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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Michael Jon Levan Jr. entitled "The Genius of a Crow: Poems." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Art Smith, Ben Lee, Lynn Sacco

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Genius of a Crow: Poems

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael Jon Levan Jr.
May 2012

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Photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing
and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth
which can make them come back again.

— Henri Cartier-Bresson

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ABSTRACT

Every age has its troubles, and ours is no different. Military conflict, economic uncertainty, environmental threats, and other serious global concerns shape how many of us greet every new day. These issues, however, are unacknowledged in a growing segment of contemporary American poetry. Too often, some poets neglect what is outside them and instead turn to producing work that is so focused on the poet's interior life that no one besides the poet him- or herself can possibly enter. But contemporary American poets can find an important influence in postwar Eastern European poets who have risen from one of the ugliest times in recent history and managed to write poems that acknowledge, respond to, and rise above the horrors of World War II, poems that help us search within ourselves and find a way to respond to the world. Through close study of several Eastern European poets, such as Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wislawa Szymborska, and Adam Zagajewski, contemporary American poets can focus again on poetry's chief aim: to establish genuine connection between poet and reader.

This issue is central to the poems in my dissertation, *The Genius of a Crow*, which rely on three steps in order to ensure they transcend the too-inwardly-focused verse common today: one, the poems engage with a series of found photographs from the 1940s through 1960s, which provide entry into the speaker's memories; two, they are written through the perspective of a persona; and three, they incorporate outside research, which deepened my understanding of the postwar period in America.

Table of Contents

Mending Disconnectedness in Contemporary American Poetry: What Postwar Eastern European Poetry Can Teach Us: A Critical Introduction

I.	1
II. Putting the Eastern European Tradition's Lessons into Practice	20

The Genius of a Crow: Poems

Proem for Found Film	32
----------------------	----

I.

Where I Remember Having No Way to Protect R. from His Future or Mine	34
Looking through the Windshield, I am Cold as Snow Falls Again	35
My Younger Son, M., Dressed for Trick-or-Treating	36
To R. Crawling for the First Time	37
When I Finally Knew What It Took to be a Father	38
From a Bench My Parents, Long-Dead, Still Teach Me about Silence	39
To My Wife Exiting the Church and Looking Forward to Our New Life	40
To M. after Seeing Again His First Picture with Santa	41
Along the Pond Edge, My First Love Proposes She Might Have Been Home	
After All	43
With Shotgun Held Tight in My Teenaged Arms	45
Hand on Hip, She Turns from Her Father and Brother Fishing	46
View across a Lake of Another City I'd Never Call Home	48

II.

Storm	50
-------	----

III.

What R. Must Have Remembered that Midnight Brought Him	67
Behind a Bundled Up R., Through the Window, My Wife Mows the Lawn	69
Posed in Front of the Five-and-Dime in My Brand New Field Jacket	71
You as a Pin-Up Girl Who Couldn't Do Anything but Keep Safe in My Pocket	73
Letter from My Wife Tucked Among the Photos	75
Self-Portrait in a Plywood Carnival Cut-Out	77
On M. Practicing Headstands on a Pillow in the Yard	79
I Lose More Each Day I Spend in This Town	81
Labor Day Parade, Three Years After I Buried Her	82

Bibliography	83
--------------	----

Vita	89
------	----

Mending Disconnectedness in Contemporary American Poetry: What Postwar Eastern European Poetry Can Teach Us:

A Critical Introduction

I.

Every age has its troubles, and ours is no different. Military conflict, economic uncertainty, environmental threats, and other serious global concerns shape how many of us greet every new day. These issues, however, are unacknowledged in a growing segment of contemporary American poetry. Too often, some poets neglect what is outside them and instead turn to producing work that is so focused on the poet's interior life that no one besides the poet him- or herself can possibly enter. But contemporary American poets can find an important influence in postwar Eastern European poets who have risen from one of the ugliest times in recent history and managed to write poems that acknowledge, respond to, and rise above the horrors of World War II, poems that help us search within ourselves and find a way to respond to the world. Milosz, Adam Zagajewski, Zbigniew Herbert, and other members of the Eastern European tradition have experienced brutality and ruin through the loss of their loved ones, homes, and their countries' identities. They are uniquely qualified to lead American poets to extend their poems beyond one moment in time or one place in order to make people feel what their speakers experience, to make others think about what else exists beyond their personal situations. The postwar poets have gained an unfortunate wisdom from their experiences, but instead of being broken by them, they call us to take in what is wrong with the world and respond to it in a way that will inspire change.

I am reminded of Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Dedication," an elegant poem which questions and then answers what poetry is supposed to do:

You whom I could not save

Listen to me.

.....

What strengthened me, for you was lethal.

You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one,

Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,

Blind force with accomplished shape.

.....

What is poetry which does not save

Nations or people? (*New and Collected Poems* 77)

Instead of the poet writing for himself or herself as in some contemporary American poetry, Milosz, perhaps the greatest contributor to the post-war Eastern European tradition, realizes what poetry's aim should be: connecting people in a world that has increasingly come to privilege the self more than the community. In "Milosz and Witness," critic and poet E. D. Blodgett notes as much:

The speakers of [Milosz's] poems, individuals they may be, have acquired a voice transcending the isolated ego and the limited regionality of so many of our poets.

The poetry that Milosz signals is great precisely because it has surpassed the small pleasures of yet another psychological insight and speaks to a condition that the world, not the poet, faces. (150)

Milosz doesn't want his simple, earnest lines to become "readings for sophomore girls" (77). Guilt and the burden of survival may have been the poem's genesis ("What strengthened me, for you was lethal"), yet the poem is not only a means for self-healing because the speaker's goal is to share the peace he has found in poetry with as many people as possible. From the poem's first sentence, we see how much Milosz's speaker cares for others. Even those he couldn't save at first, he can't forget:

“You whom I could not save / Listen to me.” Milosz understands that as a poet he has a responsibility to make his readers confront the world in all its splendor and pain, overcome the obstacles it presents, and know the calm that words can offer. Whether we know it or not, we “want good poetry” so that we can find help in dealing with and understanding the world, so that we don’t have to feel alone.

Like Milosz, Adam Zagajewski understands how necessary it is to reach outward in his poems. The beginning stanzas of Zagajewski’s poem “Europe Goes to Sleep” points to a difference between the American and European perspective, a reading that can easily be extended to a discussion of the American and European poetic sensibilities:

Europe goes to sleep; in Lisbon aging
chessplayers still knit their brows.

Gray fog rises over Krakow
and blurs the contours of venerable sails.

The Mediterranean sways lightly
and will be a lullaby soon. (*Without End* 11)

America and its citizens are perhaps too young to see what else has happened and is happening in the “poor mute world,” especially when compared to the “aging / chessplayers” of Portugal whose intense focus on thinking three moves ahead is essential for their survival, especially on a continent as besieged by war as twentieth century Europe. Even more poignant is the next couplet: “Gray fog rises over Krakow / and blurs the contours of venerable sails.” The “gray fog” looms over the Polish city, referencing the suffering and death Poles had to endure at the hands of Nazi Germany. I’m reminded of the oppressiveness gray clouds can have over us as they block the sun, but also

how the “gray fog” brings to mind the smoke and ash emanating from concentration camps. All the good Germany has produced (its “venerable sails”) is clouded by the destruction of a single political and social agenda. But as quickly as these references are made, Zagajewski changes pace and soothes us: “The Mediterranean sways lightly / and will be a lullaby soon.” Not only can he engage our pain and suffering, he can also quiet us with images that speak to us tenderly:

When Europe is sound asleep at last,

America will keep watch

over the poor mute world

mistrustfully, like a younger sister. (11)

Zagajewski’s ability to write with emotional range, from bitter to peaceful to guarded in just a few lines, is in stark contrast to what is happening in some American poetry, which watches over the world “mistrustfully, like a younger sister.” Indifference hovers all around us in America, pushing us farther and farther from those who have faced pain, dealt with it, and now can fall “sound asleep.”

Astute political commentary and reflections on philosophy and art are common territory in Zagajewski’s poems, which is no surprise considering the political upheaval in Poland in the decades following the end of World War II. Postwar Eastern European poets underwent much in order to find their identities in an ever-changing world. Former national boundaries were done away with as land was up for grabs in Poland and the Soviet Union. New political ideologies were being founded, which were then debated or revolted against because people had vastly different ideas on how government should work. Zagajewski writes because he sees how many people he must awaken to the atrocities of the establishment. Despite the political leanings of his poetry, what has always struck me in reading Zagajewski’s work is how often we encounter a solitary speaker pained by history and personal loss. In “Lullaby,” he writes, “No sleep, not tonight. The window blazes. /

Over the city, fireworks soar and explode. / No sleep: too much has gone on” (*Without End* 147).

