THE POET DEBATES WITH HIS FRIEND’S MISTRESS, DEATH

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To my parents and grandparents
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ABSTRACT

A primary mechanism by which poetry communicates intense psychological states is tension between form and content. This tension brings various aspects of a poem into communication with each other, creating an objective model of the psychological state being communicated. There are various methods of creating tension between form and content, several of which are explored in the present collection. The collection culminates with an extended narrative poem in meter, which form offers a number of effective means by which tension can be generated, and themes developed, explored and resolved.
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INTRODUCTION

To a reader with Romantic tendencies, few critics are as enjoyable as Hazlitt. In his Lectures on the English Poets, Hazlitt has many encouraging things to say regarding poets, though has a dim view of their capacity for self-control. “Poets are in general bad prose-writers” (24), he says, “who, when deprived of the regular mechanisms of verse, seem to have no principle of modulation left in their writings” (20). In his view, the exuberance of the poetic material requires a degree of artificial, formal restraint not native to strictly poetic thought.

While Hazlitt is a critic typically associated with Romanticism, and the conception of poetry as a creative effusion in need of external restraint is highly Romantic, the idea that poetry must present a balance of contrasting forces finds support in any number of poetic ages. Periods in which poetry seems most willing to combine opposing elements—such as Classical Greece or Elizabethan England—are often considered high-water marks of poetic production. Poets who begin their careers overflowing with sentiment often achieve their mature style through the adoption of some degree of restraint; and the occasionally heard story of a well-regarded poet’s attempt to buy or destroy all the copies of his or her first book suggests an exuberance or sentimentality that in its first manifestation had not yet been brought under control.

One argument for the idea that poetry must demonstrate in its composition some form of conflict is that, in effect, it presents the poem as an objective model of internal crisis. The heightened emotion related to the poem’s subject
necessarily contrasts with the relatively sedate perspective from which it arises, and either creates or draws attention to a problem in the speaker’s life or environment. By manifesting and clarifying this essential psychological discord, the poetic object serves a fundamentally therapeutic role; and this discord is most concisely embodied in the interplay of intense feeling versus the restrained form in which it occurs.

While some manner of formal restraint is necessary to convey intense poetic feeling, much Neo-formalist poetry tends to confuse cause and effect. Formal restraint serves little purpose when there is no great impulse being restrained. Just as energetic passions require boundaries in order to be communicated, the boundaries themselves lack meaning if not imposed upon some strong, internal force. Neither form nor substance provides the basis of the poetic effect, which instead arises from the ongoing contention of both with each other.

One poetic form that seems to contradict this view is prose poetry. At its best, prose poetry expresses particularly intense emotions and states of being—from the Book of Job to the works of the French Symbolists. However, what looks at first glance to be a relaxation of formal limitations is actually an expansion of the material into arguably the most demanding form at a poet’s disposal. In order to enter into a dynamic relationship with its formal boundaries, the material of the prose poem must realize itself in such an energetic state that in its sprawling form it seems compressed, seething to overwhelm the block of text in which it is printed.
In *The Illuminations*, Rimbaud conceives of subjects so violently alive that prose seems the only form in which they can exist. The material of his poems drives forcefully and persistently beyond a multitude of boundaries. The great flood with which the collection begins, which has overwhelmed the represented world in which it occurs, is, upon its departure, immediately begged to return. “Rise waters. —Foam; roll over the bridge and through the woods—black veils and organ strains—lightning, thunder—rise and roam. Waters and sorrows, step forward and reveal the Floods” (223). In the flood’s wake, much to the speaker’s distaste, has appeared a figure who is both queen and witch, “who sparks her blaze in [the] bowl of Earth, [who] never tells us what she knows, and what we do not” (223). To the speaker, the limitations of knowledge are absolute, though dependent upon knowledge for their existence. As knowledge itself is dependent upon the ability to make distinctions, however, it cannot exist in chaos. To the poem’s speaker, when he is drowning, the world is composed of a single, uniform element, and he understands it perfectly.

A similar impulse manifests itself again and again throughout the collection, and is perhaps the work’s most distinctive characteristic. “Beauteous Being” concludes with the speaker compelled to charge at the moon hanging like a cannon above the trees and air (230). “Common Nocturne” begins and ends with a single breath opening huge gaps in the walls and obliterating hearth and home¹ (251). “For a Reason” begins with the sentence, “Striking your finger on the drum discharges all sound[s] and begins [the] new harmony” (235).

¹ *Un souffle disperse les limites du foyer*: “A breath scatters the boundaries of the home/hearth/focus”.
Rimbaud’s use of the prose poem is neither decadent nor undisciplined; it is the form most representative of his ideas, in which these ideas achieve harmonious realization.

Perhaps the most notable student of the French Symbolists in the English tradition is Eliot. However, whereas the Symbolists often communicate intense inner states, Eliot is much more comfortable holding such passions at arm’s length. In “Hysteria”, his only published prose poem, Eliot does not seek to express passion, but to subdue and control it:

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: “If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden...” I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end. (19)

Being a well-disciplined formalist, Eliot deviates from his two primary modes—gravid reflection and satire—and chooses for the poem’s subject an episode of unrestrained emotion. However, unlike in the poetry of Rimbaud, the speaker in
“Hysteria” never directly experiences the emotion that he is describing. He is seated across from it, protected by the interposition of a table and a dismayed waiter from the full effects of its violence.

