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ANTITHESIS

A PROJECT REPORT

**Presented to the Department of English
California State University, Long Beach**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts**

**By James Patrick Sorenson
B.A., 1989, University of Colorado, Boulder
M.A., 1997, California State University, Long Beach**

May 2000

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ANTITHESIS

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ABSTRACT

ANTITHESIS

By

James Patrick Sorenson

May 2000

Each poet makes decisions about his work regarding form, content, and esthetic philosophy which reflect the author's definition of poetry. This project report examines artistic choices of line break, diction, sound, form, and imitation. Through these choices the artist mirrors societal values and demonstrates his personal philosophy of poetry.

This project report is a culmination of my thirty-three years of living, reading and writing. It is also an investigation of the art of poetry and the art of living which I have undertaken. In this project report I have included some of the poetry which I have written in the M.F.A. program. It reflects the direction which I have taken as an artist. Both the introductory matter and the appendix are only a sentence in the larger definition of art, the role of an artist in society, and the goal of art, particularly poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge and thank my readers for this project report: Charles H. Webb, Gerald Locklin, and Rafael Zepeda. These three writers have had a powerful and unique impact on my writing. I believe that they are exceptional poets and anti-poets.

I would like to acknowledge and thank some of my fellow students: J.D. Lloyd, Barton Saunders, and Barrie Ryan, who will be writers long remembered and who are extraordinary students and teachers, as well.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The more I write and the more I read, the more I realize that sound is poetry. If not for the use of sound, poetry is simply prose. Most of what student "poets" at CSULB and poets across the country write is prose with line breaks. This is "anti-poetry," as I call it. This type of anti-poetry works against what poetry has been trying to do for its entire existence: become elevated song. This is not to say that all anti-poetry is an evil force which ruins poetry; in fact, anti-poetry is the most important type of poetry. Without the anti-poet there would be not be free verse, a natural language approach, French symbolist poetry, or experimentation of any kind. Walt Whitman is a perfect example of the anti-poet, as are Emily Dickinson and E. E. Cummins. Anti-poetry, written by the anti-poet, has an important place in the history of writing. Anti-poetry keeps poetry from becoming a dead art and a dead language.

But because this "unelevated song" is the majority of what is written today it has ceased to be anti-poetry and has become poetry. As Emily Dickinson wrote, "the majority in this, as all prevails." The opinions of the majority make up the collective opinion of the society of artists. And this opinion of the majority of artists is always the current mode of operation, the current style.

But styles change. With anything (educational reform, politics, hem lines) there is a constant pendulum effect. This is also true with poetry. The pendulum swings one direction, toward the classical; then it swings in the other direction, toward the experimental. But eventually it will swing back again; eventually we will come upon the Neo-romantic, Neo-imagistic, and possibly even the Neo-neoclassical periods of

literature. Once today's anti-poetry becomes poetry, the new anti-poets must write a new anti-poetry. The anti-poet becomes the poet who writes against this type of poetry; his poetry becomes the anti-poetry. Thus the title for this project report is Antithesis (the thesis of the anti-poet).

And although anti-poetry is just as natural as going against nature there are certainly some pitfalls to avoid. There are three primary problems in contemporary poetry with which the anti-poet must contend. The first problem is the lack of an authorial voice. Writers, instead of making a comment, are simply reporting information. The second is a scarcity of craftsmanship; this issue stems from esthetic relativity. The third matter is insufficient use of artistic and poetic models. This results in the subsequent abandonment of long-held, major tenets of poetry.

In much poetry today, the author believes himself to be simply a reporter of an event, a scene, or an a single image. In part, this is because the beginning poet often forms a belief that the narrator is the author and the poem is reality. Because of this the novice poet often simply reports upon what is happening around him, and does so in a simple manner because that is considered modern in style. This poet refuses to recognize that the author must shape, mold, edit, and be a creator of art, rather than just a reporter of fact. The other reason is that many poets today believe that the author's voice, the message of the poem, should not be too obvious. That in order to write a good poem its meaning must be obscure. This can come from reading poetry and not understanding the method and point of the poem. The poet must use the authorial voice, must develop a tone, a mood, and have a meaning. Without meaning there is no poetry.

There are other poets who deny any models. They do not wish to be influenced by other authors, so that they can fully realize their own voice without foreign, offensive examples of past writers being thrust upon them. This can result in a lack of models

which results in a recreation of poetry. The author who forsakes all models must write the entire history of poetry by himself to advance to the modern age.

This denial of models can be harmful because it can lead to poetry which follows none of the major tenets or schools of poetry. The writer must become erudite, for himself and for his art. And as surely as the denial of models leads to formless, shapeless, pointless lines, the hero worship of an icon can plunge a poet's writing into cliché. The poet must be careful not to hold too tightly to a model, writing only in the single form of his favorite author's best poem. To write this way is to condemn oneself to be a lesser clone of a former great.

The relativism so pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s has followed the art of poetry into (and probably well beyond) the 1990s. Anything can be poetry. Just scribble something down; instantly it is poetry. The advertisement on a billboard, a menu for an Italian restaurant, my last telephone conversation: they are all found poems. This relativity takes away the need, the desire for craftsmanship. An author who uses no models and sees everything as art need only vomit upon the page and call it heroic. We'll call this poet the "pollock poet" after Jackson Pollock and his abstract impressionism.

This introduction leads me to my final point which is that an author should develop his creed and hold it close to his heart so that his poetry is worth something, if only to himself. As a poet and anti-poet I must try to use image, sound, story, and archetype to create the best poetry that I can. As an author I must do my very best to keep the best of what is old and make it new again, to find the best of what is new and use it when it works, and write a poetry which is poetry and anti-poetry too.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

The first section of the appendix, titled "Image and Meaning," includes some poems which focus on a scene or central image. That is not to say that all are imagist poems. Some are, but others are narrative in form. What is important about the image in these poems is that the image tells the story, not the other way around. The story is not created by the images, as in a short story or novel; rather the image is the story. I have also included some haiku, which is almost exclusively image. Some imagistic and syllabic poetry which resembles haiku is also included. This poetry was influenced by Ikkyu, the Zen Buddhist monk and author of Zen poetry, as well as Jim Harrison. Many of these poems were also influenced by my early reading of Charles Simic, particularly in the aspect of tone. The images used throughout this section are taken primarily from my personal experiences and activities such as gardening, traveling, walking on the beach, driving through town.

The second section in the appendix, entitled "Story and Meaning," focuses on narrative poems. These are not necessarily long, but tend to be longer than the imagistic poems, partly because a story often needs more time to develop than a single image. A story, however, can be told very succinctly and powerfully in a short piece. Robert Frost is one author whose work was used as inspiration and direction for the narrative poem. I first began to read Frost in depth when I began to teach some of his poems from a high school anthology: "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "Mending Wall," "'Out, Out--'," and "The Death of a Hired Man," were poems that were used as poetic models for the work in this section.