While cultivating a deep sense of individualism, Zagajewski’s poems also promote a connection to his community. Though the insomnia is private, what has caused it—the “too much [that] has gone on”—is not. Others can feel what the speaker is experiencing. Privy to his speakers’ innermost thoughts, we are invited to be moved as their descriptions rise above ugliness and “praise the mutilated world,” to become these pensive souls’ friends and allies as we accompany them along the page and in our imaginations. The solitary speaker then is not alone at all. Rather, he shows us how connected we are because we have so much to gain from one another.

Zbigniew Herbert’s poems are more demure than Zagajewski’s, but Herbert infuses a depth into his work that might transcend his fellow Pole’s. Herbert writes with passion and frankness, which in turn asks us to engage fully in the poem’s occasion. For Herbert, there seems to be little time for dilly-dallying. What has transpired must be tackled immediately. Take for instance “Five Men”:

They take them out in the morning
to the stone courtyard
and put them against the wall

five men
two of them very young
the others middle-aged

nothing more
can be said about them. (106)

Zagajewski's lush style, his flair for making even the ugly beautiful, does not inhabit "Five Men." Herbert's straightforward style hits us where it counts: in the heart *and* in the imagination. Though "nothing more / can be said about them," we cannot allow the incident to exist in such sparseness. Herbert challenges us to create the poem's scene, the circumstances that prompted the firing squad, and ultimately the violence being perpetrated on these five men. He will fill in some of the blanks later in the poem, but he lets our curiosity compose most of the poem's beginning. The first section's mystery ensures that Herbert will have an attentive audience as the poem continues. We want to follow along with these men. We want to know what happens. We want to find out what the speaker's reaction will be. Herbert makes us do as much work as he does in these opening lines—a thoughtful and clever gesture. He does not take us for granted, but rather obliges us, letting us decide whether to empathize with the five men or not.

In the poem's second section, Herbert reveals details about the deaths:

when the platoon
level their guns
everything suddenly appears
in the garish light
of obviousness...

the nostrils will be filled with biting smoke
a petal of blood will brush the palate
the touch will shrink and then slacken

now they lie on the ground
covered up to their eyes with shadow

the platoon walks away
their buttons straps
and steel helmets
are more alive
than those lying beside the wall (106-7)

Herbert uses abstraction with ease and cunning. If “the garish light / of obviousness” had not followed the guns’ leveling, then the description wouldn’t have worked at all. But with the right timing and context, Herbert makes these lines surprisingly clear and accessible. Instead of distancing the reader, the abstraction gives us the opportunity to fill in the blanks, to create mentally both the scene and the emotions which must be going through these men’s minds. This in turn allows us to involve ourselves more deeply in the world of pain and death that Herbert has created. Herbert’s abstractions are difficult to handle at first, but once we realize that they allow us to make the poem ours, too, through the imaginative and interpretive work we perform as we read, then we can see the beauty and ingenuity of the poet. He continues in the third section, revealing his suspicion that he hasn’t done justice to his subjects:

I did not learn this today
I knew it before yesterday

so why have I been writing
unimportant poems on flowers (107)

Herbert has every right to feel justified in writing his poem, but he second-guesses himself, calling his work “unimportant,” an especially ironic word given his historical situation. As Polish poet and critic Stanislaw Baranczak points out in his introduction to *Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule: Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun*, “In the officially published poetry of the late 1950s, 1960s,

and even part of the 1970s, irony functioned chiefly as a weapon of self-defense, effective mainly because of its clever indirections” (5). “Five Men,” from his 1957 collection, *Hermes, Dog and Star*, would certainly have necessitated such a means of self-preservation as he feared what may have been done to him for speaking out. However, as Baranczak continues, irony to Herbert and his fellow writers was a way of speaking in which three persons are invited but only two are aware of the true dialogue: the “ironist,” or poet, and the “listener,” the intelligent reader who understands the indirect message. The second listener, most often associated with the regime, becomes the “victim,” who is tone-deaf to irony (5). Herbert knows his audience will see through his mockery at “writing / unimportant poems on flowers.” He has succeeded in writing on two levels, one to protect himself and the other as means to urge his listeners to fight the government’s brutal, totalizing force, even in such a small way as believing in the power of a single voice. Irony for Herbert is meant to intensify and complicate the poem’s meanings, not to keep the (intelligent) reader away. Used correctly, it serves as an invitation to dig deeper into the poem so we can be rewarded in kind.

Herbert does not act humble in “Five Men,” either; he sincerely questions his abilities and the usefulness of commemorating these men’s lives. The deep-seated obligation to eulogize them because their lives might have been saved if someone had been willing to act haunts him. Nothing in these lines is overblown either. He describes his insecurity with a beautiful quietude. There seems to always be coyness to the post-war Eastern European poets’ work, a sense that the reader also needs to work to fully grasp the situation’s gravity. They see how much they must still learn about life and death and how poetry deals with each. Whatever their level of fame, they still see themselves as students. They are mature and self-assured enough to realize they have not learned everything there is to know about poetry. Much more is yet to be discovered. In Herbert’s closing lines of “Five Men,” use poetry to “offer to the betrayed world / a rose” (60) as a way of connecting to others, not as a symbol of their self-importance.

Like Herbert in the 1950s, Wislawa Szymborska blends irony and moralism in her 1986 collection, *The People on the Bridge*. She criticizes the forces in power shrewdly to the point of almost being too subtle in “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography.” Superficially, the poem alludes to the debate on whether to legalize pornography, which filled the pages of the censored press in Poland throughout the 1980s. Szymborska’s genius lies in her decision to give voice to an imagined supporter of law and order who maintains that “there’s nothing more debauched than thinking” (208), even pornography. The speaker strings together a series of double entendres and sexual allusions that paints the philosophers as depraved perverts: “In broad daylight or under cover of night / they form circles, triangles, or pairs” and “It’s shocking, the positions, / the unchecked simplicity with which / one mind contrives to fertilize another!” (208). Yet in its description of “those who think” sitting, reading, and sipping their tea, the poem comes to a sobering conclusion that jolts us back to realizing how indignant we should be at the speaker and what he considers just:

Only now and then does somebody get up,
go to the window,
and through a crack in the curtains
take a peep out at the street. (209)

The speaker defends a reality in which an oppressive regime terrifies people into believing that the very act of thinking can lead to police persecution. Szymborska was not considered an overtly political poet, but each of the poems in *The People on the Bridge* “relates closely to the experience and reflections of the common man, of the average thinking individual [and then] take an element of everyday experience and refract it through a prism of a specific narrative... so that reality’s absurdity or senselessness compromises itself” (Baranczak 9). Not many situations could be as unreasonable as people anticipating that a certain thought could trigger immediate punishment, but this was Poland in the 1970s and ‘80s, a time and place where Poles so craved poetry that they devoured the

official, censored poetry as well as verse smuggled into the country or printed underground, no matter the risks for publisher, printer, smuggler, and reader (Baranczak 4). Poetry was dangerous; it could weaken the government's hold over the people and had to be dealt with accordingly. Szyborska and Herbert were not afraid to respond to their history or their present; they took responsibility to make out of one voice, many.

Adrienne Rich may argue with tongue in cheek that "poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy," but more important, she asserts that "when poetry lays its hand on our shoulder we are, to an almost physical degree, touched and moved," which may be why Zagajewski so openly questions the motives of young American poets in *A Defense of Ardor*:

Why do young American poets pay so much attention to their immediate family and neglect a deeper reality? Why are there so many mediocre poets, whose triteness drives us to despair? Why do contemporary poets—those hundreds and thousands of poets—agree to spiritual tepidity, to those small, well-crafted, ironic jokes, to elegant, at times rather pleasant, nihilism? (141-2)

"Spiritual tepidity" and "ironic jokes" have seeped into some contemporary American poetry. A fairly recent issue of *The Missouri Review* featured Gabriel Welsch's series of telemarketer poems in which the caller speaks to poets about their products. They are clever, at times, but ultimately disappointing in their emotional sparseness. "The Telemarketer Means to Call Baker About Erectile Dysfunction but, in a Misdial, Winds up With Simic" manages to capture Simic's emotional directness and precise diction in which there are no excessive words, yet the joke fades fast:

Good evening, sir. I am calling you
because you asked for more information
about our product, Rigida, the natural

erectile enhancement...

I didn't do that.

Is this Mr. Baker? *I should have asked that
right away.* So, you're not Mr. Baker?

No. Who are you?

[Pause] Well, that's not really, you know,
important.

I know who you are. (31)

Welsch captures the telemarketer's voice and tone well, which is the problem. What does a telemarketer's offer about an erectile enhancement drug reveal? Is it that the poet is evening the score with David Baker, former poetry editor of *The Kenyon Review*, for previously rejecting his work by implying Baker's sexual dysfunction? Can the poem offer much more than a gentle snicker about imagining an irritated Charles Simic on the other end of the line, wondering how and why he's being called? The poem succeeds in conjuring criticism about an oversexed, pill-happy America, but it has no emotional urgency, no move to incorporate a larger, looming issue in the world that deserves commentary and perhaps change. By the time Welsch shows how an imagined Simic's pointed replies hit at the telemarketer's innermost insecurities about her life—"You know the taste of air here, don't you? / Sugared with all you lack?" to which the telemarketer can reply only "[Sniffle] Stop seeing what I see" (32)—we have already stopped caring.

