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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Charlotte Pence entitled "This We Call Many Things: A Collection of 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:

Amy Billone, Robert Sklenar, Art 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.)

**This We Call Many Things:
A Collection of Poems**

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

Charlotte Jeane Pence
August 2011

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Before the fall no story after the fall the old story
After the fires floods along with serpents and bugs
After the floods years of drought
After drought just dusk which is when everything
really begins to hurt

and then there is the human dimension.

—From “End Thoughts” by C.D. Wright

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Neither words nor an acknowledgment page can begin to express the deep gratitude I feel towards the University of Tennessee's English department. Of course, my committee, Dr. Marilyn Kallet, Dr. Arthur Smith, Dr. Amy Billone, and Dr. Robert Sklenar, who has invested more time and energy than I would have ever imagined, deserve a special thank you. To Dr. Amy Billone, I would like to express my gratitude for teaching me how to appreciate the Romantic poets, for helping to make connections between their work and my own, and for supporting my poetry. To Dr. Robert Sklenar in the classics department, I would like to emphasize how much I appreciate your willingness, enthusiasm, and interest to work with that other side: the English department. To Dr. Marilyn Kallet, I would like to say thank you on behalf of the hundreds of students whom you have influenced. I have never witnessed a writer and teacher who has given so much of herself to form a community. Thank you for encouraging me to follow whatever crooked path my poems wanted to follow, for teaching me how to firmly plant my feet and breathe, and for plying me with delicious treats when breaks were needed. And to Art, thank you for pulling me out of that undergraduate workshop years ago to tell me that I should be a poet. Thank you, as well, for our Twix-side chats, for years of insightful edits and gentle proddings, and for first putting Jack Gilbert, Anne Carson, and James Wright in my hands. Having worked with both Art and Marilyn for sixteen years now, I do not think it is an overstatement to say that my poetry and my life as a poet is what it is, and will be what it is, because of these two individuals.

And to my family, especially my mother Rita Tate, my step-father Bob, my Tia Anita, and my brother Lee, I would like to say thank you for recognizing my utter lack of skill in team sports at an early age and leading me toward books. All of you have encouraged me to follow my dreams and never tried to persuade me to take up anything "practical." To my dear friend Tiggy, thank you for providing me with a healthy diet of un-literary texts that began two decades ago with the original 90210. I would also like to thank all the crew who assemble on Thursdays at the Yacht Club for helping me keep my sanity, and especially to crew member Katie B. for her help with this dissertation's introduction and prospectus.

All of the fellow poets whom I shared workshops with at the University of Tennessee have not only inspired me, but also strengthened my work with their artistry, craft, and passion. Two poets in particular, Darren Jackson and Christian Anton Gerard, helped form one of the dream workshops where grounds, figures, and Pablo Sheezbeens served as regular contributors. Our decidedly-unofficial reading group over kitchen counters not only fostered a sense of community and excellent conversation, but also fostered friendships that I know will continue until we can no longer see the page.

Of course, there is no paragraph that could begin to convey how this collection of poems owes its existence to my best f.&f., my husband, Adam Prince. We literally dove into the wreck together. When we were diving off the coast of Malaysia into the sunken bomber, and I began to panic after I lost all sense of the surface, I began to understand something I had never quite experienced before. You took my hand and calmed me down without speaking.

And it was then that I realized how another person could not only bring love and laughter, but also how a deep trust with another would give me the courage to go where I had feared to go. The subject of these poems is one of those places I would have preferred left undiscovered, and it is no coincidence that I only began to write this collection after meeting you.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts for a residency during which this manuscript was first composed. I would also like to acknowledge the publications in which the following poems, sometimes in different versions, first appeared:

“Bardo (2)” in *North American Review*; “Argument (1)” and “Thalia Chasing Grapefruit” in *Denver Quarterly*; “Little Visible Sky” in *Tar River Poetry Review*; “My Father’s Nipples,” “A Series of Feasts,” in *Prairie Schooner*; “Bardo (1)” in *Ninth Letter*; “After My Father’s Christmas Visit” in *Dos Passos Review*; “Bordering on Acceptance” and “Life is Long and Full of Action and Color” in *DLAGRAM*; “What I Learned Early On” in *Fourth River*; “It Would Be Nice to Have a Whole Complete Male” in *New South*; “Essay on Collective Paranoia” in *Kenyon Review Online*; “Famous for Leaving: Helen Re-Imagined in the Aughts” previously titled “From Salt and Light” in *Town Creek Poetry*, sections X. and XIX. of “Branches” in *Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts*. *Branches* is also the recipient of the Black River Chapbook prize to be published by Black Lawrence Press spring of 2012.

ABSTRACT

The “I” in lyric poetry has not only shifted expectations throughout time, but has been called many names including the authorial persona, the biographical self, or, in Helen Vendler’s term, the ‘fictive poetic self.’ Currently, the term “authorial ‘I,’” which denotes a first-person poem (or collection) that invites conflation between the author and speaker, such as with the Confessionals, continues to face critique as it has since the 1950s, critique toward The New York School poets and later toward the New Formalists, Language poets, and these days toward the New Thing poets who stress self as object. Furthermore, amidst the current fascination with recording private moments and distributing them to the public via Facebook, Twitter, wikis, and blogs, poetry that reveals personal details and conflates the identity between speaker and author can inadvertently be viewed as yet another commoditization of the self. Stephen Burt and other critics voice another concern that the authorial “I” is a “bourgeois illusion, an outmoded epiphenomenon” that is simply a construct of systems outside the self.

This issue regarding the authorial “I” is of particular importance to me since my dissertation is heir to Confessional poetry. My dissertation, *This We Call Many Things*, combines personal and scientific inquiries regarding evolution, specifically addresses the anatomical changes that enabled communal living within our species, as well as my father’s paranoid schizophrenia and subsequent chronic homelessness. The interdisciplinary weave of the personal with another subject in a tightly unified collection, which I term a “concept collection,” represents one strategy to subvert the authorial “I.” Post-millennial practitioners of such concept collections include C.D. Wright, Anne Carson, Louise Glück, as well as a growing number of other poets who merge the concept collection with the Confessional such as Joseph Harrington, Beth Bachmann, Karyna McGlynn, and Natasha Tretheway. The concept collection’s structure and subject matter suggests that the personal and political, the domestic and the international, and the private and public are not dichotomous subjects, but interconnected ones. This sense that all spheres are connected encouraged me to find the connection between my family’s personal story and the human race’s evolutionary story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“Not I”: Post-Millennial Confessional Poetry and the Concept Collection: A Critical Introduction

Section 1: Introduction	1
Section 2: Historical Influence of the Confessionals	4
Section 3: Analysis of Successful Post-Millennial Confessionalistic Concept Books	15
Section 4: Strategies for My Dissertation	31
Section 5: Conclusion	38

This We Call Many Things: A Collection of Poems

1.

Argument (1)	45
Spike	46
Bordering on Acceptance	47
Pig and a Bottle	48
Little Visible Sky	50
The Diagnosis: Paranoid Schizophrenia	51
Normalization of Deviance	52
Now It's a Rat on the Hut's Roof, But Before That, I Don't Know	54
Before the City Opens	55
“Life is Long and Full of Action and Color”	57
A Series of Feasts	58
Famous for Leaving: Helen Re-Imagined in the Aughts	59
Leave	60
Family: Hominidae	61

2.

Branches	63
----------	----

3.

More on What I Don't Know	82
Loss and Attainment	83
Ducks and Drakes	84
Desire	86
A Series of Feasts	87

Scaling the Fence to the Neighborhood Pool	88
Yard Meditation	89
After Fifteen Years My Wife Said <i>Thank You</i> and <i>I'm Sorry</i>	91
This We Call Many Things, One of Which is Evolution	92
The Dogma of the Ten-Minute Egg	93
“It Would Be Nice to Have a Whole Complete Male”	95
What I Learned Early On	98
Divining	100
Spike: With Interest	101

4.

Essay on Collective Paranoia	103
The Child Beggar	107
Aloof	108
Signs and Symptoms [May] Include Delusions	110
Proceeded in Death	112
My Father's Nipples	115
Unexpected Visit after Fifteen Years	117
Wanted: A Pretty Picture	118
Bardo (1)	119
Bardo (2)	120
Thalia Chasing Grapefruit	121
Argument (2)	122
Bibliography	123
Vita	127

“Not I!”: Post-Millennial Confessional Poetry and the Concept Collection:

A Critical Introduction

Section 1: Introduction

In this post-millennial age, the line between the private and the public is increasingly being tested to the extent that the public persona and its broadcasted epiphanies, activities, and confessions sometimes serve as a stand-in for private self-reflection and personal authenticity. Through multi-media outlets such as Facebook, My Space, reality shows, talk shows, Twitter, wikis, and blogs that chronicle everything from one's choices for lunch to Senate floor deliberations, personal space is increasingly public space. As cultural critic Jonah Lehrer phrased it: “You are who you pretend to be” (1). The democratization of publishing technology further serves to blur the line between private and public as cheaper recording and distribution technologies give middle and upper-income citizens the unfettered access to create, record, and distribute their creative efforts. Basic recording features like Garage Band allow anyone with a personal computer to record music without studios and sound engineers; CD Baby distributes music without record labels; and vanity presses publish books without editors. Plans for more ebooks will also affect publishing in ways that are not clear right now—especially with companies such as Amazon proposing to be both an ebook distributor and publisher.

With the technological ability and pop-cultural fascination to record private moments and distribute them to the public, poetry that reveals personal details and conflates

the identity between speaker and author must feel the effects of what could be viewed as an over-saturation of the confessional—which was during the 1950s and 1960s with Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath a political, rebellious act. It is far from that now. In this Paris-Hilton era, revealing sex tapes are used as marketing tools to launch careers whereas once they destroyed careers. So, what is the status update of post-millennial confessionalistic poetry? This type of poetry is not aligned with the school of the Confessionals, but shares a tone with the Confessionals. It reveals autobiographical details, yet will manipulate those details to serve the poem's larger purpose. It conflates speaker with author, yet also resists such conflation. It discusses the personal, yet reaches toward the universal.¹ Considering how confessionalistic poems concern themselves with both autobiography and subversions of that autobiography, one could say that confessionalistic poetry is cognitive of the risk of overexposure.

This issue is of particular importance to me since my dissertation is an heir to the confessionals and reveals personal and familial matters. My dissertation is a tightly unified manuscript that is sometimes called a project book, but I prefer the term concept book. “Concept” books, as opposed to “project” books, suggests a shared sense of history and purpose with musical concept albums that began with The Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band* in 1967. Hip-hop artists continue to use the concept album in most of their work

¹ This term “confessionalistic” and some of the descriptors are from Rachel Zucker's essay “Confessionalography: A GNAT (Grossly Non-Academic Talk) on “I” in Poetry.” The essay argues that autobiographical poetry is quite different from confessionalistic poetry, which is a term she uses to emphasize how this type of poem has shifted from the 1950s Confessional poem. She defines autobiographical poetry as that which is “often exculpatory and can be therapeutic” (2). A “confessionalistic” poem, however, includes moments of autobiography, but “reaches for the universal. It attempts to transcend the personal, the particular...because confessionalistic poetry uses the bits and elements of story in the service of a larger subjects, subjects that are not particularities of the poet's life” (2).

as well. Musical artists, like poets, use the concept album as a way to explore different themes, material, and personas in a sustained body of work. It also suggests that the next collection may be radically different. In poetry, a concept book tightly adheres to one personal subject that is often interwoven with another inter-disciplinary topic such as a political event, historical period, or genre. My concept book combines personal and scientific inquiries regarding evolution, specifically the anatomical changes that enabled, necessitated, and facilitated the concept of communal living within our species, and my father's paranoid schizophrenia and subsequent chronic homelessness. Considering the hyper-confessional climate of our era and that "Confessional" is something of a derogatory label among poets, I am interested in ways a post-millennial confessional can transcend the personal and its particulars.

This essay will discuss post-millennial confessional² poetry's place in contemporary letters, particularly with the confessionalistic concept book. This type of collection continues to rise in popularity while the authorial "I" continues to incite criticism, a correlation that suggests a relationship. The "I" in lyric poetry, often called the authorial persona, the biographical self, or as Helen Vendler calls it, the 'fictive poetic self,' has shifted expectations throughout time. In this essay, I will use the term "authorial 'I'" to denote a first-person poem or collection of poems that invite conflation between the author and speaker. As I will discuss in more detail later, the concept collection is one strategy to move authorial "I" centered poetry toward universality. The post-millennial confessional concept collections' pitfalls—and more importantly its successes—will be discussed in this essay in an effort to

² Please note that I use "post-millennial confessional" and "confessionalistic" interchangeably. Since neither term represents an established school of poetry, but is more a hybrid of schools, the terms are not capitalized.

understand how my dissertation titled “This We Call Many Things” situates itself within the larger literary landscape.

Section 2: Historical Influences of the Confessionals

M.L. Rosenthal first used the term “confessional” (but did not elaborately define it) in 1959 during a review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. What Rosenthal finds to be distinctive about *Life Studies*—and what is now tied to the Confessional school—is the conflation between poet and speaker. As Rosenthal explains, “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal” (109).³ Granted, one could argue that many poems are *ipso facto* “Confessional,” but typically the term is confined to characterize the work by Robert Lowell, specifically *Life Studies*, Anne Sexton’s four volumes, and some of Sylvia Plath’s poems including “Daddy,” “The Colossus,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Witch Burning.” Many sources will argue that Confessionalism began before *Life Studies*—which is only logical as no period or poet performs within a vacuum. A few of the significant works also regarded as Confessional include Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1955), W.D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*, which was published the

³ The significance of this review is not the direct link with Lowell to Confessionalism, but the nomenclature that represents the generalized sense of permission that poets could treat personal experience—and all aspects of personal experience including unflattering aspects—within their work.

same year as Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (1969), and many other works by Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, and Theodore Roethke.

Each of these works shares certain characteristics that later would help define the porous boundaries of this genre called Confessionalism. These works invite the reader to conflate the speaker with the poet through autobiographical detail. Furthermore, the works sometime present an unflattering portrayal of self and family. Moreover, the speaker implicates him or herself within the poem's woes by admitting to mental illness, suicidal thoughts, such as with Lowell's famous admission that "my mind's not right" in "Skunk Hour" (line 30). And finally, the poem moves beyond a sense of propriety, and reveals shameful, personal confidences that are otherwise considered impolitic or impolite.

Confessional poems owe much of their existence to Romanticism and its personal epics that include Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection Ode," and what Abrams terms "The Greater Romantic Lyric" and "crisis autobiography" as represented by Keats's odes and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. All of these works represent a larger shift within poetic sensibilities. As M.H. Abrams establishes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the Romantic poets rejected the more pragmatic poetry of their predecessors (meaning poetry whose intent was to teach, unify, persuade, or solidify communal beliefs) and emphasized a more expressivist lyric. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams details the criteria of composing from an expressive theory:

1. It is "the internal made external...operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of poet's perceptions, thought, and feelings" (22).
2. The "poet's own mind" is the "primary source and subject matter of a poem" (22).

3. The cause of poetry is a desire for the poet to express. “The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities imitated; nor as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause—the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the ‘creative’ imagination, which, like God the creator, has its internal source of motion” (22).

All these traits typify much of Romantic writing and contemporary writing as well. One can readily see how the Romantics’ insistence on the poet’s mind for his material—hence the Romantics’ emphasis on imagination, the primitive, and consequently the sublime and fears of self-annihilation—influenced Lowell, Plath, and Sexton. The Romantics, however, were not Confessional. Yes, the Romantics articulated their feelings, yet the particulars of those feelings remain shrouded in dream visions, imagined worlds of Albion, and eolian harps.

While the details of the Romantics’ lives might have been shrouded through opium-induced dreams, ruminations on Grecian urns, and vistas from Mont Blanc, some details invite the reader to conflate the speaker with the poet similar to the Confessionals’ details and many contemporary poets’ details. For example, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth creates one of our first examples of an autobiographical poetic persona and invites the link between self and speaker. Wordsworth directly links himself to the speaker in an epic achievement. He provides enough factual biographical information that readers would know to be true like the references to his mother’s and father’s deaths, the drowned man, and naming geographical locations where he resided such as Windermere. Therefore, when he shares other experiences that no reader could know for sure were true or not, they seem true in the context of the poem. For example, consider the following lines: “Was it for this that I, a four

year's child, / A naked Boy, among the silent pools / made one long bathing of a summer's day?" (I, 17-19). After reading those lines, the reader senses Wordsworth is providing an actual memory despite the fact this memory occurred at age four and is unreliable. But because of the clear autobiographical connections throughout the poem, undocumented memories similar to this one become documented personal history. The lyrical "I" becomes a personal, autobiographical "I" speaking directly to one other person—the reader—creating a sense of the lyric as an "I" to "I."

