested in
The History and Future of Amputation.
But it's learning to accept its fate, to lay itself
out like the shirt mother wanted you to wear.

When blind fingers come stroking for the silver
lining in every bone, my face is a door,
not the door of perception that once
you pass through you can never go back.
No, the other door.

THE CURRENT POINT OF EVOLUTION

Help I have fallen into my mouth.
My party scowl, my glorious
double helix of hopes, my phalanx
of tasteful ties. The whole bestiary
collapsed into darkness
the shape of a yawn. How now
will the waiter bring my grilled cheese?

Here systems of grammar take on mutant
shapes and wriggle their speckled
tentacles. Linguistic theories dance,
while logic plays choreographer,
flexing his trapezius and shouting,
“Mean something.”

But their fate is that of all
refugee sounds— *tarantula*,
rutabaga, *quibble*— all chomped
like peanuts. Abstractions,
entropy, manifest destiny, love
become jujubes.

Even if I rode the tide of my tongue
across the glaciers of my teeth,
my lips are guarded.

TOAD MAN

You will suspect the shadows of his trousers. The words "solitary beast" never seemed less funny. But don't ask Toad for his story. He doesn't want yours, though he will listen if listening means staring at the welts on his flipper hands. With sad professorial eyes he will weep for lost gypsy dancers burning red and purple.

Hunch in the trash-gray behind Delluchi's. Tell him a joke about crows and snow. Toad will retch muddy water, snot ballooning in his lime-flecked face. Buy a few origami cowboys and he will write you a riddle on a soup bone. A sip of Old Duke and he'll swear oblivion is owl screeches or the scalloped worm of the spine, the shy keyhole and the dark mouth.

APPETITE

Beetles, black and blue and sewer
pipe green, painting on the bruised
eye-lids of plum trees those frescos
of need, which are the truths
of the mouth, working the way
I will never kiss your ear or bite
your night-lotioned shoulder.

I did bite my tongue laughing
maniacally after choking
on a pop tart. Christ, my body
wouldn't have been found for days.

Over dinner at a diner, I hear
one woman ask another,
"Have you lost your appetite?"
Appetite being the gumming
we're born with, the unknown
fire that consumes water, the flavor
of tube worms and star coral,
what I know to be the taste
of Jupiter's moons.

IN THE STOMACH

Tree frogs gargle hillsides
the color of smudged carbon
paper and Old Testament Kings.

Hours are butterfly punches.
Seeds of hunger pressed
in the dried flowers
of our tongues. Moths
streaked on windows, a fluttering
in the stomach, love dream.

Death's eyelids bob, signal
buoys going mad
in a bone meal sky.

Dancing like a shaman,
the headless rooster
crows with its feet.

Instinct, convulsing habit,
graceless need, pure electric
will, this is how we keep going

lonely as mountain gods,
one-armed picadors,
wounded jesters. Yes.

THE BELLY DANCER

1. The Village Women

In the puppetry of the moon
we are all victims of rhythms and engines.
Dark queen of mirrors and shields.
Her secrets are our secrets.
What is power but controlling
what seeks to control you?

2. The village Men

We are not enough for the moment
she has created. Our longing
consumes us. We are singed holes,
outlines of our former existence,
with bits of lust buzzing
like flies at the frayed edges.
Deliver us to desire. Wreck us
on the thorns of a bad night. Lightning,
strike. Burn something up. Please.

3. Her Body

She dances because of blood and rose
silks and jasmine whispers alive
with the greatest lovers of the past.
Surely she moves to feel them
against her skin.

4. Her Mind

Dance sleeps in stillness
like potential fire in a match. Naked feet
and finger cymbals did not exist
before they were ideas. Each movement
turns another puzzle piece,
slides another mystery closer to home.

5. The Jewel in Her Navel

Because every facet lusts
for light and because desire
requires constant churning to become itself.

UBIQUITOUS WITCH PARABLE

A dark snake of lagoon water swallows
a scarf of moonlight orange as poison
arrow frogs. Moths hover like pale
faces of little girls. Every time
some hope is cheated, lightning bugs
flicker green. These senses
are so unreliable, hitchhikers
in the night.

