

DEADHEADING

A Project

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California State University, Chico

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in

English

by

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Nicholas Monroe

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my partner, Danae, and our three beasts,
Sasquatch, Wendigo, and Chupacabra.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Publication Rights	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Abstract	x
CHAPTER	
I. A Traveler's Guide to Deadheading	1
Kinetics	1
Faces and Bodies for Experience	3
Grief is more than Sad-sack-ishness	5
Fragmented	8
Temperaments	11
The Reality of Puke	20
Kill Your Idols and Snort Their Ashes	24
II. Deadheading	31
Points of Departure	32
Totem (a rejection).....	33
Inquiry: Outward.....	34
Quantum Entanglement	35
Jeff Combed his Hair Today.....	36
What is the Over : Under?	38
Jeff on METapHysics	39

	PAGE
Neighborhoods	40
Derailleur – a ghazal	41
Fish and Chips, Seattle.....	42
Baby Puke Bus Diptych	43
Jeff Takes a Ride Through Alta Heights, 1989.....	44
Passing a House Fire on Highway 70, Just South of Oroville .	45
Baby Puke Bus Redux	46
Jeff on Gun-Control	47
Urban Impressionism	48
Afternoons.....	49
At Mare Island Navy Base, Rowdy Kids Broke Every Window but One; That Window Belonged to You	50
A Haibun after Having Seen my Hero, Jerry Seinfeld, at the Redding Convention Center the Eve Prior to my Twenty-Eighth Birthday	51
Aloha from Hawaii	52
<i>days like this keep me warm</i>	54
Landmarks.....	55
ayahuma ayahuasca.....	56
Howard Phillips Lovecraft Reads Edgar Allan Poe by Candlelight.....	57
Baby Puke Bus Revisited.....	58
Creeping Arachne	59
The Fisherman and the Syren	60
Jeff Sings the Not-quite-nine-lives-Blues.....	61
Southern Gothic	62
The Gadget and the So-called Atomic Age	64
of bark, of branches.....	66

	PAGE
The Muleteer Returns Home from Market	67
From Boulderred Perch I See	68
Deadhead.....	69
The Connoisseur Contemplates His Declining Youth Via Alchemical Index	70
Pericarditis	71
Jeff and His Schizophrenia	72
In You I Recognize Myself.....	74
Last Will and Testament	75
Dear Mr. Narcissistic	77
The Last Passengers of the Baby Puke Bus	78
Filament	79
Works Consulted	80

ABSTRACT

Deadheading

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Master of Arts in English

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“Deadheading” is a collection of poems that can be viewed as a travelogue. This is a documentation of exploration. These poems move. They cover terrain—terrain that is physical, emotional, temporal, cultural, and spatial. This travelogue explores many elements of the world in order to convey the essence of the human condition through a variety of voices and poetic techniques.

The characters portrayed within, a rich variety of personae, navigate through the literary wilderness of eastern Tennessee in “Southern Gothic,” go to market and return with little to show for their work in “The Muleteer Returns Home from Market,” watch native islander culture clash with the now inseparable tourist trade in “Aloha from Hawaii,” and experience urban decay in the “Baby Puke Bus” sequence of poems. Other characters encounter mental illness for the first time in “Jeff Takes a Ride Through Alta Heights, 1989,” commune with the natural world in “From bouldered perch I see” and “of bark, of branches,” and come to terms with their own grief in “In You I Recognize Myself” and “*days like this keep me warm.*”

A Traveler's Guide to Deadheading

Kinetics

Whether commuting forty minutes each direction from the sleepy mountain town of Paradise to work and school at California State University, Chico, transitioning from student to teacher and back again, or working weekends as a barista at an independent coffee house, I do most of my writing on the go. It may seem that I am unsettled, but this movement keeps me at the beginning, just as Rilke said, “be always beginning.” Rilke’s dictum suggests that one must always be willing to approach writing (and subsequently the world) through novice eyes—eyes where the world is always new, exciting, and unknown. The moment one thinks of herself as master, or experienced, is the moment she falters, becomes complacent, and halts movement. As a beginner, one can continually experience growth. Rilke’s call for continually fresh eyes is inherently related to movement and travel, as travel puts the traveler into contact with unfamiliar cultures and landscapes, heightening empathy and understanding.

Travel (and subsequently movement by extension) is about relationships—between time and space, between objects both biological and inanimate, and between the shifting of emotions. From the micro-level of atomic orbits, to the macro-level of shifting solar systems, and back to the day-to-day commute, everything is movement. Our life narratives are told in terms of movement from one location to another. I believe that art, and more specifically poetry, should attempt to fully explore the nuances of the human

condition, and that movement and mobility are the keys to understanding what constitutes the human condition.

My poetry travels. It is always in motion because I am always on the move. While my work is not often directly personal (in the sense that the persona of the speaker of the poem does not necessarily reflect the author), my poetry reflects my movement and the movement of those that came before me. The characters in “Deadheading” are in motion, engaged in relationships with other characters, with the landscape, and with their own minds. These relationships are in constant flux, causing friction. Friction is what makes motion possible. Friction mobilizes some, while immobilizing others. Friction is always transformative. Motion is always transformative. If motion is everything (as I previously asserted), understanding the human condition then becomes about understanding movement, motion, travel, and the relationships required for that mobility. Understanding the human condition becomes about the transformation created within movement, and thus travel and movement are the overarching metaphors for this collection of poetry.

The title, “Deadheading,” is most often used as a travel term, usually in reference to commercial transport, describing a leg of a trip without passengers. It can also be used in regard to removing dead flowers from plants. This secondary definition can be viewed in terms of the revision process. Poems require nurture much like plants. The dead flowers and branches must be trimmed back to promote new growth, and the same can be said of writing. Unnecessary or unwarranted words and thoughts can hinder the growth of a poem, but deadheading allows the poem and poet to begin again

(returning to Rilke's dictum). Deadheading is a more than fitting title for this collection not only because of the roles travel and movement play in my work, but also because of the often solitary and transformative nature of writing.

"Deadheading" is segmented (a movement in its own right) into four sections: "Points of Departure," "Neighborhoods," "Landmarks," and "Deadhead." "Points of Departure" is more figurative in its title. The poems contained within are more philosophical in nature and exhibit moments of "departure" from reality or the limits of an earthbound existence. "Neighbors" is a section defined by physical moorings or grounding points both temporary (from moment-to-moment) and long-term over large swaths of time. It is more literal in its conception. The poems constituting this section explore space as a traveling between places. "Landmarks" operates under a figurative and concrete conceit of people and places acting as landmarks for humanity. "Deadhead" as a section utilizes the term in a polyvalent manner. The characters within this section are dealing with a multitude of issues on their own. They are traveling through life by themselves, even if they are surrounded by other people.

Faces and Bodies for Experience

The poems in "Deadheading" follow characters or "personae." By persona, I mean the constructed social roles or characterizations of the speaker of any given poem. It is important to distinguish that this work is not autobiographical per se. All of my work contains elements of personal experience (because we can only ever truly write what we know), but ultimately these characters, these personae, are constructed. In his

book, *Personae and Poiesis: The Poet and the Poem in Medieval Love Lyric*, Prospero Saiz states, “art is formal, that the creator (poet) and the creation (poem or artifact) are not synonymous” (88). This pronouncement echoes something Kenneth Burke wrote in an article titled “Three Definitions.” In it, Burke evinces that “[t]he reader of the poem must ‘make allowances’ for the fact that the poem is an artifact, its moods artificial” (177).

This formal distance created through persona is crucial to the art of poetry. In fact, Saiz argues, “when the poet sacrifices the formal shaping distance provided by art, he is in danger of not creating art at all” (89). Persona allows the poet to speak to larger universal themes without relying on a limited personal experience. Saiz confirms this thought when he writes, “ultimately the author wishes to communicate to us his view of existence or some part of it. Therefore, his point of view is by definition always bigger than the persona, the ‘I’” (90). Though the reader is experiencing the world of the poem through a constructed character, the sentiment of the work belongs wholly to the author. Saiz further elaborates, “in all literary works there are two levels of address. The first level is an internal one: the voice or the voices of the composition speak to themselves or to other entities in the work. On the second, the author quite clearly addresses us” (90). For instance, my poem “Jeff Takes a Ride Through Alta Heights, 1989” is one of many persona poems I have written about Jeff, a schizophrenic character I utilize to address any number of societal issues regarding mental illness. That poem reads:

He flashes me a long, toothy grin,
pedaling down the block
on oversized trike
with black and rust-dusted wheels,

pulling makeshift wagon, ill-formed
 and crafted from worn, discarded
 two-by-fours and plywood—
 a receptacle for prized possessions—
 bowling trophies, aluminum (not tin) cans,
 a d-cell operated boom-box
 sending scant waves of Michael Jackson
Off the Wall through static.

