NOMADS WITH SAMSONITE: A POETRY
MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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The poems that comprise this manuscript were composed during the past five years, primarily for poetry workshops with Lisa Lewis, Ai, and Alfred Corn, and are written in three main aesthetics: a longer-lined, narrative, post-confessional aesthetic; a shorter-lined, lyrical aesthetic; and a postmodern, experimental, indeterminate aesthetic. The critical introduction discusses influences, poetics, and composition processes applicable to this manuscript.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
A. INTRODUCTION

The following manuscript, Nomads with Samsonite, consists of poems written over a five year period (2000-2005) during my PhD studies at Oklahoma State University. The majority of the poems were written for poetry workshops with Lisa Lewis, Ai, and Alfred Corn, and I have incorporated many of their suggestions, along with those of my colleagues, into these versions. Approximately twelve of the total thirty-nine poems in this manuscript were written outside of a workshop setting. Three main aesthetics operate in this manuscript: 1) a longer-lined, narrative, post-confessional aesthetic influenced by writers such as Larry Levis and C. K. Williams and exemplified by poems such as “The Poet at Seventeen,” “Hiding,” and “River;” 2) a shorter-lined, lyrical aesthetic influenced by writers such as William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Tate and exemplified by poems such as “Central League Hockey Night,” “Survival,” and “Hamlet’s Letter from Exile;” and 3) a postmodern, experimental, indeterminate aesthetic (as defined by Majorie Perloff in The Poetics of Indeterminacy) influenced by writers such as Louis Zukofsky, John Ashbery, and Eleni Sikelianos and exemplified by poems like “The Inebriate Airplane,” “Crêpes Dentelles,” and “In Progress.” Of course, none of these aesthetics exists as an independent entity; there are numerous points of overlap amongst my influences and in my own manuscript, and my movement from one aesthetic to another demonstrates my exploratory desire, not a sense of progression. Currently, I remain open to writing in all three of these aesthetics depending upon the subject matter
and my own mood. I am also inspired by what Juliana Spahr, in her essay “Spiderwasp or Literary Criticism,” calls “the most distinct characteristic of work by emerging poets of the 1990s: the tendency to violate the aesthetic separations of various schools and to deliberately create an aesthetic of joining” (409).

Thematically, the manuscript is bound together by the reoccurring motifs of travel, geography, dreams, perception, self-definition, and death. (The word “foreign” appears six times, and the word “dream” appears twenty-five times.) In this sense, my manuscript bears a thematic resemblance to the work of Elizabeth Bishop, whose The Complete Poems: 1927-1979 I read several times over the past five years. (My poem “Unpacked” directly refers to her poem “One Art.”) Other books and collections of utmost importance to me during this time include: Arthur Rimbaud’s Complete Works, Selected Letters, James Joyce’s Ulysses, William Carlos Williams’ Selected Poems, Robert Lowell’s Selected Poems, Larry Levis’ Winter Stars, C. K. Williams’ Tar, James Tate’s Worshipful Company of Fletchers, John Ashbery’s Selected Poems, Mark Levine’s Enola Gay, Brenda Shaughnessy’s Interior with Sudden Joy, Eleni Sikelianos’ Earliest Worlds, and Loren Goodman’s Famous Americans. These are texts I have read and re-read for models, ideas, and inspiration.

In her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” the poet Lyn Hejinian writes:” “Two dangers never cease threatening in the world: order and disorder” (653). The earliest poems in my manuscript—primarily the ones written in a post-confessional aesthetic—show a marked concern with managing the latter danger, while the more recent poems in my manuscript, written in a more experimental, indeterminate aesthetic, show more of a concern with dismantling the former danger. Overall, I remain committed to recognizing the necessity
of order and disorder, and to managing a balance between these two extremes. As Roland Barthes remarks on contemporary writing in an interview entitled “Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes,” “It’s always the same problem: to keep meaning from taking hold, but without abandoning meaning, under the threat of falling into the worst meaning, nonmeaning” (211).

B. Exercises in Post-Confractionalism

When I arrived at Oklahoma State University in the fall of 2000, I had just completed an MA at the University of Central Oklahoma, and in my thesis manuscript, entitled East-Middle-West-, I cited the influence of four contemporary poets: Yehuda Amichai, Czeslaw Milosz, Michael Ondaatje, and Lee Young-Li. However, I had read little of contemporary American poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Jorie Graham, and I had little interest in much of what I read in contemporary literary journals because of my overly Romantic notion of poetry. My first year at Oklahoma State University was marked by an attempt to “contemporize” myself. In my first workshop, I struggled to understand the highly ironic work in Stephanie Brown’s Allegory of the Supermarket and the highly intellectual work in Jorie Graham’s Swarm, two of the texts that had the biggest impact on me. In other courses, I read literary theory by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Roland Barthes, which opened up new ways of looking at language, and modern epics by Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, which revealed the modernist “rage for order” to be less than omnipresence or unified. Much of this material I absorbed and would draw on later, but poetically, I
engaged a post-confessional aesthetic influenced by Larry Levis’ *Winter Stars* and C. K. Williams’ *Tar*.

In *The Post-Confessionals*, Earl G. Ingersoll, Judith Kitchen, and Stan Sanvel Rubin use the term "post-confessional" to describe poets who came to prominence in the 1980s and who write with a rather solid sense of authentic personal experience related to actual history as conveyed through carefully crafted language and form (16-21). The poems “The Poet at Seventeen,” “Inedible,” “Hiding,” “River,” and “Medicine” are all written in this aesthetic and directly influenced by the above-mentioned work of Levis and Williams. Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* and Lisa Lewis’ *The Unbeliever* also served as models. This narrative, post-confessional style attracted me as a way to approach certain past events that I struggled to understand in the overall context of my life. In this sense, and without realizing it at the time, my motives were very much in line with much of the original impetus behind confessional poetry—the idea that one could “confess” certain personal issues in the course of a poem and find resolution or, at least, gain greater perspective.

In *The Confessional Poets*, Robert Philips lists the defining characteristics of confessional poetry:

- It is highly subjective. It is an expression of personality, not an escape from it.
- It is therapeutic and/or purgative. Its emotional content is personal rather than impersonal. It is most often narrative. It portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists. It employs irony and understatement for detachment. It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology. There are no barriers of subject matter. There are no
barriers between the reader and the poet. The poetry is written in the open
language of ordinary speech. It is written in open forms. It displays moral
courage. It is antiestablishment in content, with alienation a common theme.
Personal failure is also a favorite theme, as is mental illness. The poet strives
for personalization rather than for universalization. (16-17, para. form mine)

Of course, many of these characteristics have been criticized, as has the label itself, and
even Philips cautions against too neat and clear a definition of the style, especially in
relation to the poet’s personal life. As Robert Lowell famously comments about the
poems in *Life Studies*, “[T]here was always that standard of truth which you wouldn’t
ordinarily have in poetry—the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert
Lowell” (Interview 17). However, when I apply these characteristics to my poems
mentioned above, they fit quite well, even though I was unaware of such a list when I
wrote them. As mentioned before, my appropriation of this style was modeled on certain
confessional and post-confessional poets, the primary one being Larry Levis.

Levis’s *Winter Stars* employs a post-confessional stance based primarily on memories
and grounded in alienation and personal failure. The opening poem of this collection,
“The Poet at Seventeen,” functioned as the model for my own poem by the same title.
Levis’s poem begins, “My youth? I hear it mostly in the long, volleying / Echoes of
billiards in the pool halls where / I spent it all, extravagantly, believing / My delicate
touch on a cue would last for years.
Mine begins:

My youth echoes with the clipped, mechanical clicks
of a racing bicycle’s freewheel over the asphalt roads
I traversed, too disciplined, believing my shaved, 
muscled legs starred with ingrown hairs would

be like sails.

The imitation is obvious (it becomes less so as the poem progresses), and as such, I have given the poem the epigraph “-after Levis after Rimbaud” because, as Levis points out in the notes at the back of his book, his title is taken from Arthur Rimbaud’s “Les Poètes de sept ans” (“Seven-year-old Poets”). The world of poetry is full of such appropriations, and while my poem borrows heavily from Levis’ in tone (alienation and personal failure), form (quatrains with approximately five strong accents per line), and even certain phrasing, its overall arc and conclusion differ.

Other poems related to this style include the longer-lined “Inedible,” “Hiding,” and “River,” which typically have over five strong accents per line. At this time, the use of extremely long lines in the poetry of C. K. Williams and Lisa Lewis intrigued me. If we take a standard line of iambic pentameter as the rough measure of a medium length line in poetry, a longer line could be considered anything with more than five strong accents or fifteen syllables per line; however, both Williams and Lewis often have over nine strong accents or twenty syllables per line in their longer-lined poems. In comparison, my longest lines run to seven strong accents or fifteen syllables per line. Although the poems of Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Levis demonstrate that long lines and a confessional/post-confessional style do not necessarily go together, there seemed to be a happy relationship between the narrative drive of my post-confessional poetry and the use of long lines.
As I have revised these poems for this manuscript, one of the questions I have struggled with is how long-lined poetry differs from prose. In other words, why not just extend the lines and make it a prose poem, or why not shorten the lines to gain potential energy from the resultant line breaks? The poetry of Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Robinson Jeffers demonstrates the vitality of long-lined poetry in the American tradition, yet despite this tradition, long-lined poetry seems rare in contemporary poetry, aside from prose poems. This gives it a certain rebellious feel, which appealed to me. There is also a certain power to the look upon the page that says to the reader, “No quick, short lines here. If you want to hear what I have to say, you have to commit to going all the way across the page. Again and again.” Yet the retention of line breaks, the necessity of making the language as tight and efficient as possible, and the opportunity to make quicker, more associative leaps, all work to differentiate such poetry from prose.

During this time, I was also intrigued by C. K. Williams’ penchant for highly intimate and disturbing confessions, as in his poems “The Gas Station,” in which the speaker recounts a long-ago visit to a prostitute, and “From My Window,” in which the speaker tells of a voyeuristic relationship with two down-and-out Vietnam veterans. My poems “Inedible” and “Genealogy” exhibit similar confessions, attempts to, as Williams puts it, “reconcile the incongruities of our conscious life, the discrepancies between our intentions and our acts, the astonishing gap between our ability to elaborate admirable ideals and the ease with which we slip from identity to identity to evade them” (93-4). This attempt to “reconcile” stands in marked contrast to the postmodern attitude of tolerating the incommensurable, an attitude that I shall discuss later in this introduction. However, as with most things poetic, one must recognize the relative nature of terms and
statements. Williams’ attempts at reconciliation in his poetry, and hopefully my own to a lesser degree, are exactly that—attempts—and they contain far more irony and ambiguity than the average citizen would expect in something labeled a reconciliation.

Poems like “Oracular” and “Hagiography and Hanging” exemplify another mode of the post-confessional aesthetic described in Philips’ *The Confessional Poets*: “Real frustration, not fashion, has made alienation a prime American experience” (14). Perhaps this frustration was more overt in the 1960s and 70s, but I think that the actual experience of alienation resonates more deeply today given the extreme disparities of our capitalist oligarchy called democracy, and these two poems, as well as others, attempt to address this experience of social alienation while recognizing a certain participation in the system that alienates. Lowell was brilliant at such gestures as evidenced by lines like “These are the tranquillized Fifties, / and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?” (“Memories of West Street and Lepke”) and “The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere, / giant finned cares nose forward like fish; / a savage servility / slides by on grease” (“For the Union Dead”) (91, 137). This dual alienation/participation informs “Oracular” and “Hagiography and Hanging” and undercuts the more strident alienation/call for change by a speaker seemingly outside of the system under critique as found in Gary Synder’s *Turtle Island*, another important influence.

In *The Situation of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky argues for "the prose virtues" of "Clarity, Flexibility, Efficiency and Cohesiveness" and declares that "when poetry gets too far from prose, it may be in danger of choking itself on a thick, rich handful of words" (162), but after working in a confessional/post-confessional, narrative mode, I began to feel the opposite about my own work. I am not suggesting that narrative-driven poetry cannot be
lyrical at the same time—in fact, Levis manages to combine the two aesthetics quite seamlessly—but personally, I felt the lyricism in my poetry often suffered under an overwhelming narrative drive. For example, when I reread “The Poet at Seventeen,” I was unhappy with the overly prosaic nature of many of the lines. I turned to Rimbaud’s poem “Les Poètes de sept ans” (“Seven-year-old Poets”) for guidance in the revision and found very lyrical and even indeterminate imagery despite the narrative and confessional impulse. For example, Rimbaud ends the poem with this description of himself as a seven-year-old:

He read his ceaselessly mediated novel,

Full of heavy ochreous skies and soaked forests,

Of fresh flowers opened in the astral woods,

Dizziness, crumblings, routs and pity!

—While the noise of the neighborhood went on

Down below—alone, and lying on pieces of unbleached

Canvas, and violently announcing a sail! (Fowlie 77)

The influence of such surprising imagery led me to heighten the lyrical elements in my own poem, which tended to dampen the narrative drive.

Of course, one does not have to choose. As Stanley Plumly insightfully points out in his essay “Narrative Values, Lyric Imperatives,”

These meter-making and -unmaking arguments have, historically, obscured not only the way in which good poems are at once formal and free, personal and political, of a piece and difficult, but the way in which the lyric poem continues to depend on narrative’s “fare forwarding,” that constructed sense of followability,
line-turn, connection, disconnection, and one damn thing after another. . . . These forced distinctions also blur the demands of rhythm, cadence, and spoken emotional texture in a line, in favor of an idea or agenda. (270)

Most likely, my difficulty in gracefully managing both narrative and lyric impulses in one poem leads me to think of the choice as more of a dichotomy than it is. I recognize the possibility, even necessity, of both impulses equally informing a poem; however, as I worked on this manuscript, I felt increasingly drawn to heightening the lyrical impulse in my work.