Still we cork our thoughts like a jar of wasps,
certain somewhere there are songs
without teeth, where beauty is the easy
ventriloquism that bears up the night.
The coming morning is not even a dream
swimming under the skin
of the moon.

Another group is going down
to her candy cottage. Ceramic
knives sing songs from the womb,
while she sugar coats the bitter pill. Desire
is not a riddle tied in knots
of wind. Like the collar-choked
cormorant, it dives for what's wriggling,
unmindful of what follows.

MONSTRANCE

Peek through a slit in time's belly
back to the beginning
before daydreams, in the dawn

of paradox, when is and not
were still on speaking terms,
it hatched from some distant world

in the thirteenth Zodiac sign
to hump the mountains into shape
and cut the river beds with its tail.

It tussled with Leviathan for kicks
and nipped Behemoth behind the ear.
Then it ate destinies like chicken parts

and spat fish bones in the faces of the gods.
It throws images like a fun house mirror.
But it balances, on the tip of its snout,

the universe like a small bird.

CLAIRVOYANT

We had to guess at the contents
of the bag she carried. Perhaps
shrouded in tissue the shrunken head
of the chess-playing lobster boy,
a ram's brooding tongue that told the hour
of your death, a five-pointed amulet
trapping women who smiled too much.

We knew the old woman had been a carnival
fortuneteller. She'd squeeze my elbow too hard
turning my small palm over. Children must
be shielded, she said, from the gaze of the Hollow Man.

I worried she knew about the drawings
in the shoe box under my bed
and what we did to Barbie in the shallow
pit out behind the Thompson place.
When I dream of her it is in a city
where all the windows have cataracts.

THE FIRST DATE OF THE RAZOR EATER AND THE SNAKE CHARMER

She almost always hears the brutal music of her father's voice. His silence is an elegantly veiled threat slithering like light under the closet door. Only when she performs does the quiet shed its desiccated skin. She wishes her desires were more brittle like bones in canned salmon. But what she says is "Posing akimbo, head thrown back, gulping abandon, that's for fools. You've got to place life and death flat on your tongue, sculpt your cheeks to the edges."

"No. No. No," he replies swallowing her puckered fingers in his quick hand. "The cobra's hood is down, slick cable connecting nothing. The rattler's tail is still. The white that gives the cottonmouth its name remains unseen. The gaboon viper is a lustrous, turquoise-tinged bracelet."

All through pie and coffee she watches the Red Man pinball machine go yellow and green and purple like a bruise in reverse. Little minnows swim in her wrists. He keeps biting back his words. She can't stop thinking about reaching into wire cages.

ECCE PUER

The little wizard tries on mother's rings
and cuts holes in her stockings
to make his masks. The four-eyed alchemist
mixes cooking sherry, turpentine,
and mud into potions that will turn
termites into giant-sized minions.

He will never outgrow
the starship captain clutching
the throttle of father's bendable
reading lamp, exploring his study
full of secrets like those whispered
from another room at the edge of sleep.

Many worlds that were not
come to pass. Contemplate
the truths of science fiction.
Star Trek's Mr. Spock admires
Godzilla because they are both
half-breeds and improbably lovable.
Every image of otherness finds
humanity in some alien scene.

And so, Robbie the Robot
reads *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
and peeks into the holodeck
to watch a cozy family
of pointed-eared logicians play
multi-dimensional chess by the fire.

Our boy hero knows nothing
so readily found can be very durable.
The spaceman may rescue
the Federation Princess only to learn
she is a changeling spy. Anything
may become something else.
But there is a point past which
metamorphosis cannot be reversed,
the sinister cocoon cannot be removed,
the mind control power of the Atomic Brain
cannot be undone.

PARCHMENT

The brittle slide of metal
when the temperature drops
into bitter cold, the cracking
of a shell, the warping of a door
snuggling into its frame.

What are dreams but the love
of getting hurt? The dogs of hunger
nosing through trash? The prayers
of briars for the taste of skin?

All the guttural
sounds of desire dusted
with their own deaths
measure the slow
gray shadows of growing longer.
Dragonflies, making dusky love,
write the infinite
sadness of new beginnings—
their bodies caught
in a flurry of parchment wings.

