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Date

4-29-94

VISION TASTING

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Chad Forrest Sexton

May, 1994

DEDICATION

ii

For Lee
friend, lover, wife

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Marilyn Kallet, Dr. Stan Garner, and Dr. Charles Maland, who served as my committee members, and whose patience and encouragement during my years at UTK have made it possible for me to continue to this end. I owe special gratitude to Professor Kallet, my thesis director, whose friendship, inspiration, and guidance have helped me see how to grow as a writer.

I am also thankful for the moral support, love and humor of my parents, my brother, and all my other friends, who have given me the endurance and perspective I've needed to keep going.

ABSTRACT

The poems in this collection attempt to describe journeys of the self as it moves through time, repositioning itself in relation to others or in relation to its own means of expression. The first section portrays the merging of identities, for example the shared lives of lovers. The second section includes writing about writing, showing the movement of mind into memory and its return to the present, bringing lyrics and narratives needed to assess that journey. The last section focuses on specific moments of altered vision, ones which mark changes in the life of the narrator and perhaps, when re-created, in the mind of the reader.

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The greatest joy of creative writing, for me, has always been in the initial process, the first draft. Whether I feel the poem's rhythm rocking me gently or feel carried by its intensity to a place of altered vision, the completion of a poem brings a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment because of the work accomplished, and also gratitude to the words for bringing the feeling of joy.

One conception of the process of writing that has been useful to me is William Stafford's idea that poetry is a gift, and that the writer begins the process by preparing to receive it. My preparation begins with a positioning of attention toward the subject. The attention points both within the self, toward my memory, and outside myself, toward the objects and events making up everyday life. When the complete poem rests on the page, the image recorded serves as an homage to the initial attraction, the moment of desire to position myself toward the remembered event, the moment of beginning to express. The idea that the poem has been given by a mysterious agency outside myself, or has been placed within me by a process of accretion like the formation of an identity, is one I return to frequently. This idea says that hunger to express is continuous. It says that after the poem ends another poem is being given. My artistic life, the use of writing to keep turning toward new poems, needs reminders that writing

will continue, that there is a source outside it, sustaining, replenishing, continuous.

This collection divides into three sections. The first section, "Communion", collects poems about interpersonal relationships. Each one attempts to describe the merging that occurs when lives touch. Portraits of shared consciousness between lovers, an invocation to a muse, and dreaming safety for friends all find a place in this section because they hold in common an interest in the attractions that draw voices together.

The second section, "Story and Song", centers around writing about writing. Various parts of the process receive attention; looking for inspiration, accepting unexpected inspiration, and writer's block become subjects of poems.

The third section, "Visions", gathers poems about moments of perceptive clarity unlike everyday realistic vision. These poems re-create instants of feeling so completely folded into an image, thought, or experience that time seems frozen. The instants, whether brought on by reading another poet, writing, physical activity, or other imaginative acts, have in common heightened sensual awareness, increased desire for the instants themselves to continue, and a knowledge that they are precious precisely because time washes them away, brings them back. They do not last except in the fact that they can be re-created, and in this knowledge that they will return.

I. COMMUNION

Address To Her Voice

Slip smooth sibilants beneath my skin,
inject me with your words,
move them through me, snaking syringes
parting hairs
as they slide
hidden under my scalp.

Let language thief behind me,
club me stunned to my knees,
rob me of logic.

Whisper brutal truths,
your honeysuckle breath
a raging dustless tornado
whipping me, tearing flesh from bone.

Wield your speech as a weapon,
tip it with poisontoned sarcasm,
pump your irony through my blood.
Final merciless torture,
rip into my jugular
with your wit, suck
the green traces of your venom.
While I weakly laugh, drain me dry.

As We Love We Fly

When you unhinge me I fly open
separating like feathers.
In oil we slide among meanings
flame beats its wings behind us
doors are falling down
we walk into a beautiful room
flexing your muscles you are stretching
the limits of our periphery.

Feathers float on oily surfaces
wide reaches leaf through us
emptily gazing you into me.
The walls sound like nesting birds
until you tear them down
and now the walls are the lives
of each breath. Take the silence out
from between our feathers. Comb us through the air.

