To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rebecca Warren entitled “Witness.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Benjamin Lee

Arthur Smith

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

WITNESS

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rebecca Warren

May, 2010

for Doug, who has given new things to see, new ways of seeing

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ABSTRACT

The “Red Book” section of this work collects poems written with dream material. The “Couplings” poems investigate the mechanical and sexual implications of “coupling.” What is witnessed and how are the concerns of the poems in “Witness.”

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INTRODUCTION

"Poets distinguish themselves by what they see," Guy Davenport writes in his introduction to Anne Carson's *Glass, Irony, and God*. "A dull poet is one who sees fashionably or blindly what he thinks poets see. The original poet sees with new eyes" (viii). A new way of seeing is the means by which the poet recreates and re-envisions subjective experience. [1] Poems that are fresh, astonishing, unpredictable are often so because the poet has seen that experience, however novel or banal, in an unexpected way. A poem such as this is a discovery: "Both writer and reader can now gaze on it with some curiosity, for it is in this world a new thing" (Matthews 18).

Some poets create "new things" via form, the "how" of the poem, critic Marjorie Perloff might say, rather than the "what." The surprise in Gertrude Stein's poetry, for instance, is the patterning of language, and how word, syllable, and sound begin to suggest meaning. The aesthetic that esteems impersonality [2] and is concerned with the materiality of language is exciting, but this is not the sort of poetry I write. My poems are personal; the "what" is privileged over the "how." I have taken my cues and my inspiration from poets working in a similar manner.

Anne Carson and her "new eyes" have been a recent and thrilling influence for me. For Carson, seeing with new eyes is accomplished by always watching. "Whacher [sic] is what she was" Anne Carson writes of Emily Brontë in "The Glass Essay," and we recognize Carson to be one, as well (4). She is, in fact, watching in "The Glass Essay" the same things Brontë had:

[1] A new way of seeing, of course, was a chief intention of Romantic poetry. However, perhaps our concept of who can experience this new seeing is more inclusive, open to more than an elect few, or a "chosen son" such as Wordsworth.

[2] The term "impersonal" serves, but is problematic. Surely there is a "personal" investment in the very exclusion of "ego-sincerity" from a poem. Impersonal poetry seems "self" conscious to me in this sense.

family, landscape, weather, God. Being a watcher means not turning away from what is ugly and unpleasant to be witness. The psychotherapist in the poem, presumably Carson's own, asks her why she dwells on her awful "Nudes": "Why keep watching?" she asks, and Carson answers "Some people watch, that's all I can say. / There is nowhere else to go // no ledge to climb up to" (19). Carson's "Glass Essay" is testament to her time in darkness, a time that she not only experiences, but is compelled to re-imagine, remake in her poetry. "To be a whacher is not a choice," she writes, and for some watching may be an impulse or compulsion that cannot be overcome (5). Yet watching can be practice, as well. A poet's vigilant observance allows him or her to be alert to those experiences that will be transformed into discoveries in a poem. [3]

Watching is not limited to visual perception, and in Anne Carson's work, is also a keen receptivity to connections – hence, Carson links the narrative of her mother, father, and lover to that of Emily Brontë. Guy Davenport observes her ability to create and work through "sets and subsets of images" such that her poems become "transparences of time and place" (viii). I too endeavor to be alert to associations, and my greatest challenge remains to make the "next leap" from one idea or image to the next. In my poem "So This Is Love," the falcon plucking the intestine from the pullet carcass caused me to remember a Martha Graham dancer as Medea, pulling a red cord from her dress and miming chewing it. The gestures reached out to one another across time and circumstance, and the falcon experience began to reach out to the Medea myth in other ways, as well. [4]

[3] James Merrill admits: "I'd go a step further. *We* don't *know* what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation" (Matthews 18). If this assertion is true, it has worrisome implications for those who are not artists; it may be a "step" too far.

[4] This reaching out is not unlike Rimbaud's declaration of a "new language" for the "poet-seer," which would be "thought latching onto thought and pulling."