BELTS

Wear one twisted
and it means you're
in love. Two twists
and you'll have twins or marry

a horse of a different color. At work
they're doomed like Atlas
to hold things up.
Tricky

the way they'll miss
a loop. In closets they hang
like drying snake skins, each
with a single tooth.

IN THE FOREST OF WHISPERS

Bells with their stentorian tongues
cut out hang as warnings
from branches laid
like fingers against
the divot above the upper
lip of sunset, where the red
wind makes the sound
of blood rushing through ears that come
alive with truth. Even the leaves seem
afraid of the forgetful mouths
of men. They remind us of notes
in trembling hands.

THE LAST ROPE

-After Vasko Popa

Once a rope could amount to something.
Lure the little brown eel out of its cave.
Lariat the moon out of the Devil's maw.
Taunt the most gluttonous smoke. Bully time:
"I'm going to divot the soles of your feet."

The last rope crawls between constellations.
At each fiery crossroads ties itself a knot
to remember what it could make of itself:
escapes, horizons, towers of death,
the plight of man stretched over the abyss.

CROWSFEET, POSSUMTAIL, AND MOONWORT

By the pond she doesn't remember legends about animals becoming plants when they die. But she does know some stories about the moon liking to play dress up. On the evening news we see an armless girl making veal parmesan with her feet and putting in contact lenses with a big toe. Later, watching spiders caught between the pane and screen of a window winter warped, I ask her what the moon is disguised as now. A fossil, she tells me. I think it was Kierkegaard who wrote "I myself am a myth about myself." She stops me with a kiss. The baby octopus moon pretends to be a kite tangled in a leafless tree.

II
ESSENTIALS OF CHANCE

SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY SHE TOUCHES

I'm watching the way she coaxes
him into hitting her again.
It is an intimate thing, weirdly
ritualistic, like my mother burying
a burnt turkey in the snow.
Something about the way she touches
the tip of her tongue to her bloody lip—
about the way his hand, red and hovering
somewhere between striking and reaching out—
reminds me of being a boy
in the backyard at twilight, waiting
for the wind to make something beautiful
from the tears of pear trees.

THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD

When CeCe Williams crept up
on her husband, the pastor
of our local congregation who had
had sexual congress with one of his flock
and fallen asleep on the couch,
watching Johnny Carson,
she crazy-glued his hand
to his exhausted member.
Then she threw on all the lights—
put “Sympathy for the Devil”
on the stereo— and woke
the whole neighborhood
to teach us how hard
it is to let go
of what you love.

ESSENTIALS OF CHANCE

In the USA, the average number of people struck by lightning is just under 100 a year. Ex-park ranger Roy C. Sullivan (USA) was struck by lightning a world record seven times.

Once he could think about other things,
scan *The Dictionary of Angels* and find
Seraphim were plentiful
as species of moths. Meanwhile,
his girlfriend sternly clipped
the islands of her toenails.
Her foot was a mystery he wanted
to explore in some bold Columbus way.

For a long time now he's jumped
at sundown's glint of light. He reads
weather reports like holy writ. The fulcrum
of reality phases in and out like a florescent bulb
in the throes of manic depression.

His eyebrows thin as new blisters remind him
he can't stay invisible. He knows
that rodents are not careless or less wise
than the talons of the dark. Nor is it generosity
that runs pink through their ringed tails.

Their dry skeletons are temples
to the essentials of chance.
Their broken-toe-keys
unlock the mysteries of bingo
halls and one-armed bandits.

So he gets a new job as a scarecrow
watching the horizon darken
like a wound congealing.

WOMAN SHOOTS BOIL ON HER FOOT

Is it really impossible to understand?
She'd probably looked for too long
at the pus like that awful yellow

wallpaper in the guest room. Resentment
builds up like an electric charge, the foraging-
rat-sounds of a husband's snoring,

a wife's insincere laughter at a dinner party.
Haven't you ever had a blackhead that resisted
fingernails and sewing needle? Think

of her sense of impending relief, like opening
the gas station door after needing to piss
for 70 miles. Euphoric,

she wipes sweat from her eyes then props
her foot on the Craftsman workbench,
carefully putting the vodka bottle on the floor.