Four years old, I wave.

Typically, my poems regarding Jeff are narrated either by Jeff himself or by someone else interacting with Jeff. In my aforementioned poem (“Jeff Takes a Ride Through Alta Heights, 1989”), Jeff is viewed by a four-year-old child, someone encountering mental illness for the first time. The interaction between this schizophrenic man and young child is illuminated with the final line of the poem: “Four years old, I wave.” This allows me, the author, to speak to youthful uncertainty and naiveté. It gives the character of Jeff a “clean slate” away from the societal preconceptions of mental illness.

Grief is more than Sad-sack-ishness

Formal distance in poetry, much like persona, allows an author to discuss topics that may be otherwise unapproachable personally. While my poetry rarely adheres fully to formal structures, I do attempt to utilize the distance created with those influencing structures to speak toward difficult or more nuanced subjects such as grief. In her essay “The Poem as Reservoir for Grief,” Tess Gallagher describes grief as “a retroactive emotion which requires subsequent returns to the loss over a period of time” (1). Grief is a deep sorrow intricately tied to loss. Gallagher differentiates grief from sadness or despair in this definition. She posits that grief is more of a system or process

of emotion as opposed to a state of being. Ultimately, Gallagher laments that our society is not (yet) fully prepared to handle the grieving process due to our culture's insistence on the use of what J.T. Fraser termed the "business present" (Fraser). "Business present" is a phrase used to describe the "here and now" with only minor attention given (if at all) toward context, much like a CEO only interested in generating profits for shareholders in the present quarter. Where grief requires time, the business present is defined by the absence of time. Gallagher, utilizing Fraser's vocabulary, declares that the business present "pays only lip service to past and future; its essence is the removal of tension associated with future and past, in sharp contrast to the tragic present with its wealth of temporal conflicts" (3). For Gallagher (and Fraser) the business present is too mired in the now. It does not account for the transient nature of grief, nor for the requisite need to process loss dynamically and temporally.

Gallagher argues that one way to move from the business present into the process of grief is poetry. She elucidates that "poems allow a strictly private access to the griefhandling process, or, on another level, poems may bring one's loss into communion with other deaths and mythic elements which enlarge the view of the solitary death" (2). Poetry allows for a communal processing of loss. It allows the individual to recognize the ubiquity and pervasiveness of that loss. Poems achieve this "through ambiguity and the enrichments of images and metaphor, [and] invite our returns. Poems partake of the tragic and recreated present, while the business present continues to focus entirely on the 'now'" (Gallagher 3). I attempt to examine the nature of grief in my poem, currently titled, "In You I Recognize Myself." The poem reads:

A lost soul passes
 by my styrofoam cemetery—
 fabric ghosts and plastic
 skeletons swing against
 a late October gust.

Our glazed gazes meet
 and you smile,
 but the lines framing your lips
 spell melancholy,
 your eyes sign sadness.

The speaker of the poem sees “[a] lost soul” walking past his Halloween home haunt and recognizes his own grief through her as their “glazed gazes meet.” The speaker notices her grief in the melancholic “lines framing [her] lips” and the “sign[ed] sadness” in her eyes. The speaker returns to his own grief through this recognition. This poem does not fully fit Gallagher’s definition of grief, however, and more closely resembles “the business present” in its delivery by focusing on a singular moment in time. Though the poem resides temporally in the “now,” it is meant to straddle the line of that “moment” and a “reservoir” for grief. The poem does this by alluding to a past (something from the past was an impetus for the feelings of grief shared here) that stretches out the timeline of the poem. The requisite time required for grief is also compounded by the quiet actions conveyed in the poem. By focusing on the movements of facial muscles, time is slowed in this brief moment, allowing the grief shared by these two characters to be revealed.

This processing of grief is clarified when my poem “In You I Recognize Myself” is put into conversation with an earlier poem in this collection titled “*days like this keep me warm.*” The poem reads:

driving in paradise, a tender november

early morning sunlight sings
 through hearth-fire, amber
 and persimmoned leaves, strings
 gently plucked and piped piccolo

In “*days like this keep me warm*,” the speaker (who is meant to be the same speaker from “In You I Recognize Myself”) notices the beauty of the season and nature and says “days like this keep me warm.” Though these poems are not side-by-side in this collection, “*days like this keep me warm*” is offered as a counterpoint to the previously discussed “In You I Recognize Myself.” Where “In You I Recognize Myself” focuses on the recognition of loss, “*days like this keep me warm*” focuses on the processing of grief, the internalization and progression from that sorrow. Grief is a facet of poetry I have been interested in including in my own work, but is nearly incongruous with one of my other major poetic interests—the poem of the “moment” or “occasion.”

Fragmented

Gallagher’s examination of the “business present” brings to mind what Tony Hoagland termed the “skittery poem of our moment” (173). In “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment,” a chapter from his book *Real Soffistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*, Tony Hoagland suggests that the current landscape of poets is afraid of including straight narrative in their work. Hoagland characterizes these poems of the moment as “fast-moving and declarative, wobbling on the balance beam between associative and disassociative [sic], somewhat absurdist, and, indeed, cerebral” (179). Hoagland offers examples of these fragmented poems via Louis Aragon’s “Pop Tune,” a

French surrealist examination of the self and death; Rachel M. Simon's "Improvisation," a leaping, disjointed embodiment of the dissociated self; Kevin McFadden's "Variations as the Fell of the Fall," a manic poem that plays with rearranging the same letters from line to line to create a new (albeit nonsensical) language; and G.C. Waldrep's "Watercooler Tarmac," an associative poem that shuttles from tenuously related metaphor to metaphor; and much of my work fits directly into this oeuvre. The poems of today, from what Hoagland observes, specifically shy away from direct narrative. They refuse to tell a cogent story. But why?

Hoagland notes (quite beautifully) in the introduction to this chapter that "[a]esthetic shifts over time can be seen as a kind of crop rotation; the topsoil of one field is allowed to rest, while another field is plowed and cultivated" (173). This extended metaphor describes how poetic conventions change and adapt from generation to generation based on favored aesthetics. Hoagland suggests that these favored modes come to privilege out of a fear of boredom or tedium. (Though his use of Caroline Forché's quote on our age lacking the structure of a story contradicts this notion.) That well-worn adage (often attributed in some fashion or another to Oscar Wilde, Martin Amis, or Christopher Hitchens) applies here: to be boring, that is the greatest sin of all. Hoagland continues, "[t]he shifting of the ground of convention is one aspect of cultural self-renewal. But the fruitful style and idiom become conventional and then, conventionally tired" (173). This assertion, however, is reductive and seemingly aimed more at the reactive trends of the Internet age than the impetus for stylistic change from era to era which has traditionally been due to larger social, economic, and political

factors. Hoagland is not necessarily trying to say that change doesn't come from a rejection of previous values, but rather we have reached a critical mass within the literary arts where artists are reacting to reactions. The Postmodern experiment was meant to take the interiority of Modernism and critically examine it by calling attention to its use of language, but with the rapidly shifting nature of contemporary culture, an overwhelming amount of data and information, and a (sometimes appropriate) distrust of established narratives, self-consciousness and self-awareness seem to be all that is left for many of these poets. It may be time for a new literary movement, where all previous movements converge. We could call it the "all-encompassing" age.

I can see a "fear of boredom" at work in my own poetry at least. My poem "Southern Gothic" attempts to be both narrative and detached all at once, much like the example Hoagland proffers in Mark Halliday's "Couples." This may be the ultimate shortcoming of my piece. In fear of being conventionally boring, I have taken a traditionally narrative subgenre (the southern gothic—more on this specific subgenre later) and stripped it of its narrative clarity to hold that form up for inspection. The sections of this poem jump from point of view and voice; they refuse to be aligned with one perspective. Like Hoagland's detached specimens, my unwieldy creature "prefers the dance of multiple perspectives to sustained participation. It hesitates to enter a point of view that cannot easily be altered or quickly escaped from" (178). My fear of being boring has manifested itself as a fear of containment, but this is not all that my poem is attempting to do (again, more on this later).

