O, Enduring Sun

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Jaswinder S. Bolina

June 2010

© 2010 Jaswinder S. Bolina. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled

O, Enduring Sun

by

JASWINDER S. BOLINA

has been approved for

the Department of English

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

______________________________

Mark Halliday

Professor of English

______________________________

Benjamin M. Ogles

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

BOLINA, JASWINDER S., Ph.D., June 2010, English

O, Enduring Sun (133 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Mark Halliday

The dissertation is divided into two sections: an essay titled “Redefining the Postmodern in American Poetry” and a book manuscript titled O, Enduring Sun.

“Redefining the Postmodern in American Poetry” presents an original critical framework that seeks to comprehensively describe American poetry written since 1945. The paper posits nearly every poem published in America during that period tends to conform to one of four stylistic modes. These modes are labeled the Meditative, Discursive, Associative, and Linguistic, and each represents a distinct tactical response to Romanticism; Modernism; and the unique philosophical, political, and economic forces at work in America during the Nuclear Age.

O, Enduring Sun is composed of lyric poems that attempt to define their speakers’ experiences within a larger cultural and political context. The manuscript regularly juxtaposes conversational tone with more ornate lyricism and musical tactics such as anaphora, alliteration, and internal rhyme. The poems favor associative rather than linear logic, and they generally feature disjunctive description and imagery that extrapolates away from autobiography into more fictionalized versions of subjective experience.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Mark Halliday

Professor of English
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redefining the Postmodern in American Poetry</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Cultural and Political Origins of the Postmodern</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Four Ways of Looking at a Poem</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Origins of the Associative</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Associative and Imagism: Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Associative and Surrealism: André Breton’s “Free Union” and Robert Desnos’ “The Voice of Robert Desnos”</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Postmodern Associative Poems</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Ashbery and John Berryman</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Century Associative Poetry</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Tate’s “Poem (I Can’t Speak for the Wind)” and Dean Young’s “Frottage”</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. O, Enduring Sun and the Associative Mode</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. A Qualified Conclusion</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, Enduring Sun</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Believe</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait of the Minor Character</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Anthology of Lost Causes</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait of the Self</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait of the Memory</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Room, with Arsonist</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elegy Barcelona</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REDEFINING THE POSTMODERN IN AMERICAN POETRY

I. Introduction

There is poetry in America. It is everywhere. It’s in the sappy lyrics of the thousands of pop songs ricocheting around iTunes’ million-gigabyte servers. It’s in the 3D movie houses and in the flat-screen, high-definition televisions, in the dialogue between the earnest lovers discovering their earnest affection while the stalwart sidekick dies and the noble father dies and great America is at end saved by the hero again. It’s in the advertisers’ flourishing voiceovers and poignant print copy, in the greeting cards’ saccharine remembrances. It’s even in the oratory, all anaphora and crescendo, of the President. None of this is to suggest that the “poetry” found in these various linguistic venues actually intends to be poetry in the strict sense. Rather, the sensibilities of poetic writing, which include an attentiveness to descriptive detail, musicality of language, and emotionality, are manifest in much of America’s various rhetorics. However, in spite of the ubiquity of poetic device in mainstream forms of language, contemporary poets are not terribly important to America’s sense of itself. Certainly, our influence seeps in through what few cracks in the culture allow it to do so, but contemporary poetry is not a primary source of knowledge, empathy, or identity for much of the general public. One need only consider the relatively diminutive size of the poetry section of any given bookstore to know that the art form is to the country’s mainstream what experimental jazz is to MTV.

This is not exactly the fault of the public. It is not the case that the nation is filled with ignoramuses who have no art. Rather, it is the case that in the public consciousness,
the signifier *poetry* most likely signifies the metric, rhyming, lyric confessions of the Romanticist period. The linguistic, imagistic, and pathetic tactics and strategies of poetry employed by the mainstream are mined from the history of poetic writing rather than from its more contemporary permutations. Thus, the trouble is that little of the “poetry” of the mainstream has anything to do with the tens of thousands of poems published every year by university presses and literary journals. For contemporary poets, the lyric earnestness and forthrightness of the Romantics has long been undermined by the destabilization of subjectivity at the hands of political, cultural, and social changes, and by the difficult entreaties of Postmodern theory. Poets find it increasingly impossible to declare, as Shelley does in “Ode to the West Wind,” “Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” without undermining the sentiment with irony, self-consciousness, or wordplay.