We Dream Tattooist

Indelible ink bleeds from your hands onto my skin
you trace the outline of an eye into my back
flesh opens
canyon of agony
your fingernail burns like metal,
searing brand marking me.
The fire you write burrows into my body,
digging a hole which you fill.
You paint an eye into the socket
the ink takes shape
a new gaze stares out of my hot back.

You teach me the language of tattoo,
we write on each other until
the odor of burning air merges
with the lingering smell of branded flesh.

The smoke clears. We enjoy the view
spread out before our new eyes,
realize we need to see more.

Repeating the process
of opening air,
opening skin,
we have the same thought:
after our bodies are completely covered by eyes,
will we be able to see everything?

Is it enough to see in every direction,
or will we write a new one,
opening an eye
which can see inside the body,
show us the veins curling,
the pale bones groaning,
the tongues of blood that lap
toward the darkest recesses we hide?

Chocolate Communion

Each night as we sleep
you and I lie buried together
we wake without fear
inside a huge coffin
shared by two foil-covered bodies.
We deliciously unwrap them,
hollow chocolate replicas of ourselves.

We kneel together in this our final basket
dissolve our selves in our mouths,
feed each other
until the intoxicating syrup
drooling down our throats
becomes the purest black ink,
luscious truth streaming,
dark center of the words we seek.

Writing with our tongues,
we fill the blank pages of our naked bodies
with impossibly spoken mysteries,
making visible the unknowable
rivers that flow between us.
Thick, black, permanent, ink rolls down our skin,
loving fingers, tendrils growing
out of dense clouds, thirsty neurons laughing,
tender essence of the secrets they store.

We wake to daylight, the language
written on our bodies slowly fades,
coffin lowering itself into the earth.
We glimpse the dream scuttling
into chocolate pupils,
needing each other's opening eyes,
we watch it gently recede,
sweet mysterious amphibian
returning to the sea.

Equilibrium

In a premeditated posture of insolence
I stood leaning lightly on your wall.
To raise an eyebrow was to call you rushing
to speak was to sprawl myself
into stuttering convulsions, blinking nostalgia.
Flexing my jaws hoping to startle you
who stared waiting into responding

*I waited for your tense face to speak,
saw your small wrist
dangle cigarette-weighted hand
from its pale veined arm, a ceramic sculpture laced
with jealousy you seemed to me.
Steeling myself refusing to recall
any of the past*

*You in your cocky stance come smiling
from the snow the day I meet you.
We dance in the moss on Flattop Mountain
light over Louis Armstrong's
contribution to modern society, over
who will do whose dishes. Helpless
at a corner table we stare at each other
as we do again in this room.*

You in that tight dress brush the wet flakes
off my hair, brightly you smile
from behind an emerald waterfall
sunbaked gaze, picnicking
with me in a brittle apple orchard,
we threaten each other with loneliness
each day, I tremble, ashes on your floor,
my eyes meet yours.

Need Faster Language

In the air of heat itself:
 insolent flowers, we pommel
 toward each other,

roots grow stronger
 than octopus tentacles
 strangling through the dirt.

Way of reach, shape of want,
 appears scratching
 at the door of skin,

cries "Let us in",
 with the almost-human voices
 cats use, pathetic mists of voice,

breath sweating into palms.
 We yearn, yeast exploding itself,
 in the same way flame is energy,

with the strange current
 darkness possesses
 when it propels us inward.

I Dream Her Stone

She looks so harsh, crushing, delicious.
I crave her smell, hungry to gnaw
at her like wet sunny concrete.
As I watch her she smoothes not softens,
becomes polished marble
beneath the surface of a pond.

I want
to dive to her, caress her chiseled face,
surface with her under my arm,
soften her with oils,
unclench her teeth.

I see the dive happen frame by frame,
my hands break the water,
slide down her shoulders, my eyes open
to watch her skull,
sculpted insistent rock,
rush to smash my downturned face.

She wakes me streaked with sweat
to tell me the stone is illusory,
nothing but a firmness,
skin of ripe grape.
She hugs me so hard I feel I might break,
we run together like spilled pooling wine.

Dreaming the Third Friend

The first friend, already in the air,
asked you to catch his body
as he jumped from the cliff.
He licked down, all desire for leap,
body luscious tongue, loving the fall
with a thirst that spoke: ground is mine,
I am flame snapping at oxygen,
whip this plunge around me.