In addition to concerns about being overly prosaic, I was also disillusioned by how I was using the whole stance of “alienation,” “personal failure,” and “confession,” especially in relation to my proclaimed belief in Tibetan Buddhism, another strong influence on my work as seen in the poems “Arboreal,” “Illness,” and “How We Go.” In *Dharma Art*, Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher and co-founder, with Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg, of Naropa University, outlines the problem with aggression in life and art:

To use an American idiom, when we are uptight, we are being aggressive. We are so dissatisfied with ourselves, our world, and our work that we begin to feel that everything is worthless. Or at the least, we feel that some things are worthless, while other things might have some worth. . . . Inquisitiveness is precisely the opposite of aggression. You experience inquisitiveness when there’s a sense of wanting to explore every corner and discover every possibility of the situation. . . . Without passion, nothing can be experienced; nothing can be worked on. With aggression, we have bad feelings about ourselves: either we feel tremendously
righteous, that we are the ones who are right, or we feel pissed off that somebody is destroying us. That is pathetic. It prevents us from seeing the basic goodness. (15-16)

Of course, many poets operate in a post-confessional mode full of passion and inquisitiveness, but in retrospect, I think many of my post-confessional poems were attempts at purgation through a sacrifice of the actual complexity of the situation. In addition, the attitude of regret and failure I had cultivated seemed closely related to an attitude of aggression, whereas what I wanted to cultivate in my work was a greater openness to diverse material and perspectives.

Ingersoll, Kitchen, and Rubin remark in The Post-Confessionals that post-confessional poetry attempts to distinguish itself from confessional poetry through its wariness of being overly “I” centric, of a final “authenticity,” and of too elegant and formal a form (17-21). With this distinction in mind, perhaps it would be best to label my poems from this time as “confessional” rather than “post-confessional” since the latter seems to imply a more diverse and open approach. As the poet Edward Hirsch points out,

[W]e live as multiple selves, and we want to bring these things into poetry. I love poetry that has a personal risk, poetry where there is a lot at stake, but I dislike the activity of centering your own suffering above the suffering of all others. We do have to speak about our deeper, inner lives; at the same time, I think we want to be representative voices and speak about our place and our culture. (133)

The same concerns came up for me, and while one solution would have been to adopt a more post-confessional approach as opposed to confessional approach, I instead chose to move toward a more lyrically-oriented approach.
C. A MOVE TOWARD CONTEMPORARY LYRICISM

Over the next two semesters of PhD work, the reading I did in Linda Leavell’s contemporary American poetry course as well as continued workshops with Lisa Lewis and Ai contributed to this aesthetic change. Poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, and James Tate became important influences, and poems such as “Anthropology of Love,” “Shackleton’s Crew Member Writes from Graduate School,” “Survival,” and the Hamlet and Ophelia series are the result. These poems, which shift away from a “confessional I” as the speaker, utilize a more lyrical focus on language with content drawn from a wider variety of sources—National Geographic, polar exploration narratives, hagiography, encyclopedia entries, and Michael Almereyda’s cinematic version of Hamlet—than my personal history. (When I mention “lyric” here, I mean it in the same spirit as the following definition from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: “Lyric has often been associated with the following attributes: brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality and particularity of image, but most contemporary critics see it as internal, psychological states rendered through musical language” (713.).) My poems in formal forms, such as “Hamlet’s Meditation” and “Unpacked,” by definition emphasize metrical coherence, and others, such as the ones mentioned above, attempt to work more through a subjective feeling rendered through language than through narrative impulses.

During this time, two poems, and the collections from which they came, had a particularly strong influence on me: John Ashbery’s “The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers” from his first book, Some Trees, and James Tate’s “50 Views of Tokyo” from Worshipful Company of Fletchers. Ashbery’s poem impressed me because
of the way it manages to be completely grounded in the literary canon via its model, Andrew Marvell’s “The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers,” and its epigraph from Boris Pasternak, yet subverts so much of what the literary canon often stands for—in particular, precision in language and clarity in intent. Its tone varies widely from comedy to parody to serious lyricism, and while the common Asberyesque themes of experience modified by loss and the imprecision of language are evident, the thing that intrigued me most at the time was the seeming primacy of the language over narrative or revelation, as in contextually divorced couplets such as, “In a far recess of summer / Monks are playing soccer,” and “That beggar to whom you gave no cent / Striped the night with his strange descant” (12, 13). Of course, narrative and context are not completely effaced as Ashbery very consciously grounds his poem in the tradition and alludes to it throughout in serious and parodic ways. However, the overall narrative arc of the poem remains somewhat of a mystery. The poem does contain “one damn thing after another,” but at times, the reader can only guess as to why it is that particular thing since the linear causality of such a poem does seem to be largely effaced.

Tate’s “50 Views of Tokyo” plays as more discordant and surreal than Ashbery’s poem and impressed me through its devotion to the imagination and the process of composition. Consider the opening eight lines:

Only fly-specks remain.
I have not a thought in my head.
My head is a giant pumpkin with a thousand legs.
That must be the elusive thought I was after.
I am feeling a degree of relief and even confidence
after the exercise. Now I remember December 22, 1935.

A bunch of young officers, including yours truly,

met in a restaurant in Shinjuku to discuss a plot. (9)

The naturalness of the opening, as if the reader were overhearing the speaker’s thoughts, manages an artful intrigue that quickly portrays the speaker’s quirky and associative state of mind. I have applied similar strategies in my poems “Inedible” and “In Progress.” Additionally, Tate’s comments in his introduction to The Best American Poetry 1997 speak of the surprise I found appealing in his work and strove to bring to mine:

The poet arrives at his or her discovery by setting language on edge or creating metaphors that suggest dangerous ideas, or any number of other methods. The point is, language can be hazardous as it is our primary grip on the world.

When language is skewed, the world is viewed differently. But this is only effective if the reader can recognize the view, even though it is the first time he or she has experienced the thought. . . . The act of writing poetry is a search for the unknown. (18)

Interestingly, despite his commitment to “setting language on edge,” Tate, just as Barthes, acknowledges the necessity of the reader’s being able to “recognize the view” in order to avoid falling into “the worst meaning, nonmeaning.” I would agree, with the caveat that what one reader can “recognize” may leave another completely baffled.

Ashbery’s and Tate’s emphases on language over message or narrative influenced my ideas about poetry, as did the surreal and lyrical style in much of Bishop and in more contemporary texts such as Brenda Shaughnessy’s Interior with Sudden Joy, Mark Levine’s Enola Gay, Karen Volkman’s Spar, and Eleni Sikelianos’ Earliest Worlds.
Poems such as “Bim Gets Breakfast in the Love Kitchen,” “Survival,” “Elaborate Board Game,” “Nomads with Samsonite,” and “Arboreal,” although not all written during this time period, bear witness to a more lyrically-concerned aesthetic “skewed” by imagination. For example, “Nomads with Samsonite” has a narrative related to my personal life, but the linguistic undermining of a sense of realism would deter most readers from thinking that they were getting “the real Tim Bradford”:

Decorum dictates we pack light.

Bernoulli’s principle
depends on it. So we'll take
your long hair, like a russet kaffiyeh,
to keep us warm, and my long arms
to serve as sundial, compass,
signposts to the locals. A bit of rouge,
a sun dress, a burnoose, we will go
like this, loose, at day break when
dew sparks on spider's radar.

In contrast, most of “Hiding” and “River” could be taken as accounts of actual events, even if those events were altered or invented to serve the poem.

All poetry employs the power of imagination, but the lyrical mode, with its “internal, psychological states rendered through musical language,” seems freer to borrow, roam, and invent, even to the point of violent juxtaposition or absurd humor. A certain freedom, and subjective, solipsistic danger, arises when the internal world, even consciousness itself, becomes the poet’s focal point. The work of poets such as Ashbery, Tate, and
Frank O’Hara exemplifies this free-roaming imagination, and poems such as “Anthropology of Love,” “Jerusalem Everywhere You Go,” and “Crêpes Dentelles” bear their influence in this regard. As I moved away from the more somber realism of my post-confessional style, imagination and humor began to play a larger role in my work. The impetus for one poem in particular, “Showdown,” led me to Loren Goodman, a contemporary poet who operates primarily via Dadaesque humor and parody.

During my first semester at Oklahoma State, a colleague, Mark Parsons, told me about a game created by his friend at the University of Arizona. The game consisted of thinking up two unlikely or impossible rivals—Arnold Schwarzenegger vs. South Africa is the example I remember him using—and then asking, hypothetically, “Who would win?” I liked it so much that I wrote “Showdown” based on this idea, and after it had been accepted for publication at *Bombay Gin*, I discovered that Mark’s friend, Loren Goodman, had actually written a poem entitled “Who Would Win?” which he included in his Yale Series of Younger Poets-winning manuscript *Famous Americans*. I added “-after Loren Goodman” at the head of my poem and read his manuscript, which further expanded my conception of contemporary poetics. As with much of O’Hara’s work, Goodman’s work is largely informed by the accidental, chance relations, parody, abnormal syntax, and playfulness. In his introductory comments, W. S. Merwin cites *Famous Americans* as a fine example of irony and comedy and continues, “His mode can amount to little more than blacking out the teeth of smiles in advertisements or drawing mustaches on the Mona Lisa, but even then the black teeth may turn out to be startling doorways and the moustaches animated” (vii). Similarly, my poems “Tri-Weekly Cimarron River Report, 17 May 2003 to 28 August 2003,” “Illness,” “How We Go,” and
“Why Dogs Ingest Anything While the Human Mouth Remains So Sentimental” are influenced by a Dadaesque poetics of absurdity and play.

Three other sources led me to place an increasing emphasis on language and language play: the poetry of modernists like William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Gertrude Stein; the deconstructionist and postmodern theories of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes; and the Dada and Surrealist movements, especially in theater. All three of these influences tend to place a primacy on language and language-play over narrative and coherence. Such influences and their connections to postmodern poetics would become increasingly clear and important to my work during my second year of PhD studies through continued readings, discussions, and E. P. Walkiewicz’s course “Positioning Postmodernism,” in which I first read Charles Olson, John Cage, Susan Howe, and Lyn Hejinian.

During the summer of 2001 (a point I emphasize in the poem given the events of 11 September, 2001), a bit earlier chronologically but related to these influences and changes, I wrote “The Inebriate Airplane,” modeled on Arthur Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat.” While doing so, I realized that my conception of Rimbaud’s work was primarily formed on the basis of some of his earliest, most confessional style poetry such as “Sensation,” “First Night,” “At the Cabaret-Vert, Five P.M.,” and “Lice Hunters.” Working intensely with and from “Le Bateau Ivre” in both French and the literal English translation by Wallace Fowlie, I realized the degree to which this poem breaks with Rimbaud’s earlier Romantic and confessional styles in its complete devotion to language for the sake of language. I strove for the same effectin my poem, and while I realize that it is largely a derivative exercise, it represents an important shift in my thinking about
poetry and language. My later reading of the dramas of Tristan Tzara and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, as well as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, would further push my poetry toward postmodern experimentation and, at times, indeterminacy.

D. TOWARD A POETICS OF INDETERMINACY

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff defines a “poetry of indeterminacy” as one in which “the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not,” and she cites texts such as Pound’s *Cantos*, Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, and William Carlos Williams’ *Spring and All* as examples (18). In this sense, the poetry of indeterminacy overlaps with much, but not all, of what is considered postmodern. The eclectic collection of poets in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*—Charles Bukowski and Barbara Guest appear back to back—shows that there are many postmodernisms; however, poet and anthologist Paul Hoover offers the following introductory definition:

As used here, “postmodern” means the historical period following World War II. It also suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing. Postmodernist poetry is the avant-garde poetry of our time. (xxv)

Here, I must acknowledge a point that certain professors and colleagues have impressed upon me—the fact that no poetry can really be considered a part of “mainstream culture” in this country. I agree, and yet I do think there exists a continuum within the poetry
world with one end being closer to something like “mainstream culture,” represented by poets such as Billy Collins, Jane Hirschfield, and Lee Young-Li, and the other end being closer to something like “the avant-garde,” represented by poets such as Michael Palmer, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and John Yau. I am more doubtful about whether these aesthetic alignments actually correspond to social and political stances, as suggested in the quote above. The avant-garde’s desire to work with language in surprisingly new and inspiring ways inspires me, not its supposed alternative to the stance of “mainstream poetry” and what the avant-garde believes that stance represents.

The poet Lyn Hejinian characterizes many contemporary avant-garde texts as “including an interest in syntactic disjunctures and realignments, in montage and pastiche as structural devices, in the fragmentation and explosion of subject, etc., as well as an antagonism to closed structures of meaning” (657). Related to my qualification above, judgment as to what constitutes closed, and open, structures of meaning is often subjective. However, poets often take sides in these debates, as if their stance was anything but relative, and invest great social and political meaning in relation to the various available stances. Within this ongoing aesthetic debate, few movements have been as contentious as Language poetry, and the poet Ron Silliman, one of its founding figures, recently posted the following to his on-line blog:

I got a questionnaire from *Fulcrum* asking some very basic questions.

2. What is the most important poetry? Who are the greatest poets? What do they accomplish?

The best art in any medium is that which expands our understanding of the possibilities of the medium itself. This can be done in many different ways
& any history of American painting of the last century that doesn’t put Warhol on the same plane ultimately with Pollock isn’t credible, I would think, just as one that tried to place Rothko or Rauschenberg on that same plateau would not be credible. If you look at poetry dispassionately, it becomes very clear who moved the art forward, or at least in a new direction, over time. This is not necessarily “progress,” in the modernist sense of that term, but it is always movement, evolution.

3. What is the relationship between poetry and truth? Is there such a thing as poetic truth?

A poet who directly understands & confronts his or her medium has an opportunity to address questions such as truth. One who uses language instrumentally, as a second-order mechanism to get at some “truths” that lie elsewhere is not only a bad writer, but a dishonest one. (“20 May, 2005”)

Obviously, his aesthetics are strongly biased toward a medium-focused art that strives to explore the delivery system itself. In addition, it is questionable as to whether any poet would use language as a “second-order mechanism.” However, about half-way through my PhD studies, I too became primarily concerned with the language of the poem for its own sake. Again, as with my previous narrative vs. lyric debate, I set up a very artificial dichotomy, but this sort of pendulum swing seemed the next step in what I wished to explore poetically. Nonetheless, this shift was accompanied by a concern over postmodernism’s potential effacement of humanity and emotion and its corresponding overemphasis on the
intellect. Both of these critiques are most often leveled against one style within postmodernism, Language Poetry, and I too feel alienated at times by its extreme focus on text at the expense of human emotion. However, I would like to discuss why these critiques might be misguided and why I see some postmodern poetry as striving toward an equal if not greater sense of humanity than is present in more mainstream poetry.

First, the notion that postmodern poetry, especially Language Poetry, lacks humanity and passion often overlooks the mediated quality of these terms. If humanity and passion imply a rational concept of the self, other, and world that can be captured via clear narrative—in other words, the Enlightenment Project à la Jürgen Habermas achieved—postmodern poetry lacks humanity. However, if postmodern poetry can be seen not just as a critique of such a worldview based on the ambiguous nature of language but also an actual attempt to revise such paradigms through new uses of language, then it can also be seen as striving for greater humanity and passion. As Jean-François Lyotard writes in *The Postmodern Condition*,

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. . . . Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just. Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jürgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the
authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy. (510) [“Paralogy” being Lyotard’s neologism to describe locally mediated, heterogeneous discussion that does not necessarily lead to consensus.]