Ultimately, Hoagland gives no judgment as to whether either approach (narrative or detached voice) is more valuable than the other, rather he only provides observation—these conventions just “are.” While he contends that authors should not be afraid of coherent narrative, they should not be ashamed of their dissociative work either. Hoagland states, “[o]ne can understand how disassociative (sic) has become fashionable, celebrated, taught, and learned—it’s a poetry equal, in its velocity, to the speed and disruptions of contemporary culture” (187). Through this observation, Hoagland advocates an awareness of these trends, but is careful to note that “[a]rt has to play, it has to break rules, to turn against its obligations, to be irresponsible, to recast convention. Some wildness is essential to its freedom” (187). Neither trend is better, more favorable, so long as it is artful in its intention. In truth, I celebrate this fragmented state in my poem “Aloha from Hawaii.” It is meant to evoke certain feelings pertaining to Hawaii through association and sound/image connection without a particular narrative hook. The opening stanza, “King Kamehameha, / Vancouver, and Mr. Hoover, / Alexander / Baldwin— / it seems everyone / is cuz’ to Brudda Iz,” rushes over the reader in a fury of sound, image, connotation, and association. This is used to overwhelm the reader with a confluence of history and island aesthetics to show how it feels to be trapped between native culture and the tourist industry.

Temperaments

All artists have tools and techniques with which they create their art. For poets, these tools can be classified into four distinct groups. In his article “Four

Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry,” Gregory Orr discusses poetic techniques and devices in terms he describes as “temperaments.” These temperaments include story, structure, imagination, and music. Orr asserts these temperaments as being “distinct from each other, even antipathetic at times,” but they all have the ability to work in concert together (269). Orr further adds that “[i]f a poet is born with one temperament, then he or she grows as a poet by developing that temperament, but also by nurturing the others” (269). These temperaments allow the poet to discover what skills are “gifts,” or techniques that come naturally, and which ones must be earned, alerting the poet as to where nurture and growth are required (277).

For Orr, “story” refers to the narrative elements of poetry, “structure” refers to established forms and the “shape” of a poem, “imagination” is the use of images both literal and figurative, and “music” is the broad range of sound effects and rhythms utilized in poetry that include meter, syllabic focus, “alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme” (270). Orr argues that story and structure are limiting elements that contain and constrain poems, while imagination and music are limitless and expansive.

Story and Structure

My poem “Southern Gothic” is an examination of cross-genre form. I wanted to take a traditionally narrative prose subgenre (the southern gothic) and bring it into the realm of poetry. According to Kim O’Connell in her review of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* the Southern Gothic is typically considered a subgenre within fiction that “tells about the South’ in a darker, more complex and more conflicted way than had

been seen in the years following the [Civil] war” (63). Tanfer Emin Tunc further describes the Southern Gothic as “a literary subgenre of Gothic fiction, which had originated in the 18th century and flourished throughout the 1900s” (Tunc). The narrative of my poem follows a man as he wades into a drought-riddled river (more of a creek at this point). He ultimately drowns himself after singing a Baptist hymn in penance for killing his brother (“that old, crimson fratricide”) out of jealousy. This poem plays with elements of the southern gothic genre, specifically in its use of a southern setting (it is indicated in the poem that this takes place in the Tennessee wilderness from references to particular species of plants and animals), Judeo-Christian folklore (the Baptist hymn “O Love that will not let me go”), and magical realism (the characterization of truth as an “apparition,” the ghost of his brother).

Each numbered section describes a different aspect of the narrative. The first gives the setting, the second relates some of the backstory through the metaphor of salamanders, the third shows the man recognizing what has happened via the ghost of his brother, in the fourth section the man sings a loving Baptist funeral hymn in remembrance of his brother, and the fifth section describes him sacrificing himself for penance. While authors such as James Dickey, Donald Justice, and Rickey Laurentiis have incorporated Southern Gothic conventions into their work, their poems that use these conventions operate as Southern Gothic poetry. Few, if any, do so to explore the subgenre and its features. My poem operates both within the realm of the subgenre and outside of it at the same time by examining the structure and features of the Southern Gothic subgenre and creating a world within it.

Where story and structure are used in “Southern Gothic” to dissect a specific subgenre, I do use those temperaments in a more traditional narrative vein elsewhere. For example, my poem “The Muleteer Returns Home from Market” follows a worn down rancher as he returns home from peddling his goods at market. His pockets are “threadbare,” indicating diminishing returns from sales. Though it is extremely subtle, the conflict of the narrative resides in the rancher’s willingness to give his mule sustenance in the face of his grave destitution. He is steeped in poverty and loss; his only companion is his mule (which he refuses to ride). This man is coming to the “end of the road,” metaphorically speaking and chooses his “partner” over himself. The mule is the rancher’s friend and companion and is just as broken as he is. This can be seen in the final stanza—“The creatures’ arthritic gaits / leave an eerie mirage” The sounds and structure here are meant to imitate the content. Words like “cataracted,” “sun-cracked,” “cragged,” and “rock-ribbed” are used for their hard-consonant sounds to indicate the rigid and unforgiving nature of this man’s existence. The caesuras are used to mimic the slowness and physicality of the rancher’s movement.

Image

While I try to balance the four temperaments of poetry (story, image, music, and structure) equally within my own work, one element frequently comes to the foreground: image. Image always seems to manifest itself greatly in my poems, regardless of my intent.

In the chapter “Images” from the book *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*, Robert Hass discusses the nature of imagery in poetry through an examination of Japanese poetry, specifically haiku. Hass focuses on the traditional Japanese form because of its requisite preoccupation with image. Hass makes a distinction between pure (literal) image and metaphor using a juxtaposition between Ezra Pound’s canonical “In the Station of the Metro” and the work of the haiku masters, Basho, Issa, and Buson. Hass suggests that Pound’s “In the Station of the Metro” can be read both subjectively (as metaphor) or objectively (as image), but distinguishes that if the poem is read objectively, Pound is mirroring this image as if he himself is seeing it (which is unlikely). Read as metaphor, the poem creates “the sensation . . . in fact, that he thinks, seeing the tired white faces emerging from the gloom, of petals on a wet, black bough” (292). The poem shifts then from “seeing” to “thinking” and becomes more expansive.

Hass’ examination of image makes me think of imagery and metaphor in my own work. Often my poetry relies on pure image intersticed with metaphor, but rarely have I given thought to the discrepancy between the features. According to Hass, “[m]etaphor, in general, lays one linguistic pattern against another. It can do so with a suddenness and force that rearrange categories of thought” (287). In my poem “Southern Gothic,” I fashion the represented physical space of the section of land occupied by various flora between the water line of the river and the tree line into a metaphor of “demilitarized zone.” The first section reads:

I.
 Trek down to drought-stricken waters—
 still enough to form baptismal pools.
 He dips sandal-clad feet into not-quite-deep

currents. Rosebay rhododendron

and new pitch pine saplings encroach on steep,
rooted red oak and hemlock.

The flora line, higher and lower than should be—
a demilitarized zone of bedrock and bedlam
shallows reveal

rocks stacked six-high in service to pagan gods.

A violent, midday sun wildfires his already blistered skin
as he rinses that old, crimson fratricide from his knife's edge.

This metaphor forces the reader to confront the information given previously in regard to the flora line—“higher AND lower than should be”—and what the reader knows about military terminology. This meshing of “linguistic patterns,” of the literal and figurative, gives the reader an added dimension of meaning to consider.

This is in contrast to the purely imagistic language that constitutes the bulk of the previous lines in that same poem. For example, “He dips sandal-clad feet into not-quite-deep / currents. Rosebay rhododendron / and new pitch pine saplings encroach on steep, / rooted red oak and hemlock.” While one can “read” this image for a “deeper” meaning, its main function is to invite the reader into the world of the poem through vivid description. This parallels what Robert Hass attempts (and certainly excels at) in the first two sections of his chapter on images. Hass details at great length a hiking trip in which he has an allergic reaction. Hass’ intention for relating this story is two-fold: to invite the reader into his frame of mind while conceiving this chapter and to exhibit the notion of contextuality of images. Hass evinces that all images have context, but even when that context is missing or obscured, images can still be read, can still stir, or “haunt.” Hass ultimately surmises that “[w]hat we see clearly is not perhaps the heart of reality toward

which the image leaps, but the quiet attention that is the form of the impulse to leap” (273).

The aforementioned “meshing of linguistic patterns” can be aligned with another aspect of literary critical tradition. Victor Shklovsky begins his seminal work, “Art as Technique,” with the maxim, “[a]rt is thinking in images” (775). He does so not only to ground his emerging formalist theory in the work of Potebnya and the other Symbolists, but to upend that widely accepted thought. The Symbolists saw “aesthetic feeling” as brought about by “economy of mental effort” (Shklovsky 775), that images distill complex meaning into symbols. Shklovsky acknowledges these ideas, but reckons they are not enough.