Humor has a place in poetry, but in order to truly succeed, it should be used in contrast to something serious, to something that is “at stake.” Take Richard Siken’s “Boot Theory,” which opens: “A man walks into a bar and says: / *Take my wife—please.* / So you do” (20). We chuckle. We smile. We are welcomed into the poem expecting something other than what happens. Siken continues to riff on Henny Youngman’s famous one-liner, but the humor slowly departs and turns into desperation for the poem’s “you,” whose sexuality becomes almost more than he can handle, as in the second stanza:

A man walks into a bar and says:

Take my wife—please.

But you take him instead.

You take him home, and you make him a cheese sandwich,

and you try to get his shoes off, but he kicks you

and he keeps kicking you.

You swallow a bottle of sleeping pills but they don’t work.

.....

You go to work the next day pretending nothing happened.

Your co-workers ask

if everything’s okay and you tell them

you’re just tired.

And you’re trying to smile. And they’re trying to smile. (20-1)

The joke serves as a disarming device, a way to use humor to balance what could otherwise be an emphatically melancholic poem. The emotional range he manages to instill in it makes us feel much more as we read than if it was as one-note as the joke which inspired the poem. We agonize as “A man walks into a bar, you this time, and says: / *Make it a double,*” and even more so when the one-

liner is modified: “A man walks into a convenience store, still you, saying: / *I only wanted something simple, something generic...*” (21). We all want our lives to be simple, but nothing in life is easy, especially not for this “you” we’ve met who, by virtue of the second person pronoun, is also us. We’re asked to “*walk a mile in my shoes*” (21) and, in so doing, see a small and difficult part of understanding one’s sexuality, even if others will not be accepting or simply tolerant of it.

Siken offers intensely personal moments, which in turn afford readers the opportunity to feel at one with him, but he doesn’t stop simply at generating sympathy between speaker and reader. Sympathy suggests a casual appreciation of what another person is feeling while *empathy* entails that larger emotion which poets should all aspire to: an intense recognition, sensitivity to, and identification of the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another person without having these emotions being fully and explicitly communicated. Though sympathy is easy to get, empathy is hard to achieve considering how private an emotion empathy is. But, like Siken, we must still try to dig deep and witness its traces in our lives. If we don’t, our poems will not transform us or our understanding of the world.

Indifference to creating connections to readers shouldn’t serve as the sole vehicle for creating poems, but too often contemporary American poetry steers toward excessive navel-gazing. The opening poems of Tony Hoagland’s *What Narcissism Means to Me* exhibit this “spiritual tepidity,” a lack of extending beyond one time, one place, and most important, one very limited perspective. Hoagland’s work from the section titled “America” speaks of RadioShacks, MTV, Delaware congressmen who revel in sexual misconduct and do so with an appropriately conceived sense of satire. Because American poets look to each other for guidance and inspiration, how much does this kind of poetry set us back? As Zagajewski declares, “Surely we don’t go to poetry for sarcasm or irony, for critical distance, learned dialectics or clever jokes... from poetry, we expect poetry.” Hoagland’s “America” poems with their sarcasm and un-Herbertian irony do not have nearly as

much to offer as his other poetry which develops multi-faceted emotions and has emotionally-complicated speakers. In “The Change,” the speaker examines how a tennis match in which an African-American woman trounces “some tough little European blonde” marks the passing of the Twentieth Century:

The season turned like the page of a glossy fashion magazine.

In the park the daffodils came up

and in the parking lot, the new car models were on parade.

Sometimes I think that nothing really changes—

The young girls show the latest crop of tummies,

and the new president proves that he’s a dummy.

But remember the tennis match we watched that year? (11)

The flat diction, the suddenness with which the speaker switches topics, even the topics themselves which range from the new president's dimness to the new car models suggest in the poem a spiritual indifference, a total lack of interest in getting his hands dirty as he examines the poem’s core and what it has to reveal. Hoagland can’t invite me into the poem’s heart, because it has none. The poem instead moves along the page word by word, line by line, leaving us feeling helpless and hopeless because we have no work to do as readers. No great understanding is to be revealed in the poem; everything is right at its surface. To paraphrase Zagajewski, without complexity and depth, the poem’s triteness drives me to despair, not a feeling of being enlightened.

Along with “spiritual tepidity,” Zagajewski’s criticism of poets settling for “small, well-crafted, ironic jokes” is apparent in Hoagland’s work. “Impossible Dream” begins with such ineffective irony:

In Delaware a congressman
accused of sexual misconduct
says clearly at the press conference,
speaking
right into the microphone,
that he would like very much
to do it again. (18)

Enjambments and the use of spacing play up the opening stanza’s suspense as it finally winds down to a punch line, but this excerpt does little else for the poem. After we chuckle for a moment at Hoagland’s cleverness, we are moved quickly and forcefully to a new focus: a woman listening to the radio while painting “in red nail polish / on the back of a turtle” (18). Though using the congressman’s declaration might at first appear to be a satisfactory means to begin the poem, closer examination reveals how much of an egregious poetic sin Hoagland has committed. He has insulted us by using a joke to catch our attention instead of earnest, well-crafted poetry. Humor has a place in poetry. It can disarm and complicate our reactions to what is happening.

However, the stand-up routine Hoagland uses in the first stanza is wholly unnecessary. Instead of building to the poem’s conclusion, the opening appears tossed in strictly for comic effect, a moment of self-indulgence that easily could have been left out entirely. Hoagland’s narcissism shows itself with little concern for the readers or even the poem. In contemporary America, we can laugh at these moments of political whimsy, but how do they translate to future generations or even now to other countries? When done right, poems with historical references, like Yeats’s “Easter,

1916” for instance, have an important place in the poetic canon. They translate to other countries and ages because what drove the poet to write about the incident, whether it is the yearning for freedom or trying to denounce unspeakable atrocities against others, is common to us all. They are not singular moments in history; their importance transcends such limitations and speaks to every person. The beginning of Hoagland’s poem is not motivated by concerns as deep-seeded as the fight for freedom; scandal drives it. His “America” poems deal with particular historical moments and feel merely topical because their focus is so narrow. They have little charm or importance outside a very select audience and are therefore unable to speak to a larger, deeper reality. Nor do they reach to other moments in history, which is a move that would compound the poems’ current meanings and make them richer and more encompassing than they otherwise might be. These poems come across as written solely for the poet, which defeats the purpose of having a willing audience.

The post-war Eastern European poets achieved their greatness by overcoming adversity that the German Occupation forced on them and establishing for themselves a voice in the midst of this war. But equally as important is the fact they acknowledged how significant their singular voices to the whole of their countries’ identities. Many American poets have direct connections to post-war Eastern European poets, either through being their students or having read them extensively, going so far as to write responses to their literal or figurative mentors’ work. Even those Americans I have listed who don’t have such immediate ties to Eastern Europe, they do share this similar aesthetic, one that privileges the honest, authentic connection that can come through poetry. They do not shy away from their readers. They write with an inside-out approach, which recognizes the speaker’s motivation for beginning the poem but then manages to extend this initial inspiration to a metaphor, a theme, a moment, that a larger audience can grasp and meditate on.

Larry Levis serves as the link between postwar Eastern European poetry and today’s poets, particularly because he managed to see that his work is part of a legacy which future generations of

poets will read, be challenged by, and serve as a model for what verse must do. His friendship with Zbigniew Herbert, who taught with Levis at UCLA in the early 1970s, inspired him to write the beautiful lyric “For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles.” The second stanza begins:

Once a poet told me of his friend who was torn apart
By two pigs in a field in Poland. The man
Was a prisoner of the Nazis, and they watched,
He said, with interest and a drunken approval . . .
If terror is a state of complete understanding,

Then there was probably a point at which the man
Went mad, and felt nothing, though certainly
He understood everything that was there [...].

.....

But some things are not possible on the earth.
And that is why people make poems about the dead.
And the dead watch over them, until they are finished:
Until their hands feel like glass on the page,
And snow collects in the blind eyes of statues. (60-1)

In reaching out to Herbert, Levis has created a wildly imaginative yet focused poem. Like the Eastern Europeans, he has taken from agony and found the piece of hope that still remains. Levis has kept his eyes and ears open to Herbert, both stylistically and emotionally: “And now I will have to bury him inside my body, / And breathe him in, and do nothing but listen.” Herbert’s influence maintains a large hold on Levis to the point where Levis is obliged to approach this dead man’s memory with as much empathy and compassion as Herbert did. Even in the passive act of listening,

Levis is doing much more than many American poets do. Unlike him and the Eastern European poets, all too often we don't acknowledge what has been before us, what is with us, and what will come. Poetry that fails to see this becomes forgettable, locked in space and time to the point that it no longer speaks to people. Poets like Milosz, Zagajewski, Herbert, and their Eastern European peers remain accessible and poignant to all generations. They have faced tragedy and joy and are not afraid to examine themselves and their world in order to understand what makes them human, what makes them poets.