With this in mind, consider the following passage from Ron Silliman’s *Paradise*:

A SENTENCE in the evening. Today the boxscores are green. Tonight the boxcars are groaning in the railyard. The indexical items are not coreferential. Hollywood caenfidential. You made Cheerios number one.

Mock snow: white petals from the plum tree swirl in the wind. I was working on a different poem. The dark patches to the clouds’ glare are all we have of depth to this sky. The shudder of laundry down in the basement. A small table in one corner of the kitchen. White petals from the plum tree swirl in the wind. I slip in a pair of diskettes. Don’t miss the opportunity to earn Pediatrics Review and Education Program (PREP) credits on an hour-for-hour basis at the plenary sessions as well as Category I credit toward the American Medical Association’s Physician Recognition Award. The stapler sits on the table. When in reverse, the car emits an idiot tune. . . . (493)
What better way to represent the open, disparate, schizophrenic experience of contemporary life than this seemingly random collection of unrelated sentences? This kind of “disjunctive mosaic,” as Hoover calls his poetry in the introduction to Silliman’s work, does not divorce itself from humanism and may, in fact, express the greatest aspirations of humanity, at least from a Buddhist point of view, which would be acceptance and observation of co-dependent origination, chaos, bliss, compassion, multiple voices and viewpoints, passionate curiosity, and indeterminacy. The most postmodern poems in this manuscript—“Le Roi-Soleil est tombé, oh my,” “Edition,” “Crêpes Dentelles,” “In Progress,” and “Translation of Difference”—all embody this kind of aesthetic. At the same time, I think it only fair to acknowledge the incredibly personal, stream-of-consciousness style that pervades such writing and makes it, in many ways, highly post-confessional in a sense. Ironically, and not in the sense of purposeful irony, Silliman engages the same sort of “mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing” that he so stridently condemns in his theoretical writing. I really have no answer for this save Lyotard’s insistence that “Postmodern knowledge . . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable,” (510) the latter of which would obviously include Silliman’s poetics in light of his poetry.

Such inconsistencies aside, further evidence of a connection between postmodern poetics and lived human experience exists in the overlap between my interests as a poet and my experience with the “language play” of children as the part-time stay-at-home father of two sons. Hejinian writes eloquently about this connection:
Language discovers what one might know. Therefore, the limits of language are the limits of what we might know. We discover the limits of language early, as children. Anything with limits can be imagined (correctly or incorrectly) as an object, by analogy with other objects—balls and rivers. Children objectify language when they render it their plaything, in jokes, puns and riddles, or in glossolaliaic chants and rhymes. They discover that words are not equal to the world, that a shift, analogous to parallax in photography, occurs between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them—a displacement that leaves a gap. Among the most prevalent and persistent category of joke is that which identifies and makes use of the fallacious comparison of words to the world and delights in the ambiguity resulting from the discrepancy: Why did the moron eat hay? To feed his hoarse voice. (653)

Or, as my three year old son said recently while playing, “The boat crashes into California and turns into a cake party.” “Le-Roi Soleil est tombé, oh my,” “Bim Gets Breakfast in the Love Kitchen,” “Tri-Weekly Cimarron River Report, 17 May 2003 to 28 August 2003,” and “Crêpes Dentelles” attempt to reflect a child-like exploration of language and perspective. Similar attempts to explore the limits of language as related to the world, both actual and literary, are found in poems like “Hamlet’s Letter from the Interior,” which juxtaposes the names of Ozark river fish with a familiar literary couple; “Why Dogs Ingest Anything While the Human Mouth Remains So Sentimental,” which was heavily influenced by my sons’ fascination with the “glossolaliaic chants and rhymes” in an audio version of T. S. Eliot’s “Sweeney Agonistes;” and “Ophelia in The Abyss,” which combines the plot of James Cameron’s first movie, The Abyss, with
Ophelia’s role in *Hamlet* while borrowing tonally and conceptually from Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” and Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck.”

I would like to close this section with a comparison of aesthetic statements between C. K. Williams, Arthur Rimbaud, and John Cage as a means of thinking about the potential differences between a more traditional approach to poetry and a more postmodern one. In *Poetry and Consciousness*, C. K. Williams writes, “For poetry ultimately has most of all to do with that, with the redemption of our experiences from the temporal and trivial” (10). In comparison, Arthur Rimbaud embraces “the temporal and trivial” in his poem “Alchemy of the Word:” “I preferred bad paintings: hanging above doors, on sets or carnival backdrops, billboards, cheap prints; and unfashionable literature, church Latin, barely literate erotica, novels beloved by grannies, fairy tales, children’s books, old operas, silly songs, simple scansion” (Mason 208). And in his introduction to *Themes & Variations*, John Cage includes these two concepts: “No ideas of order,” and “Poetry is having nothing to say and saying it; we possess nothing,” which speaks of a poetics that establishes no hierarchy of experience and has nothing to redeem (622,624). While I understand and relate to, perhaps even still primarily write from, Williams’ perspective, I aspire to Rimbaud’s and Cage’s. However, I also believe that ultimately, the aesthetic does not matter, and any aesthetic stance that advocates greater openness, understanding, and invention—i.e. greater humanity—would do well to acknowledge the following quote from David Foster Wallace’s story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” with an understood substitution of “poetry business” for “fiction business:”

Dividing this fiction business into realistic and naturalistic and surrealist and modern and postmodern and new-realistic and meta is like dividing history
into cosmic and tragic and prophetic and apocalyptic, is like dividing humans
beings into white and black and brown and yellow and orange. It atomizes, does
not bind crowds, and, like everything timelessly dumb, leads to blind hatred, blind
loyalty, blind supplication. Difference is no lover. (246)

Good writing is good writing, genre and aesthetic aside, but sometimes one must
complicate one’s sense of what it takes to be a good writer in order to finally arrive. For
me, the past five years have been a process of poetic complication and exploration, which
has expanded my vision and abilities.

E. COMPOSITION PROCESSES AND OTHER TECHNICAL CONCERNS

I began many of these poems by hand in journals. The journals are usually small
pocket journals, three by five inches, which initially pushes me toward a shorter line that
I often lengthen as I transcribe the work onto the computer. I try to have a journal with
me most of the time for whenever “the muse strikes.” As clichéd as this phrase sounds,
most writers I know recognize the phenomenon to which it refers—the sense that one is
not consciously composing but is rather hearing a poetic voice that has a greater urgency
and form than the usual mental dialogue. (I realize the postmodern skepticism that would
be directed toward such a statement, but I can only explain what I experience without
worrying about allegiance to a certain worldview.) Rainer Marie Rilke was said to have
received entire sections of his Duino Elegies this way, W.B. Yeats and the Surrealists
relied on automatic writing, and the poet Jack Spicer referred to this experience as
“something from the outside coming in,” as if the poet were a radio receiver picking up
and writing down various broadcasts (273). Contemporary neuroscience may have
identified a potential source for this experience; hypergraphia, or an overwhelming need to write, is “most often associated with temporal lobe epilepsy, a disorder that may also lead to hyper-religious feelings and a sense that even the most trivial events are filled with heightened meaning and cosmic importance” (Shreeve 28). While this is not the only explanation for poetic output, I and many other poets can identify with such a locus of behaviors and feelings. In fact, as I have become more reliant on computers for writing, I often find handwriting too slow to capture that “something from the outside coming in” and will turn to a keyboard if I have access to one.

Like many poets, I am sometimes fortunate enough to receive nearly an entire poem via this “something from the outside coming in,” but the more common experience is that I receive one or two lines, perhaps a stanza, and must work that material into a poem. This process takes anywhere from a week to several years depending upon the poem and my ability to focus on the poem’s energy. I usually find it easier to work with a poem while it still retains its initial impulse, an impulse that, if given the proper space and time, can lead me to something akin to what Anne Waldman describes as her process of composition:

When one is in the grip of a poem, one is contiguous to chaos, yet one maintains a balance, an articulation through form, or “text,” mouthing those very specific vowels and consonants. One pays attention to the smallest increments of speech—phones, phonemes, allophones that register in all the parts of the body. (137)

I strive for a similar mediation of the chaos of the imagination by way of attention to sound and, by extension, technique. Regardless of the primary aesthetic orientation of the poem, all the traditional and formal devices of poetry, such as rhyme, meter, alliteration,
assonance and consonance, are available. I am especially fond of using internal rhyme, as in the following section from “Ophelia in the Abyss:”

and pulled the chord to inflate the vest
that hugged my chest and brought me back.
I even held onto a buff sailor as I coughed the fluid
up and shuttered back to respiration here
on the main stage.

Sometimes I employ these more formal devices during the initial composition process, such as the ones above, and sometimes I make additions during revision to heighten the sound effects in the poem.

Some of the poems in this manuscript have been composed using various elements of chance, an element of composition often favored by postmodern poets such as John Cage, the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo) group and, most recently, Harryette Mullen. “Edition” and “In Progress” were composed on an old typewriter without corrections keys and “mistakes” in typing were incorporated, as much as possible, into the poem. For example, if I meant to type “clouds” but instead typed “ca,” I would stop and try to redirect the poem based on that mistake (thus the word in the fourth line of the poem “Edition” became “cannas,” a flower). Other poems, such as the sestinas “Anthropology of Love” and “Jerusalem Everywhere You Go,” use a traditional, formal form but derive the six end words from the spine of National Geographic, which gives the poem a certain “found” quality in that I did not hand-select the end words but rather used them as they came, pre-packaged. The poem “Tri-Weekly Cimarron River Report, 17 May 2005 to 28 August 2005,” while composed of my own words, relied on the physical appearance of
the Cimarron River, much as a scientific report would, save that it was heavily mediated by the imagination. I realize these gestures are far from some of the more extreme chance procedures used by writers such as the ones cited above, but they do exhibit a more directed engagement of chance in the writing process than my standard methods of composition.

My use of line breaks is informed by three main concepts. The first one, offered by Betty Shipley, one of my professors in poetry at the University of Central Oklahoma, is called “beautiful finds in the parking lot” and works on the premise that, if one were to cut up each line of any given poem and let all these separate lines blow in the wind across a parking lot (a very appropriate theory for UCO given its wind and parking lots), the linguistically-appreciative people who found the individual lines would treasure each one as a poem in miniature. While overly-simplistic given the fact that the power of lines working together is completely ignored in this theory, it does offer a certain strategy toward maximizing the power of each and every line.

William Carlos Williams’ concept of the triadic line or variable foot, especially as explained by Denise Levertov in her essay “On Williams’ Triadic Line, or How to Dance on Variable Feet,” also influenced my understanding and use of the line. Levertov maintains that “the variable foot is not a matter of stress patterns but of duration in time,” with the opening lines determining the norm, regardless of length, and the following lines corresponding to this norm of duration in time (23). For the most part, and despite the fact that I still resort to British-English based accentual-syllabic meter in both free verse and formal poems, I agree with Williams’ theory that American-English has a decisively different rhythm and modus operandi than British-English. Williams’ recognition of this
resulted in his triadic line theory, and this theory is what has consciously informed all of my poems deployed in couplets and tercets with highly irregular line lengths, such as “Central League Hockey Night,” “Hagiography and Hanging,” and “Arboreal.”

Finally, Denise Levertov’s essay “On the Function of the Line” has informed the majority of my line breaks, aside from the formally dictated ones, in some fashion. In this essay, Levertov argues that contemporary, nonmetrical poetry is more exploratory in nature than metrical, formal forms, and she maintains that the rhythmic variations provided by well-managed line breaks help convey this exploratory tone: “The most obvious function of the linebreak is rhythmic: it can record the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind’s dance among perceptions but which are not noted by grammatical punctuation.” She continues, “The linebreak is a form of punctuation additional to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts. Linebreaks—together with intelligent use of indention and other devices of scoring—represent a peculiarly poetic, alogical, parallel (not competitive) punctuation” (78-9). These ideas, to the best of my ability to understand and employ them, inform most of my linebreaks.

While I greatly admire Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse,” I have made few efforts—“El Dead Hombre” the only inclusion in this manuscript—that abandon standard poetic left-hand alignment. I greatly admire that kind of gesture when well-managed, as in the poetry of Eleni Sikelianos, but I feel I have enough difficulty trying to artfully control the linebreaks on the right-hand margin without introducing the problem of breaks and spaces on the left margin and within the line.
F. FINAL COMMENTS

I see the aesthetic diversity of my manuscript as a reflection of the diverse world of contemporary poetry and as an attempt to “deliberately create an aesthetic of joining,” an aesthetic that is postmodern in the sense that it “decenters authority and embraces pluralism” (Spahr 409, Hoover xxvii). Fiction writer Rick Moody humorously and insightfully explicates this aesthetic in a Paris Review interview. When asked which traditions inform his writing, he replied “The modernist notion that anything is possible, the post-modernist notion that everything is exhausted, and the post-post-modernist notion that since everything is exhausted, everything is permitted” (215). Despite recent incidents such as Yusef Komunyakaa’s accusation, in his introduction to The Best American Poetry 2003 and seemingly in response to the experimental-oriented poetry chosen by Robert Creeley for The Best American Poetry 2002, that much of contemporary poetry is guilty of an “over-experimentation” in which “disorder becomes the norm” (14), I agree with Moody. “Permitted” does not equal “universal acceptance,” and some mutated form of the Poetry Wars of the 1980s continues. But now, more than ever, one can find a venue for the publication of work written in almost any aesthetic. As a relatively young and newly publishing poet, I am encouraged and challenged by the opportunity to write in a place and time in which "everything is permitted."
CHAPTER II

NOMADS WITH SAMSONITE
A. ROADS LEADING EVERYWHERE
Anthropology of Love

-from the spine of National Geographic, October 2001

“You never mention light anymore,” she wrote him from a rain forest in Kansas, soon to be paved for The China Tombs Mall, complete with fountains like volcanoes, display cases coddling Meave Leakey’s latest finds, and limited-motion dancing mechanical leopards.

He, a mollusk on the Swahili coast and spotted like a leopard, wrote back to say ignoring light is second nature to mollusks, akin to Richard Leakey’s ignorance of cloud formations, stingy rain forests in the African sky. “We live by the heat of underwater volcanoes, unseen, and dream of being used as eternal cups inside China Tombs.”