This does not mean that poets do not desire earnestness. Far from it. Instead, Postmodern writers have adopted a number of strategies designed to convey a sincerity of feeling and expression. The trouble is that all of these strategies seek to expand upon and complicate the aesthetic choices of our Romanticist and Modernist predecessors rather than simply continuing them. While the poets pursue a complex and compelling expression of feeling, popular culture refuses to pursue the poets. The contemporary poet’s aversion to Shelley’s effusive feeling is the very thing that cloisters poetry in the halls of universities and leaves its publication to low-volume print runs of underwhelming relevance. In this sense, poets are to varying degrees the theoretical physicists of America’s linguistic culture. Think of poetry as the Large Hadron Collider
of language and American pop culture as the x-ray machine at the dentist’s. Often, the most celebrated poets among other poets are those whose work is as penetrable as some of the finer points of String Theory.

Despite its obscurity, there is a lot to like about contemporary poetry. It possesses a verve that few other arts in America can claim. There are more poets writing and publishing their work today than at any other point in the nation’s history. However, America needs a way to understand the Postmodern in poetry. To this end, a critical framework capable of describing the tactics employed by poets and the reasons they employ those tactics would help to elucidate the art. Readers might be able to understand not just what to expect from different poems but also how to evaluate them. Further, a critical framework might allow poets to understand how and why certain poems seem to compel readers more effectively than others. There is certainly no shortage of diversity in contemporary writing and no theory would be able to successfully describe every poem by every poet. However, we can identify trends and tendencies in order to establish a descriptive account of what might be going on in the particle accelerator of the Postmodern.

Any number of anthologists, poets, and critics have attempted to account for the Postmodern by dividing it into “schools” that arise out of the postwar period beginning in 1945 and continue by describing the dozens of writers who emerge since that period as variously influenced by those schools. Most readers of poetry are familiar with these groupings which include the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beats, the New York School, the Confessional poets, the Black Mountain School, and the
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. The trouble, however, with describing aesthetic trends in this way is that the framework is unable to account very well for the massive amount of internal variation in the work of members of any respective group. It also fails to account for ways in which each of the schools interact with and influence each other. Finally, the framework ignores international writers and disregards the implications literary theory has for poetry. Those theories, particularly New Criticism, Structuralism, and Deconstruction, posit that readers should disregard the the author-as-authority model of previous eras. During the Postmodern, it is the text that matters not biographical details of the author’s life. Thus, it is odd that the school-based framework is largely based on personal association between poets or their geographic proximity to each other. The consequence of this is that the framework feels downright misguided when we consider the strange classifications it makes. For example, it places the work of John Ashbery in the same camp as Kenneth Koch. Even a quick examination reveals that each writer’s poetry has little beyond the superficial to do with the other’s. They are both considered members of the New York School—a moniker not invented or invited by them—for the fact that they were personal friends and shared the vastness of New York City for a brief period early in their careers. Despite clear flaws such as this one, the “school” framework is widely accepted primarily because it has been advanced in widely read anthologies like Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* and Paul Hoover’s Norton *Postmodern American Poetry* and because no-one has come up with a viable alternative. At end, while the “school” account of Postmodern poetry is in small ways convenient, its shortcomings are far too limiting. Its system simply breaks down when we more closely examine the
entire oeuvres of the poets it refers to. It collapses even further once we move out of the immediate postwar period of 1945-1960 and into the later part of the 20th century.

An alternative to the “school” model becomes apparent through a comprehensive and systematic reading of poems written during the last fifty or so years. This framework, which says the Postmodern is quadramodal, relies strictly on poems themselves rather than on a study of their authors or those authors’ associations with each other. In this, it accepts the demands made by critical theory in focusing on the text, and what it reveals is that it is possible to classify the dominant strategies of Postmodern poetry into four overlapping modes. Each of these owes its origins to the lyric confession of the Romantic period but each offers a distinct reconfiguration of how subjectivity expresses itself in the Postmodern. These reconfigurations are necessary because Modernity and Postmodernity have reconfigured subjectivity itself into a contingent and unreliable source of knowledge. As such, Postmodern poets engage in a kind of paradoxical evasion of lyric earnestness in order to arrive more convincingly and perhaps defensibly at it. To this end, the four principle strategies that emerge are the Meditative, Discursive, Associative, and Linguistic modes. Nearly all poetry written in America since 1945, a year here designated as the start of the Postmodern, belongs either exclusively to one of these categories or is the product of a hybridization between them. The advantage of this system is that it accounts for variation within a given poet’s oeuvre, similarities and differences among poets contemporary to each other, and it offers a reader the logic or system of thought underlying each mode such that a reader familiar with the quadramodal framework is able to “decipher” and evaluate Postmodern poetry despite its substantial variations.
Where the “school” framework simply labels poets and leaves the reader hapless when these poets fail to adhere to the account of their work offered by the given label, the quadramodal framework offers a more systematic and internally consistent explanation of a much wider array of poems.
II. Cultural and Political Origins of the Postmodern