The history of American poetry is relatively short compared to other nations around the world, which calls for us to go beyond our immediate literary ancestry and find mentors who can help us transcend the temptation to continue writing the "flashy" poem. It is essential for us, then, to have other poetic mentors, ones whose view of the world is not as limited as American writers sometimes are. The United States does not have the troubled and complicated history that Eastern Europe does. Having to contend with World Wars, the Cold War, and the final journey to freedom from under Soviet rule, writers from the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland have had to struggle to discover themselves in the midst of a half-dozen countries with their half-dozen languages. Being at the "center" of the world has prevented Americans from this kind of discovery, but that does not mean we are incapable of writing poems that blossom from an individual experience and affect a great number of other people. By recognizing this narcissism with our lives and our subjects, we can begin to correct the many flaws ingrained in contemporary American poetry. Eastern European writers do not forget they are one mind, one heart, one soul who writes not only to understand their own selves but for their brothers and sisters and their national identity as well. My intention then is to show how Eastern European poets and who they influenced in the United States to this point can help reshape contemporary American verse, especially for writers early in their careers whose journal publications and/or first books have prevented them from fully

exploring their potential. More often, we should ask ourselves, “What do we hold dear? Who do we write for?” If both answers are “the poet”—and for some contemporary American writers that is, unfortunately, the case—then our perspective on what poems can do has been irreparably harmed. But if we decide to speak for the self and to the community, there is still hope.

II. Putting the Eastern European Tradition’s Lessons into Practice

Taking my inspiration from the postwar poets, my project takes three steps in attempting to transcend the too-inwardly-focused verse popular in journals and first books. One, it centers on a series of found photographs posted online and how the speaker responds to the good and bad memories they conjure. Ekphrastic poetry has long been a tradition that writers have taken part in, and clearly, I am no exception. The magic with which Larry Levis brought back Caravaggio’s work or how Adam Zagajewski reacts to *Shoah*, I could only hope to live up to in my undergraduate responses to Kandinsky and Edward Hopper. But the sad fact was that my poems remained one-dimensional, too caught up in replicating in words what these masters of their form had already give to the world. My previous poems didn’t work hard enough to create a new experience for me or my audience.

Thinking back, I believe this was due to my constant interjection of the “I,” my unwillingness to let go of the person, the writer, I was. It wasn’t until a friend sent me a link to the website with these photographs that I began to see new possibilities for responding to an image. A man whose name I can’t track down buys old cameras, most often ones popular during the 1940s and ‘50s, develops the film, and posts the results. These photos had lost their history, and I couldn’t help but try to create one for them. Though what I have written and will continue to write for this manuscript is in the first person and the speaker does share some biographical details with me, the

images' lack of history, of context, have helped to distance me enough from the ekphrastic missteps I had taken in the past. This father and husband looks back on the photos, remembering the joy and the pain of these recovered moments, trying to make sense of his life, his mistakes. So much of a poet's work is tied to images that it's easy to get caught up in them and write poems which neither do justice to this initial inspiration or the inner self we ideally seek to explore in our work. But when both the image and our worlds are in balance, what follows has the chance to extend beyond the borders of one poet's mind, giving poets the opportunity to establish genuine connection with a host of readers in an intensely intimate way, which should be our chief aim when we write.

While the photographs' scenes and details are integrated into the collection's poems, they merely serve as the jumping off point for my work. Seeing the photographs is not essential to understand any of the poems because the project remains one in which the speaker can move through his memories associationally, and this spinning out, then, is what prevents the poems from being linguistic replications of the original photos. Rather, they call to the speaker's mind not the single frozen moment but rather the larger atmosphere which reveals his relationships with his family, his fears and anxieties, his life. Grounding the poems in this way pushes me to think more outwardly, refraining from relying too much on my own experience to generate situations, emotions, and characters, which is an important bridge to the next part of my process.

Two, taking on a persona for a book-length manuscript allows for far more freedom while still maintaining a focus that will create forward momentum in the collection. Though my speaker may feel his life has fractured in small as well as significant ways, the poems still must need to have unity of theme and purpose. Many first books of poetry are the end result of several years of M.F.A. or Ph.D. program training. Taking three or four workshops during the course of study is not in itself a bad way to proceed, but depending on how focused a student is, the collection can suffer from a lack of direction or even having too many directions. While we don't want to admit to it, students

often write to please their graduate school professors, and in striving for this validation, the true path a student should take with their work is not nearly as important as the unconscious desire of receiving a positive critique.

Breaking free of this need for affirmation is essential to a poet's long-term development, and having a speaker I can return to, puzzle over, and work to understand is beneficial in this regard. Much like Zbigniew Herbert's Mr. Cogito, a persona enables the poet to find a different voice, to give him or her opportunity to break free from a typical style and way of thinking and explore topics which otherwise the poet may not have the courage to take on under his or her own name. The freedom afforded by something as simple as taking on a character's voice can only help push the poet in new and interesting ways, which is gratifying not only for the writer but for his or her audience as well. Herbert used Mr. Cogito first as an Everyman, a universal element of humanity who shared his opinions on various aspects of life and existence. However, the more he says, the more disembodied he appears, and becomes transformed into an ethical symbol and a metaphor of the tough choices we have to make between good and evil. While I aim to have a more grounded in reality speaker, the net effect would be the same: for my speaker to represent an aspect of my own questioning spirit who can then find a way to become his own character that works to enlarge his observations about the world to make a point that is larger than what one poet can offer. A character who is both individual and who represents the group is much more able to bring a message and perspective that can evoke change or understanding in an audience, which fits in line with what the postwar Polish poets were able to achieve, though on a smaller scale.

Three, my project hopes to correct the tack of writing solely for oneself by following through on Zagajewski's advice in "Young Poets, Please Read Everything":

Read for yourselves, read for the sake of your inspiration, for the sweet turmoil in your lovely head. But also read against yourselves, read for questioning and

impotence, for despair and erudition.... Read your enemies and your friends, read those who reinforce your sense of what's evolving in poetry, and also read those whose darkness or malice or madness or greatness you can't yet understand because only in this way will you grow, outlive yourself, and become what you are. (*A Defense of Ardor* 189-90)

His cry for young poets to read across all disciplines and not just “‘only’ poetry [which] suggests that there’s something rigid and isolated about the nature of contemporary poetic practice, that poetry has become separated from philosophy’s central questions, from the historian’s anxieties, the qualms of an honest politician” (188) is another way by which we can get outside what we feel as comfortable and begin to engage the world in new and surprising ways. Zagajewski calls young poets to do research, to gather as much and as widely from the whole of human experience. Poetry can be found in more places than just collections of it. He asks us to be open to all the possibilities that our humanity presents, which can only help to deepen our relationship with the world so that we may become more responsible to our inner lives and to our readers. We should not feel limited to only drawing upon the influence of other poets. While each of the postwar poets discussed to this point have drawn upon each other’s work, they also are not afraid to use their own interests in philosophy, science, film, art, and psychology to populate their poetry. They remain open to the spirit of their times with the inevitable by-product of having the chance to connect with a greater number of people, not simply those who read poetry.

I have a selfish interest in this postwar period. My maternal grandparents were forced laborers in Poland and then Germany during the 1940s, who were lucky enough to have older family members in the United States who could sponsor their immigration. But there’s still a large hole in my family history pre-World War II, which my grandparents avoided talking about specifically. Because of that I can only work to understand my grandparents’ generation through research of how

people like them lived and raised my parents, which hopefully might reveal what they believed and thought and how they reacted to significant moments in history, from the Great Depression and World War II to the Women's Liberation Movement and the Cold War. Each of these had a profound effect on the world's psyche, but too often, this time period has been over-romanticized in contemporary American culture. Only recently with the premiere of the critically successful television show *Mad Men* and recent films like *Far From Heaven*, which examines how a wife contends with the realization that her husband is closeted and the ever-present racial tensions in 1950s Connecticut, and *The Tree of Life*, a meditation on a 1950s suburban Texas family, has this spell been broken. The postwar period in the United States was not perfect; besides the heightened racial and political climates, there was also upheaval in the family unit, particularly with gender roles. Plenty of issues had largely gone ignored in the popular media as America favored the *Leave It to Beaver* model of perfection in the home, seeing it through rose-colored glasses as a golden age in American society. But the fears and anxieties that haunt us today also shaped our previous generations. Instead of overlooking these similarities—our struggles with ideas of masculinity and femininity, the effects of consumerism, suburban sprawl and its negative outcome, the constant fear of being at war—we need to acknowledge them and find ways to use this information for our emotional, psychological, and cultural betterment.