For Shklovsky, art cannot simply be reduced to image. He argues that if the Symbolists were correct in their assumptions (art is only image), the history of “imagistic art” would focus on the changes in imagery through the years. But they don’t. Images tend to remain fixed. Shklovsky claims “we find that images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing” (776). If the images themselves remain static over time, what is left is the change in perception of those images. Shklovsky contends that art exists in these changes to our perception of familiar images through what he refers to as “defamiliarization” (778).

Shklovsky defines defamiliarization as a means “to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (778).

Shklovsky finds art in making known images new again. Defamiliarization can be seen as

part of the “context” Robert Hass examined in relation to pure images as mentioned previously. It is what allows the pure image to stir the reader. The need to lengthen perception also harkens back to the requirement of time Tess Gallagher proffered in her treatment of grief, as well as for movement.

I myself strive to make familiar images “strange.” At this point in literary history, it seems that all images have been spoken to; there is nothing new under the sun as the saying goes. What that leaves poets with is defamiliarization. For example, my poem “From bouldered perch I see” rests completely with a singular image—the speaker sitting on a boulder, surveying a river coursing through a ravine. The first stanza reads:

fossilized skeletal
remains of giants—
placid streams pool
at clavicle—
the river cleaves
cavities between
ribs, travels
crooked spine
and waterfalls
over
pelvis.

Rivers have been imagined in art throughout history, so how do we say anything new about that image? By defamiliarizing the river, by making it strange, by making it new again. I do this in my poem by imagining the river flowing, not through rocks, but through the skeletal structure of a giant. This forces the reader to confront, not only the river as something previously unconsidered, but the landscape (and by extension the world) surrounding the river as something new and engaging. This gives the reader insight into the feelings aroused in the speaker and allows them to imagine the immensity

and majesty of the scene. Transformation is made possible here. Defamiliarization becomes another tool for me to relate human experience to the reader.

Music

Orr describes music as the collection of tools and techniques that include “syllables (pitch, duration, stress, loudness/softness), syntax, and assorted sound effects (assonance, consonance, alliteration, and subtler phenomena) as they interact to create the poem’s aural and rhythmical structure” (274). I utilize all of these tools throughout my body of work. Music comes to the forefront in the second section of my poem “The Fisherman and the Syren.” The section reads:

Flaxen waves fall
 across your breasts Milky flesh
 and glimmering of areola peek
 behind towheaded tresses. Your whorl, supple—
 excites then lulls, leaves me rum-drunk—
 shipwrecked on your song, your salt-slicked skin.
 Azure eyes anchor to my marrow drag me
 to your depths

When read aloud the music in this poem immediately becomes apparent from the alliteration of “Flaxen” and “fall” in the first line, the near-rhyme of “breasts” and “flesh” in the second, the alliteration and assonance of “towheaded” and “tresses” in the third line, the assonance in “behind” and “excites” that bridges the third and fourth lines, and then the long string of effects in the fifth line, “shipwrecked on your song, your salt-slicked skin.” Even the structure (with my use of caesura) amplifies the rhythmic effect seen in this poem. I utilize these effects to recreate the sounds and textures of the ocean, in turn making this poem as expansive as the ocean. Orr further describes music as “primitive and powerful” (274), and I can think of nothing quite as primal as the ocean.

Music is another manner to express what it means to exist. Sound is a fundamental part of our world and demands to be accounted for while trying to understand what it means to be human. Musicality comes easy for me. I think in terms of sound first (followed by image). Similarly to image, rarely do I write with the intention to focus on sound. I am continuously listening for sound combinations and music in my day-to-day life, and it inherently reveals itself in my writing. Sometimes these sounds become too thick and convoluted in my initial drafts and I am forced to pare down my lines to fit the aesthetic of a particular poem. Sometimes more ordinary, realistic language is in order.

The Reality of Puke

Orr's temperaments are the tools I utilize to speak to the "truth" of the human condition. Authors have been attempting to access and portray the core of the human experience through writing for as long as there has been language. This intention can be explicitly seen in literary Realism, but often poetry is seen as antithetical to the constraints, conventions, and preoccupations of the typically prose movement. I attempt to bridge this divide in my series of poems centered around the "Baby Puke Bus."

I ride the Butte County Regional Transit (better known as the B-line) frequently. I acutely observe the spectacle created by my fellow passengers on a bi-weekly basis and have so for many years now. I've noticed that many facets of humanity are displayed on these rides and have recorded a great deal of these experiences. The poems featured in this series are the result of those rides and observations. While my

poetry typically resides outside the realm of realism, I feel that realism is the best vehicle for this series of poems. As Annette von Droste-Hulshoff writes in *The Jew's Beech: A Picture of Life Among the Hills of Westphalia*, “[l]e vrais n’est pas toujours vraisemblable,” or “the truth is not always truth-like” (123).

Though things get weird on the Baby Puke Bus (as has become expected of my work), and the structure rambles to mimic some of the movement of a bus, these poems remain grounded in reality. The details are taken from real, empirically observed experiences, characters are based on actual people, and the italicized phrases are appropriated from conversations overheard. If the depictions seem unflattering it is because they are, as Watt described of realism in the novel form, “the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life” (11). These are the nitty-gritty details. Watt stated that “truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (12). Truth can be found in the smell and image of the vomit covering the poor woman and child and then the subsequent (lack of) attempt to clean up the mess.

Truth can also be found in the semen-stained seats in an attempt to create what Roland Barthes deemed “the reality effect.” Here this effect “shows that the ‘real’ is supposed to be self-sufficient, that it is strong enough to belie any notion of ‘function’” (Barthes 147). These seemingly extraneous details do little to push any appearance of narrative forward, but rather are utilized to establish a realistic world. The impoverished passengers aren’t necessarily meant to be denigrated in these poems, but they are depicted in a manner that shows the grisly particulars of their situations. There’s a huge

focus on the ugly and grotesque, especially in the neglected, drug-addled children of “Baby Puke Bus Revisited.” The first two stanzas read:

I don’t know what is worse—
 the stench of piss and shit
 falling off their dirt-stained toddler,
 or Dad’s bloodied tube socks liberated
 from steel toes.

I can’t tell where the chocolate ends
 and grime begins on their under-
 sized six-year-old. Wild slurping
 sloshes as she sucks frosting from finger tips.

These visceral details are used to heighten Barthes’ “reality effect,” to say “*we are the real*” (148). The details claim reality unto themselves. By doing this, a segment of the larger world is represented, not just to show that specific demographic, but examine its relationship to the larger world.

Truth can also be seen in the “particularity” of the specific places and times given in these poems. For instance, in “Baby Puke Bus Diptych,” the locations and times of the bus routes, “Paradise to Chico, 10:13am” and “Chico to Paradise, 2:36pm,” are given to create a temporal-spatial setting. And on “Baby Puke Bus Redux,” one of the characters, Methmouth Mike, references a bus transfer to Oroville, California, the seat of Butte County and home to the county jail. This gives the poems a semblance of reality by locating the reader in real places and in real times as these are verifiable bus routes and destinations.

“Baby Puke Bus Redux” is also grounded in a socio-historical moment with the reference to “Obamaphonorama,” an allusion to the low-income cell-phone program, *Lifeline Assistance*. Though *Lifeline Assistance* was not actually created by President

Obama (and is, in fact, not a tax-based program), it became a neo-conservative talking point, suggesting that Obama was giving away free smartphones to “undeserving,” poverty-stricken minorities and therefore contributing to the “welfare state.” This socio-historical context is described by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* as one of the features of realism. He states, “[t]he characters, attitudes, and relationships of the dramatis personae, then, are very closely connected with contemporary historical circumstances; contemporary political and social conditions are woven into the action” (457). Like the use of particular temporal-spatial settings, grounding this work in a socio-historical context gives the reader the sense of a “snapshot” of a specific moment of reality.

Finally, these poems attempt to embrace the middle and reject Romantic ideals (meaning the exoticism of characters and locales, implausible plots, excesses of whimsy, and a preoccupation with the supernatural)—both key tenets of realism—by evading extremes and celebrating the conventional or commonplace. In his book *The Realistic Imagination*, George Levine describes how realism “belongs, almost provincially, to a ‘middling’ condition and defines itself against the excesses” (5). This can be seen in the poem “The Last Passengers of the Baby Puke Bus,” where the middle is celebrated with a reverential tone and attitude given toward the “housekeepers, secretaries, landscapers, and pavement pounders” and the signs of hard work, “soil and toil,” under their fingernails. The reverence for the middle and their hard work stands out in juxtaposition to the tone taken against excess. Ambition and Romantic ideation are made to look foolish and crass in “Baby Puke Bus Revisited” with the lines “boozier Don

Juans with DUIs / *when was the last time you had an orgy?* / pop collars, try (fail to) pick up chicks.”

