The Wrong Number

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis includes a collection of original poems introduced by a critical introduction. Some poems utilize discursive narrators to get at an idea. These narrators are often, though not always, neurotic, and are trying to find meaning despite a crippling anxiety. In addition, there are several allegorical prose poems that ask to be taken seriously. The introduction attempts to situate my work in the context of contemporary poetry.

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There is no poetry without its own criticism. You can take your minor elegance and throb around in it. I have nothing against the minor elegance, because I have nothing against the failure to think. But if the young friends who live and write after the generation of Pound are going to matter in the United States, they are going to have to develop a criticism of their own.

—James Wright
AGAINST TWITCHING: AN INTRODUCTION

In preparation for writing this introduction I revisited every poem I had written in the past two years. As expected, I found many mistakes. I also found some keepers of which I am very proud. But, more importantly, I noticed an improvement. Two years ago I might have kept a poem simply because one or two lines “worked.” Now, though, I am much more demanding and in-touch with my process. I attribute this growth to reading. I have learned the value, as Ted Kooser argues in his essay on craft, of reading other people’s poems in order to understand my own. “Every successful poem,” he writes, “acknowledges the influence of other poems. Every unsuccessful poem illustrates by its failures what might have been better if only its author had read a little more poetry” (9). My small body of work in this collection is, I believe, a testament to this. The more poetry I have read, the more comfortable I have felt with what I am “doing” in my own poetry. And I think this shows.

I have also found encouragement—perhaps ironically—in the early frustrations of now-successful poets Dean Young and Charles Simic. Young, like me, experienced a period of tremendous self-consciousness in graduate school, saying once in an interview, “nobody understood what I was saying, and I didn’t have a clue either.” Simic, too, experienced similar travails early on. In 1962, he threw away everything he had ever written because he thought it all too derivative. I, too, feel that some poems are too derivative and sometimes I just don’t have a clue. Their words have helped me brush aside these crises of self I have been having for the past two years and move on into what now looks like a hopeful future beyond graduate school. What follows, then, is an
attempt to understand my own work through a series of analyses of poems by poets who have influenced me in one way or another and, in some cases, a brief discussion of how some of my poems, in Kooser’s words, “acknowledge the influence.”

First, though, let me quickly describe how I am trying to avoid falling in line with the poetics of my generation. In the 1970s James Wright noticed that literary magazines published work by authors “who have learned through television to write bad prose,” seeing their poetry as rife with what he called “twitch” (82). Not much has changed. Just as MTV’s quick-cutting style has influenced contemporary cinema, so too has it influenced our poetry. Perhaps right now the twitch has turned into a tremor or an earthquake, fragmenting our poems. Tony Hoagland has rightfully labeled the now as “a moment of great aesthetic self-consciousness and emotional removal” (174). Being a product of my generation I see this move in some of my work though mostly I manage to revise it away. Consider this poem by Matthew Rohrer whose work I feel embodies the current temper (emotional removal):

I hear my baby crying.
Even when he’s not crying.
I hear steamships.
I hear phantoms.
The baby is not crying anymore.
All of my love rushes outwards to fill
the empty city. Rush. Rushes out of my ears.
Do you hear that? she says.
It sounds like a boxer punching a horse
through the top half of a barn door.

Like much of Rohrer’s poetry this is an exercise in obfuscation. What begins, in the first two lines, like a logic-bound narrative poem quickly grows suspicious and turns away because, as Hoagland observes, the new poets cannot “commit themselves to the sweaty enclosures of subject matter and the potential embarrassment of sincerity” (179). The
images are strangely pleasing, but the poem fails to move me because it flutters around the edges of coherence. The end moves furthest away from the baby or any emotional connection. When the “she” enters, who I assume is the mother, she says, about the city’s noise or the baby’s cries, “It sounds like a boxer punching a horse / through the top half of a barn door,” a move meant maybe only to show us how shockingly idiosyncratic is the speaker, but that also serves as a warning: when I approach sentiment, it says, I must move quickly away. The result is a poem that lacks “human heat” (Kooser 57).

Instead of finding a balance between “restraint and expressions of feeling” (57), Rohrer’s speaker opts for the linguistic rope-a-dope.

My goal as a poet is to capture the “human heat” that is missing in Rohrer’s poem. Over the past two years I have been experimenting with how best to do so. Mainly, my poems can be classified into three distinct phases—image driven, fragmented poems; narrative confessional poems; and prose poems. But before I discuss my current aesthetic, let me offer a discussion of my journey. I took my first poetry workshop much later than most of my peers. In that workshop the poet Terry Hermsen encouraged us to embrace the image, introducing us to the poetry of James Wright and Rilke whose work we tried to emulate. It took me some time to realize that an image, while powerful and important—what Tony Hoagland calls the most “potent” poetic technique (2)—, could not carry a poem by itself. Instead the images must be presented in such a way as to create an underlying drama (3). Hermsen’s poetry reflects this basic understanding. Consider his short poem, “Half-Sonnet: Sunday,” in which the speaker projects human
feelings onto the subjugated landscape thus indirectly taking a stand that, ultimately, is not enough:

The island mends itself with broken shells.
Our invasion is nothing new, timed
to the centuries, the palm of the moon,
grey cedars reclaiming the quarry, white scars
of the ancient crustaceans scraped raw
by machines that are themselves now gone.

What is real? What cannot be said—the lake’s cold heart where we hesitate and, at last, curl in.