I cannot replicate exactly the zeitgeist of the 1950s and '60s, but it is my hope that through extensive research of books and films, I can at least inject into my poems the atmosphere of the period while having my speaker react to the turmoil of his age, both within himself and in response to what is happening around him. Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* has been a remarkably useful text in this regard as she uncovers startling connections between the Cold War and family life, challenging assumptions of the "happy days" of the 1950s. The same goes with *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, edited by

Joanne Meyerowitz, and Rebecca Jo Plant's *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*.

Though I mainly aim to give my male persona voice in this collection, I also include his wife's voice and him seeing through his son's eyes in order to establish a fuller grasp of the era. These resources have been and will continue to be especially helpful, hopefully broadening the scope of the project and challenging me to write outside myself even more.

Make Room for Daddy: The Journey from Waiting Room to Birthing Room by Judith Walzer Leavitt will be instrumental in fleshing out my persona who questions what a man and father at this time is supposed to be, as in my poem, "Behind Our Bundled Up Son, Through the Window, My Wife Mows the Lawn":

What I lacked in the ability to fix a car

I more than made up for in how quickly I could

dial the plumber, my finger sweeping

plastic dial for Brownell-one three-two, three-two,

each number clicking its tinny interruptions

as I waited to be connected, embarrassed,

saved from basement pipe-burst there

weren't enough buckets to hold fast, still.

.....

Bundled in the afghan his mother made him,

slurping my recipe and not hers

he always thought salty, he'd smile a smile

I'd never trade, not for self-repaired radiator

or sunburned back from a day of roof-shingling,

not to keep husbands in the neighborhood

from whispering as she pushed the mower along

the lawn's perimeter, then in a row, and another,

cutting us into smaller and smaller boxes

we never felt trapped in until it was too late.

While my persona feels this is a failure on his part, that he cannot measure up to the time's conception of what he should be, perhaps this is instead the natural progression of what husbands and wives in modern America, and he is simply caught uncomfortably in the transition. Films like *Tree of Life* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* will be part of the basis for this research as will *Rebel Without a Cause*, specifically the scene in which Jim Stark, played by James Dean, asks his father, an emasculated man wearing a frilly apron over his business suit as he cleans up spilled food, "What can you do when you have to be a man?"

Studying these books and films will help me to delve deeper into what this time period was truly like and what it can reveal to us decades later. Have we learned from it? Have all the problems been solved or even adequately acknowledged? Poetry has power to handle these kinds of questions, and it is with a renewed sense of reading, of research, which can help accomplish it, as Zagajewski suggests:

The way a young poet organizes his reading is actually quite crucial for the place of poetry among other arts. It may determine—and not only for a single individual—whether poetry is a central discipline (even if read solely by the happy few), responding to the key impulses of a given historic moment, or a more or less interesting form of drudgery that for some reason continues to draw a few unhappy fans. (*A Defense of Ardor* 189)

A lot of good poetry written in the past several years does respond to “a given historic moment,” and it is in that spirit that I also note poets who have been instrumental in helping me understand how to write with those “key impulses” in mind.

I speak of Tory Dent’s *Black Milk*, whose title poem is an unflinching depiction of living with AIDS as well as the de-humanizing treatment for it: “For this, this stainless steel, this sanitary lack of love, / this medicine-vacuum, we were not born” (43). Dent’s openness and care inspired me to let my speaker be just as forthcoming about the ups and downs of his life. And I speak of Jennifer Moxley’s “The Fountain,” which questions gender roles still commonly accepted:

Women do not love
as men do—
or so we’re told
by adults, who
do not remember

the gelatinous
yearning of twelve-
year-olds, not for
proposals but just
to get off. (5)

Her work reminded to refuse easy characterizations of men and women, to push past popular stereotypes that only limit our understanding of each other.

I mention Katie Ford and her collection, *Colosseum*, which tells stories of ruination throughout history, those ancient (the Akkadian Empire in Iraq, c. 2100 B.C.) and modern (New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005). Also inspired by Eastern European poets, she “went to these poets because of the extremity of the living conditions of their time, if I read the poets who were in exile and loss, I might be able to find the right music for writing poems about what happened to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast” (Interview). Other Eastern European poets like Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova inhabit the book, bringing in their grief but also serving as a comparison against which Ford is able to remind herself to not let her small losses take on more significance than they deserve, as in “Coliseum Theater”:

The houses burn, the oil rigs burn,
but when the oldest moviehouse burns,
our days are named by fires.
.....
All we had then was the movies.
.....
We who wanted so much
to say again, simply,

let's go to the movies.

Please, just let us go. (34)

Though the speaker and her husband are living in New Orleans, they have been lucky. They have not lost nearly as much as many others in the region have. Ford moves deftly from the opening realization that tragedy often only becomes important when it touches us personally to a sense of guilt at the end. When others' houses have washed away, when their relatives have disappeared or died, this couple's biggest concern is the destruction of their favorite theater. They may have thought to complain, but in the end, they only "*wanted* so much" to give voice to their plea because they recognize how uncouth that would be. As Ford notes in the interview, "My own loss or grief is not, in any way, comparable to the poets I have listed, nor does it compare to what many citizens in New Orleans went through—it does not compare at all.... But I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that some citizens of New Orleans lost just as much and continue to suffer as much as, say, Tsvetaeva did when her child starved under Stalin." She isn't afraid to make her speaker look unlikable for a moment while also having enough perspective to know the best course for her to take is to stay quiet. This isn't the typical range of emotions in a poem, but it does show a willingness to get outside her head and think of others.

I can go on by discussing Brian Turner's honest treatment of his experiences in the Iraq war in *Here, Bullet*. I can reference how Philip Levine's blue-collar poems, like "Belle Isle, 1949," which describes a night of skinny-dipping in the Detroit River while the city around the speaker and a girl crumbles, and James Wright's "Beautiful Ohio," an unlikely urban pastoral, remind us to celebrate beauty when it's easy to do so and when it's difficult. No matter what, all of the poets mentioned above avoid replicating the banality of contemporary society or cataloging its emptiness. They work to create a legacy of authentic connection to others in their work, one that should last much longer than if they had focused purely on the self. I want to situate my poems within the same context as I

work to rise above the label of “a more or less interesting form of drudgery.” If more young contemporary American poets accept this calling, then perhaps we can mend the intellectual and emotional disconnectedness which prevents us from truly understanding who we are, where we come from, and where our poems can take us.

The Genius of a Crow: Poems

Proem for Found Film

How many more dusks, me warm from another beer,
will it take to silence the starlings' brusque
clicks, how they followed us wherever we moved—

farm, city, suburb—taunting me, making me hate
myself for thinking our lives three steps ahead,
three steps closer to upper-middle class ease.

Now all afternoon I want the moon to come
falling through the sky. I want disaster,
I want the freedom of never being

remembered or loved. Because that's
how these photos hurt me. That's why I can never
look at myself in them without knowing

I didn't belong with my sons, my wife
in these instants I can't take having anymore.
I can think only to rip them into pieces

that are easier to face than their longing for a new life
where I was absent because the world never did
want me. I think of cinemas and soda shops,

cameras she bought to record each new moment
and how we had first promised even if there was a day,
somewhere and some time, where there would be

no more memories, just a time to recreate old ones,
we would be together. I think this is enough to implicate
me: photographer, subject, witness, man.

I think this is what I deserve for giving
up on being all they needed me to be.
The birds' song sounds again.

I pull another photo from the box.

I.

Where I Remember Having No Way to Protect R. from His Future or Mine

I can only see this in pieces. I can
 only wish I had had something to give him
when I began to measure the days
 in disaster—Korea, polio, duck-and-cover.

I can't remember lining him up
 in the viewfinder while his mother
spoke kindly, admiring the kerchief
 she knotted around his neck, newest

member of Pack 29, the latest hope
 for a country that'd be struck numb
by the year's big-finned Chrysler,
 all shine and angles that'd catch him

in ways he never thought he had inside:
 desire, jealousy, the wish to grow up
and be whole. I forget how old he was then—
 seven or eight?—sitting on the picnic table

we had in the backyard of that bungalow
 on Cherry Street my wife hated
for its too-small tub, the oven which turned
 her sugar cookies to carameled smoke

she'd beat back with a kitchen towel.
 And that backyard where everyone saw her
string laundry, her blouses ballooning
 fitfully in late afternoon light

when gusts rushed through the pines
 out back and made them grow large,
larger than she thought her clothes should be
 four years after our other son was born.

I prayed in his room every night
 for each new day to never come, for him
to never see his mother lead me to bed, finally,
 blue-black sky settling over us all.

Iford Sporti model

Looking through the Windshield, I am Cold as Snow Falls Again

The moon's reflection off snow turns

midnight from black to gray, from dream-filled sleep

to you forever swallowing an *I love you*

when you try so hard to drift off, waiting uneasily to meet

yet another day. We are stranded, you and I—

the car, out of gas, rocks in the cloud-moving wind.