As the poem begins, the speaker has allowed himself to be captivated by the unnamed woman’s laughter, so that he blends with it and is drawn with it deep into her body. He quickly disengages himself from the experience, however, and allies himself with the trembling waiter in the struggle to subdue her shaking breasts. The waiter mentions the garden as a more appropriate setting for the woman’s effusions, but the speaker does not seem interested in such a solution, choosing instead to attempt to bring her behavior within more civil, controlled boundaries. “Hysteria” is one of Eliot’s weaker poems, not owing to its lack of formal structure, but to its failure to adequately rise to the challenges of the form in which it is presented.

Another notable student of the French Symbolists is Stevens, though his verse is similarly detached. Perhaps the greatest twentieth-century poet writing in English to engage the Symbolists on their own terms is Crane. White Buildings, his first collection, is prefaced by an epigram taken from Rimbaud’s A Season in Hell, and the influence of Symbolism is clear throughout the work. While there are moments in Crane’s poems that echo Rimbaud—“Emblems of Conduct” being the most obvious example—his verse bears a much stronger resemblance to that of Mallarme, whose lines present relentless waves of sensual confusion.

Crane’s six-poem sequence “Voyages” concludes its first poem with a warning to children standing on the shore, “The bottom of the sea is cruel” (16).
By the end of the second poem, however, the speaker has chosen to risk the sea’s cruelty in the pursuit of some distant, vaguely conceived-of happiness:

   Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
   O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
   Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
   Is answered in the vortex of our grave
   The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise. (2.21-25)

By the end of the sequence, however, the vortex of the sinking ship and the seal’s black eye give way to a vision of this elusive paradise:

   Belle Isle, white echo of the oar!
   The imaged Word, it is, that holds
   Hushed willows anchored in its glow.
   It is the unbetrayable reply
   Whose accent no farewell can know. (6.28-32)

When one’s life is at its most divided, and all values and outcomes are expressed in terms of black and white, the individual gains access to victory in its most meaningful form. The closing lines of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” depict the sea, to which Prufrock is drawn, divided from itself by the wind’s force into states of opposing qualities:

   I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (126-131)

Unlike Prufrock, however, the speaker in “Voyages” overcomes ambivalence by engaging and exploring these opposing states. The qualities of black and white are developed into distinct metaphors, allowing for complex comparisons. By giving himself bodily to these metaphors in the personage of a sea-tossed sailor, the speaker is able to reach the paradisiacal shore; and in so doing, unlike Prufrock, achieves the intense longing expressed by the speaker in Mallarme’s “Sea Breeze”:

...Birds look
   As though they’re drunk for unknown spray and skies.
   No ancient gardens mirrored in the eyes,
   Nothing can hold this heart steeped in the sea—
   Not my lamp’s desolate luminosity
   Nor the blank paper guarded by its white[ness].... (2-7)

Crane achieves a high level of aesthetic tension by fully realizing an intense emotional state in smooth, ordered lines. While the specific nature of the opposing tensions is relatively unimportant, verse that does not attempt to include
some element contrary to its central impulse falls short of its potential, being no adequate model of a life in crisis.

In writing the present collection, I was primarily concerned with creating aesthetic tension, either by combining contrasting elements within a particular poem or by writing against my own tendencies. “The Dove” is the earliest poem in which this was a goal, and is the oldest poem in the collection not to undergo substantial revision. In “The Dove”, the tension derives from a basic juxtaposition of individual and communal anxieties. It was written shortly after I prematurely left the Master’s program at Cleveland State University, at which time my primary artistic concern had become something in the direction of Brechtian.

The first stanza of “The Dove” is a love lyric with surreal elements. I felt that to continue the poem in the vein in which it was begun would be to overlook something essential in the two characters’ relationship that I was trying to discover. I wrote the second stanza in the voice of Claudia Rankine as a means of dilating the poem’s focus, making it momentarily more objective and social. This gave me more material to work with in the third stanza, and the expanded point of view enabled me to better see the specific aspect of the relationship that I wanted to address, and to deal with it in a more dramatic and complete fashion than I was otherwise likely to do.

Similarly, in “The Fox”, I reversed and manipulated the identities of the poem’s subjects. The murdered friend of stanza six is a depiction of a childhood
friend who shot two boys in the head when we were in high school. The betrayed friend of the poem’s conclusion is a cat. While these manipulations are not communicated to the reader in the poem, they nevertheless allowed me to deal with facets of the subjects that would otherwise remain obscured behind more objective portrayals, while also undermining sentimental associations. The goal of this tactic is best described by an event that occurred at a Taoist school in China, where some other students and I had taken care of a sick dog, which nevertheless died. Having never found for the dog a suitable name, we marked the stone above its grave with a paraphrase of the first sentence of the Tao Te Ching, “The dog that can be named is not the eternal dog”.

“The Ex-Husband Portrayed Sympathetically as the Lesser of Two Evils” uses short line length to express the excessive restraint of the woman it depicts, and argues against that restraint with lines such as:

Art is to know
we’re boundaries
and torture
to what we love. (31-34)

In contrast, “[There’s Rage to Find Remembered Light]” presents a similar relationship, though uses longer lines to accommodate the vitality manifesting in the couple’s children. The elegiac tone of the first stanza contrasts with the imagery, suggesting, along with the lines “But we assumed that such moments had limits, and / that we were drawing somewhat near to them” (11-12), that the relationship of the parents had far more potential vitality than either of them
realized. The dissonance of tone and imagery furthermore creates the unresolved tension from which the less conflicted second stanza emerges.