This mostly image-driven poem tries to shape the images into what at first appears to be a political statement. The opening image of the island mending itself brings to mind broken shells that, strung across the landscape, appear like sutures on a wound. Then the speaker reflects on the ebb and flow of humans who have used the land, extracted valuable materials from the quarry, and then left, taking with them their machines, but leaving the scars. The images of “grey cedars reclaiming the quarry” and “white scars of ancient crustaceans scraped raw” travel between destruction and rejuvenation. Here the poem gets very close to the political. However, the final stanza attempts to save the poem from that fate, suggesting that the speaker perceives nature as having a “cold / heart.” Despite his affinity for ecological empathy, the speaker is ultimately aware of the impossibility of fellowship with the land, and this creates enough tension to complicate the reflection. Or, perhaps, he accepts the machines as a natural fixture of the new pastoral landscape. Either way, the ending successfully twists what could have been a simple binary.
I admire this poem and know that, as Hoagland argues, many poets such as Sharon Olds find success almost exclusively with images (3), but last year I decided to move away from the image-driven poem and into the more discursive narrative poem. I am indebted to Hermsen, though, for another reason: he introduced me to the poetry of James Wright. It was Wright who, thirty years ago, dogmatically urged young poets to “stop twitching and pay attention once more to the letters of John Keats” (83). Invoking Pound (though he hated Pound in all other things), he wrote “the poet who wishes to write free verse should beware of writing bad prose hacked into arbitrary line lengths” (81). Wright encouraged young poets to write “intelligent poetry” and to pay attention to the line. Wanting the line to reflect surges of speech, often idiomatic, I moved away from the image. From Wright I also took content, which, for lack of a better phrase, I will call “the anxiety of place” (and which I have recently expanded to include the general anxiety monologue). We find this in many, if not most, of his poems about Ohio (or those that take place in Ohio), perhaps most notably in “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” in which the speaker, observing the crowd at a high school football game, is reminded of how difficult it is to escape the small town. I like the poem because I feel that the speaker’s anxiety about getting stuck in Martins Ferry lurks beneath everything he says. His “vision” is colored by anxiety. This anxiety of place is evident in some of my poems, too, perhaps most successfully in “Daytrips,” which exemplifies the beginning of my shift towards the more exploratory and colloquial poems. And while I agree with Ted Kooser that good poems do often reflect their influences, here Wright’s poem is nowhere to be found. Mine is an explicit personal reflection instead of the
implicit reflection manifested in the landscape of “Autumn Begins.” But I do try to
create a similar anxiety as experienced by two young people who used to drive through a
small town:

Driving the back roads through small towns
that look like that small town you know—
store fronts, big trucks, dust—
there is a sensation not unlike the smell of manure
being passed back and forth between drafts of passing cars,
a distant perception of the dirt being rolled
into the same tire seam over and over again
which reminds me of the person I didn’t want to be—
forever driving the car in and out of a garage
until each day is indistinguishable from the others
and the automatic door anticipates my every move.
And this gets me thinking of daytrips with Paula not long ago
when we were both in college learning supply and demand.
Back then we’d spend most weekends on the road
driving through towns like this especially fast
like even the idea of slowing down meant we’d have to stay forever.
We thought one day we’d look at our reflection in the window of a store
and realize that no one is driving the car
and suddenly we’d feel so familiar in our flannel shirts.
And Paula would say something about the lights of big cities
being like headlights on a monster truck crushing the smaller cities
on its way towards the trailers of small towns.
But it never happened—we’d drive on through and buy coffee
at a gas station a few miles out and watch the heat unfold
like waves on that ocean we’d never seen except in movies.

The speaker here is appropriately cynical, like the speaker of Wright’s poem, allowing us
to believe that his observations are informed by something underneath the surface. The
landscape only reminds him that he didn’t want to end up this way, which, I hope, then
segues naturally into the larger reflection. The content here is similar to that of Wright’s
poem: anxiety of small town Ohio. And I am proud of this poem’s movement and the
repetition invoked in thoughts and images, which I hope serve to accentuate that anxiety.
But Wright’s poem is different in that he doesn’t spell out the speaker’s neuroses—we
are to pick up on it and we do.
If I had to pick one poet whose work has had the greatest influence upon my own, it would be Tony Hoagland. To put it (offensively) simply: he writes poems so good that, after having read them, I immediately wish I had written. His poems often break out of the narrative for little flourishes of simile or metaphor in which he follows his imagination as it winds around the realistic landscape. When I try this move—digressing from the otherwise logical poem with a short metaphor or simile—, one of two things happens: the poem insists on staying figurative and therefore loses its top layer of accessibility (becomes incoherent) or the flourish stands out like a neon sign in a chapel and the poem never recovers. For instance, in my poem “Aberdeen,” which will probably be one that I do discard (having failed too many times to revise it) I tried to explore how my recollection of the place has been informed by the memory of Aberdeen’s aggressive grayness. The poem alternates between descriptions of Aberdeen and letters to the speaker’s mother (the remembered past versus the observed present). In one description of sub-zero temperatures with which I try to establish the speaker’s disposition, he says “Scotland recorded the lowest temperature ever / and Siberia sent a memo to the Northern United States / still frozen to the typewriter.” This “leap” is incongruous with the narrative and while I find it a pleasing image, it is too far afield. Hoagland’s flourishes, though, fit seamlessly into the poems. If there is a neon sign inside a chapel, the chapel becomes one in which a neon sign would be. They do not draw attention to themselves but rather heighten the poem’s narrative content; they act as supporting details in his poetic arguments. A good example is his poem, “Phone Call,” a poem that embodies this “move,” and also approaches but does not succumb to
sentimentality, something else I admire and am trying in my own work. Here the speaker attempts to reconcile two competing visions of his father:

Maybe I overdid it
when I called my father an enemy of humanity.
That might have been a little strongly put,
a slight exaggeration,

an immoderate description of the person
who at that moment, two thousand miles away,
holding the telephone receiver six inches from his ear,
must have regretted paying for my therapy.

What I meant was that my father
was an enemy of my humanity
and what I meant behind that
was that my father was split
into two people, one of them

living deep inside of me
like a bad king or an incurable disease—
blighting my crops,
striking down my herds,
poisoning my wells—the other
standing in another time zone,
in a kitchen in Wyoming,
with bad knees and white hair sprouting from his ears.

I don’t want to scream forever,
I don’t want to live without proportion
like some kind of infection from the past,

so I have to remember the second father,
the one whose TV dinner is getting cold
while he holds the phone in his left hand
and stares blankly out the window
where just now the sun is going down
and the last fingertips of sunlight
are withdrawing from the hills
they once touched like a child.