GODDESS NEXT DOOR

She could change traffic signals with mantras and control the weather at will. She could straighten the spines of old ladies in the A & P. She convinced infants to part with their tears, made pears dance to French folk-tunes, and taught magpies charades. The shrinks said she was delusional. But I think She knew the cat's meow before electrodes.

CASSANDRA SYNDROME

Heaven was on fire. The sky smoked
with a Pete's Cola advertisement.
My grandfather, a boy who had never seen
a car, much less a crop duster
converted into a skywriter, didn't wait
to read the rest of the message. He'd heard
Reverend Quick preach many times on how
the world would PERISH in a wrath of fire.
So he took off like a hunted squirrel.
With his britches still unzipped,
he ran the three miles from Izora Brown
and her daddy's woodpile
to his own family's farmhouse,
where he couldn't get anyone to look.
His mama, mending a quilting loom, told him
to quit such foolishness. And older sister
Jessie said she would maybe come see later,
after the floors were swept.
No one believed his warning.
No one could see the writing
for the wall.

THE VILLAGE WELL

As a little boy he thought if you fell down
the village well you'd keep falling

all the way to where the teeming dead
hunger for the living. Bones

and a painted cork ball lost
many springs ago are all

that materialize. In the shafts of light
all the gold, vermilion and maroon

floating down the stone throat
turn to phantom fighting fish,

reminiscent of the elder's coffins crafted
to honor whatever the deceased

most loved, death taking
on life's watery shape. Echoes

of bawling cows crowd
the yellow salt lick.

JADEY BLACK

No telling how many yearnings I've twisted like rooster necks. So many men with faces like skilletts. Trouble, trouble, trouble that's all I've been knowing, but Jadey is a good girl. She used to tell me, "Granny, you make your way piloting a scarf of smoke and blood." She'd knock out a tooth, carve it into a little fish and wrap it in strands of black hair. She called darning needles devil's chatterboxes. She wanted to know how I got them to stop telling me secrets and wondered why valentines are trimmed in flour sack and raccoon hide. She never was afraid of my gout, but fretted over ladders. She asked, "How can anybody trust such a long straight smile?"

IN THE BONES OF HIS HANDS, HIS SOUL

He'd always been afraid
it would happen. Besides,

even if you weren't jumpy,
his was a shitty job: the cold

air writing threatening notes
in the bones of his hands, his soul

escaping in every blast
of breath.

He should have quit before
the steel door slammed behind him.

He never had any impulses
to just give up. With his 79 cent

lighter he burned meat labels
and melted cow fat. Trapped

in a purely human equation of waiting,
he wrapped himself in asbestos insulation.

It's not so different, he thinks,
from when David Kerr and the rest

of the Hellions locked him in his
Jr. High School locker. Just

keep your head, show you're brave
and the watching fates will be impressed

and help you find a way out. But
that hadn't been him in the locker. Delirious,

he had been with Kerr and the others, while Marvin
Buttons was caged in the locker.

Marvin who wore the same dirty,
red sweatshirt everyday, with his long

hooked nose, and his girlish eyes always
looking down through wire rim glasses.

Getting sleepy now, he felt
the fluids in his body hardening,

a lazily droning airplane, frost buzzing
like a gnat at the corners of his eye.

His rescuers arrived after 72 hours,
a Guinness World Record. That

first night in the hospital he dreamed of horned
grotesques, born from sides of beef,

scuttling on broken and distended ribs.
In the middle of this orgy of meat twisted

in cubist violence, barely seen, like the visible
stinger of a wasp otherwise crawling with ants,

protruded the tip of a boy's nose
and the edge of wire framed glasses.

3 NIGHTMARES OF TRANSFORMATION

Sleepy fingers fumble
for the bathroom light. Stuffed
in the toilet a tiger shark's head
begins to chant, "Love
your one-eared teddy bear.
Love the lie bristling
like a badger rising
from the black hole of truth."
I blink and on top
of the toilet seat leers my little league
helmet and some dirty
plum colored towels.