“The Migration of Birds in the Body of the Condemned” and “These Pleasures Suffered as a Means” both create tension, not through the relationship of content and poetic form, but by challenging the depicted form of the subject. In “Migration”, the speaker sees himself as a momentary collage of other creatures:

Animalia as a kingdom is ever green and raw—
even this pen’s held by a hand of shredded, archaic animals. There is nothing living or dead to be had in this waste of light and void—
a wish to breathe occasionally coinciding with a thing that can. (16-22)

Similarly, in “These Pleasures Suffered as a Means”, sex is depicted as a physically destructive act for both parties, concluding “the skin / has been torn to let the bloods mix” (31-32).

Both poems recall Freud, when, in Civilisation and its Discontents, he describes the condition of “intense love” as one in which “the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away” (13), comparing this state to the feeling of infinitude underlying most religious experience. The fact that “Migrations” also recalls Freud’s subsequent discussion of related pathological “states in which the
boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain, ...cases in which parts of a person’s own body...appear alien to him and as not belonging to his ego” (13), brings to mind Duke Theseus’ assertion that “The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1.7-8), as well as Hippolyta’s response:

... all their minds transfigur’d so together,
More witnesseth than fancy’s images,
And grows to something of great constancy,
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.24-27)

Though Hippolyta is referring to a group of lovers, her statement serves equally well as a defense of poetry within the confines of the present discussion. Poetry may borrow the language, imagery, and logic of intense, disordered states, so long as it can manage to present these states as a coherent reality.

This was the aim of the final poem in the collection, “The Poet Debates With His Friend’s Mistress, Death”. I have worked with traditional poetic forms and dramatic verse in the past, though for several years my focus has been on looser structures with an inclination toward surreal narrative. My early academic poems tended toward the hermetic and baroque, and the shift to a relaxed, conversational style was I think an intuitive attempt to balance those tendencies. While I gained a fair amount of imaginative freedom as a result, I have never been satisfied with what strikes me as this style’s laxity.
Formal narrative poetry has been the culmination of the various styles in which I have written up to this point. It allows full imaginative freedom, intensifies poetic effect through formal restraint, and expresses a plurality of views. The devices of character and narrative make it possible to combine the elements of what would necessarily be several lyric poems into a single, unified object. The controlled unification of diverse, energetic elements simultaneously increases the poem’s complexity, and clarifies the conflicting material by dividing it among a set of distinct voices.

In the first draft of the introduction, I aimed to avoid sentimentality by utilizing short, unadorned lines. The result was a column of two-stress lines with a distinctly Anglo-Saxon feel, which moved too quickly through the brief space that it occupied. I moderated this effect by periodically adding a stress to one of the lines, using my ear as guide. While I preferred the result, I was unsure whether I should keep it, as I was already deviating from a regular metrical pattern. Upon examining the intervals of the added stresses, however, I realized that they were spaced in such a way as to create the pattern 2-3-2-2-3-2-2. If the number of lines were reduced by half, the stress count would be 5-4-5-4, or blank elegiac couplets. The current cut-time version maintains a degree of that meter’s hesitating quality, while blending it with the brusque, unsentimental quality of Anglo-Saxon heroic verse.

This exemplifies my goal in choosing meter throughout the poem. Instead of choosing a form in which to write a given section, I tried to let my ear determine the appropriate form given a particular subject’s nature and affective
quality. My previous work in formal poetry treated form as an external structure to which I adapted my verse, the results of which felt cramped and unnatural. In this poem, I tried to gain a more organic understanding of form, using it to elaborate or control specific effects. I therefore wanted a structure that, while controlled, allowed a certain freedom of variation. The model I worked from most closely was the relatively relaxed movement between unrhymed ballad meter and blank verse that Shelley employs in “Queen Mab”.

An advantage of longer-form poetry is that it permits greater development and resolution of a given theme. An earlier version of this project was titled, “Fugue to Resurrect a Dead Friend”, and consisted of a series of poems alternating in theme between birth and death. The structure of this earlier version was suggested by an interview with Levi-Strauss, and moved from strict division of the two themes, to a confusion of the themes within a given poem, and was planned to culminate ultimately in some manner of synthesis. The poems were formally diverse, and development of the general theme was slow, owing to the relative lack of coherence. The narrative poem is perhaps naturally capable of dealing with evolving themes in a shorter space than a lyric series due to the alternation of descriptive and expressive passages, similar to the alternation in opera of recitative and aria. The descriptive passages serve to motivate the poem, so that there is less repetition. Lyric as the expression of intense emotion is essentially static from a narrative point of view—poets are often more than happy to present a particular feeling until they no longer feel it. Narrative, however, compels development and, by extension, resolution.
The highest achievements of any genre or medium are possibly nothing more than highly refined clichés. The elements from which the objects are composed are generally recognized and accessible. When intense beauty inhabits a work, it appears, not as a deus ex machina, or some exotic quality captured and preserved in the sterile medium of the object, but as a result of the cultivated interaction of simple consonant and dissonant elements. As poets typically work in seclusion, and it is generally more pleasant to agree with oneself than disagree, it should often be productive to build one’s poems out of materials, the combination of which challenges harmony. Thus, to an extent, the object does the poet’s work for her or him, and in the process carries the poet along into newer, more interesting territories.
Works Cited


THE POET DEBATES WITH HIS FRIEND’S MISTRESS, DEATH
THE DOVE

Out of our future came one dove, a crooked stick in its beak. It lit onto a stalk of cane. The dove turned its neck and dangled the stick like a hypnotist’s watch.

The crowd grew quiet, then endured over an hour of silence as we fell into progressively deeper trances. The dove spoke to us in French.

That’s all I remember.