“Phone Call” mostly reads like a confessional narrative. It is, as the title suggests, about a phone call. The first three stanzas serve to orient the reader. At some point in the conversation between father and son, before the poem begins (the impetus for the poem), the son impulsively calls his father “an enemy of humanity” and, being a thoughtful person, he reflects on this, leading him to compare his father to “a bad king or an
incurable disease.” This simile doesn’t distract us from the narrative. Instead it enhances the speaker’s pain. “Bad king” implies a power hungry father figure and “incurable disease— / blighting my crops, / striking down my herds, / poisoning my wells” (the flourish) is an expressionistic moment, getting us inside the head of a man who has been dealing with chronic emotional abuse from his father. Without this we lack perspective. With this we get to see that the speaker lacks basic items of nourishment normally provided by a supportive parent figure. He lacks nurture. But sticking to this one vision of the father would ruin this poem, would (embarrassingly) simplify a complex emotion. The final “move” feels true. It concedes. My father, it says, is helpless and I cannot hate that. By ending on the word “child” the father’s helplessness is driven home, quite literally, and we feel a moment of sympathy for both of them. A lesser poem would make us choose. Hoagland manages to elude sentimentality, but also steers clear of glibness, what James Wright called his “chief enemy in poetry” (95). Ted Kooser once complimented Richard Hugo’s ability to “skate along the edge of sentimentality without careening off the edge” (57) and I think Hoagland does that here. Writing about father-son issues, he could have easily fallen into the crevice. I am currently working on a poem about my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s and while I hope to keep this one (after many revisions), it is obvious that I haven’t yet learned to properly use the skates.

While I will continue to write discursive narrative poems, my current project deals with the prose poem. At first I was drawn to the form because the unconfined space allowed for extended, unregulated digressions, which, I believe, mimic real conversations. I had also been wanting, but had been unable, to write whimsical poems
that gravitated far away from reality while still dealing with universal truths and emotions. The prose poem has allowed me to relax and to experiment with tone. With this freedom, though, has come an underlying fear that readers won’t take my poems seriously. I was glad to discover that I am not alone in this fear. Most discussion of prose poetry or the definition of prose poetry often includes jokes or self-deprecatory misdirection. Charles Simic correctly categorizes this general unease, saying “the prose poem has the unusual distinction of being regarded with suspicion not only by the usual haters of poetry, but also by many poets themselves” (Lehman 11). He goes on to call the form “an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose” adding “The prose poem is the result of two contradictory impulses, prose and poetry, and therefore it cannot exist, but it does” (14). His definition includes a retraction. But his definition includes the keywords that drew me in: anecdote, allegory, and, most importantly, joke. In fact, joke and prose poem sometimes go hand in hand. Steve Martin’s first book, Cruel Shoes, is basically a collection of prose poems disguised as humorous anecdotes or stories so as not to scare-off his fans. The “stories” are very similar in style and humor to what James Tate would publish nearly 30 years after Martin in Return to the City of White Donkeys. So the nomenclature is elusive. Anyone, even comedians, can join.

I hope this explains why I am so strongly attracted to the form. The prose poem community, as evidenced by these definitions, seems inviting and fun, much as the poems themselves often are. Take James Tate, for example. He describes the prose poem as a “means of seduction” in “deceptively simple packaging,” adding:
It is this same blend of irreverence and tonal steadiness that makes Tate’s prose poems work. Consider “Distance from Loved Ones,” an allegorical phone call between a son and his mother that, I believe, epitomizes what I am trying to do with this form:

After her husband died, Zita decided to get the face she had always wanted. Half-way through the operation her blood pressure started to drop, and they had to stop. When Zita tried to fasten her seat-belt for her sad drive home, she threw-out her shoulder. Back at the hospital the doctor examined her and found cancer run rampant throughout her shoulder and arm and elsewhere. Radiation followed. And, now, Zita just sits there in her beauty parlor, bald, crying and crying.

My mother tells me all this on the phone, and I say: Mother, who is Zita?
And my mother says, I am Zita. All my life I have been Zita, bald and crying. And you, my son, who should have known me best, thought I was nothing but your mother.

But, Mother, I say, I am dying…

I am not sure where to begin discussing this poem except to say it is delightful. The first line sounds like it could be another absurdist Tate poem about a woman who goes to a face store and purchases the mug of a forgotten celebrity. But the first paragraph is not absurd; it is not even interesting to the son (or us) because he does not know Zita and therefore feels nothing for her. In the second paragraph, the speaker voices our concern, asking, “who is Zita?” The tone is very controlled. Even when it turns, in the last two paragraphs, toward the bizarre, the speaker doesn’t flinch. This tonal flatness makes this poem work. We must be willing to believe that the speaker believes his mother who believes herself and that this conversation could actually be taking place in this (fabricated) world. David Lehman has noted, of Simic’s prose poetry, that “it owes its force to the tension between the flatness of the delivery and the macabre twist in the plot” (12)—Tate’s poem owes its success to this same tension. The speaker is flat, unmoved,
and heroically steady in the face of the otherwise ridiculous. Never does the content
draw attention to itself. It is funny but not a joke. A lot is at stake here. It does what
every good poem does—it sends the reader back to the beginning, to the title: “Distance
from Loved Ones.” Not only does it make us laugh, but it is heartbreaking. As an
allegory it says something about human existence. At the risk of simplifying what is a
complex poem, it asks questions, such as: “What are we hiding?”; “Do we invest enough
time in each other?”; and “Do we really listen and get to know people?” In the context of
the poem, the mother is crying out, (and literally crying) because her son doesn’t
recognize her. And he is crying out in a different way, moved to confess something
about himself that, whether or not it is true, feels honest to him at that moment.

On a similar premise, I wrote “The Wrong Number,” in which a man who
receives a wrong number call realizes, after hanging up the phone, that he might like to
give the caller and her friend a second chance. He considers that he might be missing
something and so he calls her back. The poem works because it is funny (hopefully) and
it provokes reflection on the distance between people. It asks us, as does Tate’s poem, to
wonder if we are missing out on opportunities to really know people who could be
important to us. And then it manages to complicate this idea in the final sentence when
the speaker experiences a momentary flash of reality, in an otherwise surreal world,
acknowledging that this kind of friendship cannot work. It never could. And so they end
the call on that note.