I enter Bio Lab closet 206 and find
Laura floating in formaldehyde, shriveled
face bearded in squid-like tentacles,
she turns up one milky eye. I stroke
the side of the jar then hurl it
against the darkness.

The scared ear of my hand cups
against my chest while they compare
their "Zipper Club" scars.
Mom and Dad, Grandma, dead ten years,
Uncle Norm with his prosthetic
arm and his enormous
hearing aid, they will speak
of nothing else. Nurses
burst in with baseball bats and start
smashing up everyone as though
they were made of clay. Someone wonders
should we just see
if the table is still a table.

LIGHT & HEAVY

I do not know which is worse
being a memory so hulking fat
your spindly bones are about to snap,
or an unstrung ghost puppet
with wild guesses for a backbone,
insecurity for a left shoe.

While blue siren lights played
over the abandoned tricycle next door,
the police talked to the man, whose
liver-spotted hands triangular
as fish heads shook so badly
he could hardly hold his cigarette.
I had heard the accusations, the shattering
plates of rage. I wondered if it was over
a VISA bill, some other lover, or was it just
the way people find each other by drawing blood.

"He lives alone. Poor crazy bastard.
Wife died years ago," a neighbor told me
while the dryers spun our double loads.

AT THE NORTHGATE STOP

a cadaver got on the bus today,
wearing lions and yellowing lambs
snuggled in a dream of dirty clouds.
The zombie had beige tufts
of ear hair and colonies
of acne warring on his face.
Everyone tried to ignore him.
On a silver mouth harp,
he blew a few notes
like hogs chewing snake heads
and sour figs at twilight.
Eyelids and newspapers fluttered.

Someone's infant started pointing
and crying so that the dead kid
rubbed the cigar burns on the
thinnest of arms and looked down
at the steel-bolted parasite climbing
his crippled leg, like he was noticing,
finally, a much beloved dog
that had just finished
squatting on a neighbor's rug.

WAITING FOR LOVE TO MAKE MY PHONE EXPLODE

Most of my life is waiting.
Waiting for the acceptance letter to announce
my future's arrival at the banquet. Waiting
for my nerve to get its sea legs.

Waiting for the refund check, the meaningful silence,
the doctor to say turn and cough. Waiting
to stop nodding like a funeral director.

Waiting fills my mouth like a second tongue.
I am delinquent in all technologies
save waiting. No matter
how many self improvement books I ransack,
I am sullen and half-hearted in jobs,
hobbies, community service,
spirituality, and productive living.

No matter how often reason harangues
like a street preacher,
I keep lying in bed past noon,
waiting for what I need
to stretch out and touch my thigh.

BITS OF NOWHERE

Along Jackal Beach
dunes are gray caterpillars
of loneliness, crueler
than Assyrian kings. The sea turns
more and more private, yet
generic, a lap dancer held hostage
in my retina. Salt tickles
like sickness in my nostrils. At the docks
an old bulldog with a facial
tick slurps up squid legs. Tourists step
off charter boats, trotting
strings of red snapper,
while old captain Wilson
loads crates onto the Miss Alabama
before another trip around
the western hemisphere.
Gulls of my mind snatch
at little bits of nowhere,
devour their own hunger and the cry
it makes. Coming
down the shore I run into
a ring of dolls buried head down,
imitations of life seeming to chase
each other upside down.

US AND THEM

Her hair on my pillow is the peace I'd get as a kid coming in from the ocean to the snoring air conditioning and the smells of coconut and perch cooking. I want to write a poem for the tenderness I feel for her knee socks but instead I dream a solitary kestrel turns into a pale winter sun and finally into my father's face bearded in foam and steam. No matter how I keep his head submerged under my beet-colored resentment, I'll always be in his study full of books too difficult for me. The past should be more pliant. I hope here in this bed she and I are parent-less, not caring about the legacies that crawl like Escher lizards along a Möbius. But she may be lost in pills fetched for her mother. She may be dreaming of her daddy's flannel shirts and her opening bedroom door, the wand of light that doesn't reach.