Section three, "Sound and Meaning," is the central argument for a revivification, a rejuvenation, of the use of sound in poetry. In this section are collected poems which pay special attention to internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, rhythm, and line break for the purpose of sound. These poems are sonic to varying degrees. Some simply use sound to complement meaning while others are sound first. In the latter the poem is sound to create meaning as an image might be used to create meaning. Just as music which is staccato might produce a tone, mood, or emotion in the listener of anxiety, anticipation, energy or fright, so too will a staccato rhythm create a mood in a reader. Other rhythms and sonic devices are used to create meaning as well. Wallace Stevens is one poet whose voice I have attempted to make my own.

"Towards an Archetypal Understanding" is just that. In this section I have attempted to use, as Gerald Locklin says, "cosmic, timeless, historical images." This section of poetry includes some rather enigmatic, elusive poems. But, let me insist, there is meaning and purpose in each. The images are used in an attempt to get to the deeper meaning imminent in each word. Carl Jung proposed the concept of the archetype, an image which has universal meaning. These images, or archetypes, could be cultural or simply human. I have attempted in this section to use "old" words and "ancient" images to delve into the depths of human psyche: my own as well as the reader's.

This explanation so far has touched on the decisions regarding an overall purpose and organization for the project report. What follows is a brief discussion of poetry and art followed by a description of my personal methodology and writing technique.

When an artist approaches his work, certain decisions must be made regarding the style and medium. The artist must consider both his place within a greater community of artists and his role as an artist. When deciding these aspects, the artist is defining art and shaping later definitions of art. Only a young, foolish or naive artist would go blindly

into the fray without becoming informed regarding the history, philosophy, and purpose of art.

A painter would surely become educated regarding the medium: oil, latex, watercolor. He would make a conscious choice regarding the medium for each or all of his works. He would develop a style which would be influenced by other artists: well-known or obscure. Even if he did not directly study art history or painting, he would be influenced by visual images everywhere: television, billboards, movies, photographs, and the countless images of everyday life. The decisions he makes regarding medium, style, and imitation would further affect the definition of art as other artists would see his work. The painter is an artist in a community and so is the poet.

Even the most talented painter can only make us see. One cannot hear a painting. So, as the painter creates things that can be seen, the poet works on a product which can be seen in three ways as well as heard. The poem can be seen on the page as a series of lines, usually justified against the left margin with a ragged edge on the right end of the lines. Sometimes the author will indent lines; occasionally he will use the shape of the poem to make meaning, as in concrete poetry. Often the poem is broken into groups of lines. This shaping of lines defines poetry. In fact, many writers of poetry are actually writing prose, but because of the way it is broken up on the page an artist can call it poetry. The idea that it looks like a poem makes it poetry.

The second way a poem can be seen is closer to the text. The words on the page, the order of the words, the line breaks, short and long words are all examples of this secondary level of "seeing" a poem. This secondary level involves the reading of the poem and as such is another, obviously the most important, meaning-making level. The final act of seeing a poem happens in the mind of the reader. Here, almost out of the hands of the author, the reader constructs his meaning, creates his images, with the help of the text. With this in mind an author should make careful and purposeful decisions

about line breaks, word choices, the shape of the poem on the page, and the creation of an image through careful craftsmanship.

Not much has changed in the thousands of years that man has existed on the planet. A simple comparison shows how little life has really changed in tens of thousands of years. Today, man arrives home from his day as a manager or wage-slave (hunting and gathering) and prepares some food. He enjoys his beer and TV dinner (his mead, sack or wine; dried meat or fish and bread.) Then he settles down to watch the flashing colored lights of the television and listen to a story (campfire and bard.) This storyteller started with a poem, thousands of years ago, because the poem had a beautiful sound and was easy to remember, with its simple rhythm and end-rhyme. Today the poet has all but abandoned the rhythm and rhyme of the poetry of the past, but the best poetry of today, even that devoid of sing-song rhythm and syllabic lines, pays great attention to sound. Some notable authors of the first half of the twentieth century still incorporated the qualities of real poetry: Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost.

Poetry is everywhere and the poet must simply try to capture and edit it. It is something like the field entomologist who captures a rare butterfly, kills it without destroying it, pins it down, names it, and puts it behind glass. The poet does all of those things except the killing, hopefully. The poet captures a truth, a moment, "pins it down" with language, but tries with all his might not to kill it. He attempts, if anything, a sort of Frankensteinian reanimation so that every time the poem is read it will live again.

One day last summer I experienced a series of simple events. Although they were unconnected the series of events had great meaning for me. Later, I chose to write them down to try to capture the intellectual moment, the realization, which I had because of the experiences. I coach a volleyball team which was having a car wash. The players sell tickets to earn money for tournaments. I went to pick up the tickets from a local, family-owned print shop. I have known this couple for several years. They have

always been kind: giving me free calendars advertising their business, offering to dig plants out of their garden to transplant into mine when I offer the slightest compliment. They have been in this little shop for decades, having come out to California in the 1950s. The wife handles all the office work and was waiting for me to arrive. After picking up my order we had a chance for small talk. I was not going anywhere and relaxed into some "over the fence" talk neighbors might have. During this talk she spoke to me about her brother, who lived out in Kansas; she commented on his recent illness and possible death. It was clear that this situation was very emotional for her. Her eyes began to well with tears and I wanted very much to give her a hug, but did not. When I left I said that I would keep her brother in my prayers—not too odd, unless you know me. I do not pray, have not gone to church since I moved out of my parents' home, do not believe in miracles or God's interaction with the universe. I suppose I would be considered a fringe Deist, possibly agnostic or atheist. But at that moment, seeing her crying, I cared for her and wanted to make her feel better, though we were not family and I did not know her brother.

At the time I did not think too much about my comment to her and went on to my next chore. I had decided to try to prolong the productive life of a fruit tree at my newly purchased house. It was completely infested with ants who lived in the hollow trunk of the tree. These ants feed, protect, and live off of aphids which were killing the tree. There were also a large number of white flies using the tree for its home. The curled, yellowing leaves and bumpy fruit were evidence enough for me. The ants and flies had to go, but no matter how much I sprayed they would not die. I did not want to use any more chemicals, fearful that I would suffer more from the poison than the ants had, so I was determined to seal up the entrances to their home. I purchased a one gallon, green bucket of tree asphalt from a local hardware store. I returned and began to slather the thick stuff on each bare cut left from limbs recently pruned and the ancient, termite-

eaten holes which went to the core of the tree. The ants were in a panic; they did not know whether to attack or retreat. Several of the ants were carrying the dead, injured, and partially pasted ants inside.

