ABSTRACT

A MAN NEEDS HIS VEGETABLES

by Joe Hess

The poems in this manuscript are presented in a loose narrative arc depicting a process of self-actualization and personal discovery inspired by a diversity of private and public events. A large portion of the poems were derived from the oral dictation of personal journal entries into Dragon voice recognition software, which often completely rewrote the source text. These texts explore a less personal approach to the concerns of the original journal entries, allowing me new perspectives on themes that include masculinity, love, sexuality, war, social violence and planetary conservation.
A Man Needs His Vegetables

A Thesis

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He still plays golf
with dad on weekends
out by the old sleepy dunes,

and stays in the empty
apartment alone, snorting
coke in small rooms.

His vacant stare appears
in the mirror above
the mantle; he wonders

why his teeth fell out
last night in a dream
of a dying golfer.
He taught next to a skeleton with numbered bones. His students left in school buses, while his sons explored the dry tanks of amphibians. At evening dinners, before the wife and mother arrived from the kitchen, he’d already be talking—uttering a science of life profoundly ordered to them. In time, the eldest son would die, a second would be fired, and a third would return home to live in shame. A teacher ruminates through a window on what he missed, when the wife and mother finally joins him to eat.
Sixties Refrain

My color-filled brain
proclaimed the 60’s were back
inside my bloodshot vision.

I could see us all
living together, before
I opened the bedroom

doors on amber shadows—
their giant lotus shape folding
inward like a night-

blooming flower at daylight.
The headlights were maybe hers
in my rearview mirror.
The Knot

You wonder what will come of this

   Turning

He lifted you

   over, she raised herself

away from me (I was passed out

   high

on laundry day)

   I spread her sex

For my return inside—you wait. I know

   I couldn't love,

you were broken

   and I

with rougher hands.

   stopped,

I’m late for the movie and before I smoke

   inside the not

I remind you I drink betrayal slowly.
Grave

I breathe
slower and a chorus

of flora rustles
above
the earth and stone.

Too ruffled
before to notice, I hear
him speak now.

There’s time
to hear the wind.
Point Fragment

My brother had a passion

for arrowheads, flint
tools, jagged remnants from

another time. He preferred stones
to living things that withered and died after strange lives. I
recalled him sharing in his knowledge: Mammoth fossils
when we played chess were never found in Ohio, it
was too high sounding for glacier

runoff as if someone was pushing
an often- played museum recording

below a mammoth bone
display towards closing
time.
A Man Needs His Vegetables

You’re listening to the radio at the pizza shop and notice a couple deflecting and absorbing each other like ions before a storm.

They probably don’t eat vegetables, you think. There was a time it was last call in London, someone singing about a drunk in the crowd.

The bartender took your drink. Cleopatra told you to retrieve it, and the bartender said: Piss off. The jugglers politely dodged you outside.

Later, you caught a venereal disease from a neat freak who changed her major a lot, then became a stripper. That’s when you started sitting at the pizza shop, changing the weather with your mind, like when you were a kid… then true love made a brief appearance, got its feathers all ruffled trying to save such a peculiar bird. Love became a perfect storm. You remember covering your head with your arms; her chin still met your drunken elbow.

She wailed down your hunched back; garbled screams slid off you below the streetlight. The property manager mopped the hallway. You remember a phone call—her drunk father promised the police he wouldn’t come. You and she always talked of a trip away from the neon.

All you wanted after New Year’s was to bring her some sand from Mexico. After you cruised the Caribbean with your mother, your friends told you
to *Get a lawyer.* You hear it every day and night, now, a quiet slapping inside like a neglected movie reel, whispering—

*A man needs his vegetables. A man needs...*
Snap Shot

She sat with her back
to me, towards a poor,
honest face. I approached

from the east. Her
shoulders slanted like
a grey cotton sphinx

yet alive and facing
the stone library. A breeze
through her hair—

and there
for a moment was it.
I closed my eyes

on the negative
pushing into my mind
under the sun.
What Doesn’t Fit

A paper bag with groceries breathed in her arms.

There was half a song buried in her return.

The music didn’t fit in my guitar case.