You caught him as if placed there
for that purpose, with the simple care
of a daily task. You knew how to fold
your arms around him, tenderly,
as if unfolding your flannel sheets,
absentmindedly getting ready for bed.

The second friend threw himself off the cliff
in a swan dive, arms out like wings
to embrace the earth. Soil opened,
leaves scattered, roots peeled away
in acceptance. You ran to the catch,
stumbling over eager branches,
but gravity as usual won.
Your friend bounced and flew away.
Even though years of practice
were needed to accomplish this flight,
you knew you had played a part,
your running toward formed a pushing away,
aided a lifting into sky.

Now you are always dreaming
the third friend, one leg over the edge.
Do you crouch underneath,
whisper to your arms,
"Be soft, be strong",
or step to the side,
wait for another bounce?
How many dreamed friends
are versions of you,
how do you know
how to catch yourself?

In the life of the dream
the moment of the catch
moves you more than waking,
carries more light than the sun
filtering through the curtains,
flies toward you, leaps to meet you,
sleeps within you like the hopes
of all your friends.

II. STORY AND SONG

Listen and Say

On a cliff not too far from where you're sitting
reading this, someone has told a story
of a couple torn by a love
that won't let them merge into one.
Moving out over the edge,
they break away from their pain
to be forever joined.
Or maybe the story has it that one lover
went to war and was killed.
He died heroically,
the official letter said, but she burned the letter
before she left the cliff. She imagined herself
the ashes swirling like the words
that brought the news,
flinging her body into a current
flowing toward her lover.

As many stories as places,
as happy or sad as the listener
places like this cliff
hold their stories inside them,
waiting for a receiver,
someone who needs to be heard,
someone who needs to pour words like ashes
someone torn by the need to be more than one.
Can you hear the story you need to hear
without moving from your place,
can you feel the spirit of a story fill you
like the feel of shouting into the wind,
are you soaring into the air
when you hear the lives around you?

1. Reading

Are lines of poetry
crosshatched eggs of thought
winging in reified flight
into cages of gunsight?

2. Nest

Another shell cracks
a blind yawn
moves toward its siblings
for warmth

Villanelle for Memory

Say you want that feeling when it comes around again.
Treat it like all the rest, passed through circle's arc,
Toss it up and back, watch it scatter like the rain.

A voice repeats a message, ephemeral refrain,
mumble out of reach, moan out of the dark:
"Say you want that feeling when it comes around again."

Past binds to now, anchor sinks with chain,
each memory and its twin enters mind's ark.
Toss it up and back, watch it scatter like the rain.

And you carry on, blind ship sailing before tame
wind, moving without stopping, twitching like the shark.
Say you want that feeling when it comes around again,

and it will rise up for you, dragging with it pain,
lost sensation, the past igniting its spark.
Toss it up and back, watch it scatter like the rain.

Whose voice is speaking to you, whose memory is the same?
An echo of you now, each voice will miss its mark.
Say you want that feeling when it comes around again.
Toss it up and back, watch it scatter like the rain.

Ghost Miner

I descend into memory like a miner going to work.
The events of my life live
here as though they occupy space,
as though they're objects sitting in cold dust,
the light I shed settling on them like snow.
Time's own moonstocks wait for me,
diamonds in the rough, roots of dark earth
with edges uncertain as the damp footprints
I leave behind in the mineshaft,
marrying the darkness.

Every night I will search the walls
digging into my mind
until I find the perfect lump bulging,
waiting to be cut out, benign tumor.
I'll carry it to the surface,
lovingly chip away, cut into crystal, polish
until, everyday miracle,
it smiles naked in sunlight.

Camping Above the Dam

While the night was sitting on its haunches,
you leaned toward the fire
to listen with your eyes.
Oak aged into marble, groaned
as a painting would if it came
to life, grey branches scarred
themselves across flames, instant
after instant of agonized leaps,
they threw themselves into nothing
with the precision of acrobats.

You flowed back and forth
from the night to the fire,
you squatted like a hen on the lake.

Under the water were homes
covered after the dam was built,
waiting under silt blankets,
knowing the night above them
as a word knows how to rest in its phrase.