There can be no real conclusion to this discussion. I will continue to take
Kooser’s advice to read more. I will remember Dean Young’s rookie troubles, hoping to
find my subject sometime soon. And I will return to the preface of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* to remind me what it is I set out to do:

>The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; (59)

If this critical mélange has given me any insight into my own work, it is that many of my poems fail to capture this familiar language and do something more. Lacking structural integrity, they stumble slowly towards ideas. The looseness of the prose poem is helping to alleviate some pressure and, allowing me to follow ideas off into the distance where I am making some interesting discoveries. I will bet Tate didn’t know where “Distance from Loved Ones” was headed when he began with that initial story about Zita. Or at least it reads as if he discovered it. That is what I am looking to do. And while I realize that prose poetry is dangerous—lending itself perhaps more readily to glibness—I am willing to take that chance in the name of discovery. It has been exciting thus far.

Writing within this form is, as David Shumate says of the afternoon nap in his prose poem by the same name, “like finding a hole in the universe.” I don’t know how long I will stay, but I am having fun at the moment and there is so much to explore in all that space.
Works Cited


THE WRONG NUMBER: POEMS
ARS POETICA ON A MOUNTAIN SIDE

Do you ever wonder how sheep in Scotland position themselves halfway up mountains on the only visible protrusion?

I do, often, and often I am impressed, wanting to know that feeling they possess once they’ve arrived.

Is it accomplishment, having just dragged a rigid body a few hundred feet up the side of a steep rock?

Despair maybe, or loneliness?

Or maybe I do know, maybe that one sheep I remember vividly on the side of Ben Nevis in the Scottish highlands is very much like me after I’ve written a “good” poem, having found myself hoisted, somehow, onto a high point, unseeable from the base, fragile, capable of crumbling at any moment,

like an airplane landing on a helipad. I know the complexity of that feeling for it could very well be an illusion—

a good pilot, after all, lands softly and smoothly on a runway onto which the passengers can step and feel safe and sturdy in an otherwise chaotic world.

And maybe that’s what the sheep feels— safe up there, absent from the crowded pasture with an aerial view of that acreage of landscape in which other sheep graze, feeling very powerful atop his little world and looking down on the herd as each follows another into the road, a road not meant for them.

But who cares about that one sheep up there, anyway, aside from me (and even that is debatable; is this really care?).
Maybe the shepherd, you might say, 
but even he is in the road, now, grazing among the sheep.
DAYTRIPS

Driving the back roads through small towns
that look like that small town you know—
store fronts, big trucks, dust—
there is a sensation not unlike the smell of manure
being passed back and forth between drafts of passing cars,
a distant perception of the dirt being rolled
into the same tire seam over and over again
which reminds me of the person I didn’t want to be—
forever driving the car in and out of a garage
until each day is indistinguishable from the others
and the automatic door anticipates my every move.
And this gets me thinking of daytrips with Paula not long ago
when we were both in college learning supply and demand.
Back then we’d spend most weekends on the road
driving through towns like this especially fast
like even the idea of slowing down meant we’d have to stay forever.
We thought one day we’d look at our reflection in the window of a store
and realize that no one is driving the car
and suddenly we’d feel so familiar in our flannel shirts.
And Paula would say something about the lights of big cities
being like headlights on a monster truck crushing the smaller cities
on its way towards the trailers of small towns.
But it never happened—we’d drive on through and buy coffee
at a gas station a few miles out and watch the heat unfold
like waves on that ocean we’d never seen except in movies.
I was sitting on my couch watching TV when the phone rang. It was a woman looking
for Carl. I said, “Who’s this?” She said, “Jasmine.” “I don’t know why I asked you
your name,” I said. “Carl isn’t here, you’ve got the wrong number.” So we hung up.
After I hung up I felt uneasy. First, I thought what if Carl is here, so I checked every
room and closet. Then I thought I had been too dismissive; I should at least get to know
Carl. So I called her back. “I’m genuinely sorry about before,” I said, “Carl isn’t here,
but maybe I’d like him to be.” She said, “that’s okay, and you know I think you’d like
Carl; he’s kind of like you.” I said, “Oh really, what does he do?” “He’s a doctor,” she
said, “mostly he goes to developing nations and performs expensive surgeries free of
charge for poor children.” “Oh,” I said. And then some strange man walked into my
apartment who had the air of a Carl, the presence. And I didn’t think I should tell
Jasmine because she might think I was lying before and that I had called her back to
mislead her further, though I hadn’t, but Jasmine heard Carl say, “Hey Steve, I’m back,”
making it sound like Carl was here all along or had just stepped out for a few minutes.
“Who’s that?” he asked, seeing I was on the phone, and I said, “Jasmine,” and he said,
“Hmm, don’t know her,” and Jasmine said, “Is that Carl?” and I said, “Are you Carl?”
and he said, “Yes, I’m Carl, Carl O’Reilly.” “O’Reilly?” Jasmine said, “I think I have
the wrong number.” “I think I have the wrong number, too,” I said and we decided it was
best to part ways without me ever meeting her Carl and with her never meeting mine.
Outside church in the parking lot
I can hear the exhalations
of a congregation booming
and some really sweet JBX speakers
pumping in some instruments.
Mostly I hear the speakers
and imagine those secular hip thrusts
moving in waves
through the minds of teenagers
their faces exposing those internal gyrations
for which later they'll have to confess.
I know because once I was one of them,
picking out Paula across the gymnasium/
church/worship center/whatever
and thinking of those experiences
not explicitly recorded in the Bible.

I still remember when she asked me,
if God is in here on Sundays
where is he the rest of the week?
because I heard the small h in her plea
like when she called me steve, small s,
at a youth meeting/basketball game/date
because that’s when I realized
patronage and patronize
aren't competing ideologies at all
but rather two mirrors set slightly askew
outside the strip mall of insecurity
and though I had no idea what that meant then,
I had come up with it and it was mine;
all mine, mingling with those gyrations
set so securely behind me
booming from some really sweet JBX speakers.
HALF-DEAD SQUIRREL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

I have a shovel in the garage
that had not been used
before. Shovels are for digging,
manual labor
from which I am estranged.