She read his reply, then stubbed her cigarette out in the China Tombs ashtray he’d bought her on their honeymoon when they loved like leopards, ate fresh figs and oysters, toured the volcano.

“The way it’s a wave and particle. Or the rain forests of Chile next to deserts. Or the Leakeys’ fondness for AC. You could return like a Leakey hominid, but with flesh, and still play at mollusk in the China Tombs Bar at night. I love you like a rain forest breathes for the earth. Come back, my leopard.”

She sent the request at first light and wandered among small copper pit slag heap volcanoes instead of working. At night, she burned like a volcano.

Meanwhile, the mollusk traveled inland to help the Leakeys look for their contacts under sheer walls of light west of Kenya’s Lake Turkana, thousands of miles from the nearest China Tombs. Unfortunately, everyone save Meave’d been devoured by leopards. Still, she sat looking, alone like an oasis rain forest.

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fame to score a hotel room with linoleum as cold as China Tombs. Where Richard failed, I’ll be as constant as the speed of light.”

Weeks later, a final postcard reached her in Kansas, light through a rain forest canopy. “Dear Sarah, Adieu. Didn’t make the China Tombs but discovered the volcanic love of Meave Leakey, her paleoanthropologist kiss like a leopard’s.”
We survive by the tail of the dog. 
I don't even mention the flanks or tender 
testicles because the nights we eat those 
are not survival—we're alive then. 
Stuck on this ice floe, where the energy 
is stuck. And all together, like a pack 
of penguins or scholars. We being the latter.

The headaches from the glare are the worst. 
One member thinks of cranial trepanation. Others 
focus on licking ice off Shackleton's black boots 
while the eyelets of his boots watch them as they lick 
all together, like a choir, except 
no one can sing. The wind's long voice last winter 
sounded nothing like song. Still, we survive 
our pessimism, even make our own vellum to record 
insights about headaches and ice.

There are soccer matches and departmental parties, too. 
More to be looked forward to than another toe falling off 
or another lecture by Shackleton and the faculty he's become 
on endurance and enthusiasm for the life of a penguin. 
Even so, all the members practice, at night in secret, 
their waddles, and when they get good, they practice 
in groups. The few dogs we haven't eaten 
howl at the dark shapes coming closer, 
then going away, then closer 
again. Are they coming for us, hungry?

Go off and be a dog by yourself, fuck 
this penguin business, I thought one day. 
The snow burned my hands and knees 
as I crawled toward the south. Hypothermia 
and delirium overtook me, and I became a podium, 
then an orange, then a woman 
who offered my former form's muzzle 
all the parts of her body rhyming with bliss. 
So as not to get my fur sticky, I ate each piece 
carefully, but when I came to, I was dressed 
as a man, the fur on my parka wet with the blood 
of my frostbitten hands. At least the mates
who found me didn't eat me.

It is dark now. I write by keys: the wind's one long drone, the whine of a couple dogs, the squeak of boots on snow, the skin of something being made into vellum, and someone thinking, low and pregnant, like an orange. I will seal this in a bottle with wax from my last candle and throw it toward the moon that glows like my numb body but is really much colder. Still, it’s a sign. The comedy of light is never lost on us, we who live in a circle of ice and frigid sea water, dogs' blood and ideas, like oranges, like the sun.
The Poet at Seventeen

-after Levis after Rimbaud-

My youth echoes with the clipped, mechanical clicks of a racing bicycle’s freewheel over the back roads I traversed, too disciplined, believing my shaved, muscled legs starred with ingrown hairs would carry me like sails. All day outside, the Oklahoma summer brought out the olive in my skin, said to be left by some Gaul good at building actual bridges despite leaving only a pier in my father’s heart. Leafing through cycling journals in the dim, artificial cool of my room, I imagined this absent grandfather architect as being from Normandy, the same region as Bernard Hinault, 5-time-winner of Le Tour. Hinault looked like my father, who financed weekends racing in Ft. Worth, Wichita, Moline. Meet at Love’s Country Stores. Sleep at Motel Six. Oh, the cultural education! Like a trucker’s! On Sundays after races, muscles sore but content unlike my head, I’d return with a bit of prize money or a new jersey. Café Columbia: Good climbers. 7-11: American hopefuls. La Vie Claire: The champions. And I felt safe then, knowing how to take a corner at speed: the set-up, how far to lean, the efficient arc. I was happy in my routine, rising at 6 a.m. to ride a couple hours before school or, in summer, the lunch shift at a French restaurant in a strip mall, the only place that’d give me long weekends off. Leaving early, I’d avoid both my parents and my neighbors. The blind face of each suburban home sang only to me. Every day another day to sprint to city limit signs, get caught in rain storms, and come home drenched and worn, hungry as a beggar.

And on weekends with no races, Jimmy, the team sponsor, drove his old yellow Chevy at 30 m.p.h. with the hatchback propped up while my teammates and I motor-paced behind, tucked into the slipstream. “It’s how they get fast on the Continent,” he’d
roar over the classical station blaring on his cheap speakers, his greasy hands punctuating the tempo on the dash as the smell of dope and espresso got churned into the air rushing by us. Once, I felt too strong for the pace, left the safety of the draft and raced up alongside the car, trying to equal its speed on my own. Head tucked low, mouth gulping air like a dying catfish on some red earth shore, I couldn’t make it, had to duck back into the slipstream. At least I had that kind of determination, like anything was possible as long as feelings remained orphaned. Girls? I wore the odd luck of the disinterested and managed to be seen with some attractive ones, but I’d no idea what I wanted and left off most nights early. The scent of them on my skin I’d cover with Lycra the next morning to carry with me like a mantra for a hundred miles. Tires fully pressurized, water bottles in the cages, I’d set off. The blind faces of homes behind me, an open, road kill-studded way before, I was sure of my ability to escape my beginnings by sheer muscle power connected to pedals, my weight suspended over roads leading everywhere.
Le Roi-Soleil est tombé, oh my

I felt the heat radiate from me
like from the sun’s face. There is
no face of the sun when you get there
if that’s your choice destination.
When you turn to see he. When him
looks down on the crown of your head.

There’s an explosion of atoms—hydrogen,
helium and peroxide, though the sun
is a natural blonde, butter-yellow as on
a stamp of the solar system under
black cancellation. My girlfriend
knew the proper postage for a rejection
letter. A package of obsequies

sent from Los Angeles. Her brown hair,
like summer ermine, fringed the parcel
where a 500 pound gorilla waited
to rip my heart out of my chest
through my throat. The day was overcast,
the gorilla never came out,

and I lingered in bed, facing
the wall and hoarding
her face before me like a balloon,
like a Lichtenstein
cartoon, like the Hindenburg.
Oh, the humanity.
Inedible

This morning I recalled a dream in which a friend, before we left a city with hills like San Francisco’s, before we left for a family reunion and while in some Thai restaurant, struck a woman he loved in the head, killing her over nothing. It’s difficult to see now, almost as difficult as remembering how, in the rain after midnight, two young men beat an old man nearly to death on a road outside Kathmandu. And in both the dream and the foreign land, I witnessed and did nothing but swallow my guilt, pungent as morning spit.

When he killed her, the restaurant was empty. So he, as I moved the car around to the front, dealt with the body. That's all I can say about it. It disappeared. Meanwhile, we delayed the departure. Relatives honked their horns. People were talking. They asked, "Where have you been?" implying we were lovers. My bearded and Hawaiian-shirt-wearing friend brought more luggage down than I expected, but none of it leaked blood. While he was certain of getting away, I was sure we’d get run in.

After all, the police had some noodles from the plate she held the moment he struck her. And I knew forensic scientists could track the murderous vibrations from the food, made inedible by its coppery taste, back to the culprit. I had to talk, either to the cops or the friend. He was calm, reassured, as if his love for her would translate into perfect cannibalism or a chance to mail her parts to friends. The cops were the nervous ones. At the interrogation, they implied my guilt by association, but their questions were as muted as the pad thai in the bag marked EVIDENCE. Despite their ineptitude, I thought they'd trace the arc of his fist back to him, and my face would begin to match his, and we’d be known. As I calculated these chances and wondered where my relatives had gone, he led me to a room above the restaurant, where an open bed made with fresh linens beckoned like a redolent magnolia. I expected a plan or confession. Instead, I felt desire, like murder without blood. We kissed and, undressed, he felt good to me, from behind, between my thighs. Then, when my father appeared by the infallible logic of REM sleep,
we pretended to be asleep, just as I'd pretended not to see
the murder in the dream or those two young men,
many years ago, fists raised in the rain, pummeling
the muddy head and body of a man
much older than my father.
Bim Gets Breakfast in the Love Kitchen

-after a drawing by an autistic child

Bim gets breakfast, meaning bread, butter, tea, and pork kidney from Dlugacz’s, or Lucky Charms. Bim the faded foreground of an eye’s narrow aperture focused backgroundworldly. His head a pale moon over the constellation of the Love Kitchen’s multifarious bric-a-brac: picture of a piggy bank, starry starry wallpaper like the side of a Napoleonic wrasse, flowers, candles and a photo of the sun. The windows’ edges above show the kitchen’s walls to be at least a foot thick. No brick in the wall is left unaccounted for, but three vague dots make the whole of Bim’s face above his Nehru jacket. A constellation beyond words whirls beside his small planet of a head that contains so many impressions from the universe’s constant flinging about of matter, i.e. love, but lacks a full mouth to voice them.
Showdown

-after Loren Goodman

1. Quarterfinals

Wallace Stevens vs. King Kong:
reptile mind defeats
large primate
every time.
Stevens advances.

Virgil vs. Dante:
after some rabbit punches
and table sandwiches, Dante
recovers to beat Virgil with woods,
win in extra rounds.
Virgil to Eighth Circle. Dante advances.

Emily Dickinson vs. a fly:
no contest.
Fly dies.
Emily advances.

The Italian peninsula vs. the Indian subcontinent:
boot kicks a bag of one billion—
half a billion jump out of the bag
onto the boot. Boot sinks as UN
heli-lifts the Uffizi to Tirana.
India advances.

2. Semifinals

Dante vs. Stevens:
Stevens puts on the mind of a snowman,
but Dante uses rain of fire.
Stevens throws garbage, like “the” and “and,”
from the dump at him.
Dante weaves them into terza rima.
Stevens uses volcano.
Dante counters with beatific vision.
Dante wins. Stevens agrees to go to church
next Sunday morning.
Emily Dickinson vs. Indian subcontinent (with half its population): Emily tries insanity. India eats her derangement, shits marigolds. Emily becomes reclusive. India shows up in her shower. Emily tries silence. One maunî outsilences her. Emily leaves Amherst for Mumbai and opens an arranged marriage service. India advances.

3. Finals

India vs. Dante:
India posts up and blocks the lane. Dante clears the puck. India lands a left jab via the Punjab. Dante evokes Beatrice. India evokes Vâlmîki and Kâlidâsa. Dante resorts to Satan. India makes Satan another deity. Dante prays. India has tea. After a short scrum, Dante succumbs to amoebic dysentery. India wins and makes him pedal rickshaws in New Delhi.

Dante bilks the tourists every day.
Central League Hockey Night

Before the contest, the arena’s halls, with maculate concrete floors,

echo the roiling, unintelligible polyphony of a crowd excited.

Between periods or during, children, released from the adult spectacle, return with miniature hockey sticks for pickup games.

The intricate scrum of them near concessions like the drawing of an eighteenth-century Indian lacrosse match.

Deeper inside the arena, the crowd surrounds the ice with a studied intensity, like students at an anatomy lesson, and the light is clear with a tinge of blue, the color of mother’s milk. The crowd is of one, maybe two, minds. It stands for the allegiance and an early fight in which the visiting team’s player gets it right on the chin, goes down hard. Afterwards, much of it goes for refreshments and returns to masticate peanuts fresh from the shell, nachos with neon cheese, and pizza, greasy with pig sausage,

from thick, hairy, delicate, manicured, slight and
greedy hands.

And the slosh of beer down the stairs, down gullets. On the ice,

players give as much as young men drifted down from the north with little hope of a career in the sport can. They earn 25K a year, which isn’t bad unless you consider the likelihood of taking a puck in the teeth or drawing a bigger, more embittered opponent in a fight. Or ash-tree stick across the back of the neck, 10 hour stinking bus ride for a 5 game series on the road, homeless. The lucky ones coaches or managers by 35. But tonight, the crowd gets them all confused with luck when the home team goes up by 3 in the third period of play, and the youngest children wear the anonymous mask of sleep, like a classic goalie’s mask. The red and blue lines—goal, blue, center—immobile in the rink’s ice cannot be erased but will melt after the game to reveal the poker-faced concrete beneath it all.
Hagiography and Hanging

My colleague checks himself in a crescent of broken mirror before class when he wants to look good berating our inescapable Puritan heritage. I don’t know how he broke the mirror and believe in no destiny. If you study hagiography, you’ll see miracles trump hard work. St. Anselm spoke with the birds. St. Jerome juggled flaming roses, no ash, St. Theresa made it with G, bathed in ecstasy. Of course, other towns converted whole-cloth to sainthood just by the fungus on the wheat—ergot. Whole villages shared brain’s fire and shutter. So what’s up with Salem? A tear in the sack-cloth of too much sense to let some dark light in—? and then, nothing, just sales. Today, the city’s products include cables, flashbulbs, games, lamps, plastics, radio tubes, tannery and leather products, and valves. “Note: We didn’t burn them, we hanged them.” Nineteen persons to be exact. It seems easier on my mind with fire, knife of flame on their shins, bellies, breasts. The body devoured, the myth of the phoenix. “You know what Cocteau says?” my friend asks non-rhetorically. “Don’t look in...
a mirror
to see yourself, look at your life.” Or our lies, I think. Like I
is not another, is different than we. Or belief in some sanctity
of fire
over a cold, gray rope, tight on a woman’s throat, choking
out herbal folk remedies, unpatentable
shadow language
grounded in the absolute symbolism of flowers
and roots, bowing to no god. Better we regarded, too,
our fragments,
instead of manufacturing new mirrors.

Better we understood our
logic
of rope, fantasy of fire.
Scope

The eye of the classroom building
is a round window, a rifle scope,
a periscope set beneath the roof’s ridge
in red bricks wet with sunlight under
an ocean of October atmosphere. The pressure
of engines starting, students, wide-eyed
with love, or heartbroken, and illegal
parking will not break the hull
of the building as it glides,
near noiselessly,
through the exhalations,
inhalations, of warm and
cold fronts. The climate of depth,
the brain and what
it won't say, bricks,
vents and windows.
We enter the submarine
for classes of a set duration.
Then, release.