III

ROAD SIGNS FOR ABIDING

THE ABRIDGED FIELD GUIDE TO SILENCES

Some silences teach us how to read shoes. Others you follow like pinpricks of firelight in a pig's eye. Some ask you to name the current President before the pages of history fall like crippled birds into a polar sea. Odd ones taste like caramel or thistles. White ones are janitors turning mop heads into schooners. One or two pluck curiosity and disgust off the back of your neck. Lingering ones hunch like forgotten gods, stitches in a smile rising in a polished spoon.

THE OTHER MUSEUM

In the Great Rotunda, the replica
of a train dreams of when it was a killer
whale that swallowed sinners.
"There is no graffiti" is spray-painted
on the side of a sleeping boxcar.
Lazarus, who resembles a salami sandwich
left under a car seat, buttonholes
every passing kid to warn them about
sunspots, fast food, riding lawnmowers.

In the Alcove of Unanswered Questions,
queries flop like dying fish.
Who was the first to taste teeth?
What do mirrors imagine in the dark?

In the Gallery of Insomnia,
Cain and his brother sell knives
to stab sleep. Dark mice nibble
the piping off pajamas, and
Ahab punches tickets
in the Wax Exhibition of Retired
Archetypes while Quixote leers
at a *Penthouse*. His automated
windmill charger galumphs
in and out of action.

Beneath the Arch of Failure,
Cupid convinces Phoenician sailors
to believe in the navigational
accuracy of Love,
then rides off with the Mongol Hordes.

In the Hall of Undiscovered Books,
a treatise hangs like winter
light in skim milk, trackless
as the blank page, a volume far
above you, the last moment
of a luckless diver.

**APHORISMS OF ONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF LEGION
BECAUSE HE IS MANY**

When it comes to diatribes on depraved
appetites cold roast is often more indignant
than wormy apples.

Everything beautiful demands restitution
for the betrayal of metaphor.

The folded note is both tame as a gravy boat
and sexy as a pitchfork.

Need is desire in sensible shoes.
Regret, a dancer with a pet thorn in one slipper.

Logic is a narcissistic cockatrice.
Devils are branded gods
and gods are gilded devils.

There is an indecision that stands
like Buridan's ass trying to decide
between two identical bales of hay.

And there is an indecision paralyzed
by possibility like Cold War defectors
in the aisles of Super Wal-Mart.

Some analogies argue about whether
they failed because of cheap grace or bad faith.

Some truths dream of a cat heaven
where there are perfect flea collars,
others of one where there are no fleas.

Some truths prefer the company
of crabgrass.

Some truths put on black berets
and false mustaches. Others hold
their breath till they are blue
as platypus bills.

Some poke out their eyes
with geraniums. Others curl up

with a golden cactus.

Some are broken-jawed pliers.
The rest are skinned nails.

The wounds we cannot live
without define us the way the night
sky outlines the stars.

The wounds are the stars
and the night the definition.

We are engaged with language.
Words are our only weapons.

People who live in glass houses
should wear mirrored clothes.

For every aphorism there is an equal
and opposite aphorism.

DIRECTIVES

Grackles, scatter like pieces
of a story. Sweethearts
of ash and butter, finger
squint-star light, draw
a spine down the highway.

Tiers of time, pile rock.
Careless boy, search for a treasure
to replace mother's smashed geode.

Crippling moments, restless
as beach fleas, announce yourselves.
Cautious consumer, do not so easily
pass up Jack the Ripper's garters.

Moons, gossip like monkeys
anticipating things born
between the pull of tides.

Fleshy fruits, dream of a day
when the air will not be
a thousand different flutterings.

Death devolves
into a little girl plucking
fountain pennies.

**TEMPTATION RECONSIDERED AFTER CONFLATING THE LEGENDS
OF SAINT ANTHONY AND SAINT BERNARD**

In my memory, all
the penitent wanted
was a laying
on of hands. After all
those stone saints

worn smooth with kissing,
she was ready to kneel
before flesh and blood.
Her ankle burned,

knee throbbed
for touch. But

in Schongauer's etching
freakish beasts yank
the monkish robes.
Twisted claws

and boiling fists
pluck his poor beard,
cudgel his bald head
bloody. Fiery whiskers

lick his skin. Bat-winged,
goat-faced, spiny-tailed,
troll-nosed, death-bristled
hard-horned, fanged

and howling—
did such a menagerie

of evil really spring
from a hot prickle
in her breasts,
a quivering?