Snow softens the elms' bare branches,

fenceposts, the windshield frosted over in the corners.

We can make out nothing along the empty road

where even if the steep banks converged,

it can't be in the same county anymore. I whisper

What now? but you don't hear. You don't know how ashamed

I feel to want nothing more than to taste summer

on your freckled skin, to strip us naked in our growing cold

and hold your tongue silent, to keep us forever still and warm.

Kodak Baby Brownie Special

My Younger Son, M., Dressed for Trick-or-Treating

Every day is Halloween. Every day the trees' last hints of dress are cast across front lawn, sidewalk, under the Murphys' '56 Fairlane. Each day I close my eyes and see less of my son's face. There is only the skull with top hat he took from his older brother's closet and wore three Octobers. White satin tablecloth I cut up, tied around his neck so the mask's black eyes, dark gaps between its teeth, came at me from some place like snow, but colder.

Every day is another chance to imagine watching him stop his car under a maple, stand on the tracks as a locomotive pulls the bend. I don't know what will last longer than my memory of being led to the crossing gates, the warning's lights flashing, its tinny clang ticking like a heart, and every day after coming in red leaves that settle over him, clothed in white.

To R. Crawling for the First Time

Your grandmother practices for her death
 scene on the loveseat, her arm limp

 over the velvet cushion and coming so close
 you must know what it is to want

only to be welcomed by the rain. Rain that sounds
 off shingles, tin gutters which usher

 each drop to sewer and stream,
 river and then ocean, which has always

been full of questions: Where is that girl
 from down the street now, the one who always grows

 tall and beautiful one summer and then fails
 to see you? When will the nightly

prayers we whisper turn brittle
 like dried blood? When will quiet become

 all there is to say? I don't want to hurt
 you before you need to be. I don't want

the starling who sits and sings
 on the maple's bare branch to sour

 sun breaking open the long winter's afternoon.
 I know you have no secret to hold remembering

back. No way to keep memory
 from coming like tulips or thunder,

 sudden and beautiful. All you can do
 is crawl to the rocking horse, push down

on the seat, its springs uncoiling a tinny clack
 that stirs the living and the dead.

Anso Pioneer

When I Finally Knew What It Took to be a Father

Who was I kidding when I said it didn't hurt

when your chubby arms reached through crib rails

for her, when all you said in morning's dark

was *Mom* because she was all could comfort

you, no matter how I tried to make you laugh

or how often let you fall asleep on my chest,

my breaths, *in out in out in*, shorter

every month as your weight settled heavier

and heavier into me, and still my heart beat

for you, for her, because even when you searched

living room or kitchen for her kind, green glance,

never settling for another—not mine, blued—,

even then, I was the man who loved you most,

who forgave you so easily when you finally did

call my name one long summer day as blackbirds

conk-la-reeed to thunderstorms coming fast

over plains, cornfields, the ball diamond

I waited so eagerly to share with you,

the man who knew, finally, that one word

was all it took to understand you were

the best he could have done with his life.

PHO-TAK Spectator Flash

From a Bench My Parents, Long-Dead, Still Teach Me about Silence

What was it made you stop teaching me
to find home in someone

I had no reason to trust but did, just the same?
How did I know when to begin
speaking low, *low* enough to never make a fuss,

to never wake my wife from dream
as I whispered all my before sunrise confessions:

the shame in no longer trying
to match my breaths to her sleeping sighs.
No longer thinking to hold her

as a spring thunderstorm rushed through
the valley, slant rain on slate roof

turning midnight's random consolations dark.
No longer being surprised
how effortlessly silence made her lock

the bathroom door and turn
on the faucet to cover her sounds of giving up.

I am your son, no matter how I fight it.
I am your son who hears his wife slipping
from memory, who wonders

if he'll dream her back to him tonight
and then, how he'll refuse her this time.

Brownie Reflex Synchron

To My Wife Exiting the Church and Looking Forward to Our New Life

I try to wash my hands clean of you
but the place where ring finger meets palm
is still calloused, still rough with memory
of rice battering us like cornstalks' tassels
which slapped our bodies the night we ran
naked in your grandfather's fields, you forever
the neighbor girl whose laugh was a song
I heard everywhere—in birdcalls, in wind
wrestling through thistles, in April thunder
unsettling my parents' sleep—and me always seventeen
and embarrassed to look too closely
at your still barren belly lit by the moon
as I dabbed at cuts and took the red away
with my undershirt, knowing finally what
it must be like to want for nothing
but to be locked in a heart I'd never thought I deserved.

Kodak Brownie No. 3

To M. after Seeing Again His First Picture with Santa

What was it made you

stick a fingertip in your mouth,

searchingly, as if you could sweep

stubborn words off your tongue,

write them in air and answer the man's

pepperminted question:

seeing all those red bowed boxes

appear one morning

without the least warning, December's first

snow I'd wake you to watch with me,

our foreheads burning against

the living room window's cold

as midnight came and your mother

begged me to put you to bed?

What did you, star-bright

and tongue-tied, love best then?

All I meant was to keep you

close. All I wanted was to listen

while you whispered what

could make you happiest.

We walked home from Sears,

your wool mittened hand
scratching mine, bare and wind-chapped,

pulling me under the streetlamps'
yellowed ovals, our shadows drawing

out long and faint, until
one flickered and went blank. *An angel,*

you said as you turned to run
and I went cold, high above us

the shy new moon ghosted.

Nikon 35

Along the Pond Edge, My First Love Proposes She Might Have Been Home After All

Wool coat open at the collar

despite autumn's chill, she holds her purse
against hip with a naked left hand

like I had choice, as if each empty tree's
shadow that cut across the pond,

one line at a time, marked another year
I could have let go, shared

the hollowness I kept hidden.

There must be a way to never think

of her again, to let the black ache that made me
less than what I wanted to be for her disappear.

There must be a way through her heart
past her listening for a sparrow's call

to lure me back to that October we gave
each other a sun-crackled lake,

our white skin, a midnight promise to remain
burning in each other's eyes,

everything that sounds perfect and fair
to teenagers who had nothing

to sacrifice, nothing to prove, nothing
to believe would ever leave us standing alone

in the rain below a window that won't light
no matter the shape or heft of stones

grazing glass, stones meant to wake her
childish dreams of growing into lives

our parents never had.

I was there, she was there, waiting

with every hope I would be whole
each new morning when light broke

and scattered across her white back.

Argo Flex 1b.

With Shotgun Held Tight in My Teenaged Arms

It is easier to play with a shotgun in the dark, noon sun held back by blinds pulled so low light barely glints off the safety. Muzzle propped casually in a naked shoulder's hollow, July sweat down the length of the arm. There is no recognizing me. Not the bare chest yet to be kissed, not until after that first night of skinny-dipping the quarry with Anna Campbell when she fumbled to replace her body with mine under the willow's sad embrace. Not the eyes—still, brown, ready for an ocean fifteen hundred miles away to wash every sin clean. Not the mouth curled tight for no reason other than that was how to be a man.

Where have you been all these years, boy? How long have you been locked tight inside a heart that settles before it runs away?

Genuine Rolls Camera

Hand on Hip, She Turns from Her Father and Brother Fishing

You stared and waited
for me to break the silence,
only to hear your father's hook
plink water rippling toward
what had become nameless and blue:
drifting days we knew no names for,
days spent slipping into parts
we could just as easily leave
thrown over the vanity's chair,
like blouses and skirts
pants and shirts stained
with the day's sweaty want
of nothing more from the world
than to be as we once were.
And everything fit:
your eyes daring me to snap
another frame, dress caught
by wind that rushes the scent
of freshly mown hay into our noses,
the way I swore you mouthed,
Who will help us? as a thrush

fitted over the water and angled

into late afternoon's clouds,

our world quieting

as we turned and tracked the V

the bird cut in sky growing red

over some other, nameless lives.

Agfa Box 44

View across a Lake of Another City I'd Never Call Home

This is as far as I ever went, car parked
in a hollow cut from a stand

of trees along the lakeshore
where boats eased into summer

waves that slapped lake weeds against
so many bare knees and thighs

startled red by the water's still blue
cold. This is where I stopped

and knew the lake had nothing
more to give: no stones

to skitter toward sun coming
low over smokestacks chuffing,

nothing to silence gulls' early morning
protests, no way to wash me clean

of loneliness' desire, how alive
I was listening to my blood

tick its slow way from my heart
as reeds soundlessly bent in the wind.

How perfect to stand alone and measure
hours in waves slipping back and forth

between my toes while the city, my family, slept
in tiny rooms, their time torn off unused,

until I gave in, drove back, and stood
in the doorframe looking at what I'd made,

behind me the sun bursting open
an absence I know as my only life.

II.