*

A young woman in tight slacks
with a faux snakeskin print cuts
down the library steps toward
the Union. A young man
watches her cross the space
between buildings
in the late afternoon light.
He thinks of orange, Picasso’s
blue period, how they could never
get along with him allergic to nail polish,
fearful of snakes and polyester.
Still, he wonders whom she loves.

*

A flock of heron-like birds
heads south. The ones in back
rotate to the front of the loose
arrow, silently sharing the work
as they go. Another man stops and looks up too. “Too bad I don't have my gun,” he says. The bells ringing in the tower are recorded.

*

I fear there’s not much to see here. We could leave the paper blank and call it *#9 in Light Gouache*, but still the retina would register subtle shifts of light, shadow, and last night’s dream of an overdue library book. Of course, *there is no there there*, but there is, always, something to be seen. Trees are good for wonderment over intricacy—each leaf with a stem, each stem attached to a branch, every branch flowing back to the trunk and finally, down into the soil, a source of dignity.
High and tumultuous, medium and running, *dulce et decorum nella sulla bankula*, ethereal and brown, murky but clearer than the Arkansas, Cimarron red, frothy and shimmering, vaguely blue, silvery and verdant, pensively dark green, aquasienna, milk teeth blue, frothy and stringy red, khaki, pimento and bass, greyhound green, crimson but given to viridescence, lapis lazuli, steel brown, interstate blue, shimmering taupe, recycled white glass, slate, macadam, invisible, tree bark, shivering liver, café au lait, minnow, chiffon, raspberry margarita, month-old caramel apple, lady of the lake green and silver, manure, milky vermeil, catfish belly and roiling, invisible, brick house, Serengeti red, gravy spleen, cattle, basalt.
Hiding

I doubt the sky was really
a deeper shade of blue there. I do know
I was twenty-three and the meals were as forlorn as the city:
overdone meat, viscous gravy, strange dumplings
from potatoes. As for the language, trying to make a joke
to our waitress about an unexpected rainstorm,
I accidentally implied I turned her on. Not to mention
all the overripe peaches and tomatoes I ate that summer
to avoid haggling in the market. Still, there was an innocent
power in walking everywhere, and halls with beer cheaper
than gasoline, and the mountain.

Away from the people, away
from their language of hard consonants and closed vowels,
above the city on Mt. Zabric with its hidden cave, pine forests
and drunk Romany shepherds, I thrived on words and her image.
And there I’d imagine my escape to the south, to Greece,
after teaching too-grateful Slovaks English all summer
in a hot and ill-equipped room with plenty of space to show
how little I knew. On the mountain, I lived
on cheese and bread and read Rilke’s Duino Elegies.
I even memorized a couple, like vocabulary lessons
or Gospels.

After the summer, I planned to go
overland to India, to become, perhaps, a sadhu,
or at least enlightened and passionless. Even so, sometimes
I imagined her on the mountain with me, naked as a tree,
idealized to avoid some concrete thing about love. And I
found it easier to write her "gypsy odes" and "wind songs"
on the back of old Communist postcards showing
the empty town square or the state-run department store
than to write something about our uneasy young bodies
in a real bed.

As it was easier to go
alone to the mountain for the weekend than to face
a student who tried to fix me up with his manic sister
of the delicate laugh and razor wounds. Easier to seek
groves away from the wind rotten with plastic bags and
acrid coal smoke as in my head I sought a paradise, a god,
or a vision of her as nomadic goddess of ancient German
horsemen who worshipped Wotan, all fantasies I’d
eventually undo. And so, alone, I composed in my head
poems about her and the earth, two subjects
of which I knew little. It would’ve been the same
had I taken Rimbaud in place of Rilke except I’d have ended
my verse with “indiscreet, scratching grief” instead of “fantastic,
sobbing joy.”

Either way, I’d have ignored
the Romany section of town with its broken windows
and chicken-wire to keep the stones and Molotov cocktails out.
Either way, I’d have ignored the shadows of the trees at night
in the outdoor beer garden where, in English, my blond
Slovak friend told proud, slurred stories of beating
gypsies without me saying a damn thing. It was Friday
that time, and I’d be on the mountain soon. But now
I wonder, if I’d lived for the city’s coal-stained sky, pensioners
shining shoes on the corner for change, and pasta factory
emitting a rancid smell of grain, would we have
had a better chance?

Still, she read my poems
from the mountain crammed onto the backs of postcards
and believed I was saying something, even when she
arrived at the end of summer and saw
I knew as little of the language and the people
as I knew of her and her hunger for pleasure
beneath a hazy white sky, of her need for some innocent
lie from a mountain to overshadow the beautiful, corrupted earth.
Edition

And then only four days
left until summer.
Spring had been devoured

by the succulent cannas:
Bengal Tiger,
Minerva and Miss Oklahoma.

Couples on swings, naked,
in the dark,
and Watteau’s painting, too, hung

on the horizon, large, like
a horse.
The days long

and desirable again. The miracle
of cucumber and
butter on bread at break-time.

And no one threatened to bring
the pick-axe down
on his head, least of all him. We

were almost gallant. After all,
gas prices were
falling, humpbacked whales

returning, Capistrano unveiled, a full
contralto. Even
the dead Dutch brother got a petal

on the Asiatic Dayflower. I attended
a day sale
at the dollar store to dull the ecstasy,

but that turned lubricious and joined
in too, you see.
*No hiding place,* she said

before returning to Orthodoxy and oil
painting in the Balkans.
Ghosts on the court where we

played fell behind. Not
a zone but one-
on-one. And cross-checking

for good measure. Maestro.
My mistress. “Misterioso.”
Matisse will not be home for dinner.

We cut spring out without
him. Happy
accidents of the swing.
Survival

Conscription for all bears,  
polar bears in particular.  

-Mark Parsons, "Leave"

Conscription, eh? What about invasion?  
Of the grizzly bear's land by humans and  
an occasional, escaped polar bear.  
Despite being able to, professional wrestling style,  
body slam a cow carcass to the ground  
just to break its bones and get to the marrow,  
everyone knows Ursus arctos  
is never a match  
for Thalarctos maritimus, nor is  
Ursus horribilis, despite  
its weight and reputation. Something about  
the isolation. Still, there's that little issue  
of survival, not just feeding the body  
but adapting the palate and range  
to what's there, thereby growing large.  
Not just in body. “When I put on the mask,  
I become the bear,” says George Taylor  
of the Le-La-La Dancers as his wife  
sits next to him looking  
apprehensive. A grizzly must eat  
enough calories to live  
on stored fat for half-a-year, and the diet  
includes: cattle, salmon, army cutworm moths,  
trash from dumpsters, and the faces  
of errant humans. Just a tiny piece,  
chewing on it slowly. Consider it  
an honor to be disfigured and left alive,  
touched by such an adaptable species,  
as if the four-inch claws were  
sacred ivory combs. Survival  
is not horrible to the one surviving.  
Consider that some grizzlies  
interact in intelligible ways with their captors  
instead of merely biting off heads  
and tossing the uniformed bodies  
around on a concrete block  
painted white to simulate the floes
of the Arctic. Two colors—red and white. Grizzlies work a palate of earth shades. “Where their claws contour the ground, they plant seeds and release scarce nitrogen from lower soil levels.” Their feces, rich with digested grubs and fish, the carcasses of their kills, all become earth. They’re “heavyweight gardeners,” “ecosystem accelerators.” By comparison, what do vast expanses of ice and ocean need save the witness of equally incomprehensible being? Colorless, quill-like hair. 

They are not of this world. While grizzlies are about dialogue, even if that means they eat your face, subtly, without you noticing they’ve been sleeping next to you at night, going to your classes, your bars, your zoos, demeaning themselves into trained actors or permitting the cameras of over 200 visitors a day to click and whir while they eat, thank you. Of course, it would be easier to just have a system of conscription and know you don’t belong. No take over from the inside, no confusion about roles, who’s on top, keystone species. But that’s not the kind of survival I’m talking about here. I’m talking about being alive.

Your life is in your own hide.
B. VOYAGE TO DENMARK THROUGH DISENFRANCHISED SKIES
Elaborate Board Game

A jet moves against the dawn, advances over the ocean with its myriad flora and fauna. Hydraulics, red and blue wires, and electrical pulses from the green radar screen that circles and blinks like the eye of a giant abyssal fish innervate the jet’s fuselage. Also inside are organisms who don't perceive their bodies as moving 525 m.p.h. at 35,000 feet as long as metal fatigue stays in the future—a detail in someone else's crash report to distract them from their too quotidian ways when back home, safely bored over coffee.

Now the dawn advances on the plane, cuts and peels it off the wall of night with its ancient accordion music, bellows smelling of smoke. Slight turbulence rattles the perfect, sleeping hands of passengers who don’t often dream of flying but are. They bought a reality both more and less real than their dreams. And now dream of paying in a foreign currency they don't know how to convert. Soon, they’ll wake to a morning six hours ahead of what they could've had for free, had they waited.

The taller, cramped and impatient ones, unable to sleep, are ready to worship the new light like a Hindu on the Ganges. Not because it brings rest or an end to the fatigue they wear like heavy woolen overcoats, but because it brings an ability to see, outside these stuck hours, the waves and clouds of a planet almost foreign to them now—simple distractions, like pieces to an elaborate board game, from the monotony of really flying, which is not as fun as in dreams, weightless, yet is just what they paid for.
Jerusalem Everywhere You Go

-from the spine of National Geographic, August 2003

To everyone’s surprise, the prophecy of Nostradamus was fulfilled by Amazon tribes who, with clubs and the ferocity of facial tattoos, destroyed Paris, rendered it as jagged and dry as the Atacama Desert. These tribes never considered Alaska, were beaten by centuries to the punch in regard to your average Maya City, but in not-so-distant Africa, rhinos went on alert along the border of Zimbabwe.

Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe, would not abide with “enemies of our people” or Amazon tribes. In his office hung a 3-D, five-color plan of a Maya City, inspiration for the New Harare, which would soon easily outshine Paris. Meanwhile, Stellar sea lions kept barking and mating on Unalaska Island, the grey fox hunting in the Atacama Desert.

With new soil reports in hand, President Mugabe ordered sand from the Atacama Desert. The agricultural crisis in Zimbabwe wasn’t a matter of over-zealous land reform but soil drainage, as in Alaska. He also viewed, in the war room, maps on the movements of Amazon tribes, who were headed straight for the Strait of Gibraltar after decimating Paris, leaving it looking like Piedras Negras, a ruined Maya City.

Spondylus, a prized, prosciutto-colored sea shell, comprised the mosaic body of a ballplayer in this Maya City. Sand dunes imitate the twisted, bloated bodies of the dead in the Atacama Desert, where the silent, dry air betrays nothing of moisture or Paris, still burning as something arced across Africa like an arrow toward the heart of Zimbabwe, where Mugabe directed the just-delivered sand to be sandbagged against the coming Amazon tribes. Dilapidated gun mounts, reminders of WW II battles, remain on Attu Island in Alaska, but not even these, refurbished and sent to Mugabe from the people of Alaska, could prepare the citizens to see their newly won land sacked like a Maya City. They beat plowshares back into swords and stood ready to face the Amazon tribes, silent, harsh and deadly as the Atacama Desert. All eyes were on Zimbabwe as everyone forgot the fate of Paris.
Near the front line, rhinos drank beer, smoked and listened to a static-laced broadcast of Charlie Parker’s “April in Paris” while Unisea processed its 2.2 million pounds of pollack a day in Alaska. Then Mugabe broke in with a speech that roused even the baobabs to fight for Zimbabwe.

Sleeping in pools of sweat to the roar of howler monkeys near a ruined Maya City, an archaeologist dreamt of a great battle, like a sand storm in the Atacama Desert, or the elaborately tattooed and pierced faces of certain Amazon tribes.

But the assault never came. The Amazon tribes remained as remote as the ruins of Paris or the sands of the Atacama Desert to the permafrost of Alaska. They disappeared like certain Maya Cities, never to deface the New Jerusalem of Zimbabwe.
River

After a first cup of *chai* taken from a clay cup
I'd break on the street when done, I'd go to the river,
swim in the warm, silty waters that surrounded
my body like silk, and try not to think
about tannery chemicals from upstream Allahabad
or the half-burnt bodies of the poor who couldn't afford
enough wood to finish the job, even in death.
Instead, amidst tropical, mid-morning light
on the monsoon-swollen river's black and tan surface,
I swam among children doing flips
off columns near the bathing platform steps
and the last of late morning worshippers who offered
cupped hands of river water to the sun.
We all stayed near the edge lest the current catch someone
and take him all the way to Calcutta.

Often I floated on my back, eyes shut, and imagined
the gently swaying bodies of *sadhus*, the wandering holy men
of South Asia who, having already died to this world,
don't need to be burnt but are rather tied with rocks
and thrown, whole, into the river. Gently swaying,
like kelp in the ocean, the white Gangetic dolphin
their only witness. And afterwards,
having dried off with a too-thin piece of cloth
and the intensifying sun, I'd head back up
the long, ancient steps into the beehive of narrow lanes
filled with rag-tag children, free-roaming, oblivious bovines,
silk shops, hotels, and sweet-meat sellers
to find my favorite *samosa* stand for breakfast
before another *chai* in a cup of clay, crushable.

Once, while sitting on a narrow stoop making conversation
in pidgin Hindi with the *chai wallah*, cries
from down the alleyway interrupted and grew
until a group of women appeared before us, wailing
in their red, yellow and green silk saris, then
were gone. Children with nothing better to do ran behind
delivering the news in a clipped, slangy dialect
I had no ear for. The *chai wallah* told me in Hindi
that one of the women's children had been swept away
while bathing. He said, "Kya Ganga denti hai,
Ganga lenti," and as I finished my chai, I imagined being
there at that moment, rescuing the child from a river
who takes what she gives. I was that American.

By afternoons in our rundown, British Raj-era mansion a couple
blocks from the river in which I'd rented a dark, downstairs room
from a Bengali man named Babu, women would arrive
with woven, newsprint-lined baskets of fish on their heads
and metal balances in their hands. Babu bought fish
for his extended family, but neither I nor the Australian couple
on the top floor cared for flesh. We'd come to Varanasi,
the shining city, to leave the corporeal world behind. They
studied Indian classical music on the tablas six hours a day.
I studied Hindi and the poetry of Kabir. We got skinny
while Babu and his family cherished their paunches.