That is exactly when it hit me. It was social contract theory: the democratic opposition of the authoritarian belief of the divine right of kings. It was Hobbes. It was Locke. It was Rousseau. It is missing from lives of people in contemporary American society, yet it was the foundation of this nation via Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" and the Jeffersonian Democrats. I had so often heard my students say that anyone can do anything he wants because in America we are all free to do as we please. And in an effort not only to fill my students' minds with knowledge, but to give them a moral compass I argued that "we are all in this together," and must act accordingly.

And here it was in front of me. Ants are more humane than humans. Then all the events made connections: the woman I met earlier that day and my concern for her relatives, the "duty" of healing a tree that I had not planted or cared for for its first sixty years, and the duty of the ants to save one another.

I began to play around with the concept for a poem. I started with one line which set the tone for the rest of the piece. It was, "trying to heal the wounds of trees I did not plant." This somewhat iambic line gave me the rhythm and tone for the rest of the piece. The experiences gave me my central image and story. Months later I finally sat down to write the poem. And when I did it spilled from me like blood from a gunshot wound: fast, furious and sanguine.

This is how most of my poetry comes to me. I tend to start with an idea (event, image, topic) which I think will yield a good poem and just let it ferment in the back of my mind. The poem "The Rain Still Clung to Boxwood Boughs" formed much like "Wounds" did; it came piecemeal. Other poems, however, start as a complete idea but

have no images or story. These tend to be the most difficult for me because I have to sit down and try to distill images and narration match the idea or argument of the poem in my head. The easiest ones come to me completely formed, without the delay of fermentation and without the delay of forming idea into words. They come to me as if I am the conduit of a muse; these poems are born complete in my mind.

Most of my ideas come when I am walking, working, or thinking without a desire to write at all. Many authors give themselves a time to write, making it a discipline, but that does not work for me. I simply do not need it. I always have ideas. I have never suffered from writer's block. In fact, that may be the only poem I never write.

In most of my poetry I am attempting to make mental connections or evoke images of emotion. Each of these attempts has, conjoined with it, the attempt to make an argument. In much of my work I attempt to find the eternal, the past, the memory, the ancient. Because of this I avoid the use of contemporary, transient images. Wherever possible, I have chosen not to use brand names, objects which have not been around for at least one hundred years. Certainly there are exceptions. I would not avoid writing a poem about the internet simply because it is not old, but I would try to attach a theme of mankind's existence to it. What makes a great writer is his novel approach to the eternal.

CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCES

I read voraciously when I was younger. As a child my mother often took the family to the library once or twice a week. Once I found an author I enjoyed I would read everything written by that author. Each summer was dedicated to one author. From about junior high school on I began to read the great authors of American literature. One summer it was Ray Bradbury, another summer Poe, Hemingway, and others. Since high school I have enjoyed writing and had always planned to become a writer. In my early years I created mostly short stories which were science fiction. I worked as one of the editors for the school's gifted and talented "magazine." In previous years it had been primarily a collection of student's scientific and research documents, but the year I was involved it became something more of a creative writing magazine.

But I had another academic love which competed for my affections: science. I had always planned to have a career in science. My childhood years were spent collecting bugs. The first book I made was a book of insects which could be found in my yard. Each page had a drawing and some text to accompany it: a field guide, if you will, of insects which could be found near my home. This love of insects grew to a love of biology in high school. My coursework in high school was a preparation for a career in science. I enrolled in chemistry, physics, trigonometry, biology, biochemistry techniques, and psychology. After leaving high school I began to take science courses in college. My first year of college included Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology, Chemistry (a rather easy repetition of my high school courses) and college

math. This continued into my second year with courses in cell biology and organic chemistry. I found it challenging but, as time went on, less and less interesting.

At this time I took a creative writing class in poetry. It was an undergraduate poetry seminar, at the university of Colorado, Boulder, taught by Heather Gardener. Heather was a graduate student at the time. Much of what I wrote at the time had scientific diction, terminology, and themes. Heather recognized this and introduced me to the work of Miroslav Holub. He is a Yugoslavian poet who was also a doctor, a surgeon. The other author she recommended for my reading was Charles Simic. He is also Yugoslavian, but left that country when he was rather young, about the time of World War II, and came to America.

His poetry electrified me. His poetry was amazingly sparse, yet filled with interesting, surreal images. His poetry was dark, foreboding, hinting at evil with every stanza. He would turn each poem on a remarkable edge, challenging the reader but giving every necessary image and answer. I still enjoy his work.

After this workshop I was completely addicted. I loved the idea of an audience, instant feedback, and the act of creation. At that point I decided to become an English major with an emphasis in creative writing. David Simpson, a visiting professor from Oxford, became my chair. I submitted my work and was accepted. Two other instructors at the University of Colorado were very influential to me at that time: Reg Saner and Clarence Majors. I took seminars with each.

After graduating I continued to write, but lacked the discipline to be a "writer." Also, my career became my primary focus. But it is with my career that I finally began to appreciate and understand poetry. As an instructor of American literature, I began to study the periods of literature, the overriding philosophies of each movement or era. I began to read closely so I could, in turn, explain each idea, concept, line, and word to my students. As a teacher I became a student of literature, a student of poetry. I now

believe this was an essential step in the growth of my writing. I moved and started my career, earned a teaching credential, earned a Master's in English and decided to return to my writing. I applied to the Master's of Fine Arts program at CSULB.

It was here that I was first influenced by my seminar instructors: Elliot Fried, Gerald Locklin, and Charles Webb. Each of these authors have been an influence in my life not only through their own writing but with the writing and reading assignments provided to the students. The authors who have recently influenced my work are too numerous to mention. Also, the students in the program greatly affected my writing. I began to understand how to write for an audience, not just for myself. I began to write with the idea of publication.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

To restate, it is important for an author to make important choices regarding esthetics and rhetoric. The important esthetic decisions relate to the use of image, sound, and story. Both the use of these elements and the extent to which they are used, make considerable argument by the author about the esthetics of poetry.

In the appendices of this project report I have offered my opinion on the discussion of image, sound, and story. Each section is an examination of what I consider to be the most valuable and effective techniques. I have selected these pieces from a large number of poems primarily because I feel that they exemplify the necessary elements of poetry.

It is also paramount that an author become educated and knowledgeable regarding his craft. Grammar and rules regarding use of language; the history of poetry and poetic argument; rhetorical, metaphorical and other literary devices; and contemporary movements in poetry are all part of his erudition. Without this knowledge the poet is ineffectual.

As an author leaving the M.F.A. program, I have realized how little I really know, even with the vast amount of reading and writing which I have completed as part of the necessary coursework. It is only through further study that I will be able to test my own conclusions regarding the value of the use of image, sound, and story.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
IMAGE AND MEANING

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Image and Meaning

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Bedtime Song

I

The landing in Istanbul
was as gentle and airy
as a Turkish Lullaby.

In the cab Mona said,
most tourists complain
about cruel landings --
the pilots are air force trained:
no sense dilly-dallying
with all the missiles and tension around.