She looked through me before dinner. It’s safer nowhere near her unanswered gaze.
9/11.1

He spied their woven,
pressing limbs through the blind.
Her window light was

a cause for peering in—
where... where were their hands?
Maybe it was sadness,

summer ending. He walked
in the quiet dawn and peed
on the wet concrete.

The morning phone rang.
He was late for work.

9/11.2

Under the television’s
black tower smoke, executives
prayed on their lunch break.

He wondered about hands
outside the windows, human
flight. Surely, he thought,

soldiers would be
getting laid more than
poets for awhile.

What now, genius?
Blind

I didn’t know you go blind really, not an urban legend. Then the truth came

from the optometrist assisting me at 45 with my first eye glasses.

What have you been doing, young man, to need glasses? I research. I seem to demand

pictures, sometimes text— for certain narratives of flowing, turgid bodies.

Ethos? Yes, I’m agreed with on my choices. I’m not so alone.
That kind a' good

You go to hell
for that kind a' good,
working intently

towards self pleasure
long after some futile morning
prayer and before

the fear up ahead–
then it’s… a third time.
A lost day of porn

will become tomorrow
weeping. The devil laughs
all breathy and says:

“See what He gave us…
to cultivate with determination
rivaling the humility

He demands! *Ludicrous!*”
Pixels cry; he spills. A she
shivers upward.
Immune Deficiency

The next day I feared AIDS, and wondered how often whiskey
brought me to this. I hurried her back to her cul-de-sac.

Fifty lovers seemed like a lot, but I was too drunk not
to ask, nor to rip the condom off with a certain *esprit de corps.*
The ice queen was over twenty-seven when the beadsman felt her emanate warmth during a walk after dinner. Their union made her watch him more closely. He thought doubt made her more graceful. He told her he cheated on his last lover. She found his guilt attractive. He came inside her several times. The next day he read the dailies off her back while she rode his thumb. First she saw yellow, then a fuzzy red pounded in her vision. She melted but her smiles scarcely counted towards his happiness. It was just another ice queen letting go of doubt, giving alms to the beadsman. O the things we won’t believe in.
Jujitsu--

Drugs were an ally against
  deriving
the mundane. In an Irish pub I was chosen by
  power from
a Celtic God to bring fertility to
  the
fallow land. I could sense the
  attackers’ own
silent circle forming
  weight and strength;
I shouted “buzz off,” then split. I awoke
  lower
with a broken hand. It was time to search
  your head
for a new teacher,
  and your enemies will pass
so I listened
  above you.
During fall’s rough passage,

she taught me, *Ich bin hungrig;*

pumpkins lined the brownstones,

and I remembered *Ich bin hunger,*

instead (her laughing under restless leaves).
Men from Mars I

Mars’ grooves are old.
Here they’re always new,
the grooves. Like Jenny

driving Scott around.
I cross any intersection and
they’ve crossed it. Later,

when Earth is like Mars,
we’ll internalize the finality
of dry and creviced

lake beds in the hot,
identical mornings, while
lovers gasp with sudden

apnea and remember
the roads that repeatedly forked
until they no longer forked.

They’ll laugh in pain about
old grooves in the terrible
new desert heat.
Men From Mars II

In order to groove
there must be two, the groover
and the groovee.

An illusion of
domination aids in my
ejaculation. God
gave me one gland for
sex and war. Listen, bitch, when
I’m talking. I’m sorry
about your little
planet, but I can’t stay firm
when I feel mistaken.
Men From Mars III

I see Mars as an illuminated mass, while Earth’s dreams remain opaque. Mars has pixilated truths, completely visible, making its past conceivable. Earth’s past is ravaged, obscure, determined to hound us—waking up on either scares the hell out of me.
Goodbye Still

Middle-class money
was never effective for
seduction. Columns

of power reek with
women of depth choosing golden
toys for their new sons.

I’m constrained to
the middle and realize
beauty, intelligence,

and style were never
your price for security.
They were labels

you sold when the right
man had time to look.
I was crazy about

you. But when we meet
we’ll chit-chat away
from talking about it.
Curve Wind

The devil is several years into his commitment to global warming.