I want to be a man,
manly, of sweat and dirt—
but I have very little interest in the process
of work. So forgive me,

because I did not really know
how to hold the shovel
or how to swing it
(though does any man
really know how to swing one?)

and I did not hold it long enough
to earn a blister,
though it felt rough and capable
of blistering.

Forgive me for missing
that first time,
and then for the impreciseness
of each swing thereafter,
and for the cloud of gravel dust
I produced with each clumsy clank,
and for the children nearby
in the tree watching me try
to do something humane,
and for doing it so poorly
that they’ll remember it as cruel.

And one last askance:
for me for wanting them to think
I was doing something heroic
with my shovel
the way I imagine all the men in my family
being heroic
with shovels and other tools—
the way my grandfather, in that photo, looks heroic
or capable of heroism
atop our roof holding a hammer—

For this is my great fault, I think.
A better man would have just done it
and got on with his day.
THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

I am learning, rather late, that subjectivity is on its way out, that she wants me to part with the part of myself that wants to explore the problem, any problem, that wants to know why people do things, that wants to give benefits upon benefits of doubts.

What I’m saying is that when she came home from work—having just been fired, or let-go as I put it, because the economy is killing Stan’s Café—

I’m saying I shouldn’t have said well, you have to look at it from Stan’s point of view

because, as my brother tells me, rather late I might add again, I should have watched more sitcoms in which the husband’s friend, over beers, imparts this little bit of wisdom: “just nod and say yes, honey, and uh huh; just get by.”

And why am I unable to understand—or rather accept—that this tendency of mine is inappropriate or misguided? Because when I applaud her spaghetti sauce I want to be taken just as seriously as when I say needs more garlic.

So when she tells me later that sometimes a friend just wants to be consoled just wants to be supported and defended with or against the logic of the given situation, I know I should be able to do that, I know it sounds easy.

I also know that when my burger is undercooked or when the cashier cheats me out of my proper change—whenever I’m wronged—I’m going to be asking for her support, have done so already.

And while that may not be the same thing I recognize that she’s been doing it for me, often and unasked, and that this—my recognition of her ongoing contribution—is a good start for me, me, the dumb husband tangled in the Christmas lights in the sitcom as she watches from the window of our relationship endeared by my stupidity, willing to give me the benefit of the doubt.
THE LEMURS & ME

The lemurs at the zoo
would not stop hugging each other
despite my constant pleading.

I said you can only keep it up for so long
lemurs, it’s important to me that you embrace
the logic of love.

They said nothing;
You can’t argue with a primate.

I wish I could say I moved on to the next exhibit
or that I possess the ability to let things go.
But their tails so like question marks
asked me nicely to stay at the glass.

So I stayed,
thinking of vast forests
through which I wanted to run.

Then I wished to be an umbrella
passed between countless hands at an outdoor mall
or the kind of book with a flexible body
people buy just to hold.

And then my standing there
became very much about my wanting
not to be standing there
my wanting very badly to be lying somewhere
with arms around me,
even if it was, like for the lemurs,
that simple embrace of necessity,
which keeps them from a grisly fate
fifty feet below on feces-covered concrete.

Then one lemur walked away
leaving the other one alone on a steel branch
and I knew what a fool I’d been
for thinking this was about me,
though there was something familiar
about its strut
and how it took up with the next lemur not twenty feet away.
As I was sitting in the Hamburger Inn eating waffles and reading the newspaper, a man sat on the stool next to me and said I was doing it all wrong. “What am I doing wrong?” I asked. “All of it,” he said. “But this is how everybody does it,” I said. “No, no,” he said, “you’ve got to really mean it.” “I thought I meant it before,” I said, looking at my hands. “Yeah, yeah, they all do,” he said, “until it’s too late.” “Well when is that?” I said. I was beginning to sweat. “You’ll know,” he said, looking at my plate, then standing up to leave. “But it might be too late already,” he said. “Well teach me, teach me how to mean it!” I said, holding out my hands. He sat back down, saying “Give me your waffle,” so I slid the plate toward him. “Now watch me eat it,” he said. I did that, too. “Now, go pay for my waffle.” At the register, Nancy smiled at me like she always did when I paid my bill. I think she wanted a tip. When I returned to the bar to continue the lesson, he was gone, and on the plate were just a few smears of maple syrup, barely discernible, looking very much like whoever ate those waffles meant every bite. Thank God, I thought. I thought this would be a long lesson.
The People and the burrowing owls
can co-exist if the birds have a little open space!
says the reporter to the television screen,
standing in a flooded field in rubber boots,
and the camera moves in tighter on the owl
past the reporter and the ornithologist
and the reporter gets a little jealous
and reluctant to move, though he does,
and everyone at home thinks
what an endearing little owl, indeed!

These owls were in the mist—damn it!—
in the midst of mating season,
says the reporter, now angry at the owl
for his own mistakes
and for the bird’s insistence on twisting its neck
like a corkscrew unscrewing him
and for the mating season’s insistence on mating.

This may be the only one leftover from the flood, he adds.
All the others might’ve drowned in their holes,
thinking serves them right
those house hoppers, those little prairie squatters,
thinking of the rattlesnakes now in the burrows
like burnt ochre and desert sand crayons
stuffed into his daughter’s box at her mother’s house.

But on camera he looks cool and calm
though the viewers at home might like to see
a prime time breakdown
just as they might like to see infidelity in HD on flat screens
or earthquakes inside hurricanes moving across land.

The reporter just wants a little
coffee in the morning and Memorial Day off work,
wants to cut open a pomegranate on Halloween
and tell his daughter the seeds are bleeding teeth.
And all the viewers want simplicity, too
though sometimes they don’t realize it
until they've turned the channel
then turned it back a little curious and sentimental.
That’s when they know it
like the owl knows when to move burrows,
like the reporter knows
when to forgive a bird.