They are duty-bound
to bring all planes down
like meteorites.

II

Full of ghost voices,
the black box was lifted
from the carcass of a DC-10.

Clearly, the crew knew
but the fares slept
as the captain's voice
turned soft and breathy.
"What was he thinking?"
the reporter asked.

He thought it his duty
to sing his charges to ceaseless sleep
with a Turkish lullaby.

Trip to the Amazon

A
bit
wet,
dark
like
the
womb,
but
less
room.
The
poor
man's
version
of an
isolation
chamber.
Won't need
to fret about
Pumpkin's
braces. Don't
need to buy
that cleanser
for the sink.
Sorry, Dear,
about the
credit card
bill. Should
have brought
sunglasses
for that
bright
light,
that
god-
damn
bright
light.

This Is Just to Say

I have discovered
the condoms
that were in
your purse
which
you were undoubtedly
saving
for another
Forgive me;
they were perfect
for the baby-sitter--
so sweet and firm

And This is Just to Say

I have broken
the Waterford
that was in
the buffet
which
you were probably
saving
for posterity.
Forgive me;
it was flawless,
so crisp,
and so explosive.

And This is Just to Say

I have taken
the last bullets
that were in
the closet
which
you were likely
saving
for the firing range.
Forgive me;
they were beautiful:
so smooth
and so cold.

Supplication

**You pushed me
out of your life:
so much ballast
from the gondola
of a rising balloon.**

**I hit the ground
limp, disoriented,
an emotional
quadriplegic.**

**May I forever
weigh like a bag of sand
on your hollow,
insomnia-riddled
chest.**

Programmed for Sympathy

Stopped at the light,
I glanced toward the gas station
to see a sickly, balding woman
hunched over her car.
The chemo had taken its toll:
her long gray skirt
brushed the ground
and was gathered loosely
at her waist;
her sweatshirt
bagged and sagged,
accentuating pointed shoulders.
To top it off
she filled her own tank
at this late hour.
The light turned
and so did I.
Rounding the
corner I noticed
she also wore
a gang tattoo
across her neck
and a small,
neatly trimmed
goatee.

Play

The new critics
sit in velvet seats
before the opening
of an existentialist play.

The butcher/poet
appears in a spotlight,
his apron spotted with blood
in the shape of continents.

The poet becomes
just the head,
his body and limbs transform
into his loved ones.

A customer enters;
the butcher/poet cuts off
a sister or a brother,
trims the fat,

weighs the meat,
wraps it
in yesterday's Times,
takes some coins.

This scene is repeated,
act after bloody act, until
a lone hand with a cleaver
is left chasing the poet/head.

We clap and clap,
thirsty for more,
then step outside
to have a smoke.

Six Haiku

dolphins play in surf
nosing waves to the sand
then move up the coast

seals at the pier
stealing bait from hidden hooks
taunting fishermen

the adobe home
stands like a Spanish tower
rotting in the sun

glass and glass and glass
smacked by sea salt, wind, and sun
broken by a brick

glass and glass and glass
stopping sea salt, wind, and storms
but lets in the sky

one hundred puppies
tracking paint across the sky
crimson canvas fire

Arrow Highway Haiku

green, orange, bare: these trees
knee deep in winter water
chest deep in fog

dry sand riverbed
yucca, bamboo, and sage brush
explosions echo

granite explosions
ricochet in canyons, shake
prickly pear cactus

Garden Haiku

weary sun so shy
it hides below rooftops as
bare citrus twigs point

sun pokes sleeping grass,
teasing the sound brown sleeper
who groans, rolls over

frozen on the tree
brown oranges now spot the ground
where fruit flies gather

After Ikkyu

Green to orange to red
strawberries are fall
in delicious spring.

Bark peels off a tree
each piece a letter
delivered to earth.

Always to the sun
plant arms raised in spring:
a child wanting up.

Pink petals squeeze tight
aphids crowd the bud
suck, feed off beauty;
they hunger for it too.

Angst, angst, fly this kite
into the endless sky
now, knife, cut its string!

She said my love words
were far too sweet. In
truth her greedy fat life
ate too much me stew.

Just like a candle
snuffed out you'll be
back, lit and laughing.

Shame will stop the greatest river
from flowing down its mountain.

Courage intoxicates the sensible
and sobers all the witnesses.

Last Wish

The thin, ugly trees which reach deeply
into the smog that covers the summer city
don't afford us beauty, shade, or fruit.

Perfectly fine for drawings of desert isles,
they are good for nothing in the real world
except lighting on fire during a riot.

At night, with the burning palms,
the city looks like a cake for a very old man
who has made his last birthday wish.

Yet, for all his huffing
and puffing he cannot blow
a single candle out.

Yard Sale

I

The new kitchen table and its four companions stand,
stiff-legged, on the old linoleum; the shiny white surface
is baptized by crumbs falling from buttered toast.

The thin lines on the matching table top and chairs
look just like the curvy strands of hair on glossy,
ceramic urinals in well-used public restrooms.

In the living room the rest of the new furniture,
still sealed in boxes and wrapped in sheets of plastic,
behaves like horses coaxed into the gates before the race.

II

Outside the tourists mill about the ancient, fabric Stonehenge;
across the patchy crabgrass the sun casts long shadows
which, if we could read, would tell us when to plant our garden.

If the tourists had brought flowers instead of money
they could play the part of the bereaved and leave those rainbow offerings
next to broken lamps, props, which now serve as gravestones.

The artifacts of the very first inhabitants of this spot
are strewn upon the lawn, looking not unlike a gravesite
where the dead takes his possessions to the next world.

But these are possessions no family member would wish
upon the dead; the chipped cups, old clothes
and broken-backed chairs should not be sent on this journey.

III

The old man begins to usher the tourists into his home
and the new furniture leaves piece by piece;
they buy everything except the skeletons in the closet

History Lesson

Walking in my unfinished English garden:
along untended ivy, between the overgrown
boxwood and sword fern,
past the stack of five hundred sleeping bricks,
and across the fallow and parched ground,
I fret about the impending shorter days
and another wasted summer.

I inhale the sunlight.
The air smells of tannin:
like sumac, oak bark

or chardonnay.

I inhale the shadow.
It smells of ammonia,
like animal urine.

I lean against my shovel
to rest my tired back
and see again the rusted head of a garden hoe
deeply lodged in the ancient trunk
of this patient orange tree
which grew up around the sanguine hunk of metal
years before I was born.

From the Garden

The radishes are quite potent, a bit too
bitter and the skin's rather thick.

The vine ripened tomatoes are nicely
fleshy, but have an unusual metallic tang.

The basil should be softer,
milder, with less of an aftertaste.

The romaine's barely palatable,
as pallid as these leaves are.