Suddenly the crickets
burst in upon the scene,
wearing good news like trumpets
slung across their shoulders.

Glutton

If thoughts could peel from your mind
like sunburned skin,
would you take the paper-thin curls
into your mouth, taste the shriveling patches
as they watered slowly into your tongue?
If they chipped away like paint,
would you be tempted to sample
their sweet poison, heavy as lead?

Be careful how much you eat,
you might drug yourself.
Swollen by the weight of your thoughts,
you'll sink to the ground,
fat ankles crossing,
dazed head lolling to one side.
Your ideas will sweat from you,
collect in pools, evaporate,
thicken the air like moonlight.

Oh Yeah, the Glasses

The man trying to write
sat under bizarre music
with pen, paper, coffee,
in the manner of a photographer
waiting for the perfect moment
to snap a shot of a sunset.

Nothing happened.

He looked up from the page, surprised.
Shrugging, he decided to write
whatever came into his head
in the manner of the same photographer
shooting an entire roll of film.

After a few pages,
he glanced at the shelves
in the corner
 and
 glasses
 leaped
 into
 the
 air,
 sharpened their claws,
 invited him to dinner,
 whistled an ugly tune,
 shuffled to the edge,
 peered down at the carpet,
 stuffed hands into smooth pockets,
went back to writing.

Still hungry, chasing after ashes

Each morning I need to be filled
by the hard words I wrote the night before
breaking into the stale crust of each one
with teeth transforming from bone to metal
crashing into each other through my poems
with sparks setting the paper on fire.
The words shrivel and fly
ashes into the wind that I blow
from my lungs, heaving bellows.
Still hungry, chasing after ashes
I stumble over bronze feet
clanging together, ringing like the sun--
the ashes dissolve like sugar on my tongue.

River Me Silently

As I walked up the stairs
a single tone sang out
the stairwell transformed

I climbed in a canyon
beside a river
the clear tone moved

the river sang
alive with water
clambering over rocks
trying to get to me
I allowed it to wash over its banks
we bathed in each other

the music I heard
flowed out of me as words
the river stayed in my veins
until it faded as slowly
as moving light
glides down canyon walls

the music dwindled down
to one note, one drop left in a stream
one ray of shifting light,
one step on the staircase.

Rebuilding the Dam

Suddenly all the crickets were dying,
not even Miles Davis could save them.
They appeared out of nowhere,
scattered on the floor,
legs torn off, heads imploded.
Miniscule dinosaurs no longer singing,
bodies of scabs in the dust.

Did you try to breathe into those tiny lungs?
Are you the one who picked them up,
shook off the dust, asked them to sing,
rubbed a leg against a wing?
Do you ever walk into the night, try to hear
ghosted voices of crickets
you once swept into a pile
as large as your bed?

When their crushed lives are gone,
who will leap through their air?

The voices wash in, again
you can feel the water rise in the valley,
up to your hips you move
toward the lake's mouth.
Belly the bottom,
graze against the shale on shore,
mist into coves, gather under willows.

Soon you will be able to peek over the edge
of that curved gravity below you, the dam,
already you can feel yourself slipping through

to the other side
where the rocks wait
to feel you creep across them,
already the moss, eager to drink,
speaks to the campfires, who prepare
for another dance.

Another Superfluous Angel

came to visit me today.
This one was covered in glitter
and wore a thin coat of neon paint
on his wings. Underneath the painted feathers
showed the pale sausage-colored skin
of a lifetime of work in an office
under fluorescent lights.

He smoked while he asked me,
his wings sighing with boredom,
if there was anything, anything at all,
he could do to inspire me.
I replied, No, thank you,
and could you please put out that cigarette,
it stinks of frankincense and myrrh.

Embarrassed, he shoved the unearthly butt
into the dirt around my philodendron
and said, philodendron is Latin
for loving fingers, you know,
and the leaves of the plant
burst into soft flaming hands.
They caressed the air,
urged heat through soil,
licked the ceiling,
whispered green smoke, danced laughter until

I said that's quite enough, thanks,
and it might actually be Greek for fond of trees,
so the flames curled in and the philodendron returned
in its simplicity. I thought how it's sad that they always
have dirty, tired, lice-infested wings like the angel
in that Gabriel Garcia Marquez story
or they're going through an existential crisis
like in Wings of Desire, and still they remember
Theresa's arrow or wrestling with Jacob like yesterday,
but he wanted my attention.