Also, part of this sense of conflation relates to what critic Lee Erickson coined the "egoism of authorship." He explains that writers during the Romantic period began to understand the marketplace and one's place in it. More importantly, the author began to understand that he could manipulate this marketplace through an assertion of self. Wordsworth's sheer doggedness in negotiations with his publisher resulted in him receiving two-thirds of the pay for one collection. Writers cultivated readers' tastes to fit their writing styles (and not the other way around) through writing prefaces to their works that explained their aesthetics as with the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*. Charlotte Smith used personal details from her unhappy marriage to lure readers into her sonnet sequences. All of these are examples of how the Romantics began to understand that they could create their readership, sometimes through revealing personal material and sometimes through revealing their authorial intentions. Today, a marketer would call this finding one's niche, but during the Romantic period it represented a shift in thinking regarding the representation of the self and representation of poet—and the conflation between the two.

Granted, talking about the Romantics as a unified school is fraught with overgeneralizations. First of all, there are two generations of Romantics, those born in the

early 1770s (Wordsworth in 1770, Coleridge in 1772, and Southey in 1774) and those born around 1790 (Byron in 1788, Shelley in 1792, and Keats in 1795). Blake is in his own category of 1757. And each of these generations viewed the world differently, especially because of massive changes before and after the French Revolution and industrialism. Furthermore, the Romantics' views are just simply that: viewpoints, not truths. As one critic aptly phrased it: "The Romantic assumption that the mind creates its world neglects the extent to which the converse is true" (Dawson 71).

Other notable influences on the Confessional poets are the French poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Baudelaire in particular pushed on the parameters of poetry's subjects by embracing vice and sensual pleasures such as drink and sex—all of which resulted in a few of his poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* to be censored. Walt Whitman, too, in particular his works *Song of Myself* and *Calamus*, brought corporeal subjects into the American poem and invited conflation between persona and poet. Modernism also greatly influenced the Confessionals through Eliot's and Pound's use of polyphonies, Williams's direct everyday American speech, and Yeats's evocation of dramatic emotion. The nineteenth century gave the Confessionals a tendency towards dominance of personalism, consciousness-building, and self-discovery, yet the modernists also contributed other key elements such as a tendency towards what many critics note as masking techniques and objectifications. It would be a mistake, however, to think of the Confessionals' lineage to begin with the Romantics and then to experience a straight line of influence to 1959. As Steven K. Hoffman eloquently summarizes:

Despite the radical personalism of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and virtually the entire Whitman canon, neither poet approaches the minute

autobiographical particularity of the Confessionals, the almost numbing rehearsal of family conflict, severe emotional imbalance, and the difficulties in everyday living; neither so consistently or in such copious detail affords us entry into the marriage bed, the asylum, or the detoxification ward. (689-690)

What were a couple of other factors then to explain for a reader's entry to the Confessionals' beds, asylums, and detoxification wards? One cannot ignore the cultural climate at the time of the Confessionals, which was one of increasing bifurcation between public values and private values. In the influential essay by Delmore Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," he explains how the political situation from the Cold War to Vietnam affected the poetical rise of Confessional poetry:

It became increasingly impossible for the poet to write about the lives of other men; for not only was he removed from their lives, but above all, the culture and the sensibility which made him a poet could not be employed when the proposed subject was the lives of human beings in whom culture and sensibility had no organic function.... Since the only life available to the poet as a man of culture has been the cultivation of his own sensibility, that is the only subject available to him. (10-11)

What is often forgotten when discussing Confessional poetry is how it began as a political act. The poetry was revelatory, gaining ground for what could be considered worthy subjects in contemporary letters. Anne Sexton's work alone exemplifies how "female" topics regarding abortion, menstruation, and domestic duties became fashionable after her. "In Celebration of My Uterus" is one of many examples that juxtapose assertiveness ("Sweet weight, / in celebration of the woman I am") with hard realism ("one is wiping the ass of her

child”). As one reviewer phrased it in 1959: “They have made a conquest: what they have won is a major expansion of the territory of poetry” (Thompson 482).

This tidy history, however, undercuts the complexity of the situation. After the publication of *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell returned to his poetic voice before that collection, a voice marked by elevated diction, heavy alliterations, and received forms. With Plath, no one can deny that for all of her poems’ “confessions,” the poems also do fictionalize as in “Daddy” with references to her father being a Nazi and she a Jew. These details are part of a larger myth that she cultivated for herself to establish a type of historical landscape in her work. And much has been written on how Sexton confessed to more than what actually happened to her, specifically regarding the accusations of sexual molestation by her father. Sexton herself has stated in many interviews that she was not interested in confession, yet she also acknowledges how she could be “deeply personal, but often I’m not being personal about myself” (431). Perhaps these autobiographical inconsistencies within Plath’s and Sexton’s work epitomize the key criteria to a true Confessional work: how the subjects are depicted distinguishes this genre more so than the subjects themselves.

What is certain about the Confessionals is that their heirs like Sharon Olds, Marie Howe, Galway Kinnell, and many others dominated the American poetic landscape in the late 20th century. The dominance of confessionalistic poetry incited criticism for its overuse or poorly executed use. Robert Bly, for instance, praised Latin American poet Antonio Machado for “emphasis on the suffering of others rather than his own.” Others also began to voice concerns regarding the de-politicized nature of Confessional poetry that treated admissions not so much as scared confessions but as assured avenues to poetic authenticity

(and publication). In John Gery's important review of Robert Hass's *Praise* in 1981, Gery looks at how the Confessionals bred what he terms "the poetry of nostalgia:"

Since the work of Snodgrass and Lowell in the fifties, the education of a poet has involved meditation as much on the quirks of his own past as on the relationship of his experience to language. The results are volumes of poems about evasive fathers, undulant mothers, childhood fantasies, books read beneath the covers at age thirteen, maxims muttered on grandmothers' back porches on late summer evenings, crazy aunts all of whom have fled to Arizona, and silent uncles all of whom have died in "the war." (6)

As Gery catalogs these experiences, the list increasingly mocks the poetry that reveals family secrets and suggests that what some poets present as personal, revelatory, and evocative are stale caricatures of what's been done before. What's worse is that the ironic distance, if I may take a phrase from dramatic monologue discussions, between the speaker and the reader is that the reader knows how these experiences are not unique, yet the poet presents them as such. Gery does not assert this argument directly, but instead takes issue with the fact that this subject matter "encourages us to take refuge in the dark pleasantness of its own isolated longings" (6). In other words, the dark memories elicit few complications for the poet's present or future. Hass, he argues, does cultivate uneasiness with nostalgia—a cultivation that is key in successful contemporary books that lean toward the Confessional. This uneasiness can manifest itself in a variety of ways: juxtapositions of opposing tones, questioning of the self and memory, and interplay between the particular and the general—all of which I will discuss in detail later.

Currently, the clearest movement against confessionalism is the New Thing as one tenet of this group is self-as-object rather than self-as-subject. Perhaps the two most well known reactions against confessionalism in the 70s and 80s are embodied in Language poetry and New Formalism, two schools who present entirely different antidotes to cure the same woe. Formalists such as Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Richard Howard, and James Merrill investigate how received form could temper the I-gone-amuck and emphasize self-preservation and effacement. Language poets such as Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein question the actual existence of an authorial “I” and investigate how the self and experience are constructs that are part of larger, signifying systems. Language itself is part of a constructed system, words being “bottomless pits” as Hejinian calls it. In turn, language becomes both the war and the weapon, so that language is foregrounded to reveal its constructs, duplicities, and commercialization.

In general, however, the overuse of the Confessional manifests itself more in mistrust than in movements. Some critics have gone so far as to say the authorial “I” is dead, but the smug presence of the authorial “I” requires no response. To catalog all that has been deemed dead (poetry itself, for instance) would be far too lengthy and problematic. Perhaps this is simply an issue of rhetoric, for to say the authorial “I” is problematic and overused is, well, not catchy. But that is more the truth of the matter. The authorial “I” that is being challenged is the authorial “I” that purports to convey an actual self, an actual experience, and/or an actual transcendence or truth. These are all qualities that William Wordsworth cultivated in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800—which is exactly why challenging some of these ideas is both timely and overdue.

Stephen Burt aptly articulates one argument against the authorial “I” in a recent review titled “Our Poems, Ourselves: Does Autobiography Make Good Poetry?” In this particular essay, Burt clarifies that the authorial “I” he questions is that which presents a speaker who invites supposition that speaker and writer are one and the same by including autobiographical details that can be corroborated or assumed true. He presents the challenge to the lyrical mode by asking:

But what if such selves are a bourgeois illusion, an outmoded epiphenomenon, produced by ideas in which we should no longer believe? So much of what seems like personal experience arises from systems far larger (the English language, the global economy) or smaller (a cluster of neurons) than persons can be; so much of what seems like artistic expression may also be traced to systems of convention. Perhaps poets—whose art from, more than others, appears tied to the history of individualism—should find ways to deny, or avoid, the hoary pretense that my words, my emotions, arise from causes within me, uniquely mine. (66)

For purposes of argumentation, let’s assume that the idea of individuality is outmoded, that personal experience is part of a larger construct. In fact, I would say that is true and something that contact zone theory in the field of composition has been hinting at for the past thirty years. Our ideas, our sense of selves, our experiences and the reflection of those experiences are informed, even manipulated by, representation and misrepresentations of experience through an array of media, including the shape-shifter known as memory.

What concerns me, however, are a couple of logical fallacies, one being the suggestion that systems of conventions are inherently negative, which is a broad-stroke

generalization. The other is the stance that to “deny” or “avoid” autobiographical material results in the author sidestepping systems of convention. It appears to me that one cannot avoid these systems—and trading one out for the other is simply that: trading one out for another. Finally, one poem is not representative of all of a poet’s poems. No poet feels required to present the same persona—however closely aligned with one’s authorial persona—from poem to poem. Yusef Komunyakaa exemplifies how a poet can conflate the authorial “I” in some works like in *Dien Cai Dau*, but not do so in others like *Thieves of Paradise*.

As I see it, the tiresome and disingenuous quality of the authorial “I” is one of assumption: an assumed interest from the reader in the personal; an assumed position that the personal is universal and revelatory—because it was once with the Confessionals; an assumed aura that the poet, simply by the act of being a poet, has something wise and worthwhile to say; an assumed innocence that places the poet in the position of victim far more than perpetrator in Confessional poems; and an assumed reprieve that since the poet articulates the woes of the world, that the articulation is sufficient, is informative, and is a stand-in for other action—all of which are assumptions that reveal the egotism of the authorial “I.” Wordsworth articulated quite clearly the sense that somehow poets were better than others in certain areas: “He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, enbued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 206). These are all problematic and even sentimental renderings of the poetic persona. So, the question remains: considering the over-saturation

of the authorial “I,” what are some strategies a poet can employ if he/she wants to discuss personal experiences?

Section 3: Analysis of Successful Post-Millennial Confessionalistic Concept Books

The answer is, of course, that there are multiple ways—from redefining what is experience to redefining what is the authorial “I.” Granted, many contemporary lyrics—and perhaps the majority of contemporary lyrics—mediate their subjects through the authorial lens and often do so successfully. Some of our best practitioners of this type of poem who do not seek to subvert the authorial “I” but who embrace its literary traditions include Lucille Clifton, Beth Ann Fennelly, Tony Hoagland, Charles Wright, James Wright, and Robert Wrigley. This essay’s concern, however, is to analyze those works that seek an alternative to the authorial “I.” One strategy is to avoid first-person autobiographical perspectives as we see with the increasing popularity on persona poems. The strategy I would like to consider relates to my dissertation and concerns the recent proliferation of concept collections in this era of authorial mistrust. The pre-millennial concept book that perhaps spearheaded these books is Louise Glück’s *Meadowlands* (1996) that weaves the dissolution of a contemporary marriage with *The Odyssey*. Some recent post-millennial confessional concept books include: *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl: Poems* (2008) by Karyna McGlynn, *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge* (2008) by Paul Guest, *Some Ether* (2000) by Nick Flynn, and *Late Wife* (2005) by Claudia Emerson. All of these books are worthy of analysis, but the three that I will examine represent different degrees of distancing the self from the Confessional while at the same time delivering a personal narrative that is

difficult to reveal: Natasha Tretheway's *Native Guard* (2006), Beth Bachmann's *Temper* (2009), and Joseph Harrington's *Things Come On* (2011). To clarify, the poets I am discussing are not ones that I would label as Confessional. The intent is to analyze how poets treat confessionalistic material—specifically confessionalistic material that is placed within the larger context of a concept collection.

How is the authorial “I” downplayed and subverted within these three books? What are their strategies to move beyond the narcissistic? To universalize rather than particularize personal experience? The answer is a combination of a few of the following strategies: an inter-disciplinary weave between the personal with another subject such as a specific historical period, a specific political event (the Iraq War, for example), or a specific literary genre other than poetry; a creation of a “concept collection” meaning a tightly unified grouping of poems that often features the aforementioned inter-disciplinary subject; an intense focus on form—be it using received form or creating forms specific to the collection's concept; an undercutting of “I” through direct omission of the “I” or questioning the “I;” a polyvocalic concern to include either multiple speakers, multiple points of view, and/or explicit questioning of the speaker; and finally, an heightened sense of language.

In the above list, the decision to unite a collection through a concept, and specifically an inter-disciplinary subject, is the most critical of choices. It speaks to the popularity of the memoir and is an attempt to deliver, through poetry, a more complicated and developed personal story than what one poem can often render. It speaks to a desire for depth in an age of news blips, blog posts, and status updates. It can also speak to a concern of appearing “simply autobiographical” or “too confessional.” Karyna McGlynn, author of *I Have to Go*

Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl and often associated with the New-Confessionals (which is again, a label no one wants), explains how “confessional has become a dirty word—synonymous with unrestrained adolescent angst. True, restraint sometimes loses out in the end, but that’s where catharsis happens, that sublime intimacy between writer and reader. Isn’t that one of the delights that keeps us coming back to poetry?” (2). The sense of intimacy between writer and reader, the sense of catharsis between writer and subject, and the sense of witness that a reader receives believing that a poet has experienced such catharsis are all delights. Still, the issue of unrestraint remains. Often, the lack of restraint takes form in a lack of perspective or a lack of craft.

The concept book is one way to impose perspective, craft, and restraint on topics that tend toward the Confessional. Adding another subject to the personal, which is the key method with a concept book, forces the writer to shift the authorial “I” to the background in some pieces. Also, the addition of another subject—which is often a shared subject between writer and reader such as history in Tretheway’s book or evolution in mine—reminds both the writer and reader that the personal tale is simply one tale of many. There is a larger story at work than the personal one. All of these approaches reassure the reader that the writer is aware a straightforward autobiographical poem offers too narrow of a lens with which to analyze the subject. And it is this sense of analysis that is key. The lyric, at its core, is one of dialectical reasoning and analysis. This is what Wordsworth implied in that overlooked step-sister second part of his definition of good poetry: “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: *but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were*

*never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply*⁴ (204).

Natasha Tretheway's *Native Guard*, which received the Pulitzer in 2006, exemplifies strategies now increasingly employed in the post-millennial confessional book—strategies that for the most part seek to downplay the authorial “I” in an effort to achieve universality. One, this book maintains a conceptual coherence as all poems relate to the interlinked subjects of her mother's death, her complicated relationship with the South, her bi-racial heritage, and the experiences of the Native Guard, which is one of the first black regiments in the Civil War. The emphasis on history within the collection represents a decidedly post-millennial confessional strategy that reflects the multi-media hyper-linked epoch that we live in. To imagine this collection without the added developmental layer of the Civil War is to imagine a collection that presents less conflict. The concept in this collection reminds readers how one's personal history is a product of our larger history. In Tretheway's concept collection, the soldiers of the black regiment must grapple with feelings of alienation and exclusion within a community—the army—that supposedly embraces them. In many ways, Tretheway's own childhood a century later mimics that of invited outsider. The concept collection enables Tretheway to bring together these diverse subjects and downplay the emphasis on Tretheway herself. Through the juxtaposition of such diverse subjects within one body of work, readers grasp the connections. Also, close attention to form harnesses what could be private wonderings gone amuck. Received forms such as pantoums, ghazals, sonnet sequences, blues poems, and more are deftly utilized. As one reviewer explains: “By setting the jewel of rage in a formal ring, she suffuses and subsumes it, coloring many of the

⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

poems here with pathos” (Gilewicz 1). As Tretheway writes on unruly and all-encompassing subjects such as miscegenation and racism, received forms help counter such vastness and provide shape.