Altogether, with

the stakes for the tomato vines,
the twine and twist ties,
the first garden dug up by cats,
the next two drowned in spring storms,
the fertilizer,
the gardening gloves,
the tiny shovel,
the slug bait,
the tomato worm poison, and
the water,
the water,
the water,

this salad cost sixty-seven dollars and forty-nine cents
plus tax.

But that's not why
it's the best salad I've ever had.

Commuters

The train lurches and stops,
lurches and starts.

Their eyes travel around
looking for a place to stop.

The business suit
opens the sports section;

a teen romance rests
in private school pleats.

In sunset and shadows
they pretend to read.

Blowing

The banshee and I
are playing fool's poker
in a towering oak
above a bed of nails.

The scavengers are
salivating, shifting
their weight
from foot to foot.

Whistling quietly
the banshee reads her cards;
whistling contentedly
she reads mine

Bees in Clover

The aspen-white fence
guards the lemon tree.

The fruit is dirty
from the city air.

The unpicked lemons
brown and shrivel;

some have already fallen
into the clover below.

At the Stoplight

Three cars sit
waiting for the leggy jogger
to cross.

The first driver
sees her as a fawn:
lithe and compact,
bounding through the underbrush
like a piece of meat pulled on a string
just barely ahead
of mountain lion claws.

The second driver's
pock-marked face
doesn't hint at his image of the girl--
lying across a huge sleigh bed
bound and gagged,
her legs splayed.

I look down
at my feet on the pedals
and see that they
have become hooves:
quick and light as Pan's,
and she's a nymph
to chase through the forest.

At least
that's what I imagined;
now
it's in your head, too.

Airstrip

As she nurses four,
the feral cat watches

a blue-winged couple
build their late season nest.

The pilot will take this
collection of twigs and grass

from under the wing,
just as he did the first.

The blue birds will not feed
speckled, downy chirps.

APPENDIX B
STORY AND MEANING

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Story and Meaning

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To Save a Wounded Thing

I slap the asphalt tar onto the wood,
smearing the raw surface with the brush.
The black plane, wet, glistens in the sun
like the sweat collecting on my brow.

Sweat drops, like the leaves and my arm.
But the arm rises again, like the sun,
drops and rises, drops to the bucket
and raises the healing asphalt up again.
This repeated motion lulls my mind
lets it slip away, back to the grind of day,
to those events which resonate like seismic
waves in layers of distant, hardened clay.

This morning while picking
up a package the printer's wife spoke
to me about the sickness of her
brother and his imminent death.
This woman could be my great aunt
or my mother's mother, but she's not.
Yet I see in her the green of Iowa,
the small-town farm houses,

the sun-burned grandfather coming
in for lunch at the call of the noon-time
fire-house whistle. "Where's the bread?"
he says, flexing farmer-tan arms.
I see in her the Midwest of my ancestors,
the ancient-slow pitch and throe of
weather and seasons and childbirth
all recorded in the pages of an almanac.

I see her today begin to cry, just the
moistening of eyes in the corners,
a mature-woman cry and I'm sorry
so I say, "I'll keep him in my prayers."
Strange to say and stranger to mean
because I haven't seen Him in a while,
said because it seemed the thing to say
to try to make it right, to remedy the pain.

What brings me back to now are ants,
flooding from the gaps and cracks into the pitch
I've thickly painted on. They drown in
resin while their sisters drag them out.
Struggling with the weight, they take
the sticky clumps back inside the tree to die—
doing what they can to save the others.

The compulsion of the hive is strong;
they have signed a social contract with
their birth, like bees who kill for their queen,
or men who kill because a king has told them to—
but is the hive as strong in men? I think not, and look
around to the other orange trees, their fruit large
compared to that above me, now, growing
in a tree long past its prime.

I stretch. Death has crept into my knees
and back, so I stretch to flush it out then go back
to brushing this ailing, fruitless orange, trying to
heal the wounds of trees I did not plant.

United 1709 – L.A. to Denver

Eyes closed,
her delicate silhouette
presses against blonde, wavy tresses,
her nose slightly upturned, mouth a flower,
veins on the back of her hands: slightly visible,
fingers curved softly, innocently running
into the "V" of her jeans,
resting.

The plane
starts to rumble and she bounces
in her seat, eyelashes apart,
her head turns to the window,
hands together now, folded, fingers
interlaced as if in prayer. I wonder
if, and what.

The ground rushes below us.
I think don't ever, ever,
ever cut your hair as long as you live:
soft golden thread, and when you're silver still
worth its weight.

A childhood song sings to me:

"This is the roof,
this is the steeple,
open the doors,
and here's all the people . . ."

I notice that my hands, those scarred,
hairy, lumpy stumps have folded themselves.
I look back to the golden hair,
wondering if what I thought
was my prayer. I wonder
to whom.

Turkish Beauty

We walked toward
the man selling dondurma
and lead him astray with our body language;
he told us we had to have some--
we hadn't had dinner yet
but we'd be back.
We teased and asked the price of Turkish Tea
and the set of cups that came along.

Hunger and the sun
were settling
and neither of us had been to Kusadasi,
so on we walked to the tiny island castle
that drew us so.
The rocky jetty
provided a path, a street
to cross to the castle,
and a place for locals
to lay their tourist bait.

Two old men,
everything about them beige,
waited wearing hats.
Not baseball caps
or tourist gear,
but old-man hats.
They were waiting
for something,
it seemed to me.
They could have been fishing
the way they sat looking at the sea
on the verge of comfort and ease,
but always looking out, looking ahead,
even in the midst of conversation
their eyes on something distant.
It wasn't death, really,
that they were waiting for
but something else, something close.

The snap of pellet guns came next.
Balloons on a string floated
in the dark water
and people paid to see
if they could outwit
the crooked sights
and vendors too.

A young woman sold jewelry--
cases and cases of the stuff.
She did not try to make us buy,
but let us browse.
I looked more closely
at the beauty she had
than the beauty she sold.
Her Persian face and nose were long,
her eyes were dark.
One was covered with a shock of hair
she hid behind. That hair
which bounced back and forth
as it ran down, cascading down,
all different lengths.
She had hair
raised by wolves.
Human only in its depths
and wild, wild and everywhere.

We climbed both up and down
the castle stair
and ate surrounded by the air
and four sides of sea
and beauty everywhere.
The waiter strolled over stones
placed a thousand years ago.
He warned us not to feed the cats
but we did anyway and spoke
of the girl with the hair:

The most beautiful Turk, I said.
Not even close.
Does she know how beautiful she is?
She's not.
Could you tell her she is?
Yes.
Could you ask her age?
Yes.
If she had a boyfriend?
Yes.
Your Turkish is good.
Thank you.
Could you tell her she has a beauty
like a sullen, petulant child? And
could you tell her I'd like to take her
back to the states where she would be
my princess, forever?
No.