Ego remnants clamor in minds of black ink. Some watch an old reel of Rita Hayworth blaming it on Mame. Gods witness a shift in their stories.

Everyone admits no one’s really ever seen over the horizon.
A Solemn Décor

Elizabeth Smart was
found. Inside her smile, I see
a postponed rage

on war-dead faces.
Pixilated voices serve
as a warm compress,

heightening blood flow
below the television.
Now I imagine

a splattered doorknob from
a café bomb blast, the silence
of disembowelment—

the last sound a kettle
screaming then, makes—there’s no
correctness in terror,

holding a cocktail
at evening’s news hour. Later
comes insomnia,

when a stranger
visits, like the abductor
who parted her thighs

near a basement switch
box, explaining to her Scripture;
while ghosts in trauma

arrive across hemispheres,
finding no safe zones to haunt,
just a solemn décor.
American Sublime

Gargantuan smokestacks light up the black night.

The phosphorescent water ripples under wands of fire.

An Appalachian silhouette looms between the moon and a dark rainbow glaze of silt swirls in the glowing river.

The ore carriers squeal and cry, while mothers in town hold their babies—future agents produced to employ in this sullen age. I hear the beautiful things are going away.
Let

churches promise
the earth, but they won’t
be meek. The powerless

would be aborted.
So a blue face is born
into a life of pool

water and graduation.
Father gone in youth,
uncertain words get

stuck in his throat.
Once he saw
a yellow dress spit

from a monster’s mouth
during a horror matinee.
The meek shall inherit

this earth.
Borrowed Life

A mother’s pills
maintain America's front.
Sons and daughters

travel within earshot
of love. They live without
knowing, without

lives not borrowed
from fleshy therapists.
They remember

leaves of grass, but
not the alienation
memory constructs.

Their children look
for life. I remember
being in one.
Extend Relations

He tended bar, so let
the son burn not in anger.
He married sweet love,

so let our God be;
extend relations. Her look
wasn’t friendship, so

let me learn from this
destruction. So many teach
preservation, when

we can’t go home again.
The A-bomb dropped,
so let the sun burn

not in anger...
Oppenheimer shook
Teller’s hand, so let

God be extended
relations. Teller
testified against him,

so let him learn
from this destruction.
The light is blinding

to the poet, as he
moves outside the cave;
but the sun burns not

in anger, for our God
is. Extend relations,
and let us learn from

this destruction that
we can’t go home again.
A Muse’s Journal

Bring wonder into
the population. Scout out
supernatural fruit
stands that vend gold
apples. Eat pizza on Sundays,
and make sure to
check out mentally
during a blitzkrieg. If you
see a potential
mate, study him or her
for twenty years then walk home in
silence. Poets honor
losing you— it teaches
the meek about inheriting
the earth. Get to know
subversive minds before
they’re milled. Smile, when you talk
and always ask serious
people how the fishing
went. If it’s a beautiful
day, invade it with
silence. Symbolism
could get into your house for
a fuck, but it’ll
probably end up
passed out in the driver’s seat
of your car. Start
meeting bolder bards.
Met a narrative I

I chew on narratives while you fool around, stuffing words into your head, stopping to talk to handsome meanings. So, you’re bored with unions—well, I’m tired of running around all prickly and stunned. You’re like a raccoon playing games before the Second Coming. I swear outside the movie house (as our odds evaporate) that the French New Wave should brush its teeth to meet your ebony eyes.
Muse

Men have a tendency to roam the streets before creation. A bunch of them molested the Nine Muses; when they push them away their emotions are pushed back down their throats. God didn’t create a land of gentlemen. Look back on ruins to find images of closure for those gentle things.
Met a narrative II

A pronoun for blackness
has no antecedent on
a day of severed heads.

His cashmere-padded clock
has no sound and little time.
Some leaders are raised
to believe there’s only one
sickness: getting caught.
It’s a God-given itinerary
dancing before him. Then
the game board jiggles
when the winds change.

In a newly disturbing light,
latent talent arises in
the dance of the dead.