*We wish this cute little fella a long life,*
the reporter says sincerely to the ornithologist
who thinks, what is your idea of long?
who thinks, what do you know about owls?
FEARS

How long can one stand at the edge of the trail and contemplate the distance and height of where it ends, a few hundred feet above, in an explosion of limestone?

Apparently a long time.

If I think about this moment I will have to consider my fears. Heights, of course, paired with this new addition of slipping down the slope into the mouth that is the gulley, the sycamores that would break my slide knocking me back and forth between their trunks like Plinko.

Yes, Plinko, I am not afraid of gameshows.

But heights. Still at the trailhead I tell myself the children shouting below near the pond with their parents are to be feared more than the oak. The oak gently leans and is quiet.

I imagine their fingernails, bacteria like secrets in there like the dirt and weeds and snakes settled in for the spring under those rocks up so high up there and away from here; but more importantly, all these natural beings so at home, me in their living room, intruding.

Am I afraid of heights or of children? Or bacteria? Or is all this a metaphor, too, for my inability to commit, still here at the bottom of the incline—which most people would call gradual.
CHILDHOOD FRIENDS

I was sipping my coffee at the kitchen counter when Sherry started to ask questions about the witness protection agency. “I don’t know much about that,” I said. “Yeah,” she said, “I was afraid of that.” This took me by surprise, as Sherry had never before wanted so passionately to know about running away from home. “What have you done?” I said, adding, “I mean, is anything the matter?” a little embarrassed, but knowing this is what husbands were supposed to ask in this situation. “Remember Tony Barliogni?” she asked. I said I did, and I remembered the time my buddy Tony and I traded baseball cards outside Barry’s on 7th Street. That was twenty years ago. “Well I shot him,” she said. This took me a bit by surprise, too, as I had also never known her to shoot anyone. “Okay,” I said, doing my best to look earnest, but thinking only about how that day Tony had taken my Griffey Junior when I went into Barry’s for a snowcone and how he had always denied it thereafter. Sherry was still talking so I nodded and took a drink so as to look involved, but that goddamn Tony was really starting to get on my nerves. “No reason, I just wanted to see what it felt like,” she said, “and it was a thrill, it really was.” “Uh huh,” I said, intent on killing that Tony if I ever had the chance.
NOT HOT

That’s not my mom in that picture on the mantle—
her long red hair ironed flat, parted in the middle
and running the length of her torso
like a waterfall that ceases just out of frame—

Not my mother who my best friend Nick has just called
hot, as in *she was hot at that age*
meaning twenty years ago
but also, and more importantly, meaning before she was my mom,
back when she was someone’s daughter and didn’t concern me.

Back during the years of earthy tones and smoking pot,
of dating that handsome mustachioed man that would go on to be my father—
but who was not, let me point out, my father at the time—
because that girl in the photo would do those things

but that girl— though she bears some resemblance to my mother—
is a different person altogether than the woman,

who here in this house—where Nick is swiftly falling out of my favor—
was only modified by that word during menopausal hot flashes—
which she sometimes (embarrassingly) admitted—
or when, on vacation in Florida, she got sun poisoning
and had to spend the week covered in a white shawl, ultra-freckled and sweating.

Of course, Nick is also quick to point out the obvious—
I exist, and so does my brother,
and so someone thought her hot,

but he is missing the point: that I prefer to see their relationship as necessary
for the reproduction of future generations
and that my parents’ attraction to one another is like a mild to medium salsa;
that is, manageable while also managing to be, by definition, completely not hot.
THE DEER

Joe tells me that he woke up to a deer at his window chewing on the rose bush.

He says it smiled.

I like Joe but somehow I side with the deer whom I’ve never met and despite my only contact with deer being at age ten, helping a neighbor string a carcass from the rafters in his garage.

This is the same Joe, who, when he hit a deer with his F-150 last February, said it damaged his truck more than his truck did the deer.

I side with the deer for a moment as Joe speaks because I like the idea of that deer smiling—a little payback perhaps—smiling even though one of his species is lying in a ditch nearby, even though he must pass the body on his way to Joe’s garden every morning.

But I like the idea of Joe smiling more. It’s just, sometimes I’m just an asshole for the sake of an argument in my head.

When Joe shows me the half-eaten bush—which I know he will, and soon—I am all geared up to curse the deer right along with him.
I overheard a couple talking about how sometimes all they do for a laugh is sit on their couch and listen to their children talk. *Remember when he said, “dad, why do you have a face?”* the mom asked. They so were right, these parents, easily amused perhaps, but right. So I decided to have a kid to help me write my poems. I’d be a Dadaist. I’d make readers squirm at first, then scratch madly at their hair, pulling at their clothes, asking “what does it all mean?” Gradually I’d bring them into the real world of which we are all a part, and on that common ground we would bond, briefly, and the poems would impart something heavy at the end, like “we all die too young” or “we didn’t know those would be his last words.” At first my wife was opposed, calling it “childlike” and I said, “yes! That’s it, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.” Then she understood. She told me one night over pizza and chardonnay that we would probably never have chardonnay again. Nine months later we had a kid, though I didn’t know what to do with him since he couldn’t yet speak. I must admit, I hadn’t expected this part—the waiting. A small oversight, a delay, but endurable. A few years later there we were, sitting on the couch, watching little Bill as other families might a television set, awaiting his wisdom, when he said something that sounded a lot like *heebie-jeebies*, though it could have been something about the Bee Gees. We’ll never know, I guess. My wife turned to me and had that look that said I had ruined her evening. Or her life. I sometimes confuse those two looks. The next day we put him up for adoption and I officially retired, though I insisted, and still do, that these things take time. Ultimately, though, I agreed with her: how much time can we wait?
AFTER AN ARGUMENT IN THE APARTMENT NEXT DOOR DURING WHICH I HEARD THE WORD “FORK”