You stopped
at the girl's jewelry stand
on the way back
as if to dare.
So you said, for me,
that she was beauty.
She glanced askance
as if to ask for help,
to see if someone overheard,
shocked, flustered, or abashed,
I'm still not sure.
Yet, she managed to say thanks.
Is that all, you asked me.
Yes, all, perhaps too much.
Yes, all, and if she's
like you and me
she knows the rest.
She knows she'll stay--
like you,
and I'll go home--
to someone else.

We turned and walked.
Two, I said, worth flirting with.
Two?

Yes, the second's you.
And that look again I saw in her.
But this time an act I'm sure
because I've said it all before.

Back through the city
to the man selling dondurma
which he gave to us for free
so we'd come back again
and we did.
Walking in the city
we ate our ice cream.
Two friends just friends laughing
with beauty everywhere.
We were a picture postcard,
not too unlike
the beige, Mediterranean men
on the jetty near Kusadasi
waiting, staring out at the sea.

Joe Dixon: Surfing Instructor

I had my first surfing experience
up in Monterey Bay, Thanksgiving Day.
And because I was a novice
my surfing instructor made me
put my wetsuit on twice,
not for practice but because
the first time I put it on
inside out.

While taking off my wetsuit,
the first time,
Joe commented, "Geez, Jim,
you're Auschwitz thin. You'll be cold.
See, I've got this extra layer to keep me warm,"
he gestured to his belly. "In fact, when you get in
you'll think: 'This is the coldest I've ever been.'
Don't worry, hypothermia's rarely lethal."

"Here," he handed me the board,
"in the water, on the way out,
keep pushing down
so the waves don't smack
this board into your face.
And hang onto it; it'll help you float
since you don't know
how to swim."

We walked toward
the churning and saw a dead seal
with a big chunk missing.
"Oh yeah, I almost forgot,
sharks don't like a fight;
they prefer gnawing on dead stuff,
so keep paddling, besides
it'll keep you warm."

Six Month Lease

Not a fixer-upper,
didn't need any paint,
the plumbing
was just fine.

Luxurious,
well-maintained garden,
immaculate
and secluded.

Excellent location,
great view,
easy access,
and the price was right.

Quiet
and clean,
a very big balcony,
parking in the rear.

Not a lot of traffic,
private, walking distance
to the beach,
pets OK.

The previous tenant
took great care
not to do
any damage

but I left my girlfriend
such a mess
that I couldn't get
my cleaning deposit back.

Rapt

If we attended prep school
he might have been our coxswain,
but in this reality we fixed sprinklers
and he was our boss.

He joined us for lunch just one day;
we listened for his pearls of wisdom,
knowing our experience was pale and soft
next to a man of his decades.

Imagine, our boss said,
all the semen created in one night
in a city the size of New York:
a stream, a river, an ocean!

Stunned solemn and grave
his team of seventeen-year-olds sat,
hearing the word semen
drip from a grown man's lips.

We couldn't come close to imagining
the abstract sewers he spoke of
but now we all thought
we had a clear image of him.

In the Aegean

We rented chairs just inches from the water
where, my vision unobstructed,
I watched the topless female bathers
from behind my mirrored lenses.

I suggested to my friend
that she tan topless so she could wear
her favorite strapless dress and not show any lines
"No," she said, just like all the other times.
The midday heat forced me
into ankle-slapping waves, past the children
who, I was quite sure, were peeing in the sea,
and I walked towards the bright horizon.
Once my shoulders were covered
the warm waves buoyed my chubby body.
the sun was hot, and the water cool;
I could have stayed all day.

A nymph passed by, paddling an inner tube.
I feigned disinterested solitude but turned
with devious delight to watch her figure
slowly disappear from sight.
Her narrow waist gave way
to smooth, hard cheeks
and with her kicks the inching bikini bottom
clung closer to her crack.
It struck me then, what I should do.
For weeks I had waited patiently
and now was the moment to take
the matter into my own hands.

I faced away from the beach
towards the unseen land of Greece
and the immense blue sky
and I waited for peace.
I stood quite still
like some sea fish here to spawn,
but the water was clear
and women were passing near
so again I had to wait.
But finally, peace, it came.
and as it rose reminded me
of cloudy jelly fish.

Grocery Store Musings

In line at the grocery store I stand
behind tug-o-warring, snuffle-headed children,
a checkbook and coupon laden housecow,
and a senior whose turtle-trudge
is a worthless attempt to prevent
a hip-crushing, headlong fall into death.

I realize I'll have some "free" time.
I pick up one of those freak-show magazines
with a one-armed man on the cover.
I read that people often ask him what happened--
not out of concern for him, of course,
but because they want to avoid his misfortune.

I imagine what it would be like
to swipe my card, sign the receipt,
and pick up my bags with only one arm.
I think about people staring,
eventually asking, "What happened?"
like they did to old one-arm.

In my daydream I turn to see a man
balancing four limes in one hand
and clutching a twelve-pack with the other.
His greasy shop shirt has a white, oval patch
embroidered with his name. "Ed" it says.
And I feel a rare moment of clarity, and peace

because I know he will ask about my missing arm--
expecting that it could never happen to him.
He will ask to warn his friends at work.
And I will tell him it all started at the grocery store--
buying a few beers for me and my buddies.
Here I'll mention the brand Ed carries.

I will tell Ed that I got in line
with my four limes in one hand
and twelve beers in the other
when I noticed a one-armed man ahead of me
and I made the mistake of asking him,
"What happened to your other arm?"

Gravestone

Drunk one night in a cemetery I stumbled over the perfect gift
for my little, punk-rock, Dutch girl. It represented a person
so it seemed fitting that it weighed as much, the major difference
was that no limbs flopped loosely, like other bodies I've carried.

My little car leaned for a week, the tombstone wedged
behind the driver's seat, before the surprise delivery.
I called later to make sure she got it. She was angry,
even after I assured her no owner cared, no soul was disturbed.

But I think she'd have been mad if I brought her a brick of coke,
20/20 eyesight, the Hope Diamond, the perfect, black-leather miniskirt.
Her neighbor told the police that a huge, Viking of a man had left it.
He carried it in front of him, she said, like a grapnel from his ship.

I suppose we're all a little more imposing with a gravemarker
in our arms. It's not like carrying an infant, a leaf rake, a briefcase,
or shopping bag. It says this guy's a man on a mission, a man in a hurry;
he can't be bothered with looking for a wheelbarrow.

So now the stone sits with knives and guns, wrist watches,
and car stereos in a police station's evidence room.
But even four thousand days and one thousand miles away
that hunk of granite presses on my heart.

"Stone-Savage Armed"

His boss, who reminded me of my father,
said, "Can't get decent help these days."
I felt sorry for the young man,
probably just his second day.

For a moment I wanted to be
the greasy-faced, 17-year-old, grocery checker
in that John Updike story "A&P"
where grease-boy defended
these two women, girls really,
who had come into the grocery store
wearing bikinis
and got in trouble with the boss.