ASLEEP IN THE HOUSE OF BEING

I had just stolen Batgirl's silver
pancake makeup case and convinced
her to elope to the Sugar Bowl
when you interrupted me
to tell me your dream. You said,
"There's an ontological ambiguity
to a sewing needle: one end wanting to prick
the other blinding itself." I asked, "When
did your breasts become sea urchins?"
You heard something. So we climbed down
into a cellar to look for it. No light
except for the flashlight you dropped.
When you picked it up, I had vanished.

Under the folds of a problematic purple sky,
we climbed down into a bed
of dark mussels. You cut your foot.
And I kissed it. With a flash
of moon-lit eye, a startled heron
flew out over the waters.
Silence and some feathers.

HYPOTHESIS CONTRARY TO FACT

Because early man was constantly stalked
by aerial predators that forced him to take
refuge under ground, hell is high
above the clouds and heaven deep
in the sheltering earth. If scientists discover

Fiddle-Headed Hamlet Sharks swimming in place
and the past starts standing on corners selling
t-shirts that read I ♥ Second Chances, schemes
might float up out of peat bogs before
it was too late. I was lulling myself

to sleep when I realized most chickens could fly
if they had really good hypnotists. Alexander the Great
was probably daydreaming of his scab collection
during all that time he was supposed to be listening
to Aristotle. If Hitler had had elephantiasis

and just-war theorists would mutely sip lemonade
then cartoon characters could finally learn
not to look down when they overshoot the edge
of the precipice. I must have known Betsy Bennington
would turn into a beauty. I even suspected I would meet

a friend of hers one day at the airport and discover
that while entertaining every summer in Milan,
Betsy always tells how I never zipped rocks at her
and even took her to a few of those school dances
with candles on the tables.

ERRATA

For snake read trust. For stick understand poking around in the anthill of time.

For walking substitute sitting on the toilet with your legs falling asleep when a woman crawls out of the cabinet under the sink and gives you a little doll of yourself.

For lonely nights substitute Midas admiring his pile of burnished apples.

For wizard substitute the jilted chump sending a nice wedding present.

For the story of the urchin raised by trolls read spending \$29.99 on the latest edition of *Seduction for Cretins*.

For the little trash-can-spider, hanging on a string of spittle, substitute a dark star falling on a moonbeam.

For errors substitute errors.
For eyes substitute splinters.

**A FEW OF MYTHOLOGY'S BIG GUNS ANSWER
THE QUESTIONS OF AN AGING NEWS STAND POET**

Welcome, ancient fathers!
You know this thrumming
walk of humanity,
this slouching into commerce.
What does it mean?

Job: "The are no answers,
only snot-nosed brats
and more cattle to lose in their season."

Cronos: "With flint teeth,
I bit off my father's dick."

Utnapishtim: "Death can be nice."

Once I cast my blossoms
before the womb
mandala, prayed with my body
for the mysteries only art
can reveal. Why did I brave
goddesses with flailing octopus
hair, dark eye sockets
full of teeth, round hips
curving beyond horror.

Job: "Read romance novels. Fly a kite.
Eat potato salad."

In my youth I begged for the dark smile
of a mystical orifice, the significance of zero.
I fed on stale cheese kisses and danced
through seamless nights. What did it come to?

Cronos: "The dark, vein-webbed father cock,
my scepter of power. Can you dig it?"

I sought for truth to hike her dress
above her hips and let me have my few
strokes. Love came to me like a crocodile.
But my bones have softened in this lukewarm

blood. What happened to my passion?

Utnapishtim: "The same nagging family.
The same inescapable me, forever and forever."

I see death in the trees
flying off like shadows. People
spreading their cares on chili
dogs with little plastic wands.
Skid marks in the parking lot are burnt
corpses of horseshoe crabs.
Everyday it gets harder to see
my wife's face. I fear my sons
will never find me.