When it snapped its wing, I took you in the circle of my right arm, but you had been transformed; you were a small photograph of you, enlarged by an old Xerox machine. The dove was operating the Xerox machine via hydraulic levers, like an antique calculator. He was transforming all the objects in the room into shitty Xeroxes. I begged him to stop. He Xeroxed me and dropped me into a mailbox.

I just arrived today—it took me three years to get here. It was like being in a coma. I look good in the picture, but it’s not worth keeping around. I have others, and I don’t care for that sort of thing anyway. It’s not worth the melodrama of throwing out, though. I’ll save it in a drawer somewhere.

When the real thing I am dies and becomes a photograph they’ll stash that, too, somewhere. Then they’ll find this in a drawer and confuse it for some small part of me, but there are no parts. There never were.

When we as a culture imagine psychopaths, they often are thought
to disassemble their victims
(as in, “I died because you took me apart.”)
We imagine pieces of us, like pieces
of a sheet of peanut brittle,
broken off. According to this model,
we as a culture see ourselves
as being puzzles made of sugar.

But oh, my love—

Imagine we are holding hands:
in some cold forest, on the ground.
Some poor lunatic is murdering us.
He places the chainsaw
through the bone of your ankle.
You’re still the amazing girl
I fell in love with. Or he slides
the chainsaw into my mouth
and down my throat,
not quite to the heart.
It’s all basically the same.

But then imagine to yourself
something more important—
when, through the center
of our two hands, he cuts
with a chainsaw like the knot
of an old and coiled tree: then,
oh darling, in these same woods—
aren’t we still holding hands?
THE EX-HUSBAND PORTRAYED SYMPATHETICALLY
AS THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

Each stellar animal
swerved down to consider
our hero, opposite her
whose nocturnal body
was a garden of lockets
open only
when her eyes were closed.

A garden of protected images
thriving in the depths
of her skin; a spheric
music undepicted
by her yet cold
and faltering hand

Sparks and fades
in silence, now;
she sends knickknacks
to friends via gallery walls.

Turning from the brutality
of her heart,
she ceased to be
an open doorway
to each leaping,
innocent beast
of crumbling light;

Though at any time
she could throw herself
as meat
to her ruthless heart,
the obstructing self
give up to be consumed—

Art is to know
we’re boundaries
and torture
to what we love;

To cease to kill,
and let fall
to each page and canvas
the soft thing
clutched and suffocating
in your hand.
[THERE’S RAGE TO FIND REMEMBERED LIGHT]

There’s rage to find remembered light
long since drowned in shallow air;
Globes to glow in flames of departed twilight.
In the zoo, our children tear away the bars
to fall devouring upon some thrashing tiger.
You and I, hearing the same music, walk
through our meals like barricades of paper,
and our children chew milk from uprooted glands.
When we made love, each one’s blood fell
through the other like rain. I put a splotch
of dancing chemicals in your stomach.
But we assumed that such moments had limits, and
that we were drawing somewhat near to them.
Our bright ones—look how unlike the things
they kill they sing. Each one stands like a tower
of light above itself. The child is the transparent shell,
and the child is the milky tungsten; the child
burns like small candles in the skin of each thing it faces.
You married me, my pretty bumble, because we forgot
that there’s a third thing not yet seen. We were
stitched together in a church of Russian celluloid.

Raw light stifles in the two halves of a sphere of plutonium.
When the sphere is compressed by an enveloping shell of ignited sperm,
the solid tide of light now seethes out, stabs past the wounded metal,
sizzles the material that bore it even till its name’s undone.
Ever farther now, take care. Who would expect lightning to snap
from new skies to Earth through so small a hoop of coiled gold?
This old ring is in the mind and gone. Its material is cracked apart and altered.
An eighth day has been recognized upon the calendar
that one now occupies like a swarm of knights and bishops.
The captured Queen does not exist.
In a city deep in the forests where you were born, a church
has been torn apart by birds and scattered past finding.
And beneath these forests, beyond these forests and above,
are other trees, and in them unseen, ringing bells.
THE PETTY THIEF REDEEMED

A shout staggered into some skin and was a baby. And the paper of its body slapped the air like a bell and howled for milk in blackness; that the parents stormed—and billowing into the room like clouds of sleeping powder, thought they found not the typical life, but a large cube of blue and orange flame tumbling in the crib. They bathed the cube of flame. The mother pressed her breasts into its surfaces.

And they did this because the monster is just a monster. The moon, like David’s stone, is just a stone can shock from sober thought a once-plain mind.

The child was the typical wriggling thing of gummy fat. It climbed into its eyes like trees and howled the moon come down into its hands; until the moon, though never looking down, let nod its head in cold and silent gesture.
THE WAY THAT WHEN THEY DIE IT KILLS YOU

The blood of a particular friend
seems green with envy for its lost voice,
and in thick throbs gluts
the antenna of a radio with its mess,
or the plumbing, or splashes,
as you coldly watch,
against each fading dimension
from the center of its collapsing box.

Rain leaps hissing from its cloud, outside—
from the mirror’s skin crackles a swarm of bees,
who gather your face as it spills
like jostled alcohol across the glass.
They hold the sopped-up residue of your reflection
clotted in their legs’ black fur,
hovering in the space in front of you,
that you may reference it as you brush your hair.
You expect that when you’re done, they’ll swarm
into the tunnels of your eyes and clot the skull
with syrups of condensing, sluggish light;
though then you finish, and they crash
backward into the glass and disappear.