He said you know words have a life
outside themselves, one which moves
through knowledge not inside it,
leaves trails behind it,
dust scattered between stars
after the comet has passed, hell (excuse me)
meaning may desert you and you may be suspended
in that darkness among those particles
grasping to string them together
long after language itself has stopped
gathering its tongue
and shooting through the space above your head.
You might wander in the night

with or without your precious words I mean
I'm here with a gift
I can let you read my skin
and here he stopped talking,

let ancient writing pour across his body,
words for speaking to whatever's sacred,
scrolling runaways, tiny inked teeth
stampeded their message across his face.
His eyes bled the scent of pine needles,
became a blanket under my skin,
I was humming over softness of earth,
walls were buckling into limp petals,
we were stems listening to their last fibers give way.
His torso amputated
into any lump of marble,
every leftover hero.
Toes curling around floorboards
lifted body above them into air
for another look, a newer angle.
I tasted pomegranate blood, juiced across gaze,
bit the ringing ear of the messenger from beyond.

He smiled and brought down the wrath of someone.
I apologized, thought this one is more desperate
than they usually are, more eager to consume,
infuse with desire, shatter the air,
leave me looking out from among empty shards,
but at least he's thorough, I haven't felt so much
in days, and then thought what if that's his plan,
to appear a has-been but really be the one
who rends the lightning from its blindness?

Just then he faded;

glimpse of true feathers,
roar through translucent glimmer,
shoulders grip themselves and sail
into hot new light.

Bodypiercing, the Novella

In a dream a writer needing discipline decides
to chain himself to his chair
through his own torso.

He inserts hot needles, avoids
pectoralis major in the beginning,
superior border of latissimus dorsi in the end.

He plans to canal through body,
string chains to pulley above him,
hang before his desk,
swing lightly above a circle of blood,
his thighs lashed to his chair
while he finishes a novel.

The pain makes him turn away from the story;
he believes he sees what the needle sees,
it distracts him. He watches
skin part to reveal twitching layers
of muscle asleep in a rich gravy
of opening capillaries. Blind nerves
hide their heads, screech and mole
into barrows under gleaming wings of bone.

When the wound tries to heal itself,
antibodies gather in microscopic battles,
leukocytes suspended in pus drool
past each nipple.

He must create a way to survive.
He'll invent his own artificial skin
to line the inside
of his tunnel into self,
design a stainless metal
for the chain that will go through him.
He must learn to love pain,

its relentless clarity slicing into the world
he wants to write about, its waves rolling
under his imagination, tiny swamping vessel.
He thinks pain fuses the ink to the page.
It sleeves the desire between him and words.
It determines the delicate outlines of finest branches
against an overcast March day: each year's sundering
of tree's flesh into leaves
gives growth in another direction, a blooming through,
a budding into this oak's other body, the sky.
He's getting an image on the page,
a skinny canal whose journey toward light
is worth as much blood as away from it,

he's learning how scars sit and stitch,
how the death of skin
is not an idea, is not a message outside him,
hovering untouched and waiting for him to come to it.

Here is a way for him to wake
thinking "writer", sit up in bed,
know the absence
he almost already has forgotten
like the presence amputees remember,
know the words
emptying from him as fluidly
as the blood in the dream,
know the bone
glistening in its own space,
know the lifting above the page.

III. VISIONS

Poem for the Day I Lose the Ironman Triathlon

I'll use any excuse to hallucinate.

Garlic and its rich cloud lift me
into the dim light
above the sauce that holds it, I flicker
in and out, a forked tongue,
candlelight plays me
across burgundy's surface
and it's me who ripples
up to glassy edge
of my watering eyes.

Hot mustard in a Thai restaurant
tears me down my throat,
rushes its yellow fog
across the table. I spread out,
etherized. Bruised twilight air
and mist curl from my scalp,
twist together through the restaurant.
I'm broken and flooding,
nest of capillaries emptying.