Then, I moved from Babu's place to a three-story concrete
building right on the river and owned by a boatman. Light
flooded my daily existence. The boatman's family, with its
three teen sons, made its living by muscle, taking tourists
down the river to the main bathing and burning ghats,
then back up, all by arms and oars. They lived, all seven together,
in a single room downstairs, rented the others out to tourists
on extended holidays. Above them on the second floor lived
the English couple, both nurses, who'd redone the room
with embroidered cushions, pillows, and hanging silks, like
a maharaja's townhouse. There they held elaborate feasts
and consumed only slightly more alcohol than hashish.
Late one night, I heard them fighting at the door over who'd
cheated on whom, and a couple hours later, their cries
were answered by hyenas from across the river. Still, three
mornings a week, they woke before me to tend to the city’s lepers.

I didn't understand that kind of complexity then;
it was only beginning to dawn on me like the inflamed,
crying rash, given to me by the Ganges, that kept me awake
far into the night, or the snippets of racy dreams about
old girlfriends despite my nightly meditations on compassion
for all sentient beings. Sure, I longed for sex at times
but thought it—like socializing, meat and drugs —
something an aspiring mystic would do best to outgrow.
And so I grew, narrower and narrower like the receding
river in winter, and though my errors shrunk, I'd never
been less alive. Anxiety was my ecstasy, dreams my flesh,
longing my bone. "You don't even have any character
anymore," the monkeys seemed to chide as they stole
my bananas from the windowsill one day.

And then, when Bolinath, my *sadhu*-like friend, came by with a knapsack and cried from the shore, "Come with me! I'm going on a month's pilgrimage," I stood inert on the balcony though he offered what I'd imagined my fate to be—something like hydrogen, ethereal and dynamic, but devoid of the oxygen that makes a live, silty river.
The doctor wore two days of stubble, an air of cigarette smoke and a black Adidas track suit to dinner, where we drank grape brandy out of crystal glasses, each etched with a single running horse. Enormities lay outside the circle of kitchen light—wind slamming doors and breaking glass at night, a young, drunken Bulgarian at the wrong apartment who knocked and shouted to let him in, my gut, broken by too many days in the infectious tropical climate I’d come from, her dream of me carrying a glowing skull, my need to escape her, escape me.

The doctor was her friend and sat patiently while she translated my symptoms. Who else was there? I can’t recall, having purposefully forgotten so much of that, our only winter together in a foreign land.

Somehow, it’d all seemed much easier in California with temperatures tomorrow again in the 70s, cheap Mexican mangos all year round, and our common tongue. But there, in that intimate land of saints and demons, broken Romany musicians playing in the taverns, what looked like a dyslexic alphabet, and the “blocks”—monoliths of communist concrete honey-combed with small, indistinct apartments—we fell sick.

The doctor outlined a plan for me. If I could go back, that’s what I’d ask for—a transplant of his purpose, the gravity of his dark features and thick eyebrows, the way he could drink brandy or stand the relentless cold. He probably cheated on his wife, but even then, I could’ve used the strength of what love he had for her, even if it was as small as the last sip of spirits in a crystal glass.

Instead, I received a regimen of vitamins, herbal teas, and dietary restrictions that I ignored. In place
of vitamins, I took indecision and long walks in the cold. In lieu of herbal teas, alcohol. And as for diet, the only thing I didn’t eat was her, as I should’ve, like a bear for warmth before hibernation.

Spring threatened. From our apartment, I saw a black horse gallop down the street while three men pursued in a car. One leaned out the window with a rope, but they disappeared around a corner before he could make the throw.

And when I realized the young, drunk Bulgarian hadn’t had the wrong door, I knew no medicine would work for us, but after the police came to ask for my expired passport, it didn’t matter whether we were sick or not—all the documents agreed I must go.

It was better that way, to go suddenly without a big goodbye. Suddenly, like one grows old, tired of the same fights, then leaves on a weirdly moonlit night. Suddenly, like one takes medicine, a shot of brandy, betrayal, or a kiss.
Nomads with Samsonite

There is no question we should go.
Eels are catadromous, salmon
anadromous. Swallows leave Capistrano
for the north before the heat constricts
their narrow, pink throats,
and dogs, left intact, roam
hundreds of miles
for food, sex, the sheer pleasure of motion.
The sun, moon and earth itself,
phenomenologically stable, all hum
and buck with constant movement.
Even our universe opens like a tulip
or closes like a fist, I forget
which. Moreover, the study molders,
the bedroom's a wreck, and the scenery
around here's gone thin.
There's no question—we should
light out at first light. And what to take?

Decorum dictates we pack light.
Bernoulli's principle
depends on it. So we'll take
your long hair, like a russet kaffiyeh,
to keep us warm, and my long arms
to serve as sundial, compass,
signposts to the locals. A bit of rouge,
a sun dress, a burnoose, we will go
like this, loose, at day break when
dew sparks on spider's radar.

And we shall take our tongues, all
six tongues—your deep and southern
French one that says, \textit{J'ai besoin du pain},
and your educated, scientific,
standard American English one.
Who knows when we will need to diagnose
mural folliculitis or order sulfamethoxazole
from the local farmacia. And we'll take
my tongues: thimble of Bulgarian, clay cup
of Hindi, water pitcher of Nepalese,
and plate of French, preferably \textit{with}
my foot in it. Nothing is so necessary
to the alchemy of good travel as
miscommunication or the misreading of maps.

And as for my long, mendacious,
poetic one, let's bury it in the garden
in hopes it grows into something edible
while we're gone, or feed it to the dogs
on our way out the gate so they will bark
onomatopoetically at neighbors, burglars.
And where to go?

North, south, east, west,
it matters not, just that we move.
Cold is good for health, warm salt water best,
but step by step by step, we're bound to improve.
The Inebriate Airplane

*Humanity was putting shoes on the huge child Progress.*
- Louis-Xavier De Ricard (A. Rimbaud)

As I flew through disenfranchised, friendly skies,
I felt the plane out of the control
of red-necked pilots who'd surmised
the hijacker with ice-picks—one for each eye—a fool.

Oxygen masks dropped, flight attendants distributed the balm
of peanuts and small vodkas as we, released from Bernoulli's principle,
plummeted. Vomit filled the space between the Twenty-third Psalm
and breathing as heavy as a rutting couple's. I—the only disciple
who'd singularly spotted the sun's moldy eye
through the cabin windows and aligned the wave
of our fall with the storm approaching—dodged the artificial dye
of seat backs that, bleeding, gave

commercial airline colors to the faces of passengers
as they sank from my vision, the bodies of drowned sailors,
because they believed too much in the fall. Was I a cur
to believe the craft’s rise into the torpor

of a nuclear Asiatic sky with its belly the color
of Buddha? And why did I miss nothing
of those terrible dinners with too cold spoons to stir
the mousseline of cooks’ bloods or the jabbering

mouths of children standing in their seats? The hangar
hung so far below like an old dryer at a dump
and would never again be a place to linger
while eyeing the pornographic fashion of rump

and tits on glossy covers. The cabin
saw my terror of freedom and offered to strip
its metal skin like a serpent or dancer in
a nightclub of clouds. Exposed to the rip

of the wind, my eyeballs froze with vision. Strangely,
the landing gear stayed in three sets of four
beneath the airplane floor's transparency
while squealing their cries of clemency for

my life. Never trust landing gear. The engines
no longer whirred or whined but their lift
remained like the sensation in the groin of ingenuous
children swinging by a river. The immediate rift

between all flight patterns and this pure sailing
that approached the speed of C. I’d escaped gravity
and could only cry ice for the thud of falling
bodies at the nadir. Space’s space made levity

in place of my disintegrating body—the weakness
of the arms, nausea, radiation poison of violet
pulsation. Someone new grew inside not made of flesh
but airy desire and expression. The end of violent

fear. Still, we, my open vessel made of metal and I,

had nothing to do with stars but occupied the subliminal
blue black space between the Devouring Eye
and thighs splashed red by birth. Over the lintel

of a million deities, I saw sin as the tree
that it was, rootless, and felt my desire for everything.
The pure sensation of interment and sodomy
filled my nerve set like the invasive whining

of swine. Like a demon, I was cast out in replication
and thereby cast out my swine while the apex of nowhere
arrived quickly from its previous location
of one second before. I was hit square

in the chest by phantasms of orange and purple
that ran through hotter than Master Gerveys’s colter.
Inexorably, the gaseous vista opened from its furl
and snapped in my face. Not all the fervor

of Chenrezig’s eyes could’ve absorbed such light
and my sight went as dark as the hair of that woman
from Abyssinia with a dulcimer. I became a slight
embryo or infant suckling. From that moment, like a stamen,

I gather memory’s pollen as it spirals through
in whorls like the hair on an infant’s crowning head.
Agony was absolutely absent and Einstein’s equation grew
into my own extralucidity. The universe hummed a bed
of torch in my spine like a laboring engine on fire. The earthly spectrum was eaten like so many peanuts, and a black and white rainbow revealed the spire-like height of my insouciance, like an earthworm’s dream of wine. Still, nothing could humble the opalescent, ethereal flies of my organs as they landed smack on God’s eye that’d never had the scent of an atheist so close. The seasons’ back-
ward progression to a pure summer there in the midst of what can be so cold told me nothing of the Old Life or the New World but rather life itself, kissed by materiality with absolutely no strife, a conjunction. If I missed anything of the New World from where this flight had left, it was the space between notes in "Crazology" as it whirred over the endless hangover caused by the pace of such a desperate state, and when I returned to the hangar like a pigeon from ash, the sad, empty eyes there made me one of them again, burned out and unable to believe our winging lies.

-writtten 7-21-2001
Ophelia’s Dream

Late at night, our feet rhyme like buttons on a shirt. First, the tops of mine across your arches, prostrate. Then, the tops of yours pressed into my arches, supine. Points of contact change with position, rhythm, but always the firm metatarsi, the warm, taut skin over the flex of the tendons, and the delicate hairs on the toes, brushed and brushing.
Hamlet’s Letter from Exile

Dear Ophelia, I miss your ways with scrimshaw, the delicate play of wrist over dull walrus tusk for months till gleaming white fetishes fell into our bed like solder from acetylene. First, a school of Ozark Mountain fish to recall your home: O Minnow, O Emerald Shiner, O Missouri Saddle Darter, O Common Shiner, O Hornyhead Chub. Then, the effigy of me. Finally, a dinghy in miniature, an ivory-clothed ivory man reared back with his impossibly thin spear aimed at the heart of a whale. We were a circle of three in the gloam of the oil lamp there by the looted sea—you, me, our sculpted life in ivory.
Hamlet’s Meditation

It makes nothing, this world, just empty return
upon itself like snow that snows and blots
out the surface roots of a tree. Windburn
dogs a woman out for a jog who knots
her eyes looking for the cross light. She sees
and goes. The slush will slick the road tonight
for a wreck, but now in the gutter a dull sluice seizes
the day. Hurray. How our lives go. Even
in lightest Italy, where marble friezes
pit from pollution and fathers caress forgiven
parish members too closely. When in Rome . . .
Erasure. The Bosnian street boy, driven
to thieving, when caught near the Hippodrome,
has the presence to say, Non faccio niente.
And later, when snow falls on the Pantheon’s dome,
he goes for shelter in that grand space of nothing.
Ophelia in *The Abyss*

It’s not the drink what knocks me out, it’s the swallow, the anesthetized gulp of wave after wave—the neon orange fluid like something out of a dentist’s office but tasteless save the metallic tinge of oxygen. Usually, only the dead know how many swallows it takes to get to the center of it, fill the lungs, drown, ah, not sleep but a flailing and gag before the body convulses upon itself like a sea worm on a dock in July. But I know now too and I can tell you—no, no more “seems”—put your hand to my throat and count the rhythmic contractions of those delicate rings: one, two, three, four— you count, I’ve done this before, this reverse of birthing, this ingestion so one can live at great depths, not give at every step.

*FBS, or Fluid Breathing System, was developed by the US Navy in an attempt to put live divers at unprecedented depths. An oxygenated fluorocarbon emulsion that can be swallowed and processed by the lungs, it not only acts as a substitute for traditional SCUBA equipment but also puts internal pressure on the lungs, which keeps them from collapsing at extreme depths.*

See, we, Hamlet and I, had many babies and hid them in the castle. One even popped out from beneath the stairwell when the king’s men went to retrieve my father’s body. He’d been suckling at the wound—attention to feedings was never my strength—and scrambled over to the curtain to wipe his mouth, then disappeared. Their names? Why, Rosemary, Pansy, Fennel and Columbine, Rue, Daisy, Flopsy, Mopsy and Indigo. Equally boys’ and girls’ names all. But now that Hamlet’s more bent on revenge than bottle feeding or nappy changing, I, too, have given them up to run wild in the castle, surviving on the odd dropped tart or drumstick, cute begging tricks or lichen when desperate. Most’ll make it given my sturdy servant-to-the-king stock and their father’s wits. And I, rejected and rejecting, must go to the abyss
and defuse the nuclear warheads “accidentally” sent
to destroy peaceful, amorphous aliens.

Yesterday, unnamed sources leaked that a US Navy nuclear submarine had sunk
into the Challenger Deep of the Marianas Trench, where sights of luminous
bodies were being investigated as a possible alien conspiracy to steal our
valuable technology. The Navy is denying the report and related rumors that they
would solve the issue with a tactical nuclear strike, which some fear might set off
earthquakes and tsunamis.

You thought I’d really drown? With a dress
like that, I could have hid enough oxygen to swim
underwater to the Baltic Sea, but all I had to make
was the Zodiac around the bend where Navy Seals,
strong, decisive men, waited with towels, hot coffee
and a Life Suit, orange unfortunately not my best color.
And damn if they didn’t turn away when I changed,
but no one stared or blushed either. A strange new
space, that liminal not object but not quite subject.
They whisked me to a helicopter, which flew me here,
and now, high-tech helmet on and bitter,
oxigenated drink swallowed, I’m the center
of attention, unknown agent, expendable, traceless,
going to the abyss—but my reasons differ
from theirs—secret mission to myself.

The frequency and use of X, or unknown, agents is difficult to discuss by its very
design, but historically known examples that involved such operatives include the
invasions of North Africa and Normandy in WW II and the overthrow of
numerous communist regimes in Central and South America in more recent times,
showing their vast historical and political puissance.