Randall Jarrell explains in his essay, “Levels and Opposites,” that a successful poet “imposes unity on his variety, form on his matter, just as a mind imposes order on the universe” (698). This notion that dialectical reasoning and form can be combined, and ought to be combined, is a notion that evolved from the sonnet’s birth and dominates much of contemporary poetry—including the poems in *Native Guard*. A simple analysis of a problem does not result in a good poem. As Jarrell notes, “It is the easiest thing in the world for the poet to take one subject, to say a few homogenous closely related things about it, and to end with a beautifully unified poem” (698). Simply put, unity and clarity are not enough to be effective in a poem. According to Jarrell, it is the *dis-unifying* forces in the poem that create the necessary tension, surprise, and originality to grab the reader: “The organization of a good poem, so full of strain and tension, is obtained not merely by intensifying the forced working toward a simple unit, but by intensifying the opposing forces as well” (699). In fact, the post-millennial confessional poems that fail to rise from their de-politicized state fail because of this lack of dis-unifying forces. In this collection, dis-unity coalesces in using received form to discuss wide-ranging topics. Also, dis-unity engages with the historical net that Tretheway casts, which functions against her personal story. The sense that history is layered—both in temporal, objective, and subjective senses—provides much of the book’s intrigue. The notes in the back of the book provide a history lesson, and the poems themselves are influenced by photographs and historical archives. For example, “Scenes

from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” are lyrical interpretations of the pictures she saw. Also, “Native Guard” uses journal entries to form a polyvocalic weave to the collection.

This polyvocalic strategy is successful among many post-millennial confessional books. The collection employs more than one persona in order to provide reach, contrast, and a sense of the interconnectivity between the centuries. More than a third of the collection (the entire second section) is from the point of view of soldiers in the Native Guard. “O how history intersects—my own” begins one poem from this section. The long “o” sound of “O” and “own” suggest a calling out to a self divided from one’s community, one’s nation—and one’s self. It is a vowel sound connected to the sound of a lone wolf in the night. The impact of this line is augmented by the poem that precedes it where the soldier, once a slave, uses a Confederate soldier’s journal to write in, his thoughts intersecting and covering up another man’s life. This soldier’s literal act serves to figuratively efface the first-person persona in the other two-thirds of the book. In a sense, the polyvocalic impulse reflects the multi-media experiences of our time. Perhaps the trend toward docu-poetry as seen with Brenda Hillman, C.D. Wright, and Natasha Tretheway, is a way to supplant figures with form, subjective image with objective image, and personal with universal in an attempt to encompass the multiple voices that speak to us and for us.

Despite the way in which *Native Guard* attempts to circumvent the inherited problems, such as solipsism or sentimentalism, with the authorial “I,” it does not succeed in overcoming all of them. Confessional poets’ insistence on admitting their own failings or derangement is not only a characteristic that nudges this book away from the Confessional stamp, but it is also the book’s fault. The speaker—Natasha Tretheway—never quite gets her own hands dirty but discusses all of the subjects from the vantage point of “I am wise,

Dear Reader. Let me teach you.” Where are the moments of self-crisis? Where is the sense of complicity? Where are emotions that such experienced racism would warrant like anger, hatred, even bigotry itself? Furthermore, the book’s conflict is unclear. Sadness exists here, but sadness is not a conflict but a condition. The poem that reaches toward the speaker admitting a failing is “Southern History.” In this poem, Tretheway, as a girl in elementary school, did not correct the history teacher’s statement that *Gone with the Wind* was “a true account of how things were back then” (line 11). This moment of supposed crisis is quickly absolved because one, this is a child’s act, and two, authorial issues would dictate that the child not contradict the teacher. The pantoum “Incident,” which is about the KKK burning a cross in Tretheway’s yard, repeats a nagging undertone of this book: “Nothing really happened. / By morning all the flames had dimmed. / We tell the story every year” (lines 18-20). Granted, one could argue that a lot did happen: a child learned of hate. And one could argue that as a whole the collection explores psychological exile. Yet, the poem itself, like the speaker in these poems, refuses to engage with anything that does not present her as reasonable or wise. And unfortunately, that is a characteristic of the overused authorial “I” which renders a light feel to this book despite its weighty topics.

One of the more recent concept collections that has garnered much attention is the debut book by Beth Bachmann titled *Temper* which was the 2008 AWP selection for the Donald Hall Prize in Poetry and a later recipient of the Kingsley Tufts Award. The poems in this collection chronicle her sister’s murder and its aftermath. This type of concept collection speaks to the growing popularity of memoir, yet a poetry concept collection will often tell a story through image, lyrical ruminations, and elision. In other words, it is decidedly a poetry book. In many senses, Bachmann’s collection owes its existence to the Confessional poets.

One, the book not only delves into mankind's dark nature that allows us to murder our own, but the book also discloses that the father is a prime suspect in the murder. Two, the book explicitly encourages the reader to conflate speaker with poet through autobiographical details as with the dedication: "for my sister, J.B. 1975-1993." Furthermore, the book does not offer the layering of an outside subject, but instead focuses on only the family in a similar manner to Lowell's *Life Studies*. While the collection may be a family tell-all, it is, however, not a poet tell-all—and this is one of the distinctive, and I would say successful, strategies of the book. It appears to offer an intimate story with an open hand, but it actually presents the story with a clenched fist. The poet neither reveals personal confidences beyond the story's scope, nor does she allude to mental instability or inconsolable grief—which Lowell, Plath, or Sexton would have done. In fact, the poet operates with a reasonable, detached, detective-like objectivity and presents the intimate story with restraint. And it is this restraint that surprises, adds tension, and ultimately subverts the authorial "I."

The primary strategy to reduce the first-person solipsism is to reduce the appearance—physically and figuratively—of the authorial "I" from the collection. Seldom does Bachmann situate herself in the scene as the protagonist from which all action flows. In fact, seldom does the subjective pronoun "I" enter the poem. Each of the three sections utilizes the subjective pronoun a little differently, so it is best to discuss its use within the context of each section. The first section establishes facts readers need to understand the collection as a whole. We learn the daughter is missing; we hear of the search which includes prank confession calls, line-ups, reporters eating turkey sandwiches in the house, etc. As these events are being narrated in over-heated trailers and police stations, another eye can see the crime-scene field and narrates what is happening to the decomposing body. For

example, while the family sleeps in “Sorrowful Mystery,” an “opossum’s tongue grazes [the woman’s] lip, / brushes the soft hair on her neck” (lines 3-4).

In this section, ten out of nineteen poems use first-person somehow—but it is the “somehow” that provides complexity and subverts the traditional confessionalistic first-person point of view. Out of the ten poems that use first-person, four poems only use the possessive pronoun (my, our) rather than the subjective pronoun (I, we). Second, Bachman will often reserve the subjective pronoun for the end of the poem, presenting the majority of the poem in a third-person omniscient voice as she does in the twelve-line poem, “Setting,” where the subjective “I” enters the poem in the eleventh line. Third, Bachmann often uses the “I” as an “eye,” meaning she will use this point of view to move more like a camera that describes a scene Bachmann herself never saw as in the poem, “Heaven,” which describes “a teenage girl half-naked / in the grass” (lines 1-2). Finally, Bachmann invites the reader to question her authority when “I” is used as in the poem “First Mystery of My Father”: “Yes, my father wanted to become a priest / Then met my mother, the story goes. I say / This because it is my nature to deceive you” (lines 1-3). All in all, out of the ten poems that use first-person point of view, only three do so with a direct, first-person voice. This section is the most nakedly revealing in its giving of family details, but the multiple strategies to remove the presence of the “I” universalizes the tale so the reader shares in feelings of confusion, violence, and fear.

The second section is more imagistic than the first section. These poems do not tell a story, but describe images to convey the emotion of the story. The “I” in all of these poems comes off as eerie when it does tentatively approach, more like a call from the other side—whatever that side may be. Rarely, though, does the subjective “I” approach: only two times

in fifteen poems. When the poems are not told from a camera-like eye, the poems employ the first-person plural point of view and hold off on the “I” until the ending. To be clear, however, whenever the poems are presented in third-person, the perspective belongs to a woman whose sister was murdered.

The third section is perhaps the most violent, including poems that discuss how one can kill (“a blow to the back of the ear”), how one lugs a dead body from a crime scene (“a hundred pounds over a shoulder / can collapse grass”), how a body decomposes (“usually a face is destroyed gradually / by something typical—age or light” and in general “how the weak gain dominance through leverage.” Granted, this last section would be the one for answers—who did it?—but no such answer exists. Instead, the violent imagery is ratcheted up as the teller of this tale admits to a certain type of blindness—the blindness of perspective. The poem titled “Betrayal” near the book’s end is not only one of the few with a first-person “I” from the beginning, but it also admits to the “I”’s limitations. “If I stand dead center between two men and aim / a finger at each, / my body is square with the ground” the poem opens, giving a scene where the speaker is pointing at two men, alluding to how murder cases need to pin down the perpetrator (lines 1-3). Yet, the poem then admits if one man steps back, “the second appears closer / although he has not moved. / If I turn toward him, / I can no longer follow the path of the other man / slipping behind the hill” (lines 4-7). With this admission, Bachmann lets us know that any naming of suspect results in the inability to see another suspect. Out of these fifteen poems, four of them evoke second person, but overall this section includes the most first-person poems that use the straight-forward subjective “I” pronoun. To have these poems be situated within a

section that invites discussions of perspective's faults is not a coincidence, but another strategy to cast a shadow and complexity to the first-person narration.

Other than a diminished spotlight on the “I,” the concern with form—specifically lyrical repetition—highlights the craft of this collection. Considering the book’s subject matter constantly fights with the boundaries given (life/death; facts/mystery; grief/solace), lyrical repetition complements the emotional concerns of the poem—or as Pound puts it, “form follows content.” On first read, one barely notices the intense repetition, but simply feels caught in a worry-loop: Where is she? Where is she? Where is she...? One poem titled “Last Call” is an example of this lyrical repetition that displays Bachmann’s craft and restraint. The obvious repetition is the refrain *come get me*—chilling because of the change in meaning it takes from beginning to end. The first use is a daughter not asking, but demanding Dad to “come get me.” By the end, it has turned into a plea—and avoids being overly dramatic because it is actually the last words the father hears. That repetition is the easy one to latch onto, but more is going on. Bachmann repeats phrases and words from stanza to stanza—similar to the ways in which a pantoum operates. Below I have put in bold how each stanza repeats phrases in a specific pattern; stanzas one and two are united, three and four, and so on:

Come get me. **A father in his nightshirt**, a daughter on the end of the line
calling for a **pickup**.

A father in his nightshirt, in his stickshift, switches gears; the **pickup**
pulls up to the train station.

His stick shift switches gears. **She's not there;** he pulls up to the train station
bar, the cigarette machine, pay phone.

She's not there; he drops change at the **bar, the cigarette machine,**
payphone.

In the freight yard, a body.... (lines 1-8)

There is even more repetition beyond stanzas numbered 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6; repetition also occurs within the stanzas numbered 6-1, 2-3, 4-5. All these stanzas are adjacent, too, which creates an even greater sense of obsession—and terror in the sense of being caught in something that cannot be escaped.

I am highlighting this repetition to emphasize how much is being repeated, yet when one reads the poem, it feels seamless and even conversational. What's more, this pattern is not simply a pattern, but one that reinforces how this poem is about questions instead of closure. Finally, the lyricism alone of the language—compressed, taut, imaginative—transcends the boundaries of many flaccid Confessional knock-off poems. Invented compound-nouns and compound-adjectives abound here like “stone-hole,” “blood-speckle,” and “spot-celled,” and there are other phrases that one intuits before comprehension can render explicit such as “brood of blue” and alliterative strands like “where pale strips of bark peel back and burn” (“Woodpile,” line 10). No elegy, or perhaps I should say no American elegy, operates without a sense of hope. The hope may seem far buried here, but the hopefulness is found in the attempt to understand, in the attempt to communicate, and in the belief—reinforced with the repetition—that answers or consolation will come if one keeps trying.

The most inventive of the post-millennial confessional concept collections that I will examine here is Joseph Harrington's *Things Come On: An Amneoir*, soon to be released by Wesleyan Press in April of 2011. When I first read the jacket that explains this book's concept, which is a combination of memoir and amnesia reflecting on the poet's mother's breast cancer and the Watergate scandal, I have to admit I thought, "Gimmicky." With concerns regarding over saturation of the lyrical "I," this book seemed to be a logical extension of a poet reaching too far outside of the self to legitimize the self. What's more, the jacket copy posits so much of Language poetry's tenets in such often used phrases that these philosophies—once posed to resist mainstream Confessional poetry—sound frayed and worn—almost as if Language poetry is now very much part of a system that purports to critique systems. Phrases such as how the book "refuses to become part of the overarching system," "shows how the language of illness and political cover-up resonate with one another," and "is broken and sutured hybrid of forms, combining poetry, prose, narration, primary documents, dramatic dialogue, and pictures" all are widely disseminated positions—which may have a lot of value, to be sure. But they are becoming paradoxical positions considering that this type of poetry dissects language's manipulation, and lately the positions are so widely circulated that they read like something akin to slogans. All of this calls to mind Joel Brouwer's recent quip in *Poetry* magazine that "plenty of poets are eager to inform you that knowledge is impossible, identity is a construct, etc., but have you noticed how paradoxically self-assured these poets can be?" (429).

It became immediately clear, however, on reading the collection that this book exemplifies how the post-millennial confessional concept book can best reveal the personal narrative through subverting the personal narrative. Immediately from the epigraphs one

sees the two arguments for and against Confessional poetry. “The world is everything that happens to me” by Jean-Michel Espitalier asserts that personal concerns are universal concerns. Yet, directly after this epigraph, and placed last as if this epigraph has the final say is: “I prefer to say: I know that I am a human being, and I know that I have not understood the system” by Søren Kierkegaard. Instead of aligning the text with either epigraph, the text aligns itself with both, resulting in an intellectual yet also empathetic experience. Clearly present here is the conceptualized inter-disciplinary weave between the personal with another subject, which is the historical Watergate scandal; an undercutting of the “I” through direct omission of the “I” and through a polyvocalic focus that includes multiple speakers and multiple points of view; and finally, a heightened sense of language.

The polyvocalic nature of this text creates deeply resonating juxtapositions that embody the full conflict and contradiction regarding our unsuccessful attempts to survive. The traditional definition of polyvocalic refers to the use of multiple voices in a work, and this book certainly does include other voices—in fact, directly quotes—from the author’s mother, father, medical doctors, and a spate of political figures such as Nixon and his aides. I would argue, however, that the polyvocalic nature of this text is represented not only by the multiple voices, but from the multiple types of documents that embody voices as well. The documents present messages, biases, manipulations of meaning and sense, and convey arguments not only in what they present but also in the presentation of themselves. For example, early in the work is a copy of an index-sized card that charts all of the mother’s sizes down to her ring, glove, and girdle. The card is carefully filled in to help others buy for her and to help herself buy fabric to make her clothes. The penciled, faint writing suggests an agreeable, meticulous woman who follows the rules. What’s more, the existence of such a

card connotes a time when a list of twenty sizes presented an all-encompassing view of a woman. I cannot imagine the printed and copied existence of such a card today. Another striking polyvocalic section arrives early in the book with a black and white detailed drawing of a woman, face covered, undergoing a mastectomy—an operation discussed earlier in the book as one of routine insensitivity from the patriarchal medical staff. A woman would go in for “treatment,” to put it mildly, and would not know, nor have a say, if she would awake with one or two breasts. To imagine a woman having no say in such a decision and then to see the brutality of the cut reaching all the way into the upper-third of the arm is upsetting. Furthermore, the disregard for the female experience is underscored by what directly follows this picture: namely transcriptions of Nixon complaining about the difficulty of his self-created problem in terms of death, survival, and divine intervention:

Nixon: It’s almost a miracle that I’ve survived this, you know. ‘Cause

I came out of this year ‘72 terribly tired.

Rosemary Woods: I don’t know how you’ve survived it.