Chris puts the forks in the dishwasher
with the tines pointed skyward
and Jen, when he goes to bed,
turns them back over.
She imagines a pitchfork in dirt
and sticks them extra hard
into the plastic grid
filled with a two-thousand year old pleasure
derived from scratching soil
with manmade sticks.
She imagines a moment
when she’ll remember what that was like
to work the fields and reap.
Not many people reap anymore, she thinks,
though Chris works days and pounds nails
and eventually a house pops up.
And this goes on for years,
the turning over of utensils
and Chris wonders why it’s so hard
to keep it all together
inside six-hundred square feet.
Jen often wanders outside
on days like this, two turn-over days,
into the little quad to sit on a bench
and pretend to read.
She flips the pages every sixty seconds
or so and watches the grass
beyond the words.
Millions of individual pieces, she thought once,
like the words on the page.
Sometimes the wind bends the grass on end
and other times it’s still.
She knows there’s a third possibility
and a fourth, like when all the grass dies
and grows brown and stiff as a brush
or when the landscapers have just left
and the severed blades blow about in rows.
But on those days she stays inside.
Some days Chris appears at the window
and watches and thinks how smart she is
how she can read the same novel two or three times
how she has friends in there he’ll never know
and that doesn’t make him feel lonely
like opening the dishwasher sometimes does
and realizing, for the umpteenth time,
that the forks are upside down to him,
right side up for millions of other people
just like Jen. And on those days
he thinks, it’s not so bad,
they all get clean anyway
and on other days, the stainless steel
still warm, he pricks his finger on a tine
and knows the price of being right.
I was driving this guy from the airport to that small-town Ohio hotel when he said, I come from the Nebraska plains, you know, I come from a farm where I was versed on bailing hay and where I knew what a field was and the three parts of wheat and the twenty-four sections of a thoroughbred horse.

We drove on, we drove down Route 23 and I pretended to understand when he shucked the meaning from our conversation (much like I suppose he shucked that corn back then) citing big City Chicago as the new pastoral, citing the El’s rattle and slide as a never-ending idea traversing the industrial fields.

And I asked what he did, and he turned his head with the secondhand and looked out the passenger side window into the hills or at his reflection and gave me an answer that could’ve been printed on the back of a book and I wanted at that moment to be on a farm somewhere in Nebraska, counting the granules of dirt and lifting things with my hands, much like he said he used to. And there he was, lifting an idea of himself so far above his head as to be indistinguishable from the clouds.
WAITING AT THE AIRPORT

I want to thank you
for not picking me up at the airport,
for forgetting my arrival
and allowing me to explore the unexplored
expanse of concourses B and C.

What I mean is this:
how else would I have had this kind of time?

How else would I have been able, like a food critic,
to sample the local flavor of the food court
and conclude that nothing tastes much different,
that it’s all meat and cheese?

Or, let me thank you
for allowing me ample time to finally browse—

something that I had, in the past, reserved only for malls
and bookshops—

to browse those confined specialty stores
that sell post cards and diapers
shaped like our great state of Ohio,
which, I might add, grew greater with each factoid
bestowed upon me by the sprawling murals
next to the moving floor.

For instance, I never would have guessed
that the first ambulance service sprang up here in Ohio
near Yellow Springs in 1865
or that Columbus’s downtown fire station
is the busiest in the nation,
two facts that, when taken together, and when really thought about
make Ohio both careful and careless.

But mostly let me thank you
for letting me just be in the baggage claim,
allowing me the leisure to sit and observe
that man, after grabbing the wrong suitcase,
smile that self-conscious smile
as that woman took it gently from his hand
and when, after they had already gone,
I sat and just watched as other people’s luggage
ran in an endless loop,
waiting, like me, to be picked up.
GOOD LUCK

Walking to work
a bird crapped on my shoulder
and all day long people tell me
the chances of that are small,
smaller than winning the lottery.
Twice. They tell me that bird droppings
hitting a human equals good luck.
Annie is equally suspicious as me,
says if it is good luck, then
why aren’t there bird shit key chains?
I say what if one broke?

She says that Orwell was shot in the neck
and people told him how lucky he was to live.
She says Orwell said it would have been much luckier
to have not been shot at all.
I agree with Orwell though it makes my world
seem a little small and safe.

The birds after all don’t leave scars
though a man is out there now
power washing what they do leave into the sewer
like the final scene from a play called
Life is Ordinary Crap.
He does not cease for passersby
but sprays close to our shoes, splashing.

Later I read in the news that in Orlando
they removed the trees along the promenade
“because cars had begun to disappear under expletives.”
That’s what one resident said in the interview: expletives.
That's what I say, too.
It’s just so nice to know
we’re not alone under all these expletives.
PERFECTLY NORMAL DAY

You’re sleeping in and I’m eating some cereal in our studio apartment on 2nd Avenue two blocks from High Street where other couples are out walking and enjoying the morning. All of the songs of all of the birds that I can’t name are drowned out by my own internal crunch, which could be a metaphor for my mind trudging through these wasted thoughts of morning. And there you are on the bed, mouth open like you’re about to confess something and have been trying to do so all night. And then your legs twitch a bit and I imagine you in that dream of yours out on High Street jogging with another man not quite me—clean shaven and hair closely kempt—who tells stories as he runs, never pausing for a breath. And here I am unshowered and unshaven lifting spoonfuls of Cocoa Puffs for an early morning workout. And all of this is just to say that maybe upon waking you’ll realize the stains in my shirt are permanent, these gym shorts reserved only for sleeping, and that I’m allergic to the early morning jog, maybe the jog in general. And there you are twitching again, probably laughing at his jokes, he who will not be sitting here, in real time, at the computer when you wake, or will not be able to clink the spoon “accidentally” on the bowl, waking you to a perfectly normal day.
THE PROPER METHOD OF MY DISPOSAL

The newspaper says
he had been burying the dogs
not far from our house,
euthanized in packs, then dragged out
beyond the trailhead to the river.
We are told: he thought this
the proper method of disposal.

I suppose I can’t stop thinking of our water,
of the protozoa in the public supply
seeping from the river to our wells.

(I’m sorry, but the dogs are already dead.)