Herbal tea or homebrew and music:
a sip or two and I'm vibrating
with bass strings
inside the atmosphere of a memory
hops have carried from the earth,
sliding guitar mercury,
touch of peppermint, cool breath
and sting brought by dead yeast.
These dying notes braid to carry me

beyond this shuddering string
of unconvincing stories
without a plot or central character.

The one in which I train for years to win
the Triathlon. I'm in the lead
after the swim and the bike until
I realize: all the marathons,
the addiction to pain and speed,
the gallons of sweat pouring,
were simply work toward this day,

where I am a figure
shimmering in the lava fields,
rising from asphalt on swollen stilts
I can't feel, moving after and through pain
again, again, stride, stride.
Time will stop being,

I think, if I keep moving.
Now I run like lava,
with only a memory of fluidity,
only a geographic cadence of change.

But this grand excuse,
given to me in increments
of vision, has finally added up,
and through the salt and haze
hanging in knots from my eyebrows
I see everything shedding its skin.
I have dwindled down to mere will
desiring nothing,
love of movement of body
leaves me while the road calls my name.
I am alone and extend
into the web of arms
that slap into the morning bay,
bent light that transforms
a furious ankle into its shin,
cycling rhythm of crank and gear,
pulse and breath, bone and joint,
water coursing down parched skin.

Vulture Anthology

"No one,
 moreover,
 wants to ponder it,
 how it will be
 to feel the blood cool,
 shapeliness dissolve."
 -Mary Oliver, from "Vultures"

I lie in the desert
 whose intransigent coolness at night
 surprises me whose blistered back
 soaks heat in the day
 and now returns it to the sand.
 If I drain away
 between the grains
 before the vultures arrive
 I miss the circling motes,
 the desire drawn in from the sky.
 I am the magnet;
 wings above me
 filter down, sedimentary
 feathers cover me emptying.

Empty wings cup air,
 need shuffles down.
 They gather, skirt body's edge,
 dance and spread,
 wait for another end.
 One eye on shifting horizon,
 one eye wanders,
 sun flutters by on cockeyed legs
 sand shudders beneath parched fingers
 one eye fixes
 on one eye of vulture whose neck
 drips black with flies,
 whose beak stabs.
 Eye thinks pull, pull I'm pulling
 being pulled
 up into blue backdrop for spiraling wings,
 where I will dissolve, solidify, settle again,
 die, consume, fly into night,
 circle, narrow, land,
 plunge into body, be eaten, eye the horizon.

"What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment;
 what a life after death."
 -Kenneth Rexroth, from "Vulture"

If you were the vulture and I were the body
 could you perform this alchemy of love?
 Bury your bald head in my aching guts,

watch the cage of bones rise from the sand,
yank out any slippery organ,
carry the rotten delicacy
through the burning air, drop me
soft, regurgitated, yearning for a home,
into the yawning mouths of your children.

"Polly want some entrails?"
-David Letterman to a vulture

How many vultures can there be
sitting around me, tilting their heads back
to swallow, obscenely laughing,
choking down a shining piece of flesh?
I'm at the center of a crowd
all their eyes are on me
waiting to see what I'll do.
This is the comedy of blood
whose flow can stiffen, congeal
or marry another stream,
the tragedy of an end stuffing itself
into another beginning, a fledgling end.

Poison Dream

I drink a shot of bloody milk skimmed with fur,
rise from bed into a fever,
blood boils, foams from my ears.
Hair smolders,
fire beginning at the scalp
consumes it, a burning bush on my head.
Skin crisps, splitting,
tongue a black foot
drying, swollen in the dusty cave of my mouth.
fingernails spark if I hold them too close,
back sets my sheets on fire,
earlobes drip down like wax.

I stand
spread-eagled, naked, burning, blistering
the varnish from the wooden walls,
hands raised, fingers splayed,
as if each part of my body waits
to greet a new spirit, different blood,
a cooler flame to possess me.

Topography of a Vision

The eyes of the cat who lives with me
are tiny globes,
wrinkling like mountains as they curve
into her head. Her irises shade
from fields of wheat to rain forests
around the slits of her pupils, rivers
thinking their own way in and out of light,
and she shudders around the house,
an explorer finding the edge of the world.