Nixon: And then to have this brutal assault, brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal
assault—day after day after day after day—no let up. (14)

The juxtapositions do much of the work, allowing for the reader to intuit the connections and the disconnections. In fact, this book reads like the model for what Brenda Hillman discusses in “Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems.” In this lecture, she discusses how one can approach “difficult” poetry by understanding what “difficult” poetry offers: “an ability to think through emotion on many levels—literal, abstract, concrete, metaphysical, figurative” and an awareness of “how particular and odd everything is, especially in moments of compressed though captured time” (3). This sense of

compressed time and its weaknesses is poignantly displayed through personal testimony of the father who muddles timelines, emphasizes the trivial, and downplays the significant, as when he describes learning about his wife's breast cancer and frames it all in terms of receiving and fighting against a speeding ticket (6). Another example of the excellent use of juxtaposition concerns a conversation between father and poet about whether the mother cried. The father says no, that she would "get frustrated" but that "would pass" (26). This conversation is then followed by a doctor talking about how "in order to keep [family and friends] from falling apart, the woman tries to keep her chin up and have a smile plastered on her face" (26). All of this is juxtaposed once again against another's doctor's opinion that "the President did not seem to understand the implications of what was going on" (26). What follows is more conversation between the father and poet on how the mother's two sisters had died of cancer. Finally, the page ends with the mother's once again painfully chilling cheerfulness: "June 20—Saw Dr. Fleming. All OK. Increase medication to 3 a day" (26). It is exactly what is not said between these passages that renders such complex and multiple meanings.

What is also being omitted in many of these poems is the use of first-person to tell a personal story, which is one of the many strategies used to undercut the authorial "I." Like Bachmann's book, this one is told from the perspective of the poet, but not often in first-person. Harrington further subverts the authorial "I" through the author's own admission of fallibility. He does so immediately with the title and early in the collection where the dates of his mother's cancer are intentionally confused to the point of error. Another strategy to undercut the "I" is to privilege the reader in making meaning—which is a fundamental tenet of Language poetry. Granted, many poems other than the mawkish Hallmark-style or

doggerel do not simply give readers meaning, but rather have the reader intuit meaning through layers of particulars: tone, image, specifics, etc. Still, Language poetry makes the claim to privilege reader as participant. The poem “Table. The Desperate Making of Lists” brilliantly involves the reader in that it quotes what appears to be the outside reader’s report of this book. In this case, the reader’s report, if that is what it is, undercuts the “I” and presents the opposing case to a book structured like this: “The documentary materials . . . seem to function only as distancing devices, a strategy to escape the overwhelming pathos of the personal story . . . (19). Yes, the documents may serve to distance writer from subject to object, but what’s interesting is what the documents add by doing so.

Finally, the heightened sense of language here comes from not stunning readers with fresh images and descriptions but by creating frustrating displays of droll documentese: “By law we are required to maintain records for 10 years. We have destroyed all records prior to 1980. If you have questions, please contact me...” (11). In fact, most of the passages are as straight-forward as an academic essay. But it is the inclusion of multiple *types* of language that make this book startling. *Things Come On* illustrates the multiple options available to poets to pursue personal experience and unity among disunity, and in fact *through* the medium of disunity and its means of juxtaposition, collage, and subversion.

Section 4: Strategies for My Dissertation

The result of this analysis of post-millennial confessional concept collections is that I understand the risks of undertaking a poetry book that reveals material that could be condemned as simply “too personal.” As I began working on the collection—at a time when

I did not understand that the collection was going to be a collection—I was aware of the over-saturation of the lyrical “I.” To counter that issue, I had been writing many persona poems. For example, “Yuri Ketchivosky Considers the Diplomatic Ability of ICBMs,” “Helen of Troy,” and “Bardo” are all placed in imagined settings such as the U.N. council with created characters. I also wrote two chapbooks, one in the voice of Hera and one in the voice of Penelope, each of whom are portrayed as living members of this contemporary society. This past work provided experience to develop the voice of my father, Spike, in the collection, and to sustain that voice throughout the collection. Not only is Spike’s voice one that must remain consistent through the collection, but it is a voice that somehow must evoke empathy despite suggestions of sexual abuse and abandonment. He becomes a force in this collection, and what’s more, he becomes a challenger to the poet in the poems—all of which helps to undercut the authorial “I.” One of the poems that best highlights this sense of challenge to the poet is the collection’s first poem titled “Argument (1).” In this poem, the father and poet debate writing itself and its value:

Why do you say that stuff? my father interrupts as I write.

What do you mean? About your cock?

No. That right there, he says and lifts up his arms, glass of OJ in one hand, Little Debbie oatmeal cream pie in the other, so he stands like a Lady of the Scales statue. Chewing a wad of snack cake.

What are you talking about? What’s in my poems? How I see the world?

All of this, he says and circles his drink in the air like a drunk. This house. Our family. You and me. You think it's everything. Then he nods toward the window. And what's out there doesn't even begin it.

He suggests the poet is naval-gazing, and the poet responds with citing a spectacular sight she discovered because of her insistence on recording the world around her, which in this particular case is a yellow spider web. I choose to give the father the last word and have him shrug off such a discovery by saying, “that’s yesterday,” indicating that she needs to move on and stop reflecting. This is a fair point, and throughout the book I use the father’s voice to serve as a foil to the poet’s voice—to express oppositions that a reader might raise similar to how Harrington includes a negative outside reader’s report. Other poems in my collection that do so are “Pig and a Bottle,” “Spike: With Interest,” “Essay on Collective Paranoia,” that features footnotes all in the father’s voice; and the concluding poem “Argument (2)” that allows the father the final say on this collection. By doing so, the reader is invited to question the poet, an act too often ignored in poetry, but one long exploited in fiction. To consider the narrator’s unreliability, to consider the narrator’s blind spots, to consider the narrator’s gain in telling the story at hand are all acts that have for too long not been adopted in poetry. Instead, the relationship between reader and speaker in poetry has been one of blind trust: that the story presented is *the* story. But, as we all know, that story does not exist. To trust the poet as the wise one or the one with the least stake in the story’s presentation is false and romanticizes the role of the poet and poetry—a role that has long been conflated with prophet, seer, and that Wordsworthian sense of a “more comprehensive soul.” This collection not only invites questions regarding the poet, but cultivates those questions.

Another key strategy that serves to subvert the authorial “I” is the concept of the book, which integrates the history and theme of evolution within the personal narrative. The juxtaposition, not of lines within a poem but of subjects, reminds me of Jarrell’s sense of disunity as a way to bring surprise and depth to a work. While I would agree with disunity as a method to add complexity, I did not seek out a seemingly unrelated subject, but instead developed the references to evolution. When I first noticed the hints about fire and language acquisition in what would become “Branches” but was at first only two sections, I did not understand how they related to my father. I set aside the poem and researched evolution for five months.

I began to understand how the first three significant spikes within our evolutionary history coincided with our diets. And how diet itself, specifically cooking (hence the need for fire), required a sense of shared property and stewardship. We have forgotten how odd it is to go to the market, purchase food, not unwrap it, return to our locked homes, store the food in cabinets, and then, one meal at a time, prepare the food at our convenience and often share it. This approach is far from all other animals’ habits of search and consume upon immediate acquisition. In order to preserve and store food, the human species had to undergo many anatomical changes: bipedalism, larger brains, smaller jaws, smaller guts, and other behavior changes including less aggressiveness as noted by the equal length between men and women’s canine teeth, cooperation, bartering systems, and self-restraint. All of this allowed and now requires us to live within communities. In fact, our diets are completely dependent upon other systems including agribusiness, trucking, processing plants, home builders, appliance makers, etc.

Despite this intense interconnectivity, my father, however, cannot live within a community. He must constantly roam he is so fearful of attack—even from his own family members. The realization of this connection is the circle that encompasses all of the book's concerns. Therefore, not only subjects and terms regarding evolution reoccur, but images regarding our highly processed diet (as represented by the snack cakes) and images regarding my father's fear of attack (as represented by the ax) reoccur in many of the poems.

After the research, I saw the connections regarding evolutionary history to my own familial narrative. What's more, I desired to write about both stories, not just one. All of this relates to the distinction between confessionalistic and autobiographical poetry that Rachel Zucker outlines in her essay. She explains that while a confessionalistic poem includes moments of autobiography, it “reaches for the universal. It attempts to transcend the personal, the particular...because confessionalistic poetry uses the bits and elements of story in the service of larger subjects, subjects that are not particularities of the poet's life” (2). It is exactly this sense of a “larger subjects” that drives me to relate my father's story in a broader context. Not only does the “larger subject” remove the focus from my life, but the scientific concept forces me to keep all the subjects in balance. In other words, the concept encourages restraint. This sense of restraint is achieved in multiple ways. In terms of structure, the concept collection requires a balanced order of father poems to science poems. For example, the poem “Upright But Apelike” that discusses bi-pedalism appears after five poems that deal explicitly with my father's homelessness and constant roaming. Not only does bi-pedalism provide a literal link with the father's constant walking, but the poem allows a break from the father's story. In terms of images, the concept collection invites images that are not necessarily familial ones, but scientific ones, which can reduce repetition

of the too familiar. For example, the poem “Thalia Chasing Grapefruit” occurs in a domestic setting, yet the poem quickly moves from a dog running after a grapefruit to ruminations on the first fish to walk. This shift brings surprise to both writer and reader because it moves out of the expected domestic sphere—and it is this type of surprise that the concept collection encourages.

The use of third-person in many of the poems also serves to mediate the authorial “I” and add pressure to the language. For instance, while many of the poems use third-person (“Divining,” “Gluttony,” “Before the City Opens,” and “Branches”), the reader understands that the third-person is still, in some way, the poet speaking because of the context of the poem to the book’s subject matter and the invitation for reader to connect facts to autobiography. Yet, the third-person allows for both reader and poet to achieve a bit of distance from the content. First-person, as we know, tends to mediate all the information through that voice. In fact, first-person voice often drives the poem with readers expecting an interesting perspective because of the close connection. Third-person work is less mediated by voice, but more so through character, heightened language, information, and even drama. By using third-person in the majority of this dissertation, I was able to focus more on the language rather than in conveying my viewpoint. As Harold Bloom explains, “The relationship of poet to speaker is not a simple equation; it is always mediated through and suppressed by the lyric’s figurative language” (63).

Similar to the other three collections discussed, my concept collection also stresses forms specific to the poem’s needs. As Giacomo da Lentino from the 13th century explored new areas of content in his poems, his poems experienced changes in structure, resulting in what we now call the sonnet. When I think of poetic form or poetic structure, I envision a

clear glass vase that the poet fills. Styles of vases are endless, perhaps slender or bulbous, short or long; sometimes the shape changes the content; often the contents demand the shape. More often, the consideration of both determines the vase selected from that overstuffed cupboard better known as our minds. Many of the poems use received form such as “Pig and a Bottle” (blank verse), “Signs and Symptoms [May] Include Paranoia” (accentual alliterative), and “A Series of Small Feasts” (pantoum). More often, however, the poems feature forms specific to their needs. The eighteen-page poem “Branches” operates as if the page were doubled—which it is when a reader holds the poem in book form. Therefore, the left-hand side of the page presents a subjective sense on the subject of loss and gain while the right-hand side presents a more objective portrait of loss and gain through facts about how our bodies have evolved. I also want, however, to indicate that the objective representation still contains faults, and so I added blank space within newspaper column-like stanzas. The blanks not only allow the poem poetic breaks, but also allude to missing pieces of evidence scientists still need.

Another formal strategy I use involves lyrical repetition similar to Bachmann’s to mimic the obsessive-compulsive thinking process of the paranoid schizophrenic. Therefore, entire sections of poems are repeated as one can see with the two versions of “Argument” and in the poems “Spike” and “The Diagnosis: Paranoid Schizophrenia.” What is clear, however, with my work and the post-millennial confessionals is that some type of overarching structure adds tension and restraint. When addressing topics that could be unruly, a tight hold requires questions: What is most important? What is most interesting? What is most rhythmic? Form helps achieve this.

Section 5: Conclusion

I would like to now acknowledge poetry collections that are outside the scope of a post-millennial confessionalistic concept collection, but that are nonetheless greatly influential to this dissertation. While I would not deny that this book owes a debt to the Confessional poets, I must admit that I do not consider them direct influences, but indirect. I first read Plath at age thirteen and stopped reading her at age sixteen. Swirling onion tops, shoes that won't do, and dead bells tolling are examples of her great linguistic gifts that I hope to have absorbed on some level. The poets who have greatly influenced me over the past few years are C.D. Wright, Robert Hass, and Anne Carson—each for different reasons.

Wright's penultimate collection, *Rising, Falling, Hovering* (Copper Canyon Press, 2008), features contemporary issues including Iraq, Katrina, and illegal immigration that all are part of this collection's larger concept: the impact of global capitalism. (Wright's collection meets the criteria for being a concept collection, but it is not confessionalistic.) Discussed through multiple narrators including a he, she, I, yo, Juan and Juana Doe, various passing family members and friends, the poems shift voices without providing signals when a new voice begins. This sense of disunity speaks to a larger sense of cultural disunity to which the book alludes. Also, the shifting narrators avoid a didactic Wright lecturing others on how life should operate. Instead, the disunity suggests parallels and connections rather than explicitly stating those parallels and connections. The concept that holds together this book leads readers to understand how the personal and political, the domestic and the international, and the private and public are not dichotomous subjects, but interconnected ones. It is this sense that all the spheres are connected that encouraged me to find the connection between my

family's personal story and the human race's evolutionary story. They are not separate subjects, but one subject.

Furthermore, Wright's intended disjointedness by moving from speakers, locales, or topics without transitions recalls to mind Tony Hoagland's essay "Fragment, Juxtaposition, and Completeness." He is not discussing Wright in this essay, but what he says relates to why poets might choose to not transition: "By eliminating transition, it embraces ambiguity, improvisation, speed, and multiplicity of meaning. It is expressive, but not primarily self-expressive. It does not place priority on closure, nor on conventional notions of completeness" (Hoagland 147). Fragmentation, as Hoagland explains it, is one way to shift from being "primarily self-expressive," which is what I would consider to be another strategy to avoid a false sense of a complete authorial "I." The poems in my collection do not leave a reader clueless as to who is speaking, but many poems do feature purposely omitted words such as in "Branches." One poem in particular that relies on fragmentation is "Life is Long and Full of Action and Color." I deleted all linking verbs in this poem since they are, by definition, units that denote a state of being. Since the poem discusses death at an early stage, I wanted to omit any sense of longevity. Another poem that intentionally uses fragmentation is the poem "Child Beggar." This poem features line breaks that create different meanings based on the syntactical pairings. For example, the following lines about the child begging in congested traffic can be read in two different ways:

This is Jakarta gridlocked

And she has

Time. The ukulele
Thrums. The eyes
Look inside the car now.
Mister, mister, please?

In this passage, the ukulele is both a possession that she owns along with “time” (And she has // Time. The ukulele...) and is also the subject of the next syntactical unit (“The ukulele / thrums...”). This type of fragmentation I would not have done before reading Wright when I discovered how the multiple ways of syntactic pairings speak to the complexity of the situation. Granted, Wright is far from the first poet to create a sense of fragmentation. Guillaume Apollinaire, for example, removed all punctuation from his first book *Alcools* in 1913. Later with *Calligramme*, he positioned fragments on the page, using the white space. Terms that have later come to describe this include open-field, poetic montage, and reader-centered. (This sense of using an open-field serves “Branches” well as I have previously mentioned.) Overall, fragment, juxtaposition, and collage are heavily experimented with in the 20th century. It was Wright, however, who first affected me on an emotional rather than intellectual level with such techniques.

Robert Hass’s work, in particular *Time and Materials* (Ecco Press, 2007), also heavily influenced my sense of the authorial “I.” In *Time and Materials*, one senses that Hass’s poems distrust easy manners of wisdom and are dissatisfied with closure. The narrators of his poems are often dropped into the background as in “Winged and Acid Dark.” Connected to this positioning, is the sense of a speaker who is composed of many parts, but without a nucleus. In other words, the speaker is meant to be small, not large. Many poems in this collection attempt such a strategy: “Gluttony,” “Wanted: A Pretty Picture,” and “Bardo (2)” to name a few. The strategy is once again an attempt to mediate the authorial “I” and to foreground the collection’s conceptual unity.