The dive suit is filled with heated water like the tropics
in a castle, my head is screwed on tight, my lungs full
of elixir, and I step into the lighted circle of water
inside the Navy submersible on the edge of the trench
and sink, more weighted than buoyant, more
toothed whale than woman, the hair above my sex
seaweed as I descend. There is the sensation
of falling, yes, and the pressure does increase—my temples
ache, my arms and legs feel as if a million rasping hagfish
feed there. I pass out at one point and wake to the still
slow-motion fall. H, I never loved you either, is the bell
that rings in my head, answered by the antiphony, Father,
go suck the king’s cock. Suddenly, I’m more me than ever
and never more alone or distant from the light. I’m
mollusk and under my tongue, the pearl for which
I’ve traded the world.

Still denying the rumors of a nuclear submarine/alien encounter in the Pacific,
the Navy maintained that its invasion of the Samoan Islands was friendly in
nature and designed to decrease the prevalence of alcoholism and obesity there.

Sure, I defused the warheads (save the one I put
in my pack), greeted the aliens—not nearly as interesting
as me, who is seemingly solid but amorphous
in reality as opposed to their on-the-sleeve
fluidity—and pulled the chord to inflate the vest
that hugged my chest and brought me back.
I even held onto a buff sailor as I coughed the fluid
up and shuddered back to respiration here
on the main stage. Then I noticed the sailor
had breasts and commanded a nearby man
to fetch me a blanket, and I thought the descent
had changed something. But there were queens
in my time, women who held enormous influence
on the court, and here power was the ability
to command a man who would later scan the implanted
breasts and shaved pubis of glossy female forms
while in the head? Ah, to Elsinore,
I’m as good as dead, and the confines
of this fucking sub hurt my head.

I, Ophelia of the Abyss, pearl of wisdom
in my mouth and nuclear warhead in my pack,
will ditch this vessel at first port, commandeer
a low-drawing sloop and be three times the pirate
Blackbeard or John Avry was. My flag?
Jolly Roger on a black field with yantra
of Kali behind. If you see it, tremble—I’m strong,
dashing and mean, know mercy is best extended
first to oneself, and if not, one’s as good as dead.
Once I amass a sizeable crew, I’ll return to raze
the cold castle, call my grown children
to my ship, and sail to Fiji.

And when my children’s children need
to sleep, I’ll tell them my story.

The pearl and warhead will illuminate their dreams.
C. THE SARGASSO SEA, KOKURA AND NAGASAKI
Arboreal

The trees planted in the medians follow me. They could be a kind of peppertree given the narrow, delicate leaves, like children's fingers, the milky-white sap, and berries with a spicy, resinous smell.

I try not to look at them, but there they are, flaming red and asking for my attention. The mind's luminosity adheres to such things and makes the world leap into being. Without the world, luminosity shines in the dark cave of your skull and can implode or enlighten depending upon one's ease with such light. But the alternatives—perception, parsing things up, then labels, and finally, the schematic diagrams of the brain—so often seem just an ego trick to make the little you feel essential or like a new car is what you need. Or
an education.
A friend is reading Ricoeur in translation.

(Ricoeur's words denser than daylight
is long,
so he could still be reading, though I suspect

you understand "is reading"
as "read."
Don't you know we grow old

through such narrative strategies?
Couldn’t
it all be present progressive?)

I’m dubious about anything in
translation,
especially French literary theory,

and wonder about the hours he spends
grinding
his mind, a delicate flower,

through such machinations.
I should
advise my friend

such precious time could be
better spent
in the parking lot

contemplating the essential
red
of the trees,

terrifyingly without
translation.
Crêpes Dentelles

When I played a Civil War martyr, my ending
epistolary monologue effaced all others. My mother
sewed for a week to make the navy felt fit
handsomely, and Dirs. A. Lincoln and J. Racine
lauded me publicly. This was before my mother
assassinated my father over something trivial,
and the doughy belly of love with its thick yeasty smell
filled the kitchen. Pancakes instead of crêpes.
The half frig with its stainless steel door,
like an airplane hatch, hid his body
through the trial until it was jailed
for rot. Habeas corpus, said the pontiff.
Ooooooooh, came the collective sigh
from the rows of parishioners who swooned
like iron stamens beneath the feet
of magnetic bees. A pistol was produced
but not fired. All other unities were upheld.
I watched from the loft with my sister Scout,
an albino embryo in a jar. The Africans
assured us our father was the good man.
The one on veal rails, half frozen. My baby tooth
refused to fall out—resolved by string
and a bag of wooden bricks. The green shag rolled
on and on like the Sargasso Sea. “Your mind
and you.” Arar, said the pirates. Lead us to booty.
Pecans in the black soil. Fuselage of solar
canopy overhead. My mother fixed a picnic,
but inside the bread I found my father’s
gold and lace crêpe teeth.
My Secret Fantasy Life

Cheryl, the dental assistant, welcomes me, is real nice, makes me feel right at home. She wears scrubs, latex gloves, a blue paper mask and clear plastic eye protection. She asks about problem areas, and when she has me down, my mouth wide open and a large dental pick scraping the grooves on some sensitive tooth in the back, she asks if I've been to the State Fair yet.

I nearly gag answering with my tongue trying to lie down, be polite, not follow her work all over my mouth like a needy dog. So I take to grunting. She seems to like it, responds by asking more questions, increasing the pressure and speed of the dental pick until it begins to nick at my gums here and there. Behind the too-big mirrored sunglasses she's given me for protection, I close my eyes and remember that scene in *The Marathon Man*. Cheryl could ruin my mouth with a quick slip. My leg twitches. I sweat.

And imagine Cheryl, about the same age as my wife, astride me. She wears the turquoise dental assistant's top, nothing else, and gently rocks back and forth, like a chambered nautilus swims, as she works. Fear and eroticism are fine bed mates.
She stops asking questions, works with an intensity that feeds my fantasy, almost makes the minute, enormous pain bearable.

I want to open my eyes and look at her, but when I do, my fantasy goes askew. She’s at the wrong angle, has the wrong grimace on her face, looks like she could be scrubbing the neck of some little kid in a tub, determined beyond the kid or dirt or tooth or husband or job that involves looking into hundreds of mouths, all with their own unique mouth smell, weekly. So I close my eyes again, try to imagine the pressure of her body over me. She is slender but fairly tall and would weigh more than you would think.

My fear? Vagina dentata? No, not teeth there. The teeth in our very own mouths. The labiodental and linguadental sounds and their absence. Pit, pet, pat, pot, putt, put. The way we’re born to gum, then chew, then, if we’re lucky? gum again. The singularly oracular symbolism of the mouth and the phantasms of worlds it spews. Teeth in a kiss, or more so, a kiss without teeth. These little enamel plates of clack clack that fall out, hide under pillows, mutate into coins, scintillate in the sun, work against the tongue, with the tongue, “by these teeth I thee wed,” the stain, the decay, the loss. A weak spot in some god’s plan, like knees. Or is it just our sin of sugar? Oh, little white sweets of sin, please stay firm in the sulci.

Cheryl finishes. I am awake and sitting upright, talking to the dentist. She says, "Everything looks great," and I agree. The sun, breaking through the clouds, reveals a single bullet mark in the glass before us, but the surface still has integrity, keeps the animals out though they can see, relaxed, grimacing, done, us through the glass, window to our interior human world.
El Dead Hombre

Bicycle ride to the east,
back country macadam;
a turkey vulture rises off
something—I’m moving pretty good now—
dead, a raccoon, on its side,
fur peeled back, a vibraphone
of ribs in the buttery sun,
archipelago of gore born from
its side on the hot, black sea.

Raccoon, dead on the road, strange
omen you are, masked and split
open. Hit in the dark no doubt.

Five miles on, my head still has him,
an Athena in Zeus’s aching temple. I enter. He’s
there, side still splayed open, but animated. He ambles up,
opens his mouth, a beautiful red velvet purse from which I pluck
two perfect gold coins, one for each eye.
In Progress

Your immanence, like a rusted hound,
St. Bernard Mastiff shrunk in rain to Poodle Pe-
ingese. The road was long. And winding.
Windy, too. And your knees knocked
on the macadam as you fell from da feet
to da chest and da hands. *Kiss my black*
gravel barrel, *suck tarry wind*, it sang.
*You really should run more often*, you
thought in anagram. “You” disguised as
me which means *oui*.

Dear Anselm, let’s call my daily life
Vermeer, my other life Goya. One
flooded with quiet light as a figure toils
making *crêpes dentelles*, the other
the impact of being shot in a gauzy white shirt
while the mouth of night gnaws on
yr head. Furthermore, dawn and dusk
have been subtle as buzz saws lately,
motoring across the sky of a consciousness
etched clean of words.

Summer always finds us—I, you, him,
the Proteus lie of pronoun, the protons
clear valance like a recorded, scratchy
bell. My head’s not right, right?
Ring on the third stop, exit the diesel
beast and climb the chipped, garrulous
steps to the top. Stop. Ring again.
The thing that opens is a door. The
thing that opens what opens is me.
No verse, straight-on.
Illness

It’s happened, again. The bugaboo of illness, ingenuous little death machine on my shoulders, in my spine and latissimus dorsi muscles—no, deeper, fourth layer, spinalis dorsi, page 343 of Gray’s Anatomy—in the groin. I run on. I’m nowhere near dying but the fatigue runs through me all day like a road through Kansas, and the cold air leaks into my poorly heated car, numbs my hands and feet. Weariness follows, and the infinite ache, like something Neruda would say. So I’m trying to abide with illness, feel it as the little death it is, the link no one wants to speak of. Parents never tell their children illness is death’s half-sister, and abiding with her, welcoming even, would be good practice.

A poem should be this: Little Instruction Manual for Things. "Death: A woman was dying and went to a teacher. 'My doctor has given me only a few months to live. Can you help me?' The teacher laughed. 'You see. We are. All dying. It’s only. A matter of time. Some of us. Sooner than others.' Accepting death, the woman took a practice and was healed, or dead, it didn’t matter then." Or: "Plumbing: The pipe should not come in contact with lime mortar or lime concrete as the pipes can be affected by lime. When the pipes are embedded in walls or floors, they should be covered with Hessian cloth dipped in coal Tar/Japan Black.” Or instructions for your own coup d’état. Honey, where is that lovely terza rima on tile cutting?

But most poets, like parents, remain practical. Hot drinks, rest and vitamin C. A stanza or two in The New Yorker. More reasonable, I see. Especially when there’s no belief in an afterlife or rebirth. But few claim that completely. If so, more people would say, “Die, it’s no big deal. Everybody does it.” And few say this. So I’m practicing today, trying to be patient with the pain and nausea, thinking of the suffering of others and how much of it I cause with a lack of attendance to their pains and illnesses, even absent when saying goodbye, goodbye, and the anger with my sons at times. (Other vices; I shouldn’t bore the reader with the assorted sordid details.) This practice
seems easy when home alone in front of the TV, or in the study with my lonely, aching bones and the typewriter’s skeletal keys.

But the erasure of illness reveals me.
Unpacked

I used to be a mastermind of flight, 
the physical kind where one packs it all
up and lights out for the hills, or Isle of Wight,
or Kathmandu. I first escaped the caul

of my birth, both place and right, and then escaped
much larger things—first love, the academy,
an adopted state of gold, then the auto-raped
nation of my freedom. Liz is right. It’s easy

to lose things, homes, even people. Just make
a game of it, make distance your goal until
you lose yourself. I thought that way I’d fake
out pain or find myself. No more. Though still

I long for cafés rife with smoke and strange
tongues, I know now no one escapes the human grange.
Difference

Burnt finger, charred cabin,
now the fire’s inside. It must
die down before he can sleep.
Nerves. One should stash
a pint of good drink for such occasions.
At least the down bag will keep
his feet warm through the cold
and certain silence of the night.
His head a sluice for dreams.
He doesn’t dream of flight
but her, again, the one who studies
history at a university
while he roams the Balkans
like a horse in the hungry wind.
They are on a walk somewhere
foreign, the Castro District or Slovakia.
Her bare feet reveal a fetish
or a naked, defenseless anima,
the kind that turns ecstasy
inside out on the body, like a glove, so
the body goes cold or hurts itself.

But before this sleep and dream,
he traces his path back up the hillside
past the abandoned hospital
and over the creek in the dark, then
up the gravel road beneath the country’s
most famous monastery where
a long dead saint lies swaddled in cotton.
From this womb of stagnant clouds,
monks pull strands to give pilgrims
who’ve left behind cramped apartments,
deceiving marriages, and dead-end jobs
in a city named after wisdom.

At the top of the gravel road
lies the good hotel where he eats,
before the descent, with two natives
who pity his solitary table,
its meager fare and lack of wine,
and invite him to join them.
They like what they imagine
to be his homeland
and want to visit should he
ever return. He leaves them
an address. They leave him
fantasizing that night
about them in bed together, hundreds
of vertical feet above his head
like a cup of trembling fire.

Before this dinner, he walks
beneath the rust and beige striped walls
and red tiled cupolas of the monastery,
where few tourists come in the fall.
He imagines what temptations
the demons in the frescos offer
the steely-eyed saints, then goes
inside the sanctuary to light candles
for family and her, place them mindfully
in trays filled with sand. Some traditions,
like food, sex, and pain, speak
across the barrier of tongues.

At dusk, a black robed monk beats
a wooden board with a mallet as a call
to prayers—tok, tok, tok;
tok, tok, tok. Pilgrims
show him their swatches
of sacred cotton and urge him
to procure the same. He nods,
says one of the few words
he knows—ootray—he hoists his backpack
up and heads to the hotel.

Late that night, after he hikes
with a head full of wine
down the gravel road under pines
and stars to the abandoned cabin,
he lights the one candle
he's saved. Soon, he has enough
of its quiet light and wants to test
his body against the flame,
as if he could walk through walls
or see the future. Fascinating, the difference
between passing a finger through a flame
and holding it there. The burn came
quickly, then sobriety, dark.

Tomorrow—oo tray—he'll hike over the pass to the Valley of Seven Lakes, but the blister will stay with him across the Aegean, nearly all the way home. His passport can expire, but he cannot rescind his corporeality.
Translation of Distance

They imagined days of vacation via marks on the calendar, but in the actual foothills of mental health near Mt. Sanitas, so much muddier than in memory, his mind feels impaled on a wrought-iron fence, his patience eaten by a mountain lion. Some monks find sanity among family difficult.

His son disappears for a beat too long—panic. Mountain lion?—then re-appears from a miniature castle with molded, plastic stones that intrigue him, especially when he hides, pretends to be a dog or mountain lion, then returns to them a boy with muddy knees.