Ultimately, I imagine greatly expanding this series of bus poems as time marches on in an attempt to fully and categorically explore the full range of emotions and experiences of humanity, much like what Balzac strived for in his *La Comédie Humaine*. This is a fruitful and fascinating endeavor that I think is worth further pursuit.

Kill your Idols and Snort their Ashes

Tony Hoagland

Allen Ginsberg was famously attributed with saying, “kill your darlings.” Though he certainly wasn’t the first to say it, the phrase is still apt and is often used in regard to a writer’s own work. The phrase can, however, also be taken as a variation of “kill your idols,” meaning shirk off the shackles of those that came before. Writers shouldn’t just ditch their influences though. I believe writers should internalize them and carry them always without worrying about the constraints of imitation. It goes back to what Tony Hoagland wrote in “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment” about breaking rules. One must learn the rules, internalize what has come before, to subvert or break them. Imitation and intertextuality have a long history in the literary arts and are often used by a poet to assert her place in the literary landscape.

Hoagland’s poem “America” is in conversation with Ginsberg’s poem of the same name. Besides sharing a title, both poems have similar structures and address issues of society and economy in America. Where Ginsberg’s poem is broad and associative in

its conception, Hoagland narrows his focus to the particular though his examination of a student with “blue hair and a tongue stud” and his assertion that “America is for him a maximum-security prison” (7). By getting specific, Hoagland is able to augment and adapt Ginsberg’s work to fit his view of modern society. I do something similar in my poem “Dear Mr. Narcissistic.”

I would consider Tony Hoagland to be one of my contemporaries (or idols if you will). His book, *What Narcissism Means to Me*, has been foundational in my development as a poet. I don’t only consider Hoagland an influence though, but also find a kinship with him. My poem, “Dear Mr. Narcissistic,” speaks directly to him (or rather an imagined version of him), as well as references his poem, “America.” My poem reads:

Dear Mr. Narcissistic,

You present yourself as an omniscient intellectual,
thoroughly educated through and through,
yet you readily disregard
a crucial conviction of academia—
an open ear,
an open mind.

You sit perched on your podium, pissing in the wind.
Did your holy-water urea splash your face?
Did it smell like roses as its scent wafted
up to your cynical, haughty hipster nose?
Or did it carry the stink of dehydration, like any other
armchair philosopher/armchair alcoholic.

“asleep in America?”
Asleep in your own ego.
Hip-hop is not lyrical, has no literary value?
Are you jealous of their use of slant-rhyme, near-rhyme,
staccato syncopation,
dissolution of the American Dream,
perversion of the African-American Dream,

if there were such a thing?
Or are you just purposefully ignorant, or simply racist?

Maybe you're being ironic or contrarian—
face it, your own work is full of boom-bap rhythm
and tales from the street.

*I hated Tony Hoagland before it was cool,
to hating Tony Hoagland is so over,
to this is my love letter to Tony Hoagland.*

Maybe this is just massaging your inflated sense of self,
or assuaging your fear of irrelevance.

Yours truly,
Mr. Hypocritical

While I don't believe that Mr. Hoagland actually has a vendetta against hip-hop or black culture, his poem, "America," highlights the provincial and narcissistic views of some people in higher education. This led me to invent a hypothetical Tony Hoagland, based on the persona of the speaker in "America," that does have a cultural bias. The speaker in my poem openly critiques these views before realizing he is indulging in the same narcissistic tendencies in his "letter" when he signs off as "Mr. Hypocritical." Though I find some of Hoagland's assertions to be antagonistic, inflammatory, and limiting, I do recognize many of those same tendencies inside myself. So while this poem is indeed critical of this type of demeanor, it is also in some ways a loving homage. You might say that Hoagland and I have a tenuous relationship.

Jamaal May

I was first introduced to Jamaal May's work when I attended a panel at the 2015 AWP Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, titled "Extremophilia: Defining a

Poetics of the Extreme.” The panel was given by poets Beth Bachmann, Nick Flynn, and the aforementioned Jamaal May. I was initially drawn to the panel by the subject matter (as my own work often deals in the “extreme”) and the presence of Nick Flynn. It was Jamaal May, however, who held me captive in my seat with his poem “The Sky, Now Black with Birds.” Where Flynn and Bachmann each looked at the extreme as a continuum between love and violence, May revisualized their continuum as a waveform. Sound moves in waves and is conceptualized within an x and y axis. The vertical axis measures sound pressure (changes in pressure create different tones), while the horizontal axis represents time. This visualization melded extremes in content and image with extremes of sound. As Jamaal May read his poem, I was immediately struck by his use of sound and image and how those elements move around and into each other. One stanza continues to haunt me:

I wanted Brewer dead.
So dead, my tongue swelled fat with hexes, so fat
I wonder how forgive could ever fit inside my mouth.
Somehow it’s always there, fluttering in the larynx (9)

While the story of this poem is heart-rending, the images and sounds are what transform it into something more. The repetition of “dead” and “fat,” the hard consonant sounds in “hexes” and “larynx,” and the near rhyme of “how” and “mouth” excite sonically, while the figurative image of a word (“forgive”) is objectified as something that could be placed in the mouth. As I read through *Hum*, it became apparent that sound, mobility, and setting all converge in the continuum or waveform May described. I attempt to explore this continuum in my poem, “Filament”:

The living room unravels,

unspools, devolves to wool.

Knit us back together.
Where's your skin?

All I see are tendons, rather
fibers woven like a child's

hand-me-down plush toy.
Crots of clots, spin a yarn,

grab cord, any tendril will do.
Where can the threads lead?

Will I still bleed if stuck?
Glossolalia and divinations breed

a spreading viral contempt,
but somehow I will, too, find room for love.

My poem tries to fuse sound and image to explore the areas where they meet, commingle, and ultimately push against each other. Love to violence (or in May's poem, violence to love), low tones to high tones, quiet to loud, mobile and immobile states—these are all points that cause friction. That friction or tension is what makes writing compelling, allows it to show relationships in movement, and ultimately causes transformation that highlights what it means to be human.

Sean Hill

Where I find parallels between my work and Jamaal May's work via sound (or in Gregory Orr's vocabulary: music), my work sits alongside Sean Hill's 2014 collection of poetry, *Dangerous Goods*, through locale or setting. *Dangerous Goods* is explicitly indicative of place and movement. While much of Sean Hill's poetry shares a

musicality akin to mine and Jamaal May's work, we more closely align in the way we both use poetry of place and movement to talk about sociological and political issues. A great example of this can be found in Hill's poem "Bahamas Voyage: Meditations on Blacks on Boats":

Day 4

On a slave ship in the hold below deck
Barely enough room for burial—squeezed
in tight like a coffin too small—surrounded

by others, sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers
like books shelved—handsomely bound
in black—volumes in an ongoing travelogue

Day 7

Bombay Sapphire I bought duty free
in a bottle the clear blue of the water
at a Bahamian beach

does not comfort me. (7)

Hill's poem starts out as a day-to-day travelogue of the speaker's experience as a Black person taking a cruise. The narrative of the first three days covers more expected territory, but it quickly shifts into a rumination on the speaker's heritage and his ancestors' struggles as they were forcibly brought to America on slave ships. This friction between the past and present experience centered around one locale (a ship) is the crux of this poem. I attempt to create a similar friction in my poem "Aloha from Hawaii." Friction can be found throughout this poem, but is most evident in the following two stanzas:

The "natives" fear
thuggish American rule,
long for the lost
"lawful Hawaiian government,"
Kamehameha's kingdom,

but they didn't rule the neighbor's family.

Who takes the taxes?
 Who protects the turtles from use as taxis?
 Barnacle encrusted coral patches
 grow on his face—two inches every
 two hundred years.

These stanzas attempt to highlight the political turmoil created by colonialism and how that turmoil creates added friction when it comes up against something as seemingly benign as tourism. But in reality there is nothing benign about tourism. It is often exploitative and destructive to native and marginal cultures.