Anne Carson, who is known for juxtaposing the personal and the literary, the modern and the classical, and the present and the past also expanded my sense of the

multiple layers a poem could absorb. Only in a Carson poem will one find titles such as “TV Men: Sappho” “Lazarus Standup: Shooting Script,” and “Epitaph: Oedipus’ Nap.” The poem “Glass Essay” is one of many examples that reveals how the personal story is simultaneously enhanced and downplayed through the weave of another subject, which in her case is a literary one. This poem discusses a break-up, caring for an ailing father, and a difficult relationship with a mother while commenting on the Brontës’ work. In “The Glass Essay,” the tercets remind one of Dante’s *terza rima*, and the number of references to some action of descent overwhelms: time passes “beneath” her, she forces her “arms down,” hands “dip down” and so on (935). The following stanza also speaks of the descent, quite literally of death, but juxtaposes this death with a reference to the Brontës’ moors: “... which now plunges towards me over the moor. / When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die. / This is not uncommon” (lines 51-53). While Carson reveals personal experience, which is uncharacteristic of her, she undercuts it with the last line, saying everyone has felt that. Also, the line “I thought I would die” echoes Sappho’s fragment where she describes seeing a lover with another: “I feel as if I’m not far off dying.” The literary allusions undercut sentimentality and offer a literary perspective to personal suffering. This merging is Modernist in a sense, achieving what Eliot termed as “the mythical method” which is “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity.... It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... It is I believe a step toward making the modern world possible in art” (472). The mythical method is exactly what I attempted in this dissertation. In a sense, the concept collection is Eliot’s mythical method expanded beyond the confines of a poem, but to the larger parameters of a

book.

A concern is that readers will tire of the concept collection. Actually, this should not be a concern, but an expectation. All trends die from overuse and then new trends attempt to replace and subvert them. In *The Writer's Chronicle*, Marie Howe recently articulated one concern regarding the growing popularity over this type of book: "This new notion about book projects is really beyond me. I don't understand it at all. I don't feel in any way critical of them, don't misunderstand me, but I don't understand it. What I understand is one poem" (8). What she may mean by this is that one needs to write a poem, and then another, and then another. I do not think anyone writing a "project book" would disagree. Granted, some of the poems within a concept collection may not function as well without the context surrounding them, but that speaks more to this epoch of hyper-links and interconnectivity as much as it speaks to poetic technique. We are aware, perhaps too aware, that our worlds are small, blind animals connected to something much larger than ourselves. The concept collection seeks to encompass the larger connections that we perceive and also provide an alternative when a subject is much too large for any one poem. The work in this dissertation is not merely a collection of poems, but as Jack Spicer considered his books to be "a community of poems" that echo and respond to one another. As Spicer aptly phrases it, "Poems cannot live alone any more than we can."

FIN.

This We Call Many Things: A Collection of Poems

I.

Two suitcases watch you like dogs.

—From “Western Motel” by Anne Carson

ARGUMENT (1)

The wind bending a thin-trunked
Pine, butterscotch-scented,
Sounds like the opening of a door.
And so, I think of my father,

How through him—
His Oreo-fat,
His hardening cock,
His damp, long-curved lashes

I stutter-stepped into myself.
A woman
In wonder.

Why do you say that stuff? my father interrupts as I write.

What do you mean? About your cock?

No. That right there, he says and lifts up his arms, glass of O.J. in one hand, Little Debbie oatmeal cream pie in the other, so he stands like a Lady of the Scales statue. Chewing a wad of snack cake.

What are you talking about? What's in my poems? How I see the world?

All of this, he says and circles his drink in the air like a drunk. *This house. Our family. You and me. You think it's everything.* Then he nods toward the window. *And what's out there doesn't even begin it.*

I answer: *Yesterday I saw something I've never seen before: A canary-yellow web that only one spider in the world can weave. What do you think about that?*

He shrugs. *That's yesterday.*

Spike

When the doctor scrimps back your bed curtain,
you see she's a lip-sticked take-you-outside
sort of bruiser. She offers a smile,

foil-lined water cup, that tell-tale chart. She adjusts
her hair's fake flower and asks if the ankle straps,
wrist cuffs are comfortable. A helicopter gorges in

when she speaks, TV leaks more bad news,
and the overworked psych outside your door
has already signed her scrips pad based on protocol

for men like you with charcoaled* lips
and drug rep give-aways to cue you down
to a chemical-calm. You are and are not

being treated. To the clipboard goes your heart rate,
your blood type, its pressures with its ups and downs,
name of the state's boarding house for the non-

violent—with your name next to it. And as the doctor
is reading this, her pen pauses as if hesitating,
and that's when you ask for an axe. *Yes*, she says,

Yes. You see her taking the pen to your name—Spike—
and lining through it, the "S" cut into two halves,
the "i" crossed instead of dotted.

* Sometimes after suicide attempts that involve ingesting lethal substances, doctors give patients charcoal to absorb any toxins that might still be in their stomachs after being pumped. One side effect is the mouth and nostrils turn black for a few days from the coal.

BORDERING ON ACCEPTANCE

Mid-afternoon: cheap sunlight.
A house wren perches
in the fake, lit-up Christmas tree

decorating the porch. Cocks his head
and clamps his beak around
one skinny red bulb. Tugs—.

A reminder of what can't be undone.
Like mountains, sliced onion, skinned lion.
Like what kind people do to kind people—

A mother telling her daughter:
*I couldn't protect both you and your brother
from that man—and you're the type*

who heals herself, who's always okay.
But don't forget the wren. No, forget
the wren. Mid-afternoon: sunlight whitening.

PIG AND A BOTTLE

—In June of 2010, I was invited to a funeral sacrifice in which five buffalo were slaughtered along with pigs in Sulawesi, Indonesia. This is a typical practice of the people who live in the region and who save a lifetime for this event.

The blood too fresh for flies, a skinned skull left
To dry, but otherwise this dulled dirt-patch
Where animals are being sacrificed
Is just another piece of empty ground.

I'm ten thousand miles from where I grew up
By S.D. Johnson Elementary.
At recess we would search for a kidnapped girl,
Also named Charlotte, each hoping to get

Lucky and be the one to find the skull.
*See, Dad would say, we're all the same. Don't act
So goody-goody. Why don't you marry me?*
He never meant that last part. The boy here

In front of me is trying to impress
Some girl into marriage. He's showing off
His wiggly muscles, struggling to lift a pig
Who's strapped to bamboo—its grill, its grate, its grave.

It screams and thrashes out of its rope; the men
Are running, squealing away. And right as I cheer
For this pig, an arc of warmth wets my leg as
A man machetes the buffalo's throat, the beast

Lashing, the head buckling, the blood swirling
Like water from a sprinkler. Father used
To love to tell me what he could do with
A beer bottle's broken neck. Take the glassed

Peaks to the throat:

It gives like a pillow.

I'm not a pillow, I'd say.

Not today.

Who did you take the bottle to?

A man.

*Homeless. Down by the river after I bought him
The beer. And what you need to remember, Miss
Goody Goody: No one ever noticed.*

LITTLE VISIBLE SKY

“Little visible sky” the museum-notes repeated
about the Renoirs with their wine-flushed rich
sequestered beneath leafy trees, straw hats
with fat blue ribbons, and that eye-patch of sky.

Where I sit on my couch, I can’t see the sky.
Then a crow caws, and there it flies
across the mirror-silver glass of my coffee-table,
angle just right to reflect a crosshatch

of window mullions, thick X of two power lines,
and the underthrust—once, twice—
of that bird’s wings rushing toward
the blurry ring from yesterday’s Coke can.

The oddity of a crow on a coffee-table—
what’s with me that isn’t. Like the nurse today
knotting the blue plastic band around my arm,
asking if I liked garlic minced or sliced on my pizza—

or not at all—she could understand that, too.
Sliced, I said, although I was twenty years in the past
and staring at Dad’s arm, the moon-pale skin
hooked with IVs like an overloaded electrical outlet.

I worry about too many memories, less and less
space to see what’s in front of me—what’s not.
A table. A crow. A power line, wet and crossed, touching
a cup of coffee, a book of poetry, unread.

THE DIAGNOSIS: PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIA

When the doctor scrimps back your bed curtain,
yet again, you see she's just another accomplice
in a white lab coat, another archetype of hope

in this traveling medicine show. And the fake
flower tucked in her hair is part of the act, says,
I'm different. I'm happy. I'm here—for you.

This time she delivers a name for the same thing
they've been treating you for all your life: *schizo*,
split and divide, from the Greek, o' shattered mind....

or something like this, and you, still strapped
with white canvas wraps, again test the right ankle,
the left, the wrist, ask: *Could you*

bring me that axe? Always a do-er, always
a chop-chop-chopper, you can hear that helicopter
coming back, a cough that colludes out in the hall,

that shill scribbling on the scrips pad one more
potential panacea, one more cure-all
toward the goal of “functioning adult.”

You know the intricacies of Haldol, Trilafon,
Prolizin. Know too the younger models:
positive-Sally-sounding Abilify, the sexy Saptiris,

and her fat twin Geoda. Know, too, that nothing
will work for twenty percent of people like you,
“treatment resistant” one therapist admitted.

So, you are demanding now, *Just bring me that axe*,
maybe even yelling. And they are hovering,
all of them hovering: the flower and the hall,

the coats, the carts, the machine
outside the window, gun-round-grrrr
of blades that will not, will not stop.

NORMALIZATION OF DEVIANCE

1986, winter of Challenger disaster, o-rings,
solid rocket boosters, southern cold snaps.
Dad blinked at a break in the news coverage,
walked out the door, leaving my brother and me
saying for days, *He was right here*—
as if our father were a ring of lost keys.

He returned six weeks later, but this scene
repeated into a routine. His duffel bag
always on the hearth, half-filled with Twinkies
and news clippings of helicopters purchased
by nearby counties; tips on the soft-sell;
yardage stats on touchdown passes. Always unknown

when he would come and go. My brother and I
were ten and sixteen, so we ran the house accordingly.
I was mad I had to make all the meals and once
spit in the pizza. Then had to eat it, too. Lee paid
me a quarter a day not to cry. No bedtimes.
The returns Dad downplayed to a simple *Hey*,
head nod, stacks of 100s for groceries and heat.

Five years earlier we'd day-tripped to the future:
viewed Space Shuttle Columbia, OV-102 being built.
It loomed over Florida's flatness. The metal scaffolding
alongside it, a city of angles, as impressive
as the shuttle itself sitting stiff and upright
like a scared school girl. I tripped

on the newly paved tarmac, still ridged
from no wear. Dad began yelling how he'd sue,
told me it would be the ugliest scar, doom me
to short men who played guitar. His parenting style
a list of dangers: poltergeist head-swivels,
lawn-mowed toes, detached retinas.

My fears, though, were quiet ones: a man
in a white robe standing by my bed, a black
government Buick pulling into the drive,

or something as innocuous as foam piercing Columbia's left wing during lift-off. The ground team suspected re-entry was impossible.

Some argued that burning debris was part of the process. Either way, nothing could be done, so NASA allowed the crew to drive blind, enjoy their last days, this decision something experts would later name "normalization of deviance."*

*Accident investigation boards for both Challenger and Columbia asked similar questions such as why did NASA allow for the O-rings and the foam insulation to continue being used despite past problems. Since errors with the O-rings and the foam insulation had become somewhat typical, engineers and managers testified how they began to see these flaws as part of the process. Diane Vaughan, who wrote *The Challenger Launch Decision* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), gave this type of rationalizing behavior a name: the "Normalization of Deviance."

NOW IT'S A RAT ON THE HUT'S ROOF, BUT BEFORE THAT, I DON'T KNOW

Name-game this midnight in Indonesia,
All thatched moon and waning roof.

Slip-soft near the music box,
Dust-dull by the cobweb,
And that itchity-click right over my head—If I yell,
I'll barely fill in the sky.

Oh, Thing—You Flange-Rain,
Palm Nut, Caterpillared-Twig,
More tender than timbre,
I hope.

I learned long ago no hero
Except my black-masked self.

Nothing but independence goes
This fairytale
With its stripped bamboo hut,
Loose-lipped kitchen drawers.

Call them Night-Ticks, Tom-peeps,
Bogeymen, Old Red Eyes, What-Have-Yous.
I'm simple compared to them:
My body just another thing
For rat or man to cross.

BEFORE THE CITY OPENS

At 4:53 a.m., his Greyhound exits at #396 on I-40, drives past the lit-up Weigels with one car in its parking lot.

He has never liked this city.

Stepping off the bus, he remembers a park downtown with a small mound of dirt, a fake wooden bridge, a man-made stream.

He walks past a large bronze sculpture of a man rowing a boat, the boat half sunk into the sidewalk.

Just before the park, he passes a man balancing four copper pipes on his bike's handlebars.

A pile of dog shit on the concrete, cuddled in bright-yellow piss.

A woman standing, black canvas bag over her shoulder, gut bulging between her cut-offs and tank top.

He wears a suit. The shirt tucked, the belt firm and flat. Carries a hard-shell Samsonite.

At the stream, another woman brushes her teeth.

A man wheels a cart of clover-green and white donut boxes over to a steel wall and knocks.

Maybe a coincidence needs to be arranged. Maybe outside a classroom. The car. The Kroger.

He tries a newspaper stand and the metal door opens. He skips the national news and goes for the local. In the obituaries, five people have died who are younger than him. Three older.

Metal grates on concrete as a girl drags a chair to prop open the door to a coffee shop.

Inside, clanging of silverware sorting, NPR, the cook asking about cream for his Hollandaise sauce. The windows steamed from the warmth inside.

His own voice requesting a cup of coffee. Telling the success story of his daughter, a poet, who lives in this city.

The girl behind the counter with tinsel-bright curls lies, says she doesn't know her. Says she'd like to give him a cup of coffee, but cannot.

It is now seven a.m. A reasonable time to make a phone call.

The long walk to another coffee shop with yellow lights.

He begins to practice what he will say: *This is Spike*, he tries out. And again: *Charlotte, this is your dad*. Again: *Charlotte. It's Spike*.

“LIFE IS LONG AND FULL OF ACTION AND COLOR”

—Charles Darwin

The opossum pulls herself up to the next
maple branch, her tail a fifth limb.

The higher she climbs
the thinner the bark,
unlike the scabby trunk where wood
soft as berries.

A nest of fledging robins close enough
she can see one glinty, stand-alone
piece of hatchling fuzz.

A thing so new to this earth it lacks
all color. She strikes
with her fat-rippled body, and the bird,
if it opened its eyes, would have seen
the thousand colors of this thing
we call living.

A SERIES OF FEASTS

Life began when I stood on a stool listening
to the stiff-shirt rustle of a brown grocery bag,
worms hatching, crackling from pecans I'd gathered,
warm top of the humming fridge birthing them all.

From the stiff-shirt rustle of brown grocery bags,
to the light, the dark as Dad paced by windows,
the warm hum of the fridge accompanying all,
how can this life not be "a feast of brief hopes?"

The light, the dark. From Dad pacing by windows,
my brother swallowing ten bottles of pills,
"Life is," Milosz once wrote, "A feast of brief hopes."
How Ann smiled, one corner down, at my husband

as we swallowed shots of scotch after dinner.
At that moment I realized I'd never smiled
how she smiled. Folding a page corner down, my husband
focused on his date book's next task; he avoids grief

most moments, like realizing I've never smiled how Ann smiled
or like reading reprints of love notes found on the Kursk*,
by doing his date book's next task. To avoid grief,
each ship trudges to the next shore, the next hope.

I wonder how love notes found on ships like the Kursk
differ from immigrants' prayers who travel
on orange dots of rafts floating to the next shore.
Helen, too, crossed the Aegean convinced of better.

How different is it? Immigrants traveling on,
Helen crossing the Aegean sure of better
love, to worms crackling from pecans I'd gathered,
never ate, life beginning as I stood listening.

*The Kursk was a Russian nuclear sub that flooded after an explosion, killing all 118 on board on August 12, 2000. Captain Lieutenant Dmitriy Kolesnikov, wrote notes about who initially survived and kept them on his person. Also found on him were love notes written by some of the crew for people back home.

The sunlight hovering behind the copper-windowed skyscraper,
now hits gold.
One blinding line. Like God. Like the white of the pickled egg
pressing against its jar.

Like the high-pitched inhalation as her husband tries to stop sobbing.

They walk on anyway into the park.

She should say something,
and knows what to say,
but the rusty-spring creaking of pigeons fluttering
and blundering out of their path distracts her. What is it
about the sound of their bodies...?

'88 Chevy's back seat squeaking along the gravel road to Grandma's.
Her lover rising from the couch to close the front curtains at noon.
Park-swing chains carving into S-hooks.

She's never actually pushed
a child, never gauged how hard to press against the small back.
Still, she can imagine.

If she could redo it,

she can't lie to herself and say she wouldn't betray him again.
Kissing her lover that first time, fast, before she lost nerve
Felt like—what was it? At some beginning of herself.
The chicken wire of life, she read yesterday, was another beginning,
a nickname for a discovered molecule that forms in the winds
of dying stars.