But this was different from Updike's story:
first, I was a greasy-faced 28--not 17, not a rebel,
not anymore; still, I wanted to stand up to this boss,
just like the character did in the story.

The second difference being
grease-boy did not have
the two most beautiful scoops of vanilla ever seen,
like one of the girls in the story.

Not being able to save a woman in distress
did not stop me from wanting to be the hero--
I wanted to right wrongs,
all the wrongs that were ever done to anyone.

I wanted to go up to the boss and say, "Why are you
being such an asshole?" because grease-boy
seemed decent enough to me. Then the little voice
with my mother's tone, "Two wrongs don't make a right."
Besides, I was in a hurry to buy a book,
I might want to come back to this store some day,
I didn't really know grease-boy,
and I needed to get home.

So I looked away and down
to the book of Robert Frost's poetry: a gift
for the 21-year-old girl who I was sleeping with
behind my wife's back.

The Funny Story I told my Girlfriend

After I learned the "twelve grapes" ceremony from Francisco's brother, did the New Year's countdown, toasted to everything, and kissed everyone at the party it became incredibly boring.

So the man who has three names, Francisco, who goes by "Poncho" on the boat, and who is called "Pendejo" by his Canadian wife, took me and his friend, Juan, hooker shopping at one in the morning.

Jenn wanted to make sure Pendejo came home and stayed out of trouble so she gave him the baby and then we all piled in the Chevy Blazer and drove to Main to see what was happening.

Well, Poncho called the girl over after he stopped the car and she was all in a twitter because of the baby and of course he said it was mine so he could flirt.

We priced her and found that out-of-towners were about 10 bucks less and she was available right at the moment but I told her "solamente mirando," only looking.

It was the same expression I used to ward off the salespeople on the days that the cruise ships were in port because the prices doubled and there was no sense in buying.

Well, we drove on, around the corner to the 20/20, a topless bar that was closed and I got out and checked the door anyway and asked the lady on the corner to come over and talk to us if she was working.

When she finally came over we saw that she was better looking than the first: thinner and shorter, and looked pretty good in her tight, black skirt, and after the chit-chat Poncho got down to pricing.

She was three times the girl around the corner and Poncho responded in Spanish by asking her "What you got in there? Cable?" meaning cable TV of course and I started rolling.

He turned to Juan who was sitting in the back and repeated it, "What you got in there, cable?" and I could see him laugh, again, even though he was barely conscious from the mescal he had been drinking.

When I finished the story my girlfriend looked at me, not laughing or even grinning and I realized that women don't really want communication or honesty and I would've been better off just lying.

Coffee in Barstow

My friend Skip
tells everyone a story
which isn't true

about how we were
run out of Barstow
and almost killed

because I said,
"I like my women
like I like my coffee--

hot and black."
That part's true;
I say it all the time,

but in the Denny's
nobody looked up from eggs;
no one even blinked.

The Scent of the Herb Shot

It reminds you of the Heliotrope
growing in terra cotta on your patio;
which reminds me of the play "Our Town,"
telling us to suck the marrow out of life;
which reminds you of sucking the marrow
out of a high school ballplayer.

Reminiscent of your first drink of Jagermeister:
the smell of alcohol and black licorice.
This reminds me of my first time
and the taste of sweet peach schnapps;
which reminds you that you're mad
at your boyfriend who calls you "Peaches."

It reminds you of anise in the
sausage of an old-world pizza.
which reminds me of Ouzo:
what the Greeks call their anise drink;
and this, in turn, reminds you of Raki:
the name the Turks give theirs.

Both Ouzo and Raki are clear,
like your reasons
for getting me drunk.
But when poured into water
they become clouded,
like my judgment.

APPENDIX C
SOUND AND MEANING

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Woods

Bog huddled in thicklooking fogbanks, hearing
thrushes in bullrushes, a partridge in the scree;
oboes and clarinets: woodwinds in woods, the forest is
no place.

At the edge of the saltmarshes, in swampy damp
the lungfish pulled itself ashore with its fins to a tree,
now a log, slapping his way up the sand to no
enemy.

Leatherstocking feet guided by furclad thoughts
through marshy treachery. The tearwashed carpet
of pineneedles crushed under the stomp, horselike,
of man.

To the same tree, now a log, where a man sits pushing
his hickory stick into the moist humus, peat. Feet flat now,
so far from the trees, gripping the flat, flat ground. Hands
are tools.

Kindling, flint, an easyswift motion of hands
make logs yield the snap and crack of combustion,
make smoke swirl up through needlethin pines
to sky.

Waterspout

(italics from Swinburne)

I will go back to the great sweet mother,

Run to the land where horses' stiff gallop
means naught, where drift wood and kelp
float as clouds, where the crush and crash
pummel boulders into sand of an hourglass.

Set free the soul as thy soul is free.

Travel through the orange calm of dusky
desert and hold the fossil high, evidence
that this dusty plateau was once sea shore
or more than a few fathoms deep.

I shall rise with thy rising, with thee subside.

Follow the rise of surf each day, clamber
into the cold of the great, sweet mother of all life,
she washes clean, again, the foam spills
over bare skin in stinging symphonies.

This woven raiment of nights and days

--there is no other. The salt water is inside
these simple dumb veins, thump-thumping
the blood of time before years comes to us
from the bosom of the great sweet mother.

Naked and glad would I walk in thy ways.

Forsake, forget, forgo the worldly, the earthly
for the simple wax and wane of ocean life,
the starfish regenerating arms, the jellyfish
who glides in nearly frozen ballet.

From the first thou wert; in the end thou art.

Leave, we all must but in this endless,
screaming, twisting gyre of up and around
there is still foundation, solid but moving,
the great sweet mother of life, the sea.

The Rain Still Clung to Boxwood Boughs

And as I pulled and clipped the branches slapped
and whipped, flinging water droplets on my skin.
The spit of icy pinpricks, so unlike the heat

pouring down from the sun's squinting beams to my
raised eyes. Even breathing through my mouth, the pungent
scent crept to my brain and dragged out memories:

Mother cutting heady juniper limbs
to deck our halls and wreak a wreath
for my Christmas missed eight years straight;

the censer which I carried, as thurifer and acolyte,
while pursuing Father through the flock, my steps
two thirds of his, my cassock dragging on the floor,

the smoke wafting past my half-closed eyes,
burning, and turning down another aisle I saw
the smoke, the Son, rising to the apex of the beams;

and finally, further back in mind and time,
a spruce branch Father used to rain the holy water
down on all among the pews; as a child,

hoping no one would notice, I rubbed against
the tiny droplets, trying to push the Spirit
into the flesh beneath my wicked skin.

The Coda of Sleep

Pin your ear to the frozen ground, listen
for subtle noises, hard to hear as these:
broken chords from rudimentary artifacts,
and water table symphonies.

Gifted with numbers, seeing your birthdate,
the greasy beard sips coffee in the cafe
and tucks away the dollar that you gave him
talking all the distant while and weary way.