I want to further explore the social and political uses of poetry in my own work as I continue to write. Art shouldn't just be aesthetically pleasing (though I do believe that to be "enough" as some of my poems show), but can make a difference in the world. I want to join Claudia Rankine and Saeed Jones in their social and political-mindedness. I want to stir others to move into a new direction where there are no longer outsiders looking in on a society that disregards, disenfranchises, and disenchants them. I want to spark people to become travelers rather than tourists, to realize that the problems we attribute to the fringes are all of our problems, affect us all equally, and require a coalescence to solve them.

Deadheading

/ˈdedhed/

verb

gerund or present participle: **deadheading**

1. (of a commercial driver, etc.) complete a trip without paying passengers or freight
2. remove dead flower heads from (a plant) to encourage further blooming.

Points of Departure

Totem (a rejection)

I seek a path to Chichén Itzá, Magic Jaguar,
but poison sumac pushes against the path.
Will your rubied eyes divine the way?

The face between the teeth speaks
in tongues, whispers
gently of wind bending reeds,
then screams my name—*tourist tourist tourist*

when all I wanted was:
*Follow mossy tracks through
mist and branched cover.
Find the sun.*

Inquiry: Outward

Searching for da Vinci's Vitruvian man,
 I often look in the mirror
 only to find a doughy facsimile.
 If I leer long enough, however,
 I begin to see him
 in tensions of taught muscle,
 flexion creases
 as my outstretched ostrich neck
 arms rotate from rest at thigh,
 flush to shoulder, and finally aim to sky

with those poet's lying hands,
 precision of a coroner—
 artists whose work
 never quite matches life—
 Plato's bad copy of a bad copy.

What did Althusser say about *those* hands?
 Our hands that stroke keyboards?
 What would he say about the mechanistic
 ticking of our digital echo chambers?
 What ideologies do our threaded arguments serve?
 Men and women, crosses nailed to backs,
 jumping from tall buildings, falling
 like so many kites on a windless day.
 Even the Catholics are trying to move to the center.

These are the ancestors,
 creators, gods,
 some dead, some dying,
 some newly formed.
 I meet you where our atomic fields repulse.

Quantum Entanglement

after Albert Einstein, Erwin Schrödinger, and Niels Bohr

Different names for the same things.
From smallest particle
to largest solar system.
Everything is energy, quantum mechanics—
everything $E=MC^2$.
Call it what you will:
calories, joules,
light, lifeforce;
described in terms of Celsius, or Kelvin.
This universe is shaped like neurons,
is a neuron in the brain of the multiverse.
The solar system an atom,
planets revolving around the sun,
orbiting like electrons to nuclei.
Frequencies to wavelengths,
spooky action at a distance.
Dark matter or grey, it all binds the same.
We are stardust, remnants
of supernovas, or brown dwarfs:
Hydrogen, oxygen, carbon
spewed from evaporated black holes.

Jeff Combed his Hair Today

Hello. I combed my hair today.

Dirty, unkempt white tufts
matted down with water
and Dollar Tree comb,
cowlick struggling to keep in place.

*Uh, iced coffee please...let me give you change.
Dollar, twenty-five, fifty, sixty, seventy, seventy-five,
and five pennies.*

Breath stained with Busch beer
(seventy-nine cent tall-boys)
and half-and-half diluted, iced Vienna dark roast.

*Oh, maybe going to the treatment center today
Clozapine, Ziprasidone cocktail
add Risperidone, Aripiprazole, and Olanzapine for a punch*

Hasn't shaved in days, mustache scraggles soiled
by Pall Malls, Natural Spirits, and Basic Full Flavors,
wisps bent from resting
between a mangled, swollen, taupe and viole(n)t lip
and top denture.
That device catapults out
like a petulant child's tongue at a stranger
whenever he spews his cancerous-black-lung;
forty years smoking and cough syrup use.

*I crashed my car today . . .
yeah, passed out when I sneezed . . .
woke up with my car in a tree.
But, I got a new outfit.*

Dingy, over-sized, thrift store, navy cargo-pants,
estate-sale geriatric shoes (dead man walking),
all-over print Superman hoodie with matching 'S' shield hat
from K-Mart clearance rack.

*Refill please. You know,
I was a Mickey Mouse king once*

*and so were all my friends,
but the white walls blind—
hurt my eyes.*

*My girlfriend was a Minnie Mouse
and fit in my backpack
until I got to Napa State
where they took her away.*

*Yeah, I need the treatment center today.
Good-bye.*

What is the Over : Under?

1:1

*Odds are we won't make it out
alive*, said every pulp hero ever.
Odds are this boulder
will crush us. Odds are
Rube Goldberg will sing
poison darts into our necks.
Odds are the natives will be restless.
Odds are we won't find our way
back to the plane. Odds are
we will dehydrate before we starve.
Odds are we will resort to cannibalism.

1:1,000,000

*Odds are we won't make it out
alive*, said every pulp hero ever—
just before making it out alive.
Because in those perceived last minutes—
some Short-round will do something
ingeniously stupid
that may just save us all.

Jeff on METapHysics

*the cloud floating above my head cleared up
like the clouds outside right now*

*heaven is hard to actualize
it's on different astral planes*

*existing apart from time
floating adrift in space*

*rests on tentacles of elder ones
soars on scaly wings*

*the sun's just pure light
living without food*

Neighborhoods

Derailleur—a ghazal

Pedaling under the waxing moon with a heart waning. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!
 The cool creek breeze, moist in its desire to caress my mane. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!

Finally, a change in seasons, this heat has made me weak. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!
 I dream of crisp autumn air, henleys, hoodies, football games. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!

Hyde is turned loose with the night on schedule with the tide. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!
 Jekyll once more slain by that dagger, Walker on the rocks. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!

I am not in love with you, I just like the attention. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!
 Oh Narcissus, drowning in the shallows, fighting in vain. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!

Hill-climbing, tendons tearing, only a few miles more, Jekyll. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!
 Whiskey breath, wanton excess, hypocrisy and home again. Cycle! Cycle! Cycle!

Fish and Chips, Seattle

I bit down on the fried cod
with best friends.
Ocean and perpetual cloud
pressed with wet force,
weakening knee-caps—

or, was it that magnificent fish
showered in malt-vinegar
that battered my joints?

Or, maybe it was feeling
at home some eight-hundred
miles away that sat me
in cool, coarse sand,
fogged gray as the foamy tide
swelled around me,
my ankles,
saving me from wading
out into the deep.

Baby Puke Bus Diptych

Paradise to Chico, 10:13am

neon viscous magenta chunks
paint his mother pitiful
stomach acid—thick, acrid—
pollutes my pitiful snout

Chico to Paradise, 2:36pm

your vomit fermented four hours
partitioned off by trash bag quarantine
untouched aside from baby wipes,
route schedules draped over carelessly

Jeff Takes a Ride Through Alta Heights, 1989

He flashes me a long, toothy grin,
pedaling down the block
on oversized trike
with black and rust-dusted wheels,
pulling makeshift wagon, ill-formed
and crafted from worn, discarded
two-by-fours and plywood—
a receptacle for prized possessions—
bowling trophies, aluminum (not tin) cans,
a d-cell operated boom-box
sending scant waves of Michael Jackson
Off the Wall through static.

Four years old, I wave.

Passing a House Fire on Highway 70, Just South of Oroville

Funeral pyre,
black death geyser.
A well erupting,
spilling inky contents, garments dyed pitch,
woven from crimson and tangerine loom.

Ashen earth
surrounds the hearth,
blistered by its resilience,
mourning the hopes and dreams
that stacked and mortared those bricks.

Baby Puke Bus Redux

a roving Motel 6 or Super 8
would have less semen stains
a congregation of the dregs
with nowhere to bathe
government conspiracy theorists
and recent parolees
swastikas adorning plexiglass windows
that bitch is collecting welfare AND wants child support
curses Methmouth Mike
into his Obamaphonorama
Are we gonna make that transfer to Oroville
I ain't finna get locked up again
boozer Don Juans with DUIs and lines
when was the last time you had an orgy
pop collars, (fail to) pick up chicks
invalids
the obese
homeless looking for a place to sleep
mere fixtures to permeate
gummed plastic and fabric

Jeff on Gun-Control

Pete was a crazy son-bitch
I was lookin' for mescaline
in all the wrong places
with all the right people

Pete was a crazy son-bitch
found a Glock instead
loaded with .45 rounds
I don't know why I know that

Pete was a crazy son-bitch
thought we could trade it for an ounce
guns and drugs, drugs and guns
guns for drugs

Pete was a crazy son-bitch
so I took that goddamn Glock
ran down the street
popping shots in the air
so he couldn't plug no one

Urban Impressionism

The wall was spackled.
 Little lumps various sizes, shapes,
every shade every hue every color.