Not poetic; science. Carbon and hydrogen
waiting for some nitrogen. That she understands. That
and grabbing his sweaty hand—after the kiss. Turning it over
and seeing the glint of another beginning:

silver flecks
of salt glittering in the deepest groove of his palm.

LEAVE

Your bag's zipper cleave-rings out its metal call.
Such determination in that strip
of teeth closing, a done and gone—or going.

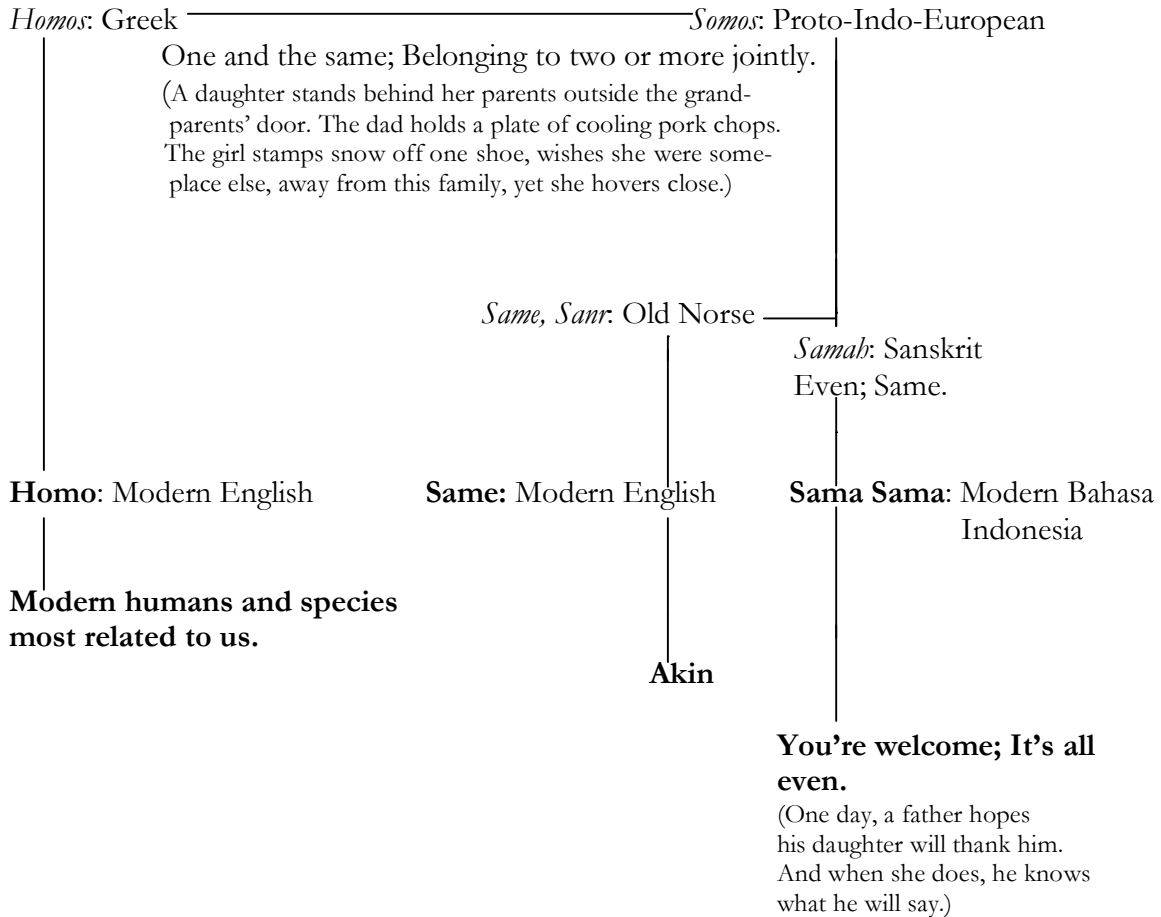
Don't call or knock again,
become as you have always been:
mud scents and mirror glares,
sun-glassed eyes and Charlie-horsed toes.

You and I,
Dad and Daughter,
overjoyed to be fake-sad.
One cast-out to the next knows
the game:
strip the six, spot the knuckle,
smile-down as you wrestle three runs of snake eyes.

Leave. Dissolve into that maze
of mind.
Husk the corn's silk for answers,
knife the hive's honed octagons,
J-brake the chrome all around you,

Nod toward the kitchen
and try to give one last time.
As you pick up that creaky, leather bag, say:
On the stove, chocolate's warming.

FAMILY: HOMINIDAE
 ↓
 Tribe: Hominini
 ↓
 Subtribe: Hominina
 ↓
 Genus: Homo



II.

It is not a question of whether we as a whole will be saved or lost, but of how much of us.

—From *The Gospel According to Darwin* by Woods Hutchinson
(1898)

BRANCHES



What small mammals

did we roast in the fire?

What first story did we

tell? Something about

longing. About loss:

The big one.

The got-away.



Around wood, around fire, we began.
Roasting small mammals as we sat
in circles. The sizzle-spit of fat striking

flame. And outside the circle: darkness.
Stalk of hyena. Crick-shift of his step.
Then man lifting a torch—jab-jab-jabbing

that dark until the sounds flee back to the
quiet: sizzle-spits. Shifts of logs carboned
and boned-thinned. Ashed by morning.



Biological anthropologists are discovering that
“around wood we began” is not
figurative.

Taming fire
led to
cooking which led to
more calories led to
bigger brains to
language speech communities
w/ clusters of moms, dads, Bobbies & Sallies.

But w/ everything gained, there is loss. What
is the equation for this?
Simply: $1+1$ is no longer one?
With taming
fire what was lost?



The wet, the cold,
makes her think of
her father. Or perhaps
what makes her think
of her father
is the house itself,
its heater clicking on
as she opens the door,
the stargazers' scent
drifting from the hall
toward that open door,
the red-packaged log
on the hearth, and
the dog by this log,
whining because
it has not seen her
in five hours. She
has not seen her
father in fifteen years.
He is homeless,
a fact many friends
don't even know. If
she is asked why
her father moved
her family as often as
every six months, she
replies that he has
a "mercurial disposition."
Mercurial an SAT word.
She does not know
how to spell
Schizophrenic.



Georgia July and the thought of ice storms occurred to her father.

Fifty-three loblolly pines surrounded their house back then. Fifty-three pines that could ice-over, splinter, crash onto the roof.

They sat on their porch next to the strawberry patch that had given up only three berries all season.

She rarely weeded. She was ten.

Her dad liked quoting Frost and his proclamations of the world's end—...*in fire, some say ice.*

He kept ten full gallons of gasoline in the garage.

One chainsaw.

Those pines all fell within seven hours.

A boy biked by with his sister on the handlebars. She wore a headband with bunny ears. Silver fabric where pink should have been.

The sound of falling pines was not unrecognizable.

A sound slow to finish like stacked plates falling after an earthquake. Something impossible to stop, forcing one to stand by and watch.

Just before dark, the chainsaw quieted and the bike squeaked by. The boy wore the ears now. There was no sister.

She began her job of walking through each fallen tree top.

Such rooms within those limbs. Sometimes she did pull-ups to the next firred space. Other times, she ape-swung and jumped down.

In one nest's weave, she found foil from a chip bag and one wobbly line of red string. Two weeks ago, she had torn her red dress at the edge of these woods.

Aren't you one lucky kid? her father called from somewhere.

She stopped moving, let the tree hide her. And it did, towering even as it lay on its side.



Upright but apelike Australopithecines?
Knife-making habilines?
Maybe Homo erectus himself
who if given a suit
could walk the streets like any
overlooked male?

Maybe the first species to strike fire

did so by all lucky-dumb
and happy accident.

Some brute banging blind
pyrites against flint in hopes
of a hammer.

Or maybe some girl who tripped,
her deerskin shawl
dipping
into a gas-fired strip in Antalya.

Or maybe our instinct to taunt:
cocky juveniles
jousting each other
with smoldering twigs
after lightning struck the savannah.



Turning into the driveway, her headlights reveal something dark.

She has light shining on darkness.

A branch has fallen, a good twenty-foot long and branched with many branches.

It is thirty-four degrees.

Drizzling.

She wants to be warm, eat that leftover lasagna, drink one glass of boxed red wine.

The engine idles.

She has just returned from her last act as a married woman: mailing the new-ex his car title. He wanted a copy faxed and the original over-nighted.

She can hear now the car part that scrapes under the hood.

She buttons her coat, lifts the collar, gets out.

Grabs the branch by the base.

Her hands slide down wet-slime of turkey-tail mushrooms in bloom.

She pauses. Decides not to wipe off her hands.

Begins again.

It takes five tugs, a deep drag. The moon seeps through to a shine.

How long has it been since she has done something as fundamental as this?

Cleared a path, been wet, been cold.

Even the neighbors' windows are ice-black. Scent of wet dog shit limps over from their yard.

Something about this feeling is honest. Like nakedness.

Like this November moon, color of silk that is neither white nor silver, but something otherworldly.

Something she wants to conquer and can't.

gulped it all, gulped up
more space, more thought,
more this thing called self-aware,
and now, so self-aware we've located
and labeled it Brodmann's area 10.



Feeding oneself one fruit, one nut, one leaf
as monkeys feed ended with control of fire.

We became
communal,

Became communities of who does what—
Who scoops honey from hives
Who cuts tongue from antelope
Who scrapes corn from husk.

We became
arranged
Into cooks and hunters,
Into husbands and wives,
Into worlds of many small fires and many small roofs.
Into fathers and daughters, lovers and ex-es,

connected
by a desire to forget our histories.



She does not know how
all this relates to when
sex was sex
 or love was sex.

She does not know
 the knowledge lost
before the mind
conceived of language,
 conceived of sound
to represent
 men cup couple of men.

The moment after we spoke
how did the world change?

In every way.

[A warbled line—a branch—a feeling
 of one limb leading to another.]

We look at this as progress.
 Language as advancement.
 In her small life, she
is happier than before.
 Those two men
she didn't like are gone.
 They were once with her
and now
 they are not. Blip of thought.
 Flick of branch.



What was the mind like before language?

Needs.

[A bird.]

Images.

[Arc of bird's chest as it rises from a bay bush.]

Metaphor.

[A man is the thrust of the bird's breast as it rises from a bay bush.]

Act.

[A spreading of the bird's wings.

A lifting.

A spreading of the man's arms.

A stilling.

His feet still on the ground.]



This is all impossible. The description and the act of man imagining to fly.

That story of Icarus
not flying, but falling;

A crack.

One crack to one crack to one crack until
a break.

A branch coming down.

This is the story we keep telling.

How it all falls.

How the small world falls.



Prometheus from Zeus,
Máui from Mudhens,
Crow from Volcano,

Rabbit from Weasel,
Grandmother
Spider from Land

of Light and so on go
the myths of taming fire.
Stealing always at the core.

A loss. An offense. A way
to incense the gods
who knew to fear us,

who knew we would
replace them
as soon as we could.



The groan of a car engine long ignored.

She hoped he heard what she was not saying.

The yellow was leaving the morning sun, but this species has never feared the change to white-noon.

They smelled of each other. Of the dog in the back seat. Of their friend's dog whom they were just now leaving.

It had been a couples' weekend in a cabin. This was last year. The beginning of the divorce.

She knew that other men smelled differently from her husband's milkiness.

Maybe that was why she asked him to pull over at the road-side stand. Buy gourds, pumpkins to decorate their porch.

The lady with Keds and an apron with blue flowers, forget-me-nots, told her they had bittersweet vine, too.

[Wasn't it Sappho who wrote: "Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me sweetbitter"? Sappho inverting the word to reveal passion's nature: first we taste the sweet.]

Just ten minutes earlier she had asked her husband, *I've never given you that look, have I? That crazy in-love look. Even when we were first dating?*

No, he said. *But we've always known that. It's okay.*

It was no longer okay.

She bought a Turkish turban, one Australian blue, two flattish Cinderellas, four butternuts. And the vine.

He asked for a third time: *Are you sure you need all that?*



Like kicking a pebble over a cliff and never
hearing it fall. Soon, you walk away
and forget about it.

Most of the time. Tonight, she is thinking about
two men, her father, now homeless, and her ex-husband.
She had been direct with both of them.

She reminded her ex that she had never
been in love. She told her father
he would drag her down with him.

She was right. They agreed. They are gone.
Like kicking a pebble over a cliff and never
hearing it fall. Soon, you walk away.



All stories come from one of two:

A person loses something and tries to get it back (i.e. *Lolita*).

A person gets something and tries not to lose it (i.e. *Lolita*).

III.

For only the last 12,000 years in human history have we been alone on this planet without close relatives.

—Professor Diordia on the 2010 discovery of a fourth species, the Denisovans, that lived with modern man and interbred with Neanderthals.

MORE ON WHAT I DON'T KNOW

My husband looking for his running shoes,
passing through the kitchen toward the yellow
back door. Me standing at the counter,
swiping spilt pepper grounds
into a blue rag.

He stops,
wraps his arms around my waist
from behind.

Passion is the word for that,
but I don't know the word for what else it is:
the web being hooked and crossed
in the basement while we sleep above.

One strand attached to the shining
bicycle spoke, another attached to the rusted
nail head that juts from the basement post.

LOSS AND ATTAINMENT

The Trojans kept Helen for twelve years,
winning at least a little while.
So often we focus on the loss
rather than the years of attainment.
But any love that matters will one day
be taken for granted. Last night,
lying down to sleep next to you
on wrinkled sheets, warm where
the dog curled, cold by our feet,
I realized as your hand grazed my thigh
you hadn't touched me all day.
Each morning when I wake I understand
you're like a hawk scanning the next ridge.
The bed heaves as you rise first,
your steps hard, stiff, while the erupting
sky behind you eases from gravel
to blue. You don't glance back
at the soft curve of my body,
not yet rigid with the day's to-dos.
Instead, you place cereal and fruit
in a bowl, then call my name.
The milk cold. The peach sliced.
Without motive or need
we sleep, eat, read, breathe together,
you running a hand under my shirt
whenever you want. But I was talking
about Helen, about how she loved
as she wished at least once, willing
to witness the loss of a world for it.

DUCKS AND DRAKES

Ducking Stool: A chair at the end of a plank, in which a culprit was tied and then ducked into water; a form of punishment, formerly used, as in New England, esp. for quarrelsome women.

—Webster's New World Dictionary, second edition

Mid-July creeps like honey
with nothing moving quickly
toward a resolution.
A game of ducks and drakes
is his suggestion, and he
skims a sliver of limestone
across the creek. One, two, three...
four, five—Five rings! Another
diminution, I think.
I worry that I said too much
at last night's party, and now
my rocks plunk in the water
like a woman tied
to a ducking stool. I replay:
November's vote won't be
democratic; I don't care
for the baby stage; and did
I say tapanâde instead
of tapanâde? Why this fear
of saying too much or not
saying enough, why this clench
in my stomach? Creek water
sprinkles my leg, conversation
starts. Stops. In the overheated
afternoon, my life skips back
to junior high, to the drone
of science lectures, of toilet
flushes down a distant hall,
the rat-atap-tat of Ms. Wright,
the next-door teacher, chalking up
her thoughts. As a girl I knew
to speak with only facts,
obedience preferred to
opinions. I flick my wrist,
fling another rock; it, too, plops.

His skips seven times.
Why do you always worry?
he asks. And I wish
I didn't fester, fester
Put me on the stool,
dunk me in with this rock lodged
in my throat. He interrupts
to say try again. And hold
the stone as if it wants to fly,
as if you're holding it back.
But again, plop; a single,
circular bubble rises
after it, the way I know
my breath underwater would
rise to the surface, break open.

DESIRE

On a stone by the resistant water,
a blue heron stares downward,
eyes darkening as if in prayer, sky
creasing with purple dusk.
How long has she been waiting?

She needles under her wing, right
when a slim, silver fish jumps up.
She jerks, looks back only to see
defeat of water circles closing in.
Feathers, once alert, poised,

now inch down. I would like to coax
her toward me, hold her gray body
against mine. Wind carries my scent
and desires over her stoic back, a back
hunched like that of an old woman

with long, gray hair. I am sitting
suddenly at her kitchen table, insisting
she doesn't get up to fix the tea,
yet she does. She tells sad stories
that end with: *But I'm thankful for what*

I've been given. And I will nod,
the agreement of a liar. If I could
ever unlearn this mind, I would
break into satisfaction, focus on the gray
stone on which the heron stands.