Despite this play, the day ends with little satisfaction, feels like the scrambled slide show of his wife’s family’s lives as they click and whir into focus on the white wall. Voices broadcast interpretations from around the darkened room. Some in agreement, some in discord. Who will order her family's inchoate history?

Later, on the porch, having completely forgotten the Vinaya Pitaka’s prohibition of alcohol, or pretending to some knowledge of the indulgent Vajrayana school, he relaxes with Drambuie and the words of Bodhidharma:

Open spaces; nothing holy.

"Relax" is an anagram for drunk, "open" rhymes with avoidance, and nothing can write the adequate weight of mountain air pouring over the pass from the west. Over the bones of the day.

He sees the wind has no patience, which, unlike what his old teacher Lama Patience said, seems today a virtue. On his walk, his son and he found a memorial to Chief Niwot of too much patience, who was murdered with his people. At the town’s public library, three ripped Lakota-Sioux handed out books on child-rearing to hustle change.
At lunch in the library's small cafe, 
his son saw Boulder Creek as going up and up, 
not spatially away. He read 
the first three pages of Basho's 
*Narrow Road to the Interior.* 
His son climbed the creek to the sky.

Suddenly, he felt related to nothing around them 
save the rushing water, a good subject for haiku, 
and the miniature plastic castle, distant 
relative to the ones built by medieval samurai.

Ten miles. They walked ten miles and ate and read.

A good day by most accounts. Now the moon 
does not exist above the low, pregnant clouds.

He sheds his robes and becomes an embryo 
inside the illuminated house of glass.
How We Go

From the outside to the inside
like a tongue lathing an ice cream
on a violent August day. Seventy-two
thousand subtle energy channels in the body,
but when the hand stops moving,
you're done. Drip, drip, drip. And when
the yab-yum of blood orange
and Devonshire cream at the heart goes
topsy turvy, the little consciousness
escapes. Those going to a Pure Land
exit the crown of the head.
Those going to Hell go
out the ass. Same process for
small animals with all their diverse
sufferings, hopes, dreams of the flea and
flea-bitten. Buddha Shakyamuni
was a flea, a monkey, an ox, all
of these once. Where
was my mind? Ah,

escape, as in that old organ tune,
"There is no place I know that
compares with pure imagination."
Yes, consciousness moves wherever it
desires, sticks to nothing, like
the invisible bees of Time gather
the Infinite pollen of the Phenomenal.
But how exhausting, those travels,
and there are all those fireplaces
to sit by, swings to swing on,
dandelions to blow, even
Chinese to learn, and that takes
many lifetimes, so the little consciousness
desires a body again. Your father's body
if you're to be a woman, your
mother's if you're to be a man.
Subtle-body Buddhist physiology
slips neatly into Freud's black leather glove,
like the little consciousness nestles
down in the mother's womb for
an angry nap, caught now,
done wandering except for in
the ocean of itself, roiled by
waves of desire, hatred and ignorance
that undulate non-stop
in the radiator of the brand-new
shiny embryo. Again.
Past Life Drift

Their meeting? The sound of a drawer of cutlery being quickly drawn open, jangled. The nerve set infinite, cut fresh fig on a holographic plate. East Jerusalem, 1967, he knew they’d met before, but it was queer, this realignment of eyes when not disguised by gun scopes. Blam, blam. The sight of her bare bodice.
Recoil. The Dead Sea taste on his skin. And holy was the rifle, the matzo and the sin.
Genealogy

Difficult to figure, like a town named "Moore"
with a yellow happy face painted on its gunmetal gray
water tower and just slightly fewer pregnant high schoolers
than Trans Ams and Camaros. That was their hometown.
And on a street like the edge of a postage stamp lost
behind the coffee pot for months, torn, and ticked
with food particles, they lived.

Once, I dreamt I was there of my own accord
and glad to see the overweight
disco queen—my aunt—who taught me how to read
when not washing her own children's “foul mouths” out
with the pink foaming action of Mr. Bubble.
It was always Saturday Night Fever
on Queensbury, and The Bee-Gees
sang with a flying whine from their seemingly
swollen throats while my aunt and I tried
desperately to catch the wasp in an old mason jar.
It never landed on the record player's dust-covered
dust cover, and when it stung her, I knew she would die.

I can't remember whether this dream
was before she actually died or not. Definitely after
I learned the meaning of "orgasm" and "fellatio"
from her nurse's encyclopedia and fancied myself,
through that moment of study, older and wiser
though confused like I'd just read the directions
to becoming a 33rd degree Mason or for making tiramisù.
Still, knowledge is everything, no matter
when it comes. Like my aunt, a nurse, knew all along
the prescription drugs she abused
would harden her lungs to the consistency
of some water-logged bracket fungus on a tree.

Of course, no one knew then her husband,
like Hephaestus with his polio limp and affections
of wrought iron, would die watching ESPN while sucking
the last bits of life from oxygen tubes in his nose
and cigarettes out of a green and blue package
suggesting the sea. I'll never forget
how well-dressed his undertakers were as they
straightened the stiffening body to the gurney's 
horizontal cut, the man in a charcoal suit 
and dress shirt with cufflinks, the woman in a sheer 
white blouse that seemed luminescent and left her 
cleavage tastefully visible. And now their eldest son 
dreams inside the same clapboard house 
of becoming lupine while the hungry mouth of a tumor 
devours his insides. And their youngest son 
holds down his house's front porch 
with sacks of aluminum empties. I'd prefer 
to pronounce the above as "aluminium" 
just for the sake of distance.

We are maternal blood relatives, and try as I might 
to uncover my special, royal, paternal dispensation 
from suicide, arson, sodomy, bestiality, and that simple 
daftness of the jay-walking kind, 
I cannot. And lately, after certain 
trying hours with myself or my two-year-old son, 
I've been thinking of washing my own 
mouth out with soap, abusing 
my wife's prescription veterinary products, 
or sucking on straw, gravel, or my lip until some gist 
of what seems like life comes out. Then I take 
a long walk around our property with its edges 
frayed like those of an old postcard’s from 
a distant country showing pigs prized for their ability 
to sniff out truffles from the earth, 
and I say, "Merde!" three times real loud, 
and it is done. I belong to no one.
Why Dogs Ingest Anything While the Human Mouth Remains So Sentimental

1. Things I've seen dogs eat: dog food, squirrels, cats, grass, side of a 1972 GMC truck, Heart of Understanding by Thich Nhat Hahn, Scooby snacks, dirt, fast food (including most of bag), horse shit, cow shit, human shit, other dogs, a bloated human corpse on the banks of the river Ganges.

Twelve thousand years ago, in a site near Jerusalem, a man was laid in a grave, right hand cradling a dog.

Who has not at least slept in the same room as those with the most omnivorous mouths?

2. My older son teaches my younger son to pray:
These are your ears and these are your eyes
and these are your arms and these are your legs.

Part of a prayer that was said much earlier:
Wolf don't eat my ears and Wolf don't eat my eyes,
then Dog don't eat my arms and Dog don't eat my nose.

Part of a prayer to be said much later:
Sir, don't torch my ear; God, don't eat my eyes;
Work, don't eat my arms; Lady, not my legs.

I, being Buddhist, don't believe in prayer to save one's skin, despite the shape I'm in:
eaten by my work clothes, eaten by my school clothes,
eaten by the horses who live in the yard,
eaten by the Maenads, eaten by my TV,
eaten by my own two sons who learn to pray.
And the gods in the yard and the woman at school
and the books on the shelf and the kitchen knife, too.
Eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten up.

Rinpoche, I warn you seriously. I have some medical knowledge;
your disciple may be driven to madness by the terror
he experiences. He really appeared to feel himself being eaten alive.
No doubt he is, but he does not understand that he himself is the eater.

3.
You be the dog and I'll be the vet.
   No, I'll be the dog and you be the catcher.
The vet.
   The catcher.
The vet.
   The catcher. Remember, the vet always gets it in the end.
The dog always gets it in the end.
   Well, the vet first . . .
And the dog in the end. Definitely the dog.
Definitely in the end.
   But first a surprise, a growl, bared teeth, a lunge to scratch or bite!
Only when I'm cornered.
   So you’ll be the dog.
Maybe the dog and maybe the wolf.
You won't know till you're in my teeth.
   Not a chance. I'm too careful.
The chase makes one careless.
   No way, I'm too aware.
The fur makes one awareless.
   So, careless, awareless, the dog always gets it in the end.
Not till the very final, very last, very breath, on the leash and wearing muzzle very last end.

4.
Do we have such horrors inside our body?

Nothing was horrible about the beginning: my pack flowed around me like dancers at a party, the sun still lulled in the trees, the dry heat of the day not yet on. My bow was taut, my step, light, as if all those years of hunting either fell from me or buoyed me—I was other than myself. Instinct led me up an unknown slope to a miraculous grove radiating like the sun itself. The moist sounds of panting and licking died down as my pack
fell in around me. We stepped nearly in time, 
breathed the same rhythm. And from the edge 
of the grove, in water like silver—what to say 
about what I saw because you know the story, 
know her body pulsed perfect on my vision 
like a white heat mirage. What is not spoken of, 
and seldom imagined, is the more perfect vision 
I had that last day. Unmuddied by self-consciousness, 
I, now another, hairier, swifter animal, watched closely, 
meditatively, as my own sharp-toothed hounds flayed 
the skin from my muscles, bared the miracle of fasciae 
and nerve from inside my body with their generous, 
ungentle mouths, and I saw for the first time, 
and for the last, the network of optimism I was.
The other day, my youngest son in the carrier on my back and my body warm with the rhythm of filling, shovelful by shovelful, the third wheelbarrow load that would go to the garden, I thought of how some dubiously elected world leaders would benefit from mucking stalls. The sun was out for the first time in weeks, a bright hydrogen-supported star burning and roiling roughly ninety-two million miles away, one astronomical unit, AU, the perfect distance for such a golden thing as opposed to just over one's head. Curious the difference distance can make, like Kokura was almost Nagasaki.

And the rains were over for the moment, heavy rains only lightly tinged with random radioactive particles, still buzzing around the atmosphere from '45 and then the 50s and 60s when everyone joined in. I love the clarity of light in the fall out under the open wheel of sky turning bluer unto itself until it almost turns black. And shoveling, composting, made me think how G. Snyder's "Four Changes" contains enough answers to end all the current nonsense: fossil fuel-based transportation, an economy that insists on cancerous growth, bread evermore like stale rags, tongues for wealth and power at all costs, even war. The new manure is hottest, and it's best to mix it with the scoops of sand and older, broken-down material. And I thought of how few of the "Four Changes" I really live.

I'm like a grub worm in the dirt, essential to the process but unable to change it much. My role seems set—consume, fatten, shit, die. And the outcome of such blindness makes me think of the other September 11th, the one in 1973.
when Pinochet's troops took over Santiago and marched all the socialists and communists to the Estadio Nacional with US-financed guns at their backs. I think it must’ve been hard to hear the echoes of soccer fans’ cheers amid the howls of men and women with broken hands, arms, legs, and no confessions to give, nothing to confess. And I doubt the CIA had to give a lesson on the breaking of bones, natural to the human race, almost like love.

After all, even composting is a violent cycle, with the maggots writhing in a discarded orange like someone's brain on fire. And I wonder if our monuments of education, entertainment and infrastructure will be used for torture someday when the country falls, as all great countries do. Sometimes, I can almost see the bodies of our "innocent civilians" chained to water pipes in malls, to railings in stadiums. Maybe some haunting Chinese or Arabic song, or Sousa march, will echo off the concrete as the strong arm or blow torch or kitchen knife comes closer. "I didn't do anything!" the civilian may scream. That's the point—what we are not doing now will hang us later.

_Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre._

I don't mean to be melodramatic or maudlin, just practical. My hope is of the same cloth—put your back or foot or finger to the manual wheel of composting or pedaling or typing and turn it like a prayer wheel until you feel human again. Something will absolve you then, and you will find rebirth in this physical sphere, mirror of all we are blind to or faintly hear.
III. WORKS CITED


---. from “Paradise.” Hoover 493-97.


VITA

Timothy G. Bradford

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy or Other

Dissertation: NOMADS WITH SAMSONITE: A POETRY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:


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Name: Timothy G. Bradford  
Date of Degree: December 2005

Institution: Oklahoma State University  
Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: NOMADS WITH SAMSONITE: A POETRY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pages in Study: 108  
Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: Nomads with Samsonite consists of poems written over a five year period (2000-2005). The majority of the poems were written for poetry workshops with Lisa Lewis, Ai, and Alfred Corn. The three main aesthetics (with associated influences) in this manuscript are: 1) a longer-lined, narrative, post-confessional aesthetic influenced by writers such as C. K. Williams and Larry Levis; 2) a shorter-lined, lyrical aesthetic influenced by writers such as William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Tate; and 3) a postmodern, experimental, indeterminate aesthetic influenced by writers such as Louis Zukofsky, John Ashbery, and Eleni Sikelianos.

Findings and Conclusions: Thematically, the manuscript is bound together by the reoccurring motifs of travel, geography, dreams, perception, self-definition, and death. (The word “foreign” appears six times, and the word “dream” appears twenty-five times.) In this sense, the manuscript bears a thematic resemblance to the work of Elizabeth Bishop, whose The Complete Poems: 1927-1979 was a primary influence. In addition, none of the above-mentioned aesthetics exists as an independent entity; there are numerous points of overlap amongst the influences and in the manuscript, which aspires to what contemporary poet Juliana Spahr, in her essay “Spiderwasp or Literary Criticism,” calls “the most distinct characteristic of work by emerging poets of the 1990s: the tendency to violate the aesthetic separations of various schools and to deliberately create an aesthetic of joining” (409).

ADVISER’S APPROVAL: Lisa Lewis
The first critical survey of the development and achievements of "modern" Arabic poetry (1880-1974) in English. Ranges over the entire Arabic-speaking world and includes the work of poets such as Kahlil Gibran. No knowledge of Arabic is necessary. Ranges over the entire Arabic-speaking world and includes the work of poets such as Kahlil Gibran. No knowledge of Arabic is necessary. The poem An Introduction is an autobiographical verse of Kamala Das that throws light on the life of a woman in the patriarchal society. I have divided the poem into five parts for better understanding. I have tried to first give a brief explanation of the lines and then provide a comprehensive analysis. Hope you may go through the poem and understand its central idea. Poem Summary. Men as the Rulers of Country. I don’t know politics but I know the names of those in power, and can repeat them like Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru. The poet starts explaining by saying that