One stick peach carefully rolled
between thumb index, gently applied.
The texture alien begged to be felt
if not for subconscious singing, HEP C!

Four sticks traditional pink mashed against
molars, haphazardly slapped next to history.
Wet confetti flung against presumably
brick wall hidden underneath.

A small stick of white
(spearmint or peppermint),
 forcefully pressed in the center leaving
a perfect five-point fingerprint.

Afternoons

The Browns Valley
creek bed bled
stagnant mossy-green
where Mike
and Barrett dammed
its flow with fallen
limbs and sedimentary
stones. I skipped over
the muck and mire
as you climbed
up downed oak
to reach your hidden Playboys
and Penthouses pilfered
from Uncle Raymond's
trailer. We reclined
against ancient roots, shared
treats from the Sweet
Shoppe, marveled
at the cave roof
of thatched brachial branches.

At Mare Island Navy Base, Rowdy Kids Broke Every Window but One; That Window
Belonged to You

I never learned how to jump onto a speeding boxcar,
but I did find out how to carry a bleeding body over chain-link.

I probably didn't catch toads in a creek, or worry over potential warts,
but I did lie to pigs about how you were cut from elbow to wrist.

I rarely rode with gangs of boys on bikes, hair slicked back by switchblade comb,
but I did pick a shard from your arm for every last one that broke your heart.

for T.

A Haibun after Having Seen my Hero, Jerry Seinfeld, at the Redding Convention Center
the Eve prior to my Twenty-Eighth Birthday

I stumbled out The Alehouse on Hilltop Drive, and immediately evacuated the distilled
contents of my stomach into bristled juniper. I contemplated the meaning in my expelled
cargo, its profundity dripping ochre off spines green. I turned in half-sprint, half-trip,
shouting sentimental movie misquotes—*and in this moment... I am invincible!*

spring breeze ships ripples
across my gin and tonic
dew slips down the glass

Aloha from Hawaii

Poi and koi to karp
 But is the ono fish delicious?
 Lilikoi and passion fruit
 (don't eat the skin),
 mango, papaya,
 and four kinds of banana.
 Fifteen types of ginger,
 of relation to ginger root
 and ginger ale, but not edible.

Black rock beaches
 from A'A lava
 flows tubercular tubes,
 smoker's charcoal lungs.

Tourist Luau with fire dancer spectacle
 and mainland dancers provided pork—
 its flesh smooth like folds of pahoehoe.
 Kiss the snout and bob the apple
 from the pig's singed snaggle-tooth.

Harte International
 art house heist, Lahaina
mahalo for the pineapple vino,
we're taking it to go!
 Rembrandt, Chagall, Picasso—
 Who knew Anthony Quinn was a true fine artist
 and that Sir Anthony Hopkins thinks he's one?
 Though some of his work is *nice*.

King Kamehameha,
 Vancouver, and Mr. Hoover,
 Alexander/Baldwin—
 it seems everyone
 is cuz' to Brudda Iz.

The “natives” fear
 thuggish American rule,
 long for the lost
 “lawful Hawaiian government,”
 Kamehameha's kingdom,

but they didn't rule the neighbor's family.

Who takes the taxes?

Who protects the turtles from use as taxis?

Barnacle encrusted coral patches
grow on their faces—two inches every
two hundred years.

Trade winds waft scents

of cake mix and ash—

they clear-cut cane with fire.

days like this keep me warm
after The Polyphonic Spree, "Section 3"

driving in paradise, a tender november
early morning sunlight sings
through hearth-fire, amber
and persimmoned leaves, strings
gently plucked and piped piccolo

Landmarks

ayahuma ayahuasca

headless giant,
head-spirit drift
amongst the thrush
past brush burning

Howard Phillips Lovecraft Reads Edgar Allan Poe by Candlelight

There he sits—Poe's spine between
 knuckles clenched powder-white.
 Flash movement steals his attention—
 what malevolent shifting is this?

Knuckles clenched, powder-white,
 had there been a witch riding the shadows?
 What malevolent shifting is this?
 He slows his breath to steady his pulse—

had there been a witch riding the shadows?
The moon is dark, gods dance in the night; there is terror in the sky.
 He slows his breath to steady his pulse,
 peering through the pane, he traces outlines of figures in the night.

*The moon is dark, gods dance in the night; there is terror in the sky—
 lo! Death has reared himself a throne.*
 Peering through the pane, he traces outlines of figures in the night.
 Wax dances with wick as that magic hour draws near.

Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
 and forbidden knowledge stirs the bowels of madness.
 Wax dances with wick—that magic hour draws near
 and harkens him to the brink of lunacy.

There he sits—Poe's spine between
 knuckles, clenched powder white . . .

Baby Puke Bus Revisited

I don't know what is worse—
the stench of piss and shit
falling off their dirt-stained toddler,
or Dad's bloodied tube socks liberated
from steel toes.

I can't tell where the chocolate ends
and grime begins on their under-
sized six-year-old. Wild slurping
sloshes as she sucks frosting from finger tips.

The oldest pre-pubescent son twitches from tweak
ready for an afternoon fix and I am reminded
that apples fallen from trees can rot when left unattended.
Will the seeds be salvaged? Can these lives be made fruitful?
Or do they ride the route in an endless loop?

Creeping Arachne

with prone breasts,
nipples perked
her legs skitter, drag
arms vestigial
all over Purgatorio

The Fisherman and the Syren
after Frederic Leighton, 1858

□□□

I navigate your waters, set my alidade,
 plot points on my chart.
 I hear you through mists on the horizon,
 make bearing for your shore.

□□□

Flaxen waves fall
 across your breasts Milky flesh
 and glimmering of areola peek
 behind towheaded tresses. Your whorl, supple—
 excites then lulls, leaves me rum-drunk—
 shipwrecked on your song, your salt-slicked skin.
 Azure eyes anchor to my marrow drag me
 to your depths

□□□

What is the name of your sirenian visage?
 Shall I call you Calypso? Lorelei? Or, Thessalonike?
 Your aria lures compels
 I dive willingly.

for Danae

Jeff Sings the Not-Quite-Nine-Lives Blues

I got sour-mashed,
cock-sure confidence,
but my kitty ran away,
my kitty ran away across green blades.

Yeah, my kitty flew the coop—
I caught that feeling-far-removed blues
danced, danced under stars like black magic true.
Mmmh—my kitty ran away,
my kitty ran away across green blades.

Oh, my kitty quit—
spark those jazz cigarettes
with Roman candles red,
'cause the third eye splits,
says, *this man was born to lose, lose his muse.*

Hmmh—my kitty ran away,
my kitty ran away across green blades.

Caged in shame I share the blame,
share the blame in killing you.
If only I had closed that door,
I wouldn't have this blues no more.

Southern Gothic

I.

Trek down to drought-stricken waters—
 still enough to form baptismal pools.
 He dips sandal-clad feet into not-quite-deep
 currents. Rosebay rhododendron

and new pitch pine saplings encroach on steep,
 rooted red oak and hemlock.
 The flora line, higher and lower than should be—
 a demilitarized zone of bedrock and bedlam
 shallows reveal
 rocks stacked six-high in service to pagan gods.
 A violent, midday sun wildfires his already blistered skin
 as he rinses that old, crimson fratricide from his knife's edge.

II.

from sun-
 bathing heat rock perch, he witnesses
 a hellbender
 salamander dive into the river
 next to the remains of his sun-
 shriveled brethren,
 sinew and rancor and truth

one brother swims
 the other dies dry on a rock
 exposed in the light.

III.

Truth, borne of meat, and gristle, and bone,
 pushes against surface, splinters pup-tenting skin.
 Truth transmutes, is ghost vapour. An apparition
 riding the wind of necessity—a will-o'-the-wisp
 seen in the distance briefly dissipates.

IV.

He didn't mean to kill his brother, his Father's favorite. He didn't want to let jealousy and anger overcome. Just as he is sure his brother must have felt some internal strife before lusting after his wife. How will he find penance? How will he find peace? How could he continue to live his life?

V.

*O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths it flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O Love that will not let me go,
O Love that will not let me go,*

O love that will not let me go

V.

Pagan monolith
altar to elder ones
he offers up cleansed blade
and fades to the last remaining deeps,
recedes, and lets the final baptism pour over him.

The Gadget and the So-called Atomic Age

after Julius Robert Oppenheimer, John Donne, and the Bhagavad Gita

I.