Elizabeth Bishop is another watcher, and another of my influences. Bishop practiced the power of the close look, the observing eye pulled further and further into what it perceives. Brilliant poems such as "The Fish" are what that close look yielded. The speaker studies the fish, adding layer upon layer of detail: "his brown skin hung in strips/like ancient wallpaper," "He was speckled with barnacles,/fine rosettes of lime," the "frightening gills" are "fresh and crisp with blood," and his lip, festooned with the five hooks from which he had escaped, "like medals with their ribbons/frayed and wavering" (*Complete Poems* 42). The first time I read Bishop's "The Fish," it was a revelation. I felt the images steadily accumulate intensity, gain momentum, and swell into stirring epiphany:

> I stared and stared
> and victory filled up
> the little rented boat,
> from the pool of bilge
> where oil had spread a rainbow
> around the rusted engine,
> to the bailer rusted orange,
> the sun-cracked thwarts,
> the oarlocks on their strings,
> the gunnels – until everything
> was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
> And I let the fish go.
> (*Complete Poems* 42-3)

My own writing was dulled by the old, hammering "I," bludgeoning away at the delicacy of the poem. Representations of the observed world, when present, were peripheral or misappropriated to accomplish the emotional aims of the poem. Bishop's poem freed me: the "I" is not denied nor distant, but unselfconscious and ardent in the act of observation; the poem is emotionally powerful without being sensational; the observed world is the source of that power, not its device. Bishop's meticulous, respectful handling of the observed object "gives it the space to display its uncanny otherness, different yet always recognizable" (McNeil 400). She makes connections to the observed object rather than imposing meaning.

One such connection takes place in Bishop's uncollected, possibly incomplete "Vague Poem (Vaguely love poem)," in which the speaker meditates on the rock-rose/rose-rock, a "dull,/ rose-red lump of, apparently, soil/a rose-like shape; faint glitter…Yes, perhaps/there was a secret, powerful crystal at work inside" (*Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box* 152*)*. The final stanza is a rapturous blason of the lover's unclothed body. But the speaker need not seek a metaphor for the beauties of the female form: the lover's body evokes the rock-rose/rose-rock already pondered, appreciated in the previous stanzas. As in "The Fish," the culmination is euphoric:

> Just now, when I saw you naked again,
> I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock-rose…
> Rose, trying, working, to show itself,
> forming, folding over,
> unimaginable connections, unseen, shining edges.
> Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
> clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,

rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,

exacting roses from the body,

and the even darker, accurate, rose of sex --

(*Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box* 153*)*

Bishop wrote to Anne Stevenson, "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration" (McNeil 395). For the poet, that still, almost meditative observation can open up the world and the word.

In Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Thomasina Coverly, thirteen, presents her tutor with an essay and a diagram of heat exchange. The scenes of the play with Thomasina and her tutor Septimus take place in the late nineteenth century. Other scenes occur in what Stoppard calls "the present day." In the seventh and final scene the two worlds overlap; characters from both times are together on the stage, but never interact or acknowledge one another. This is a point of dramatic irony: we see the characters coexist even as they cannot "see" one another. This is the scene in which Septimus, in the late 1800s, and Hannah and Valentine, in "present day," concurrently read Thomasina's essay and realize the significance of her discovery:

HANNAH. What did she see?

VALENTINE. That you can't run the film backwards. Heat was the first thing which didn't work that way. Not like Newton. A film of a pendulum, or a ball falling through the air – backwards, it looks the same.

HANNAH. The ball would be going the wrong way.

VALENTINE. You'd have to know that. But with heat – friction – a ball breaking a window –

HANNAH. Yes.

VALENTINE. It won't work backwards.[…] She saw why. You can put back the bits of glass but you can't collect up the heat of the smash. It's gone.

SEPTIMUS. So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow cold. Dear me.

(Stoppard 131-2)

Thomasina's finding had its genesis in her observation of an ordinary, seemingly inconsequential phenomenon:

THOMASINA. When you stir rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. […] Do you think this is odd?

SEPTIMUS. No.

THOMASINA. Well, I do. You cannot stir things apart.

(Stoppard 12)

Thomasina is a watcher, alert to the mystery of the ordinary. The implications of Thomasina's observation and subsequent discovery are that of loss, what cannot be recovered, or reclaimed, the "heat of the smash." [5]

We poets may be trying to "collect up the heat of the smash." The experience gone, the poet's recreation is not only (and maybe not ever), putting the pieces of the window back together, but communicating the energy, the dynamics, the heat of the experience. [6]

[5] Thomasina has glimpsed the mechanism of doom, she has told its story, her tutor chides, even if she does not fully understand its mechanics, and even as Septimus holds the doomsday document in his hands, and on the same night she will die in a fire, she entreats him for a dance.

[6] The "heat of the smash" may be the lyric impulse; "putting back the bits of glass" may be the narrative.