The radio sobs out your description, now, as well,
like a mirror for the blind and afflicted;
though the bees attack that, too, and drag it from you
deep into the black oblivions of glass—
that you’re left as always with less than nothing,
and again have no choice but to begin.
ON A ROCK BY THE RIVER, PIERROT WRITES A LETTER TO THE MOON

Sweet tower of mercury, Moon! Come set your wafer in my mouth and bleed warm metal from sockets of sugar and your own mouth wet with running honey—

O dear friend, come—melt in my tea like a wife. Anger is drinking all the wine right out of my throat, that it never turns to tender feathers in my stomach.

I picked myself from the bed this day like a fist of lilies, and gentle I presented me—a tender tiger surging to her starry boudoir. But there, not her alone, rather writhing like tickled snakes with some hollow-headed clown I find her tangled.

She glibly gestured. I became a broken thing—and left.

A spiral tore itself from her stomach and now haunts me, turning like a feathery drill in the side of my head. I nearly for shear weariness of torture returned to re-adore her. But what faith were then in you, uncompromising white-and-black, diligent angel, to whom I mark stones in praise, and for whom I become a pool of wine to reflect your face, most dear, O infinite throbbing white shred of glacier and of sunlight?
THESE PLEASURES, SUFFERED AS A MEANS

I worship my or any lips that say
in silence my love’s name.
I worship shadow that seems shadow bled
of her by sharpest sight.
My love stands in the corner of the room
and it breathes and beats as a harvest of ripe spasm.
She is the vein in the palm of my left hand,
or an eyelash fallen to an open eye.
My blood jumps to her when she raises her flesh
to feed me its silks and sugars;

just so each cricket scraped its violin-like
thigh about Christ’s friends as God
was laid a withered flower in their hands;
and as such my love she sleeps curled against me.
I am a frenzy to her likes and pains; while
to suck her neck’s to eat the flesh of a cloud.

Her fingernails untangle bruised vein;
when I tell my love her body’s a spiral staircase
through which I melting walk, she laughs.
Her throat falls like rain upon the skin of her shoulders.

At such times, she says, ‘my love he lies sleeping
in the kitchen of my palm; he has
his head in a pot of boiled ginger, and his fingers
in a cup of warm cream. His sword
that is an old, wooden spoon
lies silent by his hand.’ I laugh and smile,

and suck the splinters of my penis from her throat.
The penis fractures at its climax, and one’s lover is struck
with splinters of its broken form; like a drinking glass
on stone the penis fractures; and where it touches
is a wound, as it is a wound, as the skin
has been torn to let the bloods mix.
THE MIGRATION OF BIRDS WITHIN THE BODY OF THE CONDEMNED

His blood was just painted onto his insides—
and skin more or less just painted on the blood.
Like most of the rest of anybody.
The light bulb crawled down from its fixture
and nestled under his arm as he slept;
and in the kitchen, a ring of blue,
ignited gas slipped from the stove
and mocked him a halo he never saw.

So slow he creeps, come day, into the sun!
...and nearly there, in its one dot of heat.

Eternal forms are carnivorous to the meat
that fills them. Each new season, the old
meat gone, the forms are ravenous
vacuums, sucking new creatures
out of dreamy, gelatinous globes.
Animalia as a kingdom is ever green and raw—
even this pen’s held by a hand of shredded,
archaic animals. There is nothing living
or dead to be had in this waste
of light and void—

a wish to breathe occasionally coinciding
with a thing that can.
THE DOLL

“The doll has a black hand and a white hand. If one is bored, the doll can be placed in front of a stove, so that it seems to cook. With its black hand the doll touches the copper of the ladle; with its white hand maybe it holds one’s pet cat? One lets the doll hold cats upright by the throat, sometimes, pressed against the metal of a stove. You should also maybe see the doll seem to play piano. Its perfect black hand appears to dig into the soft white keys like soil, and its perfect white hand appears to hack the brittle, black keys down to the level of the counter on which they rest. Water climbs the doll’s slender, black hand. When the hand is placed so that it dips into a saucer— and it seems to drink; and in a blackened room the doll’s slender, white hand is pressed into unlit bulbs to stroke cold filaments like coiled, greasy whiskers.

We were in sunlight by the water’s edge and had forgotten the doll. The waves snapped themselves together like jigsaw puzzles of Paris above the water’s level. The doll snapped itself together like a jigsaw puzzle between us and was touching our thighs with its clever hands. When we got home or left again, the doll’s hands followed us. I have married you in secret and none but the doll was there, and it was posed in such a way that it seemed to be tearing us apart like paper. On Sundays, then, the doll was placed so that it seemed to be driving the car that you were riding in, or bending the metal of a parked car about you like an accident. I was reading a similar story
today in the paper—there are
two people, and one of them has a doll
that they gave to the other one. No one bothered
to check the doll, and it disappears and returns.
No one thinks to care about the doll,
and it tears up flames from the hearth
like confetti for attention, and no one cares.
There was a photograph of that same doll
heroically placed to seem that it was
with its own oscillating hands pulling children
from a pool of burning gasoline;
and then in the surgery, photographs of doctors
worked frantically to position the doll
so as to seem that it was having skin
hewed from its back to cover
the smoldering cinders of its arms,
and even then on the table
it evaporated and congealed.”