My own eyes are cities
clenching their teeth,
under siege,
fortresses with drawbridges raised.
My pupils yield
to the pressure of irises flexing
and shrink to black points, weapons
aimed at what I see.

Nights, letting the cat out,
I stumble over things
stuttering under my feet
while the cat maps a straight course
for the door, waits to leap
over boundaries. She sails
across the threshold. I blink
after her into the void,
my pupils expanding into oceans.
I can follow,

 step after her,
feel the light on the porch swallowing
into darkness like a beacon,
listen to the word "Home" fade.
surf pounds home fades

Frozen Margarita

It's the frost on the glass that gets me,
as if the very moisture in the air
were hallucinating,
humidity imagining itself a solid film
that separates and planes over
with the natural violence of earthquakes.

And the surface of the drink!
Sloping beneath the tongue,
in stubborn mists of breath,
evading my reach
with the elaborate turns of conspiracy,
hills of ice thrust themselves
to the bottom of the glass, cold lips
barring the way surely
as the sky keeps us on the ground.

A sky frozen and mind-altering, its mezcal clouds
move into my blood like levitating poison.
If the ice begins to melt,
Margarita lumping in the center of the glass
while a buffer of liquid surrounds it,
shake it to distribute the crystals.
Make your own hurricane.

But don't shake too long,
because sometimes you'll forget
you're shaking a drink and just get lost in the idea
of making your own hurricane, and you'll start shaking
your body in a circle around some imaginary eye,
as if you were watching the formation of an identity
around a body, circling yourself like vultures moving
to meat, hawks riding a thermal, a leaf
soaring into the sky above the tree that created it,
moving out of yourself, spiraling into yourself
until you freeze, liquify, cloud over, sky your body,
intoxicate your mind, fly blind eye into hurricane
of self, plane memory over sliding glass,
rush steam over ice, cold alcohol head,
wave tides of images across the present
as infinity reaches through you
for another shot
of Pepe Lopez.

The Rain Speaks Any Language

The rain sounded like pulleys cranking.
The rain sounded like something being ripped.
The rain beat down the heads of listening dogs
who shuddered on glazed-over asphalt.
The rain soaked its voice into the veins
of the city, screaming like a human throat.
The rain cauterized the darkness and the hot
sealed night moaned "Thank you".
The rain sang into the mouths of the earth.
The rain composed hymns on leaves, branches, love.
The rain scattered its words like seeds.
The rain wept on shoulders, swept hair out of eyes,
fell into the arms of infinite lovers,
plunged into the river, crackled like cruel fire.
The rain whispered to the wind,
tried to raise itself from its death bed,
shattered the sky like glass.
The rain started stampedes, avalanches,
riots, hurricanes, marriages, murders,
floods, wars, oceans, lives, religions,
headaches, mudslides, civilizations.
Between the drops of the rain, silence gestured.

Holding back an answer to a question,
the rain sounded like screeching tires.
Switching on a light that seems an explosion,
I move out into the rain.
Silent rivers laugh down furious skin.

Vision Tasting

Fast. When the stains on your wall crawl
like shadowy flames, when the hairs on your body spider
away, collect into fur on your windows, select a rhythm.
Carry it into the forest, pound out the rhythm
until you can eat it and are satisfied. Choose a sound.
Bend it until it fits in the small of your back,
the palm of your hand, or the dimple in your chin.
Carry it with you as you walk through the forest.
When you hear the rain bleed through the trees,
set the sound loose, let it return to its shape.
Listen carefully to the groan it gives you,
and choose a word which describes it visually.
Hold onto this word until it is the only one you know.
Wait for the rain to hammer down on you, knifing
through the air with its tiny fists. Pretend you are still
human until you know that you belong to the cavernous roots,
melting frost on the earth, the pelted moss.
Let the last word go.

Coxswain's Song

I want to feel
your back, hot animal,
heave beneath me,
pound me into the air
with every stroke.
Sling me through the water,
beam of light
cutting into darkness,
arrow biting through flesh
to fly further still.
You are muscle stronger than stone
crush the next bridge
leave it powdered,
a thin film floating on the surface.
Blur the banks, erase the trees,
straighten this river
with your speed.
Give me all your pain
burn your legs
offer them as a sacrifice
naked incense
smoking on the water
behind us.
oars sprout feathers
I need you lifting me

Wet wings, carry me home,
sweat the elixir
that floods my blood.
 my hair stands
 clouds rise before me
 the living air
 shines gold on my skin
Now is the moment
when meat, bone, voice disperse
and I dissolve into mist,
hovering over you
as an opening flower
colors the silence above its stem.