No one’s dead after all.
So new scripts,
new parts are written.
O, Sons of Dayton,

the ancient scribes were butchered at their writing blocks, and the Dark Ages continued a thousand years. Oral traditions passed through threats of empires scattering papyruses through countless states, surviving to be—

less cool than a teenager in the mall at Twilight (and the dark ages continue a thousand years). O, sons of Dayton dreaming of Hadrian’s Wall or young bards starting tales in dangerous times of rented out minds and boot-driven rhymes, do foretell a beginning reaching deeply—to trip the switch fantastic.
Reclamation

The morning reconvenes
on songs
playing
in parlor rooms
at the end
of board walks
shaking
splintered

youth
at summer’s end.
Totem Ball

The game is similar to
golf today. The *primitive*
on tree hill near the reef wind

asks his sons to worship in
their play. Playing deeply is
their worship. Now the tribe

edges toward the mission
house, where the white
woman, walking with

the administrator, confronts
totem-ball serenity with
words—*ball is false.*

How can reality be words?
What is *false*? Totem-ballers
follow to a thought

center of inner-clout, where
the hunter gathers his
ancestors under the moon.

Now they run from moon
song to the administrator’s
speech and the pleasure of

a white woman whose rigid
religion of winning
and losing says *separation*

for faith and ball—
chilling him on the hill.
He remembers a fearful cloak

from childhood arriving
moon-white in the daytime,
a danger in a child’s face.

The missionary talked of
*making it new.* His father
asked would the hunter
have a place in the shack of worship? Why do totem numbers fade? Their fire burns irreverently all day, while nothing sacred gathers under the moon.
The City Pool

The blue dusk filters through evergreens. I balance on pedals watching the lifeguards lithely moving, lifting chairs, exchanging phrases beyond my world. A jungle of bike frames is gone now, prompting anxiety earlier—an omen to bathing-suited bodies erupting with language. I push from the chain link fence and move my pedals over the popping cedar.

White and lavender magnolia tulips blow across the shuffle board court under evening wind hurriedly escorting my wheels from the park. Home ward bound to a well-lit TV room, a secret darkness unwraps its marooned hues upon the night.
A Bit Much

The twilight crickets
droned in the churchyard.
Our toy-gun battle
wore on past supper.
Walking home, my voice
hoarse from the sounds
of war—sudden and
warm, by an old, dented
shed in the alley,

God’s meaning
enveloped me. A bit
much, I snidely

comment to myself,
in middle age, walking
to the old church.
Met a narrative III

We’re our own kind of unaddressed wrongs. I baptize myself here,
in this pond, anticipate new chances for entanglement. We’ll
experience this fight together—all the volley balls under the sun
can’t interrupt adults straining to find their way home.

Rainy day people will know when you're feeling blue.

Continue buying notebooks and shoes; you’ll eventually
sense acts of kindness happening inside tinted car windows.
Service Attendant

A man requests two
different cartons of smokes.
He feels a need to explain.

I want him to take his time.
The service attendant should too.
I don’t want her to miss

anything. Their hands go
idle as they talk. Something
remains when he leaves.

A toy tractor’s chrome
shines by the counter;
someone will buy it

and later be kind
at the wrong time.
The door to the Flying

J hisses open
next to the interstate,
as the service attendant

turns to ring me out.
The Devil’s Tail

(An early model press with a large handle-lever)

Escaping the executioner
in those Gutenberg days,
it's here. It awakens

in this backroom.
A hand pulls toward
a vision—like pressed

in Luther’s edict,
setting fires in time
with speed. It works

amidst a commotion,
a celebration of letters
casting the lines

of reason emerging
from mind’s prison.
It waits each day

for a friend to bring us
our heart to press it
free beneath

the Devil’s Tail.
The Sentinel

You shower alone, portraying a lost sentinel in a world chained to long over-due departure plans. Like MacArthur in the Philippines, you want to say, *I shall return*—

that mystic, lucky bastard of some greatest generation.

Soon you’ll smooth into productive multiplicity a sad and happy childhood.
July 4th Barbeque

I carried the tinfoil
towards the flames.
Someone donned an apron

of Washington
crossing the Delaware
in a hot dog bun.

Carnivores circled;
the voices of children
pierced the dusk.

The summer of locusts
grew louder.