Storm

*

There is a thing in me that dreams of prairies,
 rocking chair knocking porch rail,
some oaks huddled in the yard's far corner
 that bend not nearly far enough to touch
the other tree dropping apples in the middle
 of football field or plot to sell, what my father
thirty years earlier would have turned
 into thirty years of pies and cider
not nearly enough neighbors would buy.
 I dream of a swing—nothing fancier
than leftover rope pulled through leftover plank—
 lifting my boys high so they disappear
into the reddened branches long enough
 they are a little way away from everywhere
that doesn't matter just then:
 schools, factories, a window in a quiet
house through which a father peers
 and smiles at the beautiful mess.
There is a thing in me that still dreams

of prairies a little way from every trouble
I could imagine. But let it go.

Let my sons have their story
of a spring day where, as so much
pleads for grief, they have time to make music.

The Savoy

*

They have time to make music

while the winds and rain begin to fly and flow,
as the sky turns green,

when the first tree offers its will to breaking.

They run to me singing for it to *Come*,

come again some other day not so mild,

not so soon, when the second quits

the earth and is carried

to where it has never been:

in the apple's full branches

caught full-dip, wind still whistling.

I rush them to the cellar, dank as a ditch,
past steel hand sickles and adzes,

a worn horseshoe held on the heads
of rusted nails, so much use turned

to ornament within one generation
rattling wooden beams. My heart

hums wild like a bird after a sudden retreat
as we sit among the potato crates

and onion sacks, on the dirt floor
ripe with a small damp breath. We

tremble with the elements and count
seconds between flash and boom—

One one-thousand, two one-thousand—

to distract us from asking where

she might be: the grocery or the Thompsons',
caught in a black swirl only two boys

and a husband who stopped long ago
could pray back home. I hold my sons,

all warm and scared, until thunder
loosens from a wail. *One one-thousand,*

two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four—

The Savoy (II)

*

Two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four—

I count as R. and M. hide between the green
wrap of leaves inching yellow
after another day split from their roots
and branches which shook free their nests
now strewn about the yard.

Limbs which missed kitchen window
by bare feet because of what held firm:
one apple tree buried beneath shattered oak.

Our boys play there for days, stopping only
for lemonade my wife brings,
she who descended from earth into concrete
with her friend, her friend's husband and daughter,
enough water and canned beans and soup,
plenty of cigarettes to last a long winter.

She was across such distances but safer than us.
For days I hold her in the kitchen as she cooks
and when she sleeps, on the porch looking out
on those not so lucky—the Jollys and Bensons,

the Murphys whose neighbor's elm crashed
through two floors, house split

like two beige waves.

I look past it all to the far-off times

that remain where we will listen

differently, like children, those moments

purged of the doubts within our hearts.

The Savoy (III)

*

Purged of the doubts within our hearts,

gutted and opened raw to the world like trout

Mr. Cavanaugh from next-door splays across his grill,

we walk the improvised block party.

Every house or two, I bring

her hand to my lips and kiss her palm.

We are in love again.

Two teenagers learning

what each other's bodies are for

when her father clomps upstairs an hour early.

We pass coolers of Coke and Schlitz,

lettuce and tomatoes, everything else

iceboxes won't keep cold without power,

and come to the end: an enormous sycamore

spread across the street. I take

the switchblade from my pocket

and set it in her hand, mine

settling around her thin fingers.

We push the edge into bark—

W + E.

I look at what we made,

then to our friends and neighbors,
how most of us married so young,
so close to the first bomb drop
on an island in the middle of
some ocean we had never seen
or the final peaceful signature drying,
that it was easy to forget what *in love* was.
If only such panic as this wouldn't be
what made us know it again.

Kodak Brownie Starflex

*

What made us know it again,
 slow slide across asphalt,
jitterbug's quick kicks and jives?
 We swing to a DeSoto's
tinny speakers and wonder
 just who is that girl in Kalamazoo,
will she ever recover
 from that end-stopped telegram
enough to dance in the street
 on a cloudless afternoon
like we have? So much reason to rejoice,
 so much for the survivors
to be thankful for that of course
 we make quick work of families
and spoil houses
 with TVs, dishwashers, Tupperware.
We have our dream.
 We have our children who have
their dreams we'll make happen

no matter what. The cost
of an apple is at a ten-year low,

an IGA ad says, so what isn't
there to celebrate in the streets?

Why wouldn't I twirl my wife
so hard, so fast she catches

a few dark leaves in a corkscrew?

Kodak Brownie Reflex

*

A few dark leaves in a corkscrew,
two men trading pushes and pulls
of a saw through the tree that broke
my father's headstone. It's easy
to feel fit for such long sleep
when so many rhododendrons suffer
bees bringing back their blossoms,
when lily and tulip petals loose
themselves to damp earth,
when pines jostle in a breeze,
needles falling ever fair
and equal over grass and grave.
The hills' shadows cool the air,
dulling other stones' shapes
in the distance, ones gathered
near the train tracks always full
of cars clacking their slow way
across country. It'd be easy
to say my father would be jealous

of all that commotion passing
along lakeshores, through forests

and dirty trainyards. Of not being
a burden to anyone again,

just slipping into a moonless night
and having roots replace his bones.

He'd be embarrassed for all this fuss
over a stone's reminder

of dust that came from nothing
and to nothing returned.

But I have to pay for this
damage, and I do so without question,

because men honor their fathers,
as silently and easily as possible.

Brownie Hawkeye Flash

*

As silently and easily as possible,

we take the boys to their beds

and walk the stairs slowly,

remembering in the dark

each step's creaks.

I follow her back to the porch-dark—

still no power, no sign

when the streetlights will return

their yellow ovals to the block—

and hold her close. I feel

lazy dribbles of spit

settled into my collar, her blouse's shoulder,

and we carry them as badges of honor

for surviving another day.

Sitting on the porch, we watch

neighbors blow out candles one by one

until it's hard to tell where the space

of pure air ends and houses begin.

I clutch her tighter and point

across the street to a pile of branches
and leaves flickering.

Fireflies, she whispers, and I don't believe
at first, not when there are
so many flashes bursting open night.
I stand and walk to them,
my white shirt the only clue where I am,
and even then, as I get closer
to each small explosion, I am disappearing,
I am slipping from her,
I am letting go.

Unknown, Roll Two

*

I am letting go. I am

closing softly doors to rooms

I don't want to come back to.

I speak again in the present,

the *real* present where in mirrors

I rediscover my own vacant stare.

I let go of picnicking

in the sun and ungainly laughter

and instead listen to April rain

dance on the house, hoping

there will be another storm,

one more chance to be like an apple tree.

I know. It's ridiculous to say,

but why wouldn't I ask for

every star to be put out,

so somewhere someone can travel

furiously toward me

when the world, finally, settles down?

Knowing what I know, I'd do

anything to make it all last longer.

A bedtime story. A kiss.

A graveside prayer for forgiveness.

Every night, I am older

and grayer and fuller of sleep.

Even worse,

there is a thing in me that still dreams.

III.

What R. Must Have Remembered that Midnight Brought Him

It's wonderful what a smile hides,
what my closed eyes kept from you. I
was awake more often than you
knew when you slipped into my room
and I felt that stare, long and black, cut
my dreams. You thought you wanted them
for yourself and paced my room, caught
in your lost light, never mindful
of what burden I had being
hope for something better, for you,
for her, but not for me, never.
You loved me, yes, but how could I
do anything but smile when asked
if I did *you*, never saying
a word, not once, not as you looked
out the window toward the moon high
above us all and chased after
something that was already gone
while all I wished was for your hand
to wake me from faked slumber and
pull me in close. Not now as I

watch your grandson's sleeping mouth twitch

into smile, kiss his cheek and know

that fathers will always suffer

being selfish men who make such

a mess together.

Ilford Sporti Model

Behind a Bundled Up R., Through the Window, My Wife Mows the Lawn

What I lacked in the ability to fix a car
I more than made up for in how quickly I could

dial the plumber, my finger sweeping

plastic dial for Brownell-one three-two, three-two,
each number clicking its tinny interruptions

as I waited to be connected, embarrassed,

saved from basement pipe-burst there
weren't enough buckets to hold fast, still.

I was so sorry for what I never had

in me. I was sorry for what I could do
for our son, burning in the night: spooning out

tablespoons of fish oil, setting the DeVilbiss

on his nightstand, its vapors coming
in halting puffs that'd set the room's walls

weeping in brown streaks I'd wipe away

as he twisted himself into a few more moments
of sleep before sparrow-song lifted him

into morning and he warbled for grandma-soup.

He'd slide back beneath the sheets until I had it ready
and came to carry him to living room sofa,

bowl of overflowing noodles hiding

chicken, carrot, broth, all that would ease him
back to afternoon kick-the-can, sunset frog-hunts.

Bundled in the afghan his mother made him,

slurping my recipe and not hers

he always thought salty, he'd smile a smile
I'd never trade, not for self-repaired radiator

or sunburned back from a day of roof-shingling,
not to keep husbands in the neighborhood

from whispering as she pushed the mower along
the lawn's perimeter, then in a row, and another,
cutting us into smaller and smaller boxes
we never felt trapped in until it was too late.