I. Red Book

Biodome

I tend the switches
that keep up the tenuous ceiling.
See how that patch of plastic sky
wrinkles and shrinks?
This switch fixes it, pushing in the air
that is beam and rafter.
Isn't it as though the thing breathes,
fills like a lung that had begun to contract?

My wife and I have lived in it for years,
roll like stones around the sphere's periphery.
Or, we are planets orbiting.
I have time and quiet to imagine what we
are now. What we once were.
What this experiment is really testing.

From time to time, I rest my hand
on the toggle, let the sky
suck in and start to collapse.
It would smother us, I guess.
Or we would meet the shadows
that move across its surface,
whatever lives outside it.

Only Child

I dropped the dream baby, but that's not the worst of it. I dreamt him despicable in the first place, misshapen, big barreled chest knobbed with narrow shoulders. And ill-tempered, bellowing mightily with a strained purple face. Worse yet: in my journal I wrote the boy baby as it, it, it. But how can I name him, feed him? What mothering will turn his screams into song?

Entreaty

Visit me in my dreams.
You are nearly there,
sleeping beside me.
The last time was wrong,
wrong.
The oranges had gone bad,
skins plush with white mold.
My offering was small:
two good slices, still firm, that I found
and held to you in my palm.

If you come to me,
maybe I can take you to the floating city
with the rose-marble palace.
There, water sluices over cobblestone streets,
and it is warm.
The water will pool under us,
under bare legs and arms.

Visit me in my dreams.
You are nearly there,
sleeping beside me.

Notice

In Joseph's dream, sheaves of grain bowed,
pliant stems bent kernelled tips to the ground.

In my dream, birch bark is obsidian.
The trees harden.
Porous fiber vitrifies,
trunks are polished columns rain streaks down.
Branches are glistening onyx.
Cedar crystallizes to glass.

Limbs once waved in the wind like so many
palm-branch bearing citizens,
but the trees are changing.

II. Couplings

Pipe Fitting

Underground, overhead, on all sides,
pipes hum and rumble
with waste, water, gas, electricity, oil.
Living network gaining ground,
propagating. Union of male and female
at the threaded coupling.
Laying pipe, colloquialism
for the sex act.
Jungle fecundity of steel, copper, plastic.
Angled and angled web, enclosing.

Big Rig Trailer

The driver's coupled to it,
mammoth hanger-on
that grinds the fifth-wheel hitch.
He feels it restraining its heft,
the shift and slide of its cargo.
He feels it swing itself out
round a curve – a half step –
before it falls back in line,
dancer pulled back to partner's hip.
Just as well he has no rearview
to reflect the hulking thing,
near and constant as death,
shadow we fear
to find ourselves in,
accelerate to escape.

Early Studies in Love and Anatomy

Two photographs that I, as a child, turned to
again and again in my mother's album:
My father, bare-chested, hands atop head,
soaps his hair into fine white foam, grinning.
The other a strange flesh-pink hourglass
I couldn't make sense of.
Was it a hollowed-out female torso,
model from my mother's nursing classroom?

The excavated, emptied-out woman
was the open mouth of a Memphis Zoo hippopotamus.
A gaping figure eight, blunt teeth along its edges,
pink, wrinkled palate.
I do not remember how I realized this, how
I overlooked the other photos of zoo animals.

Neither do I remember how I one day understood
my mother took the photo of my father in the shower,
that something more was going on between them.
Something that sanctioned nudity.
Something that made my father smile.
Made my mother snap the picture.

Beat the Bed

Not inexpensive, not old,
but not memory foam, amnesiac coils
forget the shape of our bodies.
No sleep numbers to calculate our comfort,
but a degenerate geometry that pitches us both
to one side of the bed, crams
us together at the edge.

Unfortunate Union of Insects

End-to-end dragonflies
wheel above the creek,
clumsy apparatus,
graceless prototype
for quick, singular flying.
Monogamous ladybugs
scorch themselves in light fixtures.
Praying mantis, post-coital cannibal: *Enough.*
This is as far as I want to go with this.

III. Witness

Aubade

Sunday morning our passing car scatters a clump of vultures on the side of the road.
Seven, eight of them. Whatever's in the ditch must be big: a deer, a horse, a human.
Not a human, you say.

They settle into a tree in someone's front yard. Bare limbs clotted with blunt-headed birds, wings open and close. Unfortunate portent for the early riser who steps outside to greet the morning.
Not a portent, you say.

Monday through Friday, by daybreak, you're gone. And the murmur of wings is just beginning.