Besides, this is of a more immediate concern:
the proper method of my disposal,
which, in my mind, has never involved
cholera, hepatitis, typhoid, or dysentery —
all being much slower than rifle shots to the head
like if those dogs had carried around the bullets
for weeks before dragging themselves to the river.
THE EVOLUTION OF DOMESTICATION

Sitting on an old family couch
in my attic apartment
in an historic house
on a street made of cobbles
as my neighbor's dog scratches
and whimpers at my door.

What a smell that is.
What a horrendous beast
they have invited into their house.

What are we doing with all these animals—
dogs, cats, the rabbit
across the street who sits on the porch
who's so fat and bulbous and immobile
as to be a standing offer to extinction.

All of these animals that were once wild,
that smell very much like they still are.

And at the grocery store
I'm reminded of the next step
in our evolution of domestication:
a small child being led around the oranges by a leash.

And the next step,
placing them in cages when company arrives—
they get too excited, they sometimes pee themselves.

But I'd like to think we can control the dogs first,
starting with this one at my door
very proudly inventing new smells,

before branching out to inspire parents
to remember their children as humans,
and as part of humanity,
so I will not have to defend them
against the part of me that wants to judge.

I’m having a hard enough time as it is
trying not to dislike the neighbors.
BLACK HOLES

When I was eight, I shot Jesus with a bb gun.
Back then he used to float in a frame
above our dining room table
and he looked very much like my mom,

who asked why'd you do it, is it the hymns?
I said no, that he invented the gun
or at least metal, or at least the idea of the guns.
So in a way we did it together.

When I was fifteen, he made a cameo in my dream
as I accepted the Nobel Prize.
He became the gold medal,
then the ribbon around my neck,
then my mother waving from the third row.
Remember that thing you read about Hemingway, he said,
“That son of a bitch writes on water”?
That was my water, he said, still is.

And so by twenty my life was pretty much set—
He claimed permanent residence behind my eyes
where he sits still at a little oak table
drafting legislation against the liberation of me.

Why just yesterday
I built a birdhouse with my hands
and some scrap 2x4s
and stepped back into the glow of myself
to admire my own hard work. And there he was,
a glowing saucer on his head:
Try stepping back from the universe, he said,
try stepping carefully around the black holes.
ALTERNATE REALITY

*You’re just picking on me because you’re white*
Rayvon says every recess as I lead him to the wall
where he’s etched his name into the crumbling brick,
calls it his *office*. I say, if you’re so clever
then why are you always in trouble and he laughs,
says, *This? This isn’t trouble.*

And so I leave him near the door,
tell him to count the kids on the playground
with whom he hasn’t yet fought,
say *it won’t take you long.*

And then one afternoon
the neighborhood turned our playground into a stage
and put on a play about clichéd inner city violence
and used us as extras and it was sort of a pop-quiz
designed to pull us teachers through our lattes
and into this alternate reality
that had been collecting around the edges of our school.

And then that day I just had to say it because Rayvon—
my little persistent epiphany—was somehow right:
*go to the wall because I’m white*
and because I drive to school with the windows up and the a/c on,
because, basically, I’m concerned with humanity
as far as the edge of myself.

And the principal’s memo said *you can’t beat yourself up about it*
and the steadiness of his signature said *go figure.*
Tony is in the living room watching
Paul Newman walk across the desert
without leaving footprints
and Sheryl is in the kitchen
drafting an op-ed on apathy
in the form of casserole for two.

Then it’s Paul Newman at the bus stop
telling Patricia Neal he’ll miss her,
that she’s the one who got away
as she stands in the mouth of the bus
and Tony roots for the impossible,
for her to step out and embrace Hud.

And Tony starts feeling
sentimental and looks into the other room
where he can just make out the end
of the table and says, “You’re the one
who got away” into his empty bottle
and Sheryl, overhearing,
feels a little sentimental too,
so content in her separate room.
LANDING IN ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND

In 1982
Scotland recorded the lowest temperature ever
and Siberia sent a memo to the Northern United States
still frozen to the typewriter.

Also, I was born.

Thus the thermostat of my life was set to cold
and I investigated its whereabouts
twenty years later in Aberdeen
as an international student
returning to the homeland of gray.

When I arrived
the North Sea was retreating
and oil rigs bounced in the harbor
to keep warm.

And the spires from the distance of our plane
looked like granite lances
impaling the sky,
deflating the clouds
perpetually drowned in fog.

Dear Mom, I wrote,
still cold.

Everything was charcoal and smoking and wet
and everything went soggy and sank into cobbles.

Tell dad I said hi.
The cows are thick with hair,
hair like tiny icicles.
THE NOTE

The suitcase-shaped spot in the closet
took me awhile to find
but the absence of car and furniture
were very successful as messages.

It was like reading a note
I was supposed to have written
two weeks before.

Like
pick up more milk
as I held a gallon in my other hand;
call your mother
as the ring-tone pulsed and pulsed
and she searched for the phone on her end
and I hoped she wouldn’t find it.

It was the note itself—
not anything written on it
or missing from it—
that confused me the most
as a bus stop will
ten minutes after you’ve missed a bus—
Everything looks the same
minus the people, minus the bus.
TOASTED CHEESE SANDWICHES

The doctor opens a folder like an average guy
then turns to us as a doctor
reading from a list of medical terms
and says, what I take to mean,

her brain is shrinking
like a jawbreaker in the mouth of God,

as my mother nods and my father,
sitting slumped on a stool, sips his coffee.

Meanwhile, the subject of our deliberation,
Betty Jean, 80 and mostly bone,
sits very still on an exam table
in the middle of the room
like a sculpture of a woman
lost inside a cloud. My grandmother
hasn’t a clue with which to solve
the great mystery of her stolen memory.

I remember my friend’s father
telling me a story about his mother
who had Alzheimer’s, how she used to
ask the lamp if it was hungry,
how he used to laugh.

I think this person has not yet begun
to converse with the furniture,
has not yet embraced the confusion
enough to be funny.

I think of the summer I lived with her
just after my grandfather died;
she called me buddy
and made toasted cheese sandwiches.

That’s funny, isn’t it?—

toasted cheese sandwiches.
I call them grilled cheese.