_He told her this, but as he did, the doll crawled up on the table between them, and it read through the paper while they watched; and when it was done, it looked from one to the other; and the woman was angry, because she knew the doll did not like her. She left, and the doll turned to the man. It spoke to him confidingly:_

“In the back of the paper, next to the forecast,
there is an article about your old home town:
A hurricane sometime last year
ate Cleveland’s weather and vomited it out
into the desert around Salt Lake.
When Cleveland’s weather grew back,
another hurricane came holding a tornado
in its vaporous hand like a hypodermic syringe.
It drew off the sheet of thick, gray cloud
like stale blood. It jabbed with the tornado
at the roof of your old house, and chipped it away.
Your mother and your siblings were inside,
and with them a woman you’ve never met,
hiding the particles of your children
in a silken labyrinth. The hurricane drew them up into the tornado and carried them with him. The hurricane raged with clinical precision through all the famous cities and the wastes between. He tore through sunrises like curtains of spiderweb, and when he came to Berlin he injected the sheet of cloud into the sky and your family into scattered balconies along the canal. The mayor of Berlin has a black hand and a white hand. In the park, a flock of swans attack a black bear like hounds, and the bear tears them from his fur with savage sobs. The mayor of Berlin staggers from house to house like an ignited match. He drags your screaming daughter by the hand from street to street and finds you barely conscious in the cafe. She remembers you vaguely, and her eyes grow clear. She wipes her cheeks dry, and she sighs.

Here is the crisis. Your daughter, who has not been born, has come to find you. She’s come from somewhere that hasn’t happened, and from inside the body of your wife. Your wife knows that her child’s life is in jeopardy, and that she has never met you. She knows that she stands at the beginning of a maze. Your daughter pulls you barely walking through wrecked buildings and alleys like a thread winding itself before you into a ball. The stones of the houses are gelatinous drops of rain dissolving in a pool of gravity. The maze fades, and when it’s gone, there will be no other.

The time is short. It took 36 years to build this puzzle from the ground up. The maze is a single, straight tunnel like the barrel of a gun.
You walk out from the metal into sunlight, and your family falls upward into your arms. There’s more to be done, but this is just the end of a fever, where one’s home uprights itself out of apparent nothingness and begins.”
AN INVITATION TO ONE’S ENEMY

My fists sink like teeth
in what meat I choose.
If I fight, I fight—hit hard
until the marrow seeps
like syrup from the bones.
O, my brightest and supple—

With my fingers I’ll comb
your skin like bloody hair;
groom each piece of flesh
to its fullest shine—
For the old dance leaps again
from the dusk tonight,
in parking lots and bars,
alleys and intersections,
to take us, tender
and masculine, in its arms;

And so it ever is—that one might ask
what room there’ll be in the world
for such old men as we’ll become,
slow cups of pulp.

In the eyes of all other old men
we’ll gleam like buttery stars—
protected in their thoughts
from the mirror’s well
of dreamy, decaying shadow.

Battered and dull,
a stunted forest
looms inside the skull;
a fading wilderness
in which we’ll roam
like deer that day to day
and up until the limits
of our haunted lives
will soak up the fog of bullets
like shrieking sponges.
GAMES IN THE EXOTIC NURSERY

Peasants with slick guns
will weed you
of your sick and poor.
As the bomb falls,
might a baby suck it?
Our friend was prettiest
in his desert suit, but the hot
bang slapped him out of it—
as nuns slap transgression
from a hand. Where
have all the good wars gone?
Drowsy slaughters,
with no good cause—
why do mothers bother?
It’s nearly their milk
that spills from torn veins
in the streets, boys chopped open
like doors of a burning house.

The pieces of an angel
hover into the living room,
clinging to each other
like bits of gum.
Though they are covered in flames
and melting, they sing
to a woman, who runs
to throw her arms about them;
but as she grasps them,
you melt away completely,
soaking back into her pores,
and are nothing, now.
THE FOX

Ghosts melt like sugary cobweb in alcohol.
The air is washed in alcohol that spills in blurry flashes from the eyes.

Alcohol washes the table until it’s as fragile and clear as cellophane; it washes the walls and floor.

My hand rests across a pool of spilled alcohol and is washed until it seems like glass; and inside it, like an x-ray, very clearly I can see your hand.

And then—

A bright fox tears through my chest and stands as if venerated on the table’s glassy residue, while in rage the full count of my teeth burst up and out of my head in howling chase. The fox bounds clear into the black vacuum of the dissolved wall, and through what’s left of my body breaks, as if through fog, a riderless horse;

The hounds and hunted fox the horse pursues, whose hooves bruise the shadows of their tumbling fur and drum them forward into fever and riot;

Likewise, long ago, when two boys shot my friend in the park by my house, the bullet knocked away the slab of skull
to reveal lush honeycomb,
and he had never been so
beautiful;

And we know by this that
Death has no hunger,
takes not what’s best—
the dying bleed sugar
into the mouths of friends.

The fox leaps high
onto the horse’s back;
the hounds press on
to wilder game.
The horse’s heart
is a small, skinned horse,
running within him,
and he carries the fox
deeper into the night.

And you—my old good friend,
who died quietly in the snow—
whom, above all others, I betrayed—
you, with your small space
of either Heaven or Hell
clutching you like a pillow
in its dreaming arms—have shame
to wound a still-loving friend.
Cease to fill the room
like burning pins.

I give you all that I am
in praise, can do no more,
and tell you that’s enough.
The dead are not the only
one’s who need to sleep;

and when I do, I am
for those few hours
the Heaven or Hell
that embraces you. And
whether that’s enough
or not, no one—
not here, not anywhere—
will ever give you more.
I’ll name as friend
no person dead
to sentiment or the chaos
of one’s own beating heart.
In winter the orchard
ripens into cloud—
cold grasses eat
the fallen fruit—
and in dull meditation
the stifled field slacks not
the dreamy rage
that drove it from its first oblivion
into danger
and the harsh, broken light.
[THE BLOOM DEVoured AND REDROWNED]

The bloom devoured and redrowned
in a voracious sap, just so again
does anything begin, rising always
from a sugar of such fierce structure
as its sweetness and thick stickiness is its teeth.