Anso Pioneer

Posed in Front of the Five-and-Dime in My Brand New Field Jacket

I was still young enough to be in love

with war: how each mortar shell's concussion

kicked me in the chest hard enough

that I died small deaths every red morning,

how if I made it home, those two girls

twittering behind me, either of them

I could dip backwards on the crowded street

and stop her whole life with a kiss,

how killing one Jerry, even one,

would be enough to make my Polish father hate

this world a little less.

But I lost

how much less unbearable I made

it for him, and then how many times

I woke to a car door slamming in the night

which pulled at me hard enough

only hours alone at the kitchen table

and day's strengthening light could quiet me

when newspaper thumped on the porch

and a boy pedaled an empty street.

Now I am old and difficult enough

to know to be afraid for the world,

for my sons who I see

in the distance and don't call out to.

For that boy in the picture

who believed there was only one way

he could become a man.

Butcher Watch Pocket Carbine Camera c. 1943

You as a Pin-Up Girl Who Couldn't Do Anything but Keep Safe in My Pocket

I speak to you in the second person as if
 you could still hear, as if you were still a girl
 who perched herself on an oil drum,
waited for her best friend to snap one photo
 at roll's end, one her father might not make it to
 as he thumbed through the stack, judging
just how much of a jack-of-all the pharmacist was.
 You, a girl forever, with whom I'd share nothing
 of myself, not until I was good
and ready because I knew you were too shy
 to lie to. You took your time with me. You waited long
 for a muddied envelope with your smudged address
to show in the early afternoon's mail. You wanted
 me to write of war. How I struggled with sharpening
 my heart, and the knife I used as last resort to save
a farmer's family—father, mother, sister and brother
 so unquestionably like yours— who hid one, two,
 no *three* Jews with the onions and potatoes.
How, maybe, a bullet shot clean through
 the back of my field jacket when I bent to pick up
 your picture, and all I could think to do was hold it
to my lips as I saw a vision of what we'd be.
 Or how as constellations turned
 each night from me to you, I thought of nothing
except how you held yourself up on that drum

you had no choice but to arch your back just so,
my picture in your locket pushing out and then falling
back against your two-unbuttoned blouse with each breath,
or your skirt hiking up just far enough
I'd be reminded where God resided
even if I was stuck in such a forsaken place.
You always wanted to save me. You always
had such grand ideas, but war's a joke for me
and you. There's no time to sit alone
and wistful, stealing glances by firelight
of a dog-eared photo of a girl who gave me
her heart before her body, who stiffens
in the theater's dark as the European newsreel
flickers its squadrons of planes speckling sky
and bombed-out cities I must've been marching to,
who will be patient not for weeks or months,
but decades to be thanked for keeping this boy safe.

Unknown

Letter from My Wife Tucked Among the Photos

W,

I walked far from home with you
where names never fell easily from my tongue.
Not when each mother, father, little boy or girl
crowded us on the cul-de-sac so close
I could reach out to grab a borrowed cup
of sugar, an egg, a spool of thread
to put right holes in the boys' pants.
I saw buildings reach toward heaven
so unnaturally I thought they'd always fall.
I saw thunderclouds, our little babies,
and my grandfather's barn tumbled to the ground.
I saw believers making music
you never paid any mind to, not ever,
though you held my hand in the pew anyway.

I walked far from home with you and cried
all night after my father called to say his love
was dying and there was nothing he or I could do.
I saw lovers through a window whisper,
Want me forever, please want me forever.
I saw blessings and withering cornfields.
I saw blood and a bit of it was yours.
I saw our children leap into a river
but their hearts were still dry.

I walked far from home
and took photos of everything I saw:
a nestful of blackbirds take flight
chirping so loud you woke with a start.
Moonlight on morning snow.
An old man facing backwards on the train
who slipped into the future without ever seeing it.
I saw tree limbs' shadows on a hillside
and a woman throwing bread into a pond.
I saw a boy in a uniform take a bus ticket
and say, *I'll be with you again soon.*
I saw a car crash in the city
where prayers rest like stones in the gutter.
I saw teenagers stealing looks

and wanting to give only their everything.
I saw leaves corkscrew in an October draft
and a pair of initials carved into a stone.

I saw my face in a mirror crying,

Take me back home.

I saw an ocean, saw an angel
in a dream I never told you.

I saw widows rocking on porches
waiting for their sons' cars or the Lord.

I saw hungry dogs knock over trashcans
and angry husbands shooing them away.

We walked so far from home
where names never came so easily
as they did when we were nineteen, maybe less.
I saw a man who loved with all he had
and who struggled every day with how to be loved,
whose face I still saw in every good I did
if only he ever believed it.

E

Self-Portrait in a Plywood Carnival Cut-Out

Dogpatch Gift Shop, Lake Ozark, MO

I could have shed my shape easily

like water pouring from pitcher to glass,

glass to beads slipping down chin

then summer-tanned throat, water which never
settles on one identity when there are

so many ways to be itself. Isn't that a promise

I could have made to myself? To peek my head

again and again through wooden ovals,

pushing from darkness to sun so suddenly

there'd be no way to know whether light
or each chance at being new had me

crumple to my knees, clutch my eyes tight,
blink them open as whoever I could be?

Maybe a black-and-white clad prisoner
ankle-chained to the next man, leaning

shovel into dirt heap as shotgunned guard, bloodhound,
my every mistake stood at the roadside.

Or a no-shoed and knee-patched yokel,
corncob pipe in my threadbare vest's pocket

and triple-X'ed jug at my hip, sitting atop an ass

I was *heading fer home* as the stocky letters

drawn in mountain-stretching clouds

declared. Or even a golden-skinned skier with two choices:

grip the tow line hard back to shore

as the sharkfin tailed close in the boat's wake

or let go and fall back into the dark

because there's always time for a man to ask forgiveness,

to be cleansed, to find how he fits in this life once more.

Dacora Digna c. 1954

On M. Practicing Headstands on a Pillow in the Yard

I want to think all the right things:
of his ingenuity at saving himself

from stone or shed acorn,

a blue bruise mottling his fair crown,
of his need to best his older brother

that didn't end with broken finger, my idle threat of belt,

his mouth turned scarlet
and tongue lapping at what he couldn't spit out,

of blood rushing to his brain so fast, so hard, he had no choice

but to turn everything upside-down:
suffering and joy, doubt and trust,

cold and love. But what good would that do?

What does a boy care of abstractions
when his worries come to turning

over a chocolate-stained sofa cushion to hide

what he had no chance to make clean,
to not finding any shapes recognizable

in clouds—no turtle or truck, no man's face lazing indifferently

to the wind—, to listening, at night,
to a dog that went on whimpering ceaselessly

its small hunger? What right does a father have

to force such heavy wishes on a boy
when what scares *him* most has no heft or blood,

when he's done nothing to make believe

the world can be seen new?

I want to think all the things

I should have thought then. I want

to think about what I can touch
and what can hold my son in the darkest room

of the darkest night of his whole life. I want

my son to push hard against the earth,
spring himself into each new day

and see with blood-dizzied eyes leaves falling

as a gift not death, his father's face
hidden behind a camera not as distance

but the only way he can keep fast the future's possibilities.

Spartus Full Vue

I Lose More Each Day I Spend in This Town

I wish I had the genius of a crow,
could understand the shortest distance
from a town that stretches farther than eye,
where power lines hum below elm leaves
threatening always a bitter sting of flames,
at whose every Saturday garage sale,
a wedding dress hangs on a rusted nail
waiting for mothers and their newly
unbarren teenaged daughters. I find less surprising
every day. I shut my windows tight
against autumn drafts that want nothing
but to curl little girls' hair or red boys' cheeks
as they leap into leaf piles, swallow their laughs
until they burst into days that could hold
back nothing comforting or fair. I lose
hate, love, memory equally
but never jealousy for the crow perched
on the streetlight who might take flight
now, now, or now.

Labor Day Parade, Three Years After I Buried Her

It's not sadness, but something else; waiting
for the majorette's foot to clap
asphalt straining against September sun,
still so unforgiving, so harsh

the vineyards remain impotent
for the seventh year in a row,
like everything in that town. She'll be still
forever. There's no wishing her

to march on, throw her baton high
toward the moon edging
between cloud-dappled sky and plane trails
left to billow into nothingness.

No way to tell if candy that rattled
the blacktop, crashed against cracked
curbs, and came to rest in a puddle will ever be peeled
open by a five-year old's thick fingers.

No noise from flute or sax to imagine
filling me, the air, two boys
perched on a Chevy hood who lean
unworried into their futures.

Of everything that happened, why do I think
of these memories? Why do I fight
so much against what can now never change,
no matter the song I feel in my blood?

Kodak No. 2 Bronnie Hawkeye Jr.

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Vita

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