A SERIES OF FEASTS

Life began when I stood on a stool listening
to the stiff-shirt rustle of a brown grocery bag,
worms hatching, crackling from pecans I'd gathered,
warm top of the humming fridge birthing them all.

From the stiff-shirt rustle of brown grocery bags,
to the light, the dark as Dad paced by windows,
the warm hum of the fridge accompanying all,
how can this life not be "a feast of brief hopes?"

The light, the dark. From Dad pacing by windows,
my brother swallowing ten bottles of pills,
"Life is," Milosz once wrote, "A feast of brief hopes."
How Ann smiled, one corner down, at my husband

as we swallowed shots of scotch after dinner.
At that moment I realized I'd never smiled the way
how she smiled. Folding one page corner down, he
focused on his date book's next task; he avoids grief

most moments—like realizing I've never smiled that way
or reading scrawled love notes found on sunken ships—
by doing his date book's next task. To avoid grief,
each ship trudges to the next shore, the next hope.

I wonder: how dying notes scrawled on ships like the Kursk
differ from immigrants' prayers who travel
on orange dots of rafts floating to the next shore.
Helen, too, crossed the Aegean convinced of better.

How different is it? Immigrants traveling on,
Helen crossing the Aegean sure of better
love, to worms crackling from pecans I'd gathered,
never ate, life beginning as I stood listening.

SCALING THE CHAIN-LINK FENCE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD POOL

Twelve, sneaking out, we went to the pool on a dare
and stripped in silence. When the moonlight pinkened
my nipples, I stared, and allowed them to stare.
In the curls of Michael's pubic hair, light glistened

like tiny beads of mercury. No one joked
or touched, aware how easily and harshly
all private moments will change. Stroke after stroke
arms raised and lowered strings of crystal jewelry.

How lightly droplets echoed when only one swam.
A softened clatter, a spilling upward, thin
as rippled air in that space between a priest's hand
and sinner's chest, a cross of absolution.

Nothing could wave away our feeling doomed—
yet content: living one night as if it would be
our lives. And now, doesn't the same full moon
and sense of what's untenable urge me

to think of my lover, stare at a black patch webbing
between the tops of two pines, stripped by blight?
That empty space—a palm that's holding something
out for me—a palm that others call the night.

YARD MEDITATION

He steps outside with his glass of water,
Settles into his lawn chair, and stares
At the shell-white sky: hazy, humid—constant.
Each day he loses more the expectation
That all will better itself; the gnat

That keeps poking, trying to sip
From the corner of his eye, will return,
Hover again in the background breeze
Of cicadas and I-40 traffic.

This is neither city nor country.
Neither today nor yesterday.
He thinks of his ex who called,
Can't remember what she said.
Instead: sliced wedges of a Pippin apple

She cut in her hand while they lay in bed,
Her thumb the knife's stopper; a strand
Of sunlight, spotted from window dirt,
Hitting her calf; same cicada

And highway humming around them.
One summer's end, they set out to find
The shack where his grandparents lived.
A day trip. Something to fill time.
Queen Anne's lace and ragweed

Flicked behind his knees as he trudged up
A stranger's hill to the shack still standing. Leaning.
Newspaper on walls curling down
Over the wrought-iron headboard.

And in the corner, a spider moving in.
Web open, unfinished, yet she wrapped
The gnat into a whitish bundle for later.
Her movements—something he'd seen before—
The fussing of hands over a kitchen counter,

Her sorting forks from spoons, sugar spoons
From tea spoons, tea spoons from soup spoons...
Then the pulling out of the drawer,
Darkness there, and long, open boxes.

Everything fitting into its own little space
As if no other option ever exists.

AFTER 15 YEARS, MY WIFE SAID *THANK YOU* AND *I'M SORRY*

Nothing lasts, we know, so why do I lift
The box turtle from the middle of the road
To the side where crab grass pocks asphalt crumbs?
Picking it up, I feel the tight-fisted weight
Of some creature shrunken inside, desperate
To be set down. I hold it away from my chest
As if I don't want to touch it, trace
Its nail-smooth underside halved by a seam
As rough as a re-scabbed wound. The longer I stand,
Unsure of what to do, the longer I give the turtle
that dizzying sense of no control. I know that feeling
As sure as I know the sound of hard-soled shoes
Grinding roadside gravel. *Set it down. Set*
It down. Here—or there—almost doesn't matter.

THIS WE CALL MANY THINGS, ONE OF WHICH IS EVOLUTION

The point is not why I was dying in a gas-station bathroom. [Abortion gone wrong.]

The point is I wanted to return.

The dog waited for me in the rental car.

It was August. Texas. Windows one-inched.

I loved neither where I was driving from nor driving to.

Neither the boy-husband I was married to nor the non-husband I occasionally fucked.

Given these circumstances, of course I wanted to live.

Like my homeless father who wanders the streets scared-near-death of what's following him.

Nothing wants to live less than anything else.

These bodies are built to return

To the mediocre

To return

To the unknown

We believe is better than now.

This desire we call evolution, survival of the fittest, genetic drift.

Stupid hope.

THE DOGMA OF THE TEN-MINUTE EGG*

Why molecular gastronomy? the interviewer asks Monsieur This as they sit inside *Le Perigo* before it opens for dinner. The kitchen is at work behind the closed door: oil crackling, metal bumping against metal banging. Where they talk among the unoccupied tables with empty goblets, linen napkins stiff in inaction, all feels quiet.

She remembers being eighteen, swearing not to marry, climbing out her hotel window and hoisting herself onto the flat, hot roof. The equinox at noon. She stretched off her shirt, her bra, then found a mandarin among the flakes of soot and paint. Too juicy to peel the fruit, she pierced the skin and sucked until it gave its juice and warped into a squashed sun.

I would love for you to elaborate on your earlier statement that a humble boiled egg is as worthy of attention as the banquets of kings. Would you mind explaining that a bit more?

Last year this time, she watched an egg-white dishwasher pass twice in the bed of a pick-up truck. It signaled dislocation, honesty, miscommunication akin to Eliot.

She nods, realizing he has stopped talking. With his index-finger, he scoots the napkin a quarter-inch to the left. She nods again. *And what is it that drives you*, she asks, *that makes you view The Ten-Minute Egg as just the start of kitchen dogma? That makes you want to challenge how we've always done certain things?*

The washer passed the morning after she realized her husband's one desire: that she love him not as a friend, but as a man. It all became clear as he searched the fridge for tapanade and talked about his day: *Gonna be huge, this pot luck. Pinnacle of San Fran community action*, he said. In that moment she fully understood how much he wanted to impress her, how sad she found the attempts, and how all this would never end. So she asked, *Does Kroger have mandarins?*

Is ignorance partly the motivation? How we know better the temperature inside the stars than inside a soufflé?

He was a good husband; their lives, content.
So, she decided loving without passion
was wise. But later, she kept a shined acorn
from a hike after deciding divorce was wise.
And then the Château Léoville Barton
wine bottle after she decided again.
And now the empty tin of pink sea salt.

The executive chef emerges from the kitchen and carries to Monsieur This an egg cooked according to his research. Spoon to shell, he begins to rap it, chiming the egg. Then, the rolling out of custardy egg whites, a consistency she's never seen before. A consistency that makes him say, *That's not a 65-degree egg. It's a 64.* The white not white enough. The rolling not slow enough. Monsieur This, a scientist, not a chef, knows what temperatures and durations do to proteins, how certain ones unravel—how in the unraveling, new shapes form from the old. Different tastes, consistencies that once changed, won't return.

After she left, her cooking changed first. Rather,
she stopped. Ate lettuce from her fist. Tossed back
walnuts like aspirin. And thought how close
they'd been from that couple wobbling a knife into
the anniversary cake. Eggs-in-a-basket
is what she started making again, a meal
from childhood. Overcooked. Overbuttered. Hot.

*The prose sections of the poem are inspired by and sometimes quoted directly from "Cooking for Eggheads" by Patricia Gadsby published in *Discover* magazine. The blank verse sections are not from the interview.

“IT WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE A WHOLE COMPLETE MALE”

—Quote from archeologist Mike Morwood in “Hobbit
Skeleton Changes Evolution”*



What do you see
 Inside the small skull
 That you hold in your hands?
Memories
 Of shivering nights feeding
 The moon orange?
 Or simply impressions:
 Brain curls and Brodmann’s area 10,
 Broca and Wernicke’s regions?

Down in that 130-foot cave
Where you search for more fossilized men
Tell me

 What don’t you see:
 A tickle in the twilight of throat,
 Raw water lilies bent toward mystery,
 Cut heels from a rat’s long lather.

On this island of Flores, rats grow to size of dogs,
 Elephants are pygmy,
 And humans take a rickshaw-roll backward:
 Two meters tall instead of three,
 Brains a third the size,
 Bellies potted like chimps’.

It’s the surprise that surprises me,
The assumption that progress
 Is one straight climb
 Without detours, switchbacks,
Figure-eights,

 Slides through skunk scents,

Slips into holes
Shaking with yellow
Jackets.

Tell me: the last time you hiked off-trail,
What was more certain:

Where you would end
Or the path you would take?



I traveled to this remote island of Flores where
eight complete males have since been found.
Only eight, I thought as I set foot on land
that promised a shower, dry mattress, AC.
Girls passed me with pink plastic backpacks en route
to school. A boy pointed to a long great hornbill
in a cassava tree, charged a *ribu* for showing it to me.
A monkey with a chain around his ankle grabbed
my glasses, and a bellboy climbed the monkey's tree
to retrieve them. I dropped off my bag, went out
for a breakfast of imported cheese, reports
of the World Cup, fresh stash of anti-biotics.

I found this to be the familiar world, the one that made
sense. Yet each little luxury a type of manipulation:
monkeys chained, eyes corrected, air cooled....
And nearby in excavation caves, archeologists
were taking spikes to the cave floors, chinking
their way down to investigate a species that fascinates
because its progress is not what we call progress.
Leaning in with a pastry brush to wipe dirt from bone.

WHAT I LEARNED EARLY ON

The tea-colored spaniel began as a gift from Dad who required a too-tight hug and kiss whenever she made me smile. So, when the tire flipped her

into the air like a piece of gravel, I only felt relief even though she'd been chasing the school bus to get to me. But the next day, she returned

in a cardboard box Dad wanted us to bury. We traded time with the shovel. Soon I felt how earth stays chilled a foot beneath me,

saw how red clay sucks in rain, refuses to let go, heard what sounded like wind in a seashell bumping side-to-side as I lowered

her box into the hole. Even then, it was not over. Dad grabbed my arm and said, *Pull her back up. Every girl needs to see what death looks like.*

He razored open the box and out rushed the scent of an attic with its dusty stiffness of the unneeded and needed to be forgotten.

Her snout, her skull, her cheek smashed into a perfect circle. Incisors, canines, molars bared as jowls had stretched up and away like dough

smoothed for a pie plate. Everything flat except her eye—a black and milky-blue world—open wide as if she finally understood something she didn't know

that she did not know. A second before it happened, she must have realized what death looks like; a tire spinning all the world's gunk caught

in its tread: gravel, oil, grass, gum, tar, apple, ash. Darkness rushing toward the eye like a fist, And then the flinch to the right as it hits.

Her face, not that of death, but of the contortions
we make as we try to preserve this life.

DIVINING

i.

We are a train, father and daughter, car and caboose, divining rods held in front of chests. We are water-witching, doodlebugging. Divining.

We are marching. I tell him we are ready to parade down Main Street. And I'll write our banner slogan: *Call Spike. He'll treat you right.* He says, *Shush. You have to feel it. Shush.*

So, I wait for the twitch, wait for the sticks to cross. To x. Follow his pace, head down, feet placed in eight-inch patterns. Listen to whatever it is that rides the wind. Butterfly. Apple. Old bell. Nothing. I am learning how to listen to nothing. More real than what is there. I hear his face sweating, the sticks not moving, the promise from earlier in the morning: *We'll get rich. You would like that, huh? Be like your friends.*

His stick rigs. Or doesn't. We stand so still I see how much everything moves in this yard: the leaves, the squirrels, the shrubs. We stand so still Dad says, *I can feel the ground soften. Water. There is water.*

Or maybe not. I realize we do not have a machine to drill a well—nor do we know what prevents a well from caving in. I can hear his face reddening, and so I tell him I don't want a well. I want what I have: a father who is a diviner.

ii.

Tell me a secret, I asked him later. *Tell me how you know where there is water.*

He said: *It's like you can fall down. And just drop and drop and drop. And no one or no thing is there to stop you.*

Like the girl who fell in the old well last summer and died? When all the news crews came out and camped by the hole?

No, not like that at all, he said. *She was one of the lucky ones. People didn't forget her.*

SPIKE: WITH INTEREST

Let's imagine a world of lack.
Lack of luck, steady money, calm men
closing used-car deals. The way the road narrows
the closer to home. Lessens. And the lessons there.

Let's imagine a girl of extras.
Freckles and glares, stories and friends.
A girl who sells rotten tomatoes at the farmer's
market for more money than the good ones.

Let's imagine the world as it is: giving
and taking. Of course, people were selling
pigeons in the Temple, that den of thieves,
house of dens. Need is not, I tell you, thievery.

Let's imagine a man asking his eight-year-old for a loan.
She draws up a contract on her toybox. Her stuffed
animals lined up like prisoners before a firing squad,
everyone watching as she says: *With interest.*

I bend down to sign. And she asks me, a man,
to pinky swear that I'll mean it this time.

IV.

I watched you grow silent and hungry
Like the middle of the night.

—From “Blue Yodel of the Desperado” by Frank Stanford

ESSAY ON COLLECTIVE PARANOIA

Metaphors, like epitaphs, must be fitting. –Bion Theophilus

I. The Incident: A New Method for Death and Metaphor (°)

Waiter carries a tray across the hotel
lobby to three men clustered in fat arm chairs.
Litvinenko (°) dunks in his tea bag. Brown-red
hovers then spreads like blood from a cut. L. sips,
nods *Yes, yes*, to men

he calls comrades. Someone has laced the water
or cup with Isotope Polonium 210.
“The want of harmony between two things
is emphasized by their being placed side by side.”
This is rhetoric,

according to Aristotle, and relates
to love, maybe marriage, and assassination.
Poison only effective if presented
harmoniously: old friends; damp, chilly day;
suggestion of tea.

Later, L. walks in through the hospital door.
Doctors do not understand his sickness, so
the hospital charts resort to metaphor:
“His face is the color of the room’s white wall;”
“Stomach a ping-pong ball

⁵ I doubt my daughter remembers that I first taught her about metaphor. The word is from the Greek and means “to carry across.” It is also a moving van that blocked the view of the Parthenon while Stephen Jay Gould lunched alfresco. He tells the story in one of his books: “I was annoyed at first, but later wonderfully amused as I watched the moving men deliver some furniture to the neighboring house. The van said *Metaphora*. Of course, I realized. *Phor* is the verb for carrying and *meta* is a prefix meaning “change of place, order, condition, or nature.... A metaphor carries you from one object ... to another.”

⁶ Alexander Litvinenko served in the Soviet KGB and publicly accused his superiors of assassinating Boris Berezovksy and bombing apartments to blame on terrorists. An accusation that he had to have known would be his end. On November 1st, 2006, he walked into a London hospital and died soon after that from radioactive polonium-210 poisoning, the first death of this kind. I know more than she thinks I do about this world.

hit by a missile." (⁷) Metaphor is the mind catching itself in a mistake, which means we learn the new through the known, such as this first hit of the 21st century. (⁸) We know death, but not like this death.

Tests come back clean. Still, L. insists: *They are killing me.* Doctors think: *Metaphor; The pains and exams are difficult.* Then, he is dead. We loathe the passive construction, demand subjects, clear relationships.

So, next come questions: Whom did he meet? Unknown. Tea? Darjeeling. Maybe they killed him when he said, *Please pardon me* and left unaccompanied his cup. L. had always feared walking through crowded lobbies

under those recessed and shadowed ceilings. Air cooler at his face than feet. Death and duty merging in that air, the two terms indicating "what is fair or what is foul." (⁹) In the end, his fears accurate. (¹⁰)

⁷ These lines are direct quotes from the doctor's charts as reported by James Geary in "The First Assassination of the Twenty-first Century."

⁸ The poem needs to explain more about this idea of learning the new through the known. I'll give the example. When I tried to teach her how to dive off a dock—which she could never learn to do because she doesn't really listen—I gave her a simile. I said, "You are like a spring coiled up tight. Bend your knees and then release." The girl knew how a spring moved. She did not know how to dive. So, I related diving to what she did know—however inaccurate. A spring is not a dive, but like the feeling of diving. The inaccuracy (a.k.a. metaphor) helps one to learn something new. All quite simple really, but this poem overcomplicates things.