And though a burden of some gloom
did bruise the stem, and gouge
through bark to the deadened core—
that accumulated, brittle leaves
were piles of chattering teeth
that seemed to swell and breathe
with breezy sighs—a spongy mass
whose restless trembles we dreamed not dead,
not not passion and seething, if only
would come to us some sun again, would come
deep language of the thriving, floral core
(or so we thought we heard us say);

Yet still the seasons come, thick as snowflakes
when they come, all time at once
in one storm finally here
to tear us from our decaying body,
throwing us inward to drown in the blood’s soft flame
of springtime and the body not yet born.
[LOVE GROWN TO PITCHED ATTACK—]

Love grown to pitched attack—
and now her long shock of skin
lies tangled and burning in your own;
Red, wet nails and tattoo-less skin
and spent lightning drowned
and melting in her silken core.
When the morning throws
its sun into the day, does it come
crashing through her? Does the moon
that’s driven down into the tide
by swelling dawn do so bursting
through the ascending fountains of her bones?
All this, or she is simply there, returned
and hovering at the heart’s limit,
the way a mirror tears the skin from your face
and gives it back again.
HIS UNCLE ASKS FOR A COMMEMORATIVE POEM

Time is livid, will consume her young
For mere anger, till her guts, stretched
And bloated like a bullfrog’s throat, teem
With the maggot minutes that she’s spawned.

Objects not fresh in their one shred
Of time, compressed to bottled images,
Intricate and on a quiet shelf,
Would not support you, now,

Nor carve forward through a slew of waves
To leap from dot to dot of foam,
Spinning between scattered, up-flung rocks
Round a distant cape.

Could we return to any day and find it there,
In wrecked abundance rising from the sea,
Although we had watched it once
Sawed open and splintered by the jagged wave,

Still, from its friendly deck no fervor
Would hail us nearer over blank, destructed foam;
Sirens sob not but quietly pennies, now,
And not the grave, but its strenuous lack,

Is the tube of flame down which we grieving fall.
THE POET DEBATES WITH HIS FRIEND’S MISTRESS, DEATH

Having howled too long
For the abducted soul’s return
To the cold flesh
Of one cherished,
I belabored Death
With an invitation, which she
With grace accepted,
Appearing at my door
One early afternoon.
We ate small cakes with tea.
She was without affectation
And beautiful. It went like this:

Sharp lack of ecstasy had been a poison
That thickened blood to a cold paste
And paled my kindled skin to wasted ash,
That at first I did not hear her knock.

She knocked again. I rose
And staggered to the door.

Sunlight tore through the room’s air
Like ignited birds that scraped
The floor and walls in raucous throngs
With melting, illuminated feathers;
And this as I opened the door
And found her there,
A vision of subdued cheer—
So that I was dazzled, and my eyes failed.

I took her for a stranger—and her eyes
Sizzled as she crossly spoke:

“Does my stupid lamb lack sense
Enough to know his Shepherdess?
A glob of shadow is the slop
His skull holds, if this be so,
And his eyes still swirl in their cups—
Or have I like a cat
Lapped those milky orbs down
To the rotted bone?”

She smiled then, and I knew her.
She entered, and I closed the door.
I took her coat and found the lining
Warm from her body; and as I did,
She touched her finger to my eye,
Which I did not like—
Though it was as soft as a tear—
And said she would not eat them yet;
Though then saw and took
Into her hands two sketches made
In charcoal of my friend, and asked,
Did I feed these same eyes, that once
Seemed half-melted fragments
Of the day’s sky shattered by starry pistols,
Such trash in endless series—
That they now must crawl like worms
Forward through the light they eat?

And then I was displeased, because
She was a guest, and I had not asked
Her there to mock me.
I said as much—again
She smiled, and told me
That the likenesses were keen,
Though I was an idiot,
And a poet’s tears are his disgrace;
She said:

“What honest shadow won’t dissolve
And break apart in brightness?
And here you’ve set, like Pompeii’s stains,
A ruthless dullness to persist—
Contrary to sense, contrary to health and elegance.
The grand, loping blob you weep for now
Was a mass of slowly rotting thread—
Nerve, meat, and skin mere tangled string
In which the soul played kitten—nothing more.”

I mumbled, quite dissatisfied,
And offered her her coat;
But she brushed it to the floor
And demanded cake; and I was pressed
By my shoulders into the kitchen.
I’d bought a cake, a luscious
Sachertorte, which she ate and criticized,
Dropping crumbs as she gestured—
And this at times maniacally.
I said that she was cruel;
And she leapt up on her chair, arms cocked,
And declaimed her fanatic protest to the ceiling:

“Who holds that mercy is a type of crime?
Or are my gestures harsh? For in truth,
I ease disgraced excellence; while the twisted child
Born stifling in the racket of its form,
Cast out by its parents, I nourish with milk of my flesh.
To them, as to the infant torn in war—
Whose slaughtered mother’s blood is the melted arms
That it hold and soothe—to such disordered lambs,
I say my knife but combs their throats
Like shining hair to make them smooth again.
And then, am I not tender?”

She nipped her cake. I wished that I
Could think of some response,
But the reeling frenzy of her speech
Had left me so agape
That she looked at me and said that saints,
When butchered, hold their faces so.