Cracked leather boots, heavy on the muddy floor,
the winter coat given by a gentle friend for such snows
slows his gait, makes him wait at closing time, near the door,
knowing, I knowing, when but not where on nights like these he goes.

The prismatic piano music shining
from the crystal spinning in the window
and the murky sonata from the rock salt
so dirge-like: sad-strong and slow.

And when she asks me where I've been,
nowhere darling, here and there, but still nowhere
nowhere still and still it sleets and still
we beat each other with our love.

The naked heat, crisp and clean,
blowing from the register, I lie awake:
what simple motion would it take to turn
the switch and pull the quilt around my neck.

The choruses of copper pennies ring away
change in an echo chamber, in a bottle, glass and green,
they lay the notation of the score that asks us again to play
to recall the instant, that dream, we lived today

The Barnacles of Insomnia

The sea-horses of Archimedes' onus
pulling the staid and pregnant earth onto her side
with the tip of an iron plow;
keeping the frantic team on course:
studying an endless exercise,
testing the infiniteness of one iota,
traipsing that scant pace,
probing the vacant pinch of space
being caressed between the presses
twitching thumb and spastic trigger finger.

The bloodless farmer/mathematician/philosopher
raking the plump sea cucumber's vines aside
with the point of his iron plow;
searching for his lever he's forever lurching, off balance
happening upon a Roman coin minted in time out of mind,
clearing away the Celtic sea soot,
melting the pitch of a static limbic system,
raising immense oaken planks which, once waterless, will serve as
kindling for the fry-- the fetal fire of our imagination.

The Tea I Call Red Rover

Into the tea infuser I place
orange and lemon peel, chicory root;
rosehips and hibiscus, too,
offers their sanguinity.

As with an infant the kettle's
picked up to stop its cries;
the steaming clarity's
poured into a ceramic mouth.

The infuser lowered
and allowed to steep,
the dried herbs come back to life
from dreams of death and wakeful sleep.

Removed, this bather leaves the water,
hangs above the cup, towelless and dripping:
each drop waits, pauses upon the surface,
struggling to get through the border.

It's as if the cup of tea checks the droplet's papers
--the molecules joining hands in solidarity
against the otherness of the brother--
and reluctantly grants it entry.

Like the game we played as children,
yet even as children we knew better
than to grip hand to hand, but hand to wrist,
to make our chain nearly impenetrable.

Genesis

-this is the beginning and how it began

The hope of persistence of beauty;
the persistence of hope for beauty.

The big sticks of witch cackle
beat the membrane of a head drum
godsmack and godslap the jawbone
of glass-fragile dignity.

The lack of purity of love;
the love of lack of purity.

Gallons of corruption pour
from pus-filled groin boils,
the earthy reek and hearty retch
of gangrenous flesh.

The crooked road of contemplation;
the contemplation of a crooked road.

Pinned, roach-like, to a straw tick
the cadaver was probed, weighed
down by the five stone of a rampant
hag perched on the dead breastbone.

The threads of the rug of desire;
the desire of the threads of a rug.

Night-island fiends and their daemon
lovers grapple, grope and drag orgy-riddled
minds past palms, nails leave furrows
which disappear in the surf . . .

The sweet hope of execration;
the execration of sweet hope.

Before mother time, close
to the singing firelight the storyteller
channeled the best night through the brain pan,
gave us sleek fear, sinewy pain, and courage.

The story of the first relation;
the relation of the first story.

Foxen Canyon

The children of Foxen Canyon
grow up wild-strong and waving,
like roadside poppies, pulling in
wandering eyes of passers by.

No, stronger: they're thistles
whose downy seed was swept
into a dewy asphalt crack.
They live to break the winding road

and choke the springtime flowers,
to reach out with those
thorny, purple heads and poke
through traveler's clothes.

No, stronger yet: they're songs
of pleasant, distant shores
which suck and yank at seamen
working silently at oars.

These piquant children
lure just like their Siren mothers
whose shaped melodies draw in
and seduce unprotected visitors.

Yes, their fathers must have come
into this fissure years ago,
reckless, stumbling, limbs untied;
their ears not filled with wax.

Complicity

Our nightingale's the barking of a sleepless dog
and every night we die close clasped in twisted arms
(like star-crossed lovers from the story we all know)
but rise each morning to a lark, alarm, to start the day.
Her distant mother startles us from sleep and dreams
of peaceful mountainsides where we reside with monks
who live to work and pray in peaceful solitude;
they stand like pines; their chant's the branch's creak.
She teases, "stay and play" but pushes me to go;
my secret side door exit sends me out
to pass the day without my girl, the sun becomes
my night, the moon my sun, my balance gone.

Like endless water torture, bamboo shoots or screws
for thumbs, her mother, half a world away, begins to push
the loyal girl to wed a doctor: rich and Mandarin;
a tourniquet, she'll stop the blood but lose a limb.
The blood still flows in other parts, her mother's soldier
goes to push the economic battle in
a country, red and communist and huge, where girls
do anything, I've heard, to make it out alive.
She worries constantly; the mother mouse still thinks
her husband's business trips embrace the busyness
of making love; she's thinking thoughts just like her self-
effacing daughter does about her busy man.

152 Miles to Bakersfield

The good and gentle doctor is again a stranger
though he paced us once through awful wind
and steered us past the earthquake ravaged road.
While he repaired a flat, I drank and waited -not too long-
for him to start again and push us up the steep.
It's good to have a partner, even if unknown, for such a journey.

Still further on this mostly lonely journey
I found a couple with a kindness even stranger.
Lost, I stopped and set my thoughts to steep;
I found defense against the sun and wind
granted by a bridge, and there I waited, long,
for reason to explain the disappearing road.

It seems that it had fallen forty feet, the road
on which I had proposed to make my journey.
It was as if I had surrendered, that's how long I waited.
The pair then gave what I would never give a stranger;
yet their kindness, their solution sent me back into the wind
up hills I just descended, thinking they were steep.

My lungs were taught the analogue of steep;
the treacherous, deserted, asphalt rode
up ridges, snaked along in ceaseless wind.
And only when harassed did I begin the journey;
Pushed this hard I formed the stranger
which I sought so long and long awaited.

And long, I found, he too had waited,
quietly, for me to scale the heights, so vast and steep
and gaze upon the self that is a constant stranger,
alien unknown, outside your vision, off the road.
The foreigner you see and don't on every journey
except the trip that makes you crazy with its wind.

So does it take a startling, wild wind
to grant the lunacy for which I waited?
Craziness will force that wondrous journey
on routes remote; astonishingly steep
enough to make a soul on that amazing road
who's so like him that he's a well-known stranger.

The breeze that I once called a wind, the hills I thought so steep--
It's strange, I waited long in fear to ride this road,
that I now must journey back seems stranger.