Cronos: "Bye-bye wiener."

Job: "Only daycare
and cattle farts."

Utnapishtim: "A one-minute egg."

THALES OF MILETUS AND TARZAN'S JANE

The Master of Adventure, the Jewels of Opar,
Leering Lizard Men: Is there no unity in these
phrases? No perversity in the tempted animal?

To ask is to flail at swarms of crazy wrists.
Forget peonies and the taste of plum sauce.
Use fussbudget as a safety word.

Still think you are the root of a conjugated verb?
Does the lantern flame shimmer? Wind stream?
Why trace tributaries along forearm or leaf?

No, the long and open use of the next far vine.
Match tips dark and occasional as bruises.
Origins are the only truly shocking things.

Will our hero or the crocodile emerge from the
underwater ballet? Is the imagination prisoner
or drum that we should beat it with sticks?

Cheetah will fetch help before the python
reaches the still stunned form. In a game of
bones moonlight has oh so many bodies.

Do the jaws of insects eat all silence? Who
has put a jungle where my head should be?
Why instead of a head do I have the night sky?

Your fear is punctuated by end-stopped ellipses.
Transformations are not too dirigible. Learn
to forget your father's Geiger counter necktie.

Do people who like no one else doubly prove the
importance of sleep? Man or beast, will you hide
me in your eye? Have we always been together?

I would give up all metaphors for one word
to describe the dead carpenter clutching his saw.

PUPPETRY

I.

Coiled upon itself like a pigmy rattlesnake,
 no hands to put in the pockets
 of doubt, a force becomes aware
 that it is the solution
 to everything except itself.

The stage darkens
 where children hunt for seeds of fire,
 and fire becomes a fastidious eater.

In the introspection of the bone,
 all else pauses.

II.

When do katydids become our longing?
 When thoughtfulness
 becomes the skull of the spring moon?

What is love?
 An electric karma chain saw?
 A melting popsicle?

Then what is death?
 A father's orange laughter?

III.

Subtract the secrets of the dead
 from the praise of liturgists.
 Divide by the flattery of drunks.
 Multiply by the mute, calloused fists
 of the poor, the palsied cursing
 fists of the poor. Add up
 the logics that fall into what if
 like flies sucked down
 the pitcher of a carnivorous plant.
 Does the answer change?

Paper lanterns burn with shadowy threats.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MY LAST IDEA

My last idea was convinced that time
had something allegorically to do
with birds. Clock hands are crippled wings.

My last idea was comforted that Einstein said
he only had one idea his whole life.

My last idea took classes in epistemology and baking.

My last idea as a calloused stub of a finger
never became the Emperor of Prodding
or even Assistant to Regional Poking.

My last idea was just another suicide
not the bill of a transparent sailfish.

My last idea wanted a parting kiss.
Its tongue, a tiny red fox squirrel,
cavorted between its teeth.

My last idea fell out of context
like the henna-colored roach
that dropped from the hole in the ceiling
of my first apartment, while I knelt
between pale knees.

EVENING IN EARLY WINTER

From the sleeves of your dark coat
woven out of silence, you dip your cold finger
into me, dial the number of my sadness.

Ash falls from the pockets of your eyes.
The pain shimmers like light on water.
It can't find a form that will suit it.

A giant grouper swallows every quick,
silver thought. The sleek, black, muscular spirits
circle, waiting for the coronation of their king.

There was a name I needed.
I had forgotten what is coming.
Now it is too late to believe.

NEW STANDARDIZED TEST FOR DEMENTIA

Identify a pencil by

- (A) letting it become your eye
- (B) asking a librarian
- (C) stabbing it into a kneecap
- (D) pencils died out about the same time as teeth marks and algebra

The current President of The United States is

- (A) happily married to television
- (B) one who steps on rubies thinking they are cockroaches
- (C) the infinite emerging from approval ratings which you have denied
- (D) a toaster with epaulets named satisfaction and accomplishment

Draw a clock face. Which of the following does it most nearly resemble?

- (A) a diary entry of no date
- (B) a road sign for abiding
- (C) a snake hole full of price tags
- (D) the cartoon goose egg of the mind

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