She laughed and stepped down. She cut
Another slice of cake
While I turned to start the kettle;
And while it warmed, I went and got
My notes, wherein I’d set
A lengthy accusation, and returned
To find her seated and attentive—
The wedge of cake
She held upright in her hand
And bit with birdlike dartings
Of her smile. I almost laughed—
Though grew serious by remembering
My complaints, and read to her:

“You end all good things; though many
Of us you send, we hear, to grave torture,
And for them you manifest no end.”

At which point she clutched her knees
And rolled about the floor,
That I regretted to have tasked
Her harshly; till I heard
Her laugh, though she tumbled still,  
And seemed a cork tossed round  
On giggling foam. She stretched  
Gasping at my feet and said:

“So the poet wheezes sighs and drools  
His honey on the page,  
Like a dull and weepy bumblebee—  
Who lays his friends in mausoleums  
Of carved salt, decayed by rain,  
And lies down even among  
Their carcasses to moan.  
But if you’ll sob so wretchedly,  
And simple as an infant, I’ll soothe  
Your petulance with fresh candy.”

She pulled from her purse a skull,  
And, standing up, she set it  
On the table; and I saw  
From the chipped front tooth  
It was my friend’s, and I yelled in anger;  
Though she smiled and stroked it  
Like a pet, and I said  
It was an unbecoming pleasure  
To so enjoy our losses  
And our suffering. She said:

“You moan of pain as if it were not good—  
The burning hoop I whip my tigers through  
To give them discipline; and though there be  
From time to time some tardy one who lingers,  
Recognize you not that there are some  
Who still, like Saturn for their heaviness,  
Must be in Heaven ever held in place  
By a disc of flame?”

I did not speak, but was confused;  
She marked this and continued:

“Hell is a bin for the disharmonious doll,  
Who sings too foul or shrill its melody  
When the string is pulled; Heaven is similar,  
Though collects more pleasant mannequins.  
We gods care not for your love or hate, your tears  
Fall not from our eyes; we like the sort of doll  
Who looks like us, and fits its simple habits
To our own proportions; and such a thing
Is fine enough. We’ll keep it near.”

She stroked the skull and gobbled cake;
I weighed disjointed arguments.
The kettle boiled; I made the tea,
And when I turned around,
I saw she’d set the cups and placed
A third one for the skull.
I poured just two, though saw
Her face and bearing grow severe;
I poured the third; then cut more cake
And sat me sullen down.
She softened and spooned sugar,
In hers and then in ours,
And the swirling liquor seemed to make
Of each thin shell of porcelain
An ear; and this she saw me think, I guess,
And said that they were listening.
She whispered into hers
Before she sipped, which I found grotesque;
And this again she saw, and said
I was just such a shell
Made hot with neatly spinning liquids;
Though as fragile to destruction
As a curling wave. I said:

“Though fragile, still I govern force
Throughout my instant;
My voice lends its savor to the air,
My joy and sorrow add their texture and sense
To the dust of their composition.
I sail for my few days above the depths
On a splintering, wooden bubble;
And though I fall in wreckage to the waves,
And with my colleagues melt
Like dispersed sugars, sweetening the deep,
Yet the carved effect of every life
Persists in time’s unfractured mass;
And this dignity is our inviolable home,
About whose doors you howl and scratch,
Though may never enter.
As mere cessation, you lack all quality;
You do not exist, and drag things into you.”

She frowned at me and clucked her tongue.
She said:

“What savor, chased to wild
Extremity, does not,
Like a hunted animal, turn and bite?
My touch, and nothing else,
Translates all thrashing flesh
To nourishment, or spills honey
From the cracked heart
Of a slaughtered enemy.
The church digests its rooms of clotted
Prayer, breath locked and rotted
In the vaulted stone, which I make snap
And tumble at my will;
And stifled voices find their gods.
And if thereby some pleading bones
Be smashed to jagged dust,
No cruel, negating hand it was
That fell to pluck, from its cage of knotted vein,
The dispassionate animal of smoke—
But prayers answered more abruptly
Than one knew one wished.
To Heaven or to Hell, all’s to be preferred
That drags one through a hole
In the floor or ceiling of one’s cell;
To breathe free, not stifling
In the moon’s discarded skins
That fall to earth, ensnaring
As they do some darting souls—
Who fall like sleepy snow
From dreamy, unremembered wombs
And populate the world.”

She sipped her tea. She wiped her hands
Till they were clean of every speck;
And I was lost in rapture to observe
The limber dip and curl of every finger.

And now, there can be no doubt at all
That here I lost all sense—
As I took her hand and, ravished, kissed
The shadow of her palm;
Though she laughed, and like a playful ape,
Kissed mine identically. She said:

“Joy is not joy, but a frenzied child,
Who tears with both fists flesh
From its petty frame, and weeping, feasts;
Nor knows love its savaged prey—
The heart unfolds its wolfish fangs
To attack its image in another’s blood.
Am I pretty in your eye?
Pleasure, like a sick dog gunned down,
Teeth melting in a pool of foam,
Gives way to softer ecstasy;
And I find you beautiful.”

We kissed. Much later, in her arms
I asked if she was happy,
And she stretched and smiled;
And moonlight, like evaporated doves,
Fawned and licked her skin.

The night progressed, and at some point
I drifted into sleep.
I woke and she was gone—though still,
In the kitchen, my friend’s skull
Sat quiet by its cup.

O Wonderful friend!—Does he climb even now
To Heaven on his strangled dreams?
Or are his faults scattered over yet-unborn faces
Like infectious, disfiguring shadows?
Wherever—and in whatever form—

Indestructible fool! Take care!