Evolution of an Aura

Dionysus was the father of twins
and Aura was their mother.
He was never at their home,
always being torn apart and eaten
by his worshippers or hovering nearby
when a goat's heart slipped across the stage.

Aura drowned one child.

The other twin, when he knelt
to drink from the spring
that Zeus made his mother become,
wondered whose face
was reflected in her surface.
She was still a source,
still flowing, neither here nor there
he felt ripped to pieces,
part of himself underground, waiting
to rise into the air,
another part already downstream.

Later, "aura" became aureole, golden crown,
halo around the heads of painted saints.
Ring of light surrounding planets, stars,
but you didn't feel it yet, it was not a cloak
you were wrapping around you.

Did aureole become areola?:
the circle of color around the human nipple,
any small open space, distance between words.
Leap to another idea across this emptiness,
linger as you pass by the void,
love the intensifying color,
stiffening of flesh in the circle's center.
Will there stream a jet of milk?
Can you make the leap, write the next word,
create a new color between two points?

Still later, you thought
aura was saying it will have you.
The more you shrink from it
the narrower its circles around you tighten.
You thought aura was image,
read from you by every observer.

You and the library were together one day,
suddenly a bookstack corner shifted,
and there you were, an older version of you
with darker hair or maybe the same eyes,
staring back with a smirk,

holding a book whose title you couldn't focus.

You thought for a second
you knew what the other twin knew,
the one whose father's image
is always diffused and consumed,
whose mother may be half-mad, may possess
him with the tender glow surrounding
any messenger's body, the one who feels half-dead
or almost reborn each time another word appears.
You thought you were reading your own aura
as it unfolded its milky scarving mist before you,
unraveled its invisible tattoo.

How you remember it now,
the world tilts further,
the other you is swept away,
you're filled by a breeze
which both coils inside you and washes
over you, carries out the door
any thin smoke that had covered your skin.
You're bending over fresh water,
the reflection is neither obscured nor magnified,
there is no lifting fog,
you don't know what you see.

You Walk with Words

for William Stafford, 1914-1993

Dangling from you,
words are brambles after blackberry-picking,
dust deep in fingerprints from work in potato fields,
a single owl feather
delivered by darkness,
the wealth of fingers lacing,
spheres of sound surrounding us all.
Everything leans toward you, asks
to be carried a little farther into the woods.

Lines of poetry leap
 into seams
 of your clothes,
steep in skin of generous stillness.
They wait for their chance to be given:
friends talking about love,
rolls of dough rising, gentle feet padding
between trees, colors joined at the hip,
wind rattling windows, music among wingbeats.

A season speaks the end of its story,
decides to tell a new one.
You think you might not have heard a few pages,
right after the part where forests say
"We missed you," and readers taste
the memory of persimmon, feel the smell
of sage rustle through their hair.

So you nestle down. Lean into the same air
that ground loves to soar with, stay
ready to learn another fire, play different water,
bliss with silence and chatter alike.

All things gather time, fill themselves, hitchhike
toward a reception you prepare:
step into each day and accept ripeness
floating into open hands.

The words "gift" and "enough" are meeting,
your clear eyes are washing us
into the arc they form.
We are turning toward Oregon,
preferring "gift",
saying to each other:

"That flavor lasts a long time. Forever."*

*from Stafford's poem "Honeysuckle"

VITA

Chad Sexton was born in Boulder, Colorado. After moves to Hampton, Virginia and Newport News, Virginia, his family settled in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He received the B.A. with a major in English from Virginia Tech in 1991. While enrolled there, he was selected for the Bucknell Summer Seminar for Younger Poets in 1990. While completing his M.A. in English with Writing Emphasis at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, he has worked as a legal assistant, part-time tutor, high-school English instructor, and jumpmaster of a bungee tower. He currently works as an administrative assistant for United Parcel Service. After completing the M.A., his plans are to continue his academic career and to continue writing.