This Path is a Reckoning

As if I needed any more evidence of your industry, I come outside to find you have cleared a swath through the woods; you have slashed back the vines and scrubby limbs, and I can walk through as though this path has always existed. All afternoon I have been aimless, wandered through rooms picking things up and putting them down again. I cannot do anything, and I cannot be still, so I've come to find you. I walk the broad path that is yours, watch your bare torso turn, your arm swing, the machete falling, and the woods yielding.

Death Etiquette

I did not know death etiquette
and I could not invent it
as I waited in that spare room,
eyes magnetized to the monitor,
its plains and peaks a kind of landscape
that passed and passed
like scenery glimpsed from a train.
And you, strung with apparatus,
you were the beautiful thing in the room.
I want to believe that you were far away,
gone from the murmuring voices
and shrilling hospital instruments,
and I was tied to the fleet of machines,
not you.

The Woman on the Roof

Creeley's or the first Mrs. Rochester
in a fit of love

she does not float like a flat feather-woman
when she jumps

Cicadas

Everywhere, now, the rattling husks of cicadas,
emptied and left behind, their translucence
revealing nothing, their blood borne elsewhere,
pulse flown.

I sweep cicada shells from the thresholds,
flick them from the windowpanes, careful
not to crush the brittle bodies, careful
to keep them intact: hollow legs,
eye hollows, wing skeletons.

And in my body, an ache to call back
the song. A wish to burrow into
the good ground and fill up again
with sap and sugar and juice.

Touchstone

A fool's singular advantage:
to be candid. So let me say,
downstage, delivering my finest lines,
I find myself playing to the gleaming skin
of a bald man's head, bent
as he pries ice cream with a little plastic paddle.
For a moment, my mind slips off the lines.
It is not the indifference that arrests me –
to find myself ineffectual, to discover
frozen confection the better entertainer –
but to reckon the final ineffectuality,
the thin-skinned skull,
fingers trembling around a spoon.

Habits of Listening

Worn out by the inner voice, spun on
a reel, repeating.

In her sleep, the pale blonde child
sighs a high *hm*
hm.
Not a whimper,
but the syllable of peace,
of being swaddled in soft dreams.

The night hums, too,
quivers with calls of owls,
susurrations of trees and bat wings.

The fat moth's tap
tap tap
makes the window-glass ring.

Last Wish

Bury me in my four-inch heels
with petite gold buckles at the toes and ankles.

Joke at the podium about a skeleton in stilettos.
And: shoes no more ridiculous in death than in life.
And: these shoes are killing me!

Imagine my heels stabbing peep-holes
in the cloud-cover of heaven.

On the Island

> *There is nothing so selfish as misery nor so boring,*
> *and depression is devoted only to its own practice.*
> *Donald Hall, "Kill the Day"*

My husband finds me mid-day
in the beach house bedroom, staring,
beaten back by its immunity.
How do I tell him it thrives it spite of everything?
Even here, white sand and cerulean sea
must permit it. Tremendous sea
and sky cannot absorb it. It defies
white sand and blue-green water,
foaming at my feet.
What can I find to kill it?
The waves of this paradise
are slamming up against it,
and retreating.

The Only Watermelon

The only watermelon of this drought summer,
cleaved neatly with a heavy-handled butcher knife,
insides mealy and webbed with tendons of crystalline sugar,
is pitched face-down in the plot intended for a garden.

Its shell withers slowly. The deer skull the dogs
carried from the woods ends up beside it.
A prickly weed blooms through the skull's nostril.

The watermelon hull collapses, yields its seeds
to the dirt. The dogs rediscover the deer skull.
The garden, such as it was, is tilled under.

Prey

The cat's flayed a rabbit in her little house.
We heap her bowl and still
the sidewalk's bejeweled with bluebird heads,
her house is a den of furs.
The white ribbon on the doorstep
was a belly-up snake.
The joke is: we're next.

We're next, the joke goes.

So This Is Love

The falcon's handler
takes a limp pullet
from her satchel.
Falcon sets its beak
to yellow down,
lifts and curves its wings --
cloaking -- needless instinct
in captivity.
Falcon dips its beak,
stretches blood-bright
intestine, red as
the sheened cord -- viscera,
jealousy, desire --
that Martha Graham's
Medea claws from
her chest. She chews
and chews, takes it
into her body
again. There is no one
else to consume it.
Medea was the key
and trophy, but she
blanched in the shadow land.
Her husband is lost.
The Other's collapsed
in a poisoned dress.
Her children are next.
Untethered, she'll fly
back to the sun.

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