July 16th, 1945. Alamogordo, New Mexico,
 outside of Los Alamos in the Jornada del Meurto desert.
 Time of death? That sounds about right.
 This heat, my word this heat. Not at all like Berkeley.
 How can anything live out here?
 How on Earth am I to concentrate?

Trinity—We have revealed the face of God.
 What did John Donne say just before he died?

*As West and East
 In all flatt Maps—and I am one—are one,
 So death doth touch the Resurrection
 Batter my heart, three person'd God*

This wait is crushing.
 I can't breathe,
 this post keeping me from collapsing.
 Sam Allison comes on over the loudspeaker:
 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . NOW . . .

II.

*If the radiance of a thousand suns
 were to burst at once into the sky,
 that would be like the splendor of the mighty one.*

The atmosphere darkened for a moment
 just before catching fire,
 illuminating the world
 with a clarity never before seen.

Yellow – 511 THz
 Violet – 676 THz
 Cyan – 607 THz
 White – Chaos.
 20 kilotons of TNT.
 Deadly parasol. Death cap. Destroying angel.
 Certainly no hallucination.
It worked.

III.

Silica sands become shards of irradiated green glass.

Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

of bark, of branches

you are white willow—
hunched, stolid—
hair wind-bitten,
not weeping

The Muleteer Returns Home from Market

Under meager birch shade
the leather-necked rancher feeds
his companion Indian fig shavings
from a threadbare pocket.
Scanning cataracted, weary eyes spot
dovecote amongst briar and heliotrope.

His skeleton buckles creaks
as he resaddles and rehitches
those paltry supplies to his partner.

He grabs reins with sun-cracked, cragged
hands of a hard-scrabbled man
and sets off back down
that last unpaved road—
friend at side,
sharing the hot, rock-ribbed burden of travel.

The creatures' arthritic gaits
leave an eerie mirage
in midday dust.

From bouldered perch I see

fossilized skeletal
 remains of giants—
placid streams pool
at clavicle—
 the river cleaves
cavities between
ribs, travels
crooked spine
 and waterfalls
 over
 pelvis.

O how small this
terrestrial body seems.

Deadhead

The Connoisseur Contemplates His Declining Youth Via Alchemical Index

□ (Projection)

Last night I dreamt of crumbling teeth. Ivory
jettisoned from jawed pockets, breaking
as they fell from mouth bloodless,
their swan song as elegant as using
“ding-dong” in a poem.

*O let it rain! Elegiac cloudburst, bathe away
sins of yesteryear, they sang as they hit
sink, before clinking and jangling down the drain.*

□ (Calcination)

Caffeine aches in the heart again. I gave up trying
to breathe normally, my lungs heavy with guilt and tar.
But I've been eating right, and exercising.
It's all very much Huey Lewis & *American Psycho*—
pleasures of conformity—
too square to be hip.

□ (Fixation)

You, stoic, static old man
leg so lavishly crossed,
Italian wing-tip points
to the painting in the lithograph print.
Why does your retinal stare
affix to the replica de Milo—
when coy young women
carriage past your window?

□ (Incineration)

What happened to the danger?
What happened to that punk-rock
fuck-you tattooed to my lips?
I want to loose my moorings.
I want my storm to swell, to roar, to monsoon.

Pericarditis

The pressure of an elephant's foot? No. Not really.
More of a light squeezing, an infant anaconda grip,
scales tugging on the sack from front to back.

Uncomfortable, a jacket three sizes too small, inflamed
muscles stretching fibrous fabric threadbare.
Maybe this pilule encapsulates salvation.
I lie flat, hoping it goes away, praying (ha!).

I begin to feel the haze of sleep, but
launch up, drenched in fear,
leaving the sheets beneath me damp,

not because of what comes next, no,
not because of decomposition,
but because of what it means
for the one next to me.

I am chilled and restless.

What does she think when she
grabs my hand to comfort
and feels glacial cold?

blaring white noise.
SSSSS

Other patrons' shadows
stretch and peer over my shoulder,
intruding upon my space,
invading my thoughts,
fuse with the wall of sound.

Even the menu board joins in.

Americano

Cappuccino

Latte

and
have been replaced by

GET OUT, YOU SHIT

NOT WANTED

POISON POISON POISON,

GO FUCK YOURSELF.

and
all under the heading of

I slink inward and regain my composure by focusing on that People magazine on the reading rack as I reach out for my coffee before grasping the cup it begins to vibrate shifting side to side like the thoughts in my mind as they begin to speed and bounce back and forth like a game of pong on that Commodore 64 I had many years ago and I manage to blurt out THAAAAANK YOU. THE NEWSPAPER SAYS BRADLEY COOPER IS THE SEXIEST MAN ALIVE BUT I DON'T HAVE ANY SAY IN IT. YOU'RE OUT OF CREAM. GOOD-BYE.

In You I Recognize Myself

A lost soul passes
by my styrofoam cemetery—
fabric ghosts and plastic
skeletons swing against
a late October gust.

Our glazed gazes meet
and you smile,
but the lines framing your lips
spell melancholy,
your eyes sign sadness.

Last Will and Testament

I. Upon memorial:

At my funeral
 the procession will file into the mortuary
 to the tune of *insert sappy, nostalgic lyrics here*
 and as my friends, family, and fellow funeral crashers
 approach my open casket to grieve,
 they'll be greeted by a curious revelation:
 that my not-me-looking body's been replaced
 by a trough of sloths

and as the thoroughly
 confounded and confused crowd
 looks around the room
 for answers and affirmations,
 the house lights will drop
 and flashing strobes will pop
 and my taxidermied corpse will topple from heaven
 on a slick rig of cables and pulleys
 like some mad marionette
 and dance a jig like those grainy,
 black-and-white Disney skeletons
 to some club-thumping Euro-house electro
 or the boom-bap of some street-wise hip-hop

and while some will have heart-attacks in fright,
 or spit on my memory in disgust or spite,
 those that truly knew me will give a hardy chuckle or wink
 and hoist my lifeless, well-lacquered, maybe well-liquored
 body up along with a pint—
 something dark and hoppy,
 a draught of stout or an IPA—
 and hall me off to Valhalla

II. Upon burial:

Bury my carcass in a death forest,
 young saplings feasting off my carbon-based,
 organic material, intertwining with the sinews
 of sessile oak, or wych elm, or crack willow.

No zombification for me, no devouring of loved ones,
or separating brain from spine.
No golden chariot, no praise eternal, or servitude.

Sure, I'll live on; in roots, bark, branches, and leaves.
Call it the after-life cycle.

Dear Mr. Narcissistic,

You present yourself as an omniscient intellectual,
thoroughly educated through and through,
yet you readily disregard
a crucial conviction of academia—
an open ear,
an open mind.

I imagine you sit
perched on your podium, peeing in the wind.
Did your holy-water urea splash your face?
Did it smell like roses as its scent wafted
up to your cynical, haughty hipster nose?
Or did it carry the stink of dehydration, like any other
armchair philosopher/armchair alcoholic.

“asleep in America?”
Asleep in your own ego.
Hip-hop is not lyrical, has no literary value?
Are you jealous of their use of slant-rhyme, near-rhyme,
staccato syncopation,
dissolution of the American Dream,
perversion of the African-American Dream,
if there were such a thing?
Or are you just purposefully ignorant, or simply racist?

Maybe you're being ironic or contrarian—
face it, your own work is full of boom-bap rhythm
and tales from the street.

*I hated Tony Hoagland before it was cool,
to hating Tony Hoagland is so over,
to this is my love letter to Tony Hoagland.*

Maybe this is just massaging your inflated sense of self,
or assuaging your fear of irrelevance.

Yours truly,
Mr. Hypocritical

Last Passengers of the Baby Puke Bus

Sun starts to set
and the overhead's fluorescence
illuminates ads and boarders,
just enough for a lone student
to find prose faint on the page
and some shadowed faces.

There's a quiet that settles over
the housekeepers,
secretaries,
landscapers,
pavement pounders—
soil and toil under nails—
only interrupted by the chime's
stop.

Workaday passengers file off
one by one by one,
stop by stop by stop,
until the last—
an old, hunched man,
a Père Goriot
remains.
Final stop, pops

Filament

The living room unravels,
unspools, devolves to wool.

Knit us back together.
Where's your skin?

All I see are tendons, rather
fibers woven like a child's

hand-me-down plush toy.
Crots of clots, spin a yarn,

grab cord, any tendril will do.
Where can the threads lead?

Will I still bleed if stuck?
Glossolalia and divinations breed

a spreading viral contempt,
but somehow I will, too, find room for love.

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