⁹ This is yet another quote from *Rhetoric* by Aristotle: "Both terms will indicate what is fair, or what is foul, but not simply their fairness or foulness." Shakespeare later stole this line.

¹⁰ "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you," Richard Nixon said. Curt Kobain later stole this line. Writers steal. That's my point. Taking things other people say out of context.

II. The Cause and Effect: Paranoia

Let us return to the lobby where L. sipped
his last tea and watched guests rush through the doors.
He suspected these moments as people came
and went were significant. Lobby a place
to execute plans,

remake the self. Brief cases with proposals,
purses with passports, valises with garters.
Lobby carpet also loaded with design:
burgundy stars inside navy squares over
toast-yellow diamonds.

It is necessary, psychiatrists say,
to function by responding to fragments: “bits
of conversation, beginnings of actions....” (¹¹)
We live on pieces. And attempt to piece all
into place. Someone

should be snapping photos while hiding behind
an indoor palm, eating a slice of folded
pizza. We know the wrongs we’ve done, the meanness
we’ve thought. Who knows what others might do? This is
not paranoia.

P (¹².) is akin to feeling loved. An attempt
at completeness. (¹³) Intimate Friend, we tell it
all. Who slighted us. How we deserved it. Fears.
And P. responds with: *Yes, worry! Yes, you’re doomed;*
Then, we feel understood.

¹¹ Another stolen phrase. This is from a book I own by Daniel Freeman and Phillipa A. Garety called *The Psychology of Persecutory Delusions*. They said it was a book about me.

¹² P. is another abbreviation. Seems to stand for Paranoia.

¹³ This sounds like that idea from Plato that we were once joined as one, then we were split into two. Standing on the dock, trying to teach her to dive, we were one. And then she jumped away. And love is a process of seeking someone to complete oneself. Trying to complete fragments, however, can also lead to wrong conclusions. Hence divorce, paranoia, and/or both.

III. Conclusion: Security Is All False

Concern for L. is not why we detail his death.
It's self-survival. P. can't protect if P.
can't imagine the threat. (¹⁴) The world churns and purrs
by forecasting our demise and devising
grand pre-emptive strikes.

All loss can be avoided: right liquid ounce,
right sexual mount, right hedge shape, right help mate,
right gruel, right bio-fuel, right SPF,
right laws against meth, right sugar substitute,
right Buddhist attitude,

and right polonium antidote will save us.
Reports assure that L.'s poisoning is not
possible for mass killings. But look here, P.
whispers, tapping a story on page D7,
U.S.A. Today.

Men in hazmat suits carrying twelve-liter
oxygen tanks, radiation meters, screw
drills, deem a doorknob lethal, the door itself
a threat, and two hotel rooms unsafe for use.
They must remove bits

of the rooms, too: outlet plaques, curtain hooks,
the Gideon. Would have been covert except
for a snitch. Who took that picture of our *charons*
carrying a door through the lobby? A door walking
sideways through a door.

¹⁴ A.k.a. the "clinical relevance of persecutory delusions." In other words, our suspicions are Real.

THE CHILD BEGGAR

Rests her cheek on my taxi's window,
Strums her ukulele. Once.
Maybe again.
Does not rush these faces
Flat and shut
In AC'd cars.

This is Jakarta gridlocked.
And she has
Time. The ukulele
Thrums. The eyes
Look inside the car now.
Mister, mister, please?

Don't you dare
Pity her, I think. Pity
Nothing more than distance.
My own father has been homeless
For fifteen years.
How can I help her
If I do not help him?
All I give
Is shore
To horizon
Distance.
Ink-squid-black water
Distance.
A thing to feel
When I feel
Nothing
Will change this scene.

ALOOF

Her house was quieter than all of her friends'.

Even the T.V. turned too low to hear. Only a flitting of other faces talking, sky-blue blousy sleeves rippling to wave hello or hug goodbye.

She would sometimes hang around with her father in the garage.

He hung upside down with gravity boots clipped over a chin-up bar.

It grows back hair, he said.

He followed his schedule for 29 days. Breaks of 5 minutes after 17 minutes of hanging. Three hours a day total.

She sat on a paint can near the kerosene heater.

She had a new puppy who stayed in the garage.

All over the concrete floor was pretzel-shaped dog crap. Even when she scooped it up, the wet shape remained.

So, they named the dog Pretzel.

She cannot say why she would have been sitting out there with her father.

The puppy?

Was this a happy memory?

She remembers smiling and the crisp, vitaminy scent of fresh puppy poop.

Reading.

His face reddening to a purple rainbow.

Her brother was there, too, playing pool, teasing their dad.

That's why she was there.

What color does a man turn after purple? her brother taunted.

Boy, you better shut up. You couldn't take this for one minute.

Sure I could. She couldn't though, he said, waving toward her.

The puppy pounced on a cave cricket. Pounced again.

Blue, she said. *You turn blue.*

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS [MAY] INCLUDE DELUSIONS

Pitch pines,
 sap suckers,
turkey oaks,
 tit mice,
surround, surround
 this man working,
leaning left
 on his ladder, right
foot a toe-
 tip-touch
as he goes to roof
 his girl's playhouse.
This man knows
 to number, to name,
accounting a means
 of first strike.
So...sweet birch,
 borer bees,
sedge wren,
 robins, robins,
whorish robins,
 willing to roost
on his shoulder
 should he let them.
He swears he feels
 a hard stare
as he screws down
 the starter strip
on this simple grey
 gable roof,
no valleys,
 no hips,
just one pair
 of pitch planes.
He works right
 and uphill all day
until it's time
 to tar shingles
to buckling flange.
 He hates the black

ooze glue
 that grabs fast
as handcuffs,
 that could hold-drown
a saber-tooth
 in a tar pit.
Cicadas choir,
 twining their timbres
so loud
 some souls
can't think,
 so he climbs
to the ridge top
 and straddles tall.
Fists clench,
 then unclench,
decision made,
 decided against.
And then, she's there.
 Through the cedar
limbs he glimpses
 the girl glaring,
sitting cross-
 legged, leaning
over her notebook,
 always note-
note-noting
 and staring straight
at him, at his
 eyes as if she
sees nothing,
 sees no one.

PROCEEDED IN DEATH

I.

Proceeded in death by—
that odd phrase of obituaries
as if death is a reunion,
and you've been running late
to meet the gang all your life.

Proceeded in death by—
is what the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*
writes today about a friend
from high school: Jill Morgan,
thirty, breast cancer. A quiet girl,
well-liked back then,
too polite to be loved.

Proceeded in death by....
My own list:
my grandfather who
sliced a bees' hive in half
with his axe and fell.
Mama-Ruth, my grandmother,
white-haired bull of a woman.
No one knows how, but after
one hour alone with her,
I stuttered over every word
for the next three years.

And my father will be there soon,
still hopping trains for now.

Proceeded in death by....
I notice who the newspaper
does not allow on this list:
Strangers. Friends. Past lovers.

II.

You must be grieving yourself. I heard last week
from the department secretary that your brother
died suddenly of a heart attack. I would not dare
call or write; it would upset your wife.

Do you remember how you lost your sunglasses?
I stole them when you turned to place the cream
back into the fridge. It was in the middle of us.
I knew. I wanted something to prove we happened.

They never smelled like you.

III.

You were the forced fuck,
someone I did because I needed
to be touched after a break-up.

I had just met your girlfriend,
an ex-Mormon stripper.
On a vacant hotel balcony,

you ended up going down on me.
All the prepositions from the line above
sum up my feelings for you:

a man between my other lovers,
a man between emotion too strong.

V.

You looked like any bum—
sugared and oiled, coated
in the eighty-degree heat.
You bolted toward me
and asked, *Do you know
the nearest salad bar?*

That's all you wanted to do
with your newly given ten
dollars. Dear man, maybe
you loved reading Nietzsche,
maybe you once rolled
pie scraps into Jesus
figurines, maybe you once
patted your mother's arm,
told her it would be okay.

Whatever you did or didn't do,
you gave me hope that someone,
somewhere might be talking

to my homeless father as I did to you:
Do you prefer organic or those
salad bars with lots of mayo sides
like pasta salad. Or do you like....
Someone talking about nothing,
talking as if you were a man
whom no one needed to fear.

MY FATHER'S NIPPLES

I.

Fat, pastry-dough sacks,
tipped with cone-shaped nipples, not hard,
considering it. No—more like
bloated pieces of candy corn.
The raging colors of that autumn, that maple
we sat under as he told me his plans
for other girls, but mostly for me.

II.

A father and daughter under a maple—
so tall it scratched all day at the sun.
Branches gnarled but striving up and away,
something Frost might say a boy could climb,
a man might climb to leave earth awhile,
only a little while.

III.

From a distance,
perhaps the kitchen window over the sink,
his hand cupping mine might have seemed loving.

Index finger circling, circling inside the palm—
This is how you masturbate.
This is how you kiss a man's nipple.

IV.

One side of his pectorals:
a beached jellyfish,
a strong hope,
a deflating ball

sitting all winter in a puddle outside the door.
Rain didn't skin over that hole each day,
but what always remained: the sinking
in the driveway. Twenty feet down a maple root
must have broken off part of the earth, pulling down
part of the drive, flattening one side of the ball,
so don't tell me earth itself doesn't leave for a while.

V.

You cannot leave this earth, but you can cross
a splayed log that crosses the creek
once spring begins its thaw; You can stare
at the shifting light through the shivering branches;
And you can decide to love what isn't attached
to what you hate.

Separate the log,
the crossing,
the leaves,
the mother watching
by the kitchen window
from the maple's trunk,
the body,
the weight of the body.

Even relinquish your hate of this earth
forbidding you climbing away, giving only
an afternoon by the creek under cover
of damp-green rhododendrons where humidity
and ghost-thin mosquitoes hover
alongside something else best not to name.

UNEXPECTED VISIT AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS

An hour ago, I held him as he cried, snot mixing with tears, mouth open. Now, dropping him off at the corner,
I ask what he's going to do, where he's going to go. *Not too proud to walk to The Bread Box and buy a beer like the others.*
At least once a week, homeless men like my father calmly step off the sidewalk into the quiet that follows the thud.
A cop once told me the homeless he knows often say goodbye first. As I watch my father walk away, rain thinning
to drizzle, softening everything except his cheeks taut from clenched teeth, I wonder which number in the cop's cell
takes care of removing the body, takes care of that part of living. A tidy past-time, this thinking about death,
one that doesn't involve me too much, fools me into believing I'm doing something, but I don't help my father
find a job, a home. Instead, I watch the cars blow his bangs in quick bursts off his forehead, then fall in the pause
of traffic. Pass and pause. Black tires and exhaust move on in the sticky hiss above the rain-slick roads.
This watching is all I do. When I feel optimistic, I squeeze my eyes closed like a child over a lit birthday cake
who believes wishing is the first act toward reality. Luck, I wish for. Luck and another life inside this life he has worn down.

WANTED: A PRETTY PICTURE

That visit from my father never happened.
Instead:

A bike ride alone.

The carrion:

A maze of its own muscle on the back road.

The turkey buzzard:

So engorged, it doesn't fly when I bike by.

Rather, it steadies its glare, and I give it space.

One could say this is the path

I too often take: One that swerves clear.

One that prefers a certain type of calm:

Day-burned road-gravel

Red-flicked and firm.

BARDO (1)

My childhood chore was to shoo away the two ghosts Dad didn't like: Grimekle and Had. Had stole oil from our Oldsmobile, streaked his cheeks with it until the car burned dry and caught fire. Grimekle tramped through the garden after hard rains, making the dirt rocky, useless. He would machete down Dad's cornstalks soon as they reached four feet tall, forcing Dad to stop writing his letters to ex-bosses, come outside with pencil paused over clipboard, yell about my neglect—everything hulking around mid-sentence.

Like us, they worried what to do. What was real. What passed for normal. Each night on the way to bed, they paused with Dad and me around our Van Gogh print. *Haystacks Under a Rainy Sky*. The strokes thick as a man's fingertips. And each night Dad told us how Van Gogh cut off his ear and mailed it to a woman who scorned him. He'd always say, "He knew how to show a bitch what she was missing."

Sometimes, I didn't notice the ghosts when they squatted motionless as pennies on our counter top. Sometimes I'd whisper how Dad was crazy. A pervert. Sometimes I lied. They'd shrug as if to say, "That's life" or "Sorry." Once I suggested Van Gogh painted with his cut-off ear, his paint strokes the size of an ear lobe. They laughed, called me a dumb kid, teased me for believing in spooky stories.

They passed their plans from one world to the next through the spilt salt grains at the dinner table, as if the salt itself were the message, as if we had long agreed to this life of passing messages between the in-between.

BARDO (2)

Yeah, I'm having to watch that right now with my dad,
The man said, "That," being the slow death of his father, Spike.

He was talking at the pool to this woman
With a prison tat, her boobs somehow
Up and full as two oranges.
Bikini tops are amazing things, he thought,
Not fully understanding the simplicity of synthetics.

What she said next, the woman sunbathing
With the tits and prison tat,
Was that traditional Japanese Buddhists believe
No one is fully alive until the 7th birthday.
Life something you become filled with—
Like water pouring from a pitcher into the body.

Dying takes a long time, too, he said, thinking about
Spike pissing himself by the packaged Swiss
And shredded Mozzarella in the Kroger aisle.
That darkness spreading across the crotch of his tan pants
And moving down his right leg in a wobbly line
Like water pouring from a pitcher.

The look in his eyes: scared, apologetic.
And then he blinked. Smiled.

Began humming "In the Mood—"
A song he'd danced to with all the girls in the fifties.
He was no longer there, no longer in Kroger,
When he stepped forward and reached out both arms
Toward the brightly lit rows of cheese,
All the while humming, *Don't keep me waiting,*
Don't keep me waiting,
When I'm in the mood.

THALIA CHASING GRAPEFRUIT

The grapefruit rolls downhill,
That motion June morning.
 Fruit heavy with 7 days rain,
 Climbing ants,
 Plump, white-veined seeds.
The wide paws of the golden spaniel
Flail after it, similar to a conductor criss-crossing his arms
In a final dare of energy.

Evolution, somewhere then and now,
Went a little manic, did a step-ball-change tap movement
And then the fish walked,
The seed split,
Wet, craving something more.
No.

 Take away agency.
The seed sprouted.
The sprout seeded.

There are limits to knowledge, limits to language
Describing the comedic effect of Thalia finally squashing her teeth
Into the fruit,
Flipping her head high and prancing by, drooling juice.

Some times it's best a poem fails us.
Reminds us of limits. Of simplicity.
Like dog. Sunlight. Rolling grapefruit.

ARGUMENT (2)

The wind bending a thin-trunked
Pine, butterscotch scented,
Sounded like the opening of a door—
And so, I thought of my father,

Of our loblollies, our axes, our
History and our longer history
Detailed in teeth-length, pelvis
Flares, hyoid bones, guts—

But why? my father interrupted.

What do you mean? Why do I write, or why do I write about you? You don't think you matter?

Definitely not that I like Little Debbie snack cakes, he said, chomping on one even then. An off-brand pie. Chemicalized-something approximating an apple turnover.

You're just the same, I said and shook my head.

Isn't that your fault?

I answered: *I have traveled all over this world, even to that nowhere island in Indonesia where they are discovering a new branch of human beings. I've looked down the 200-foot shaft archeologists have dug, each century a different color dirt. Smelled what they smelled: ash, lather, sunning bone. My life is no longer what it was with you: a child's illuminated globe with a burned-out light bulb inside, broken blue oceans, and our yellow splat of a state.*

He took a bite, then licked a crumb that hung from his mustache:
Yeab? Well, having seen so much, look what you're still going on about.

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VITA

Charlotte Pence is the author of the textbook *The Writer's Path* that merges composition with creative writing. Next year, she has three forthcoming titles: *The Branches*, *The Axe*, *The Missing*, which won Black Lawrence Press's poetry chapbook contest; *Weaves a Clear Night*, which won the Flying Trout chapbook prize; and *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, an essay collection she edited that features work by Kevin Young, David Kirby, Claudia Emerson and many other poets. The purpose of this collection is to bring song lyrics into the literature classroom and to locate points of separation and synthesis between poetry and songs. Pence's poetry has received the Discovered Voices award, an individual artist commission from Tennessee, and three Pushcart nominations. She has been published in *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Tar River*, *Ninth Letter*, *Diagram*, *Iron Horse*, and many other journals.