While the Romantics embraced sentimentality as a desirable, untethered expression of self and subject, cultural, geopolitical, and socioeconomic realities that emerged in the 20th century largely muted the impulse in poetry to explore its themes with ecstatic earnestness. Where Keats went into nature and discovered deep mystery and meaning, Frost discovered ambivalence and nihilism. Where Whitman found strength in the individual will, sexual and spiritual liberty, and a culture fulfilling the promise of modernity, Eliot discovered self-doubt spiritual decay, sexual inadequacy, and urban despair. Where Dickinson wrestled with God, Stevens wrestled with the metaphysical in the absence of God. In the poetry of the latter period, poets seemed to eschew sentimentality in favor of a more austere subjectivity. The realities of the Modern age—meaning the period from c. 1900 to 1945—overwhelm the emotionality of its poets. Take for instance the opening lines of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which evoke the musicality of the Romanticist lyric, “Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky...” It seems as though the poem is about to embrace the ambulatory wonder of Wordsworth or Keats, but before a reader can take the lines to suggest Romantic effusiveness, Eliot undermines their sentiment with the morbid simile, “...Like a patient etherised upon a table.” There is a darkness then in the Modern. It is shared by Pound and H.D. and Frost and Stevens and Williams. The terminal poet in that list is the only one who finds himself occasionally celebrating the self in poems such as “Danse Russe” to any degree of memorable success. While Keats, Dickinson, Wordsworth and the other poets widely dubbed Romantic were by no means devoid of...
darkness—one only need think of Poe here—their sense of foreboding stemmed largely from the metaphysical reality of mortality. Mortality, though, was a part of nature, which remained the source of God, mystery, and Truth. By the Modern, however, mortality is a newfangled thing. It is less a law of nature as it is a consequence of human action. The Modernist world is one permeated by war and the bleakness of the urban, while remaining absent of moral and spiritual clarity. In this reality, effusiveness of feeling seems almost naive, and it is no surprise that where Modernist writers embrace a frank expression of emotion, they do so not to acknowledge wonder but to admit their own powerlessness, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”

The Postmodern simply takes the concerns of the Modern to their logical conclusions in the context of the atomic age and the rise of American dominance over global culture. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed by the Soviet Union’s successful development of nuclear weaponry ushers the world into a state of Cold War, and this has serious implications for the art produced in the aftermath of those events. While the Modernist encounter with mortality does take place in an industrial and urban setting, that encounter is still largely a personal one. By the Postmodern, our sense of mortality turns global and in this sense universal. We are no longer dealing with the spectre of personal apocalypse but instead with the possibility of a literal, worldwide one. The consequence for the artist and writer is a destabilization of the place and value of subjectivity. In a world constantly on the brink of World War III, the notion of the individual as an important source of knowledge is constantly undermined. This is clearly in direct opposition to the Romanticist elevation of
subjectivity. The Postmodern takes Prufrock’s insecurity and makes it suddenly self-conscious and self-aware. Where the Moderns might have believed that the subject has in it a deep connection to history and could generate truth and meaning through genius and creative production, the Postmodern no longer holds these illusions about the self or about the efficacy of the author. It is these insecurities that directly contribute to the emergence of the Meditative and Discursive modes of poetry, both of which tend to be exquisitely self-aware and also to vacillate between self-assured assertions of truth and humble acknowledgements of the unreliability of subjective confession.

Further, the Cold War has at its heart not a struggle between capitalist and communist ideologies but a graceless nihilism which assures mutual destruction rather than any real chance of ideological victory. This calls the very notion of ideology into question. It seems futile and foolish to adhere to any ideology that has only the catastrophic conflict with an oppositional ideology as its endpoint. Thus, the art of the period since 1945 unsurprisingly resists blatant alignments with any particular ideological stance and instead presents its belief structures as tenuous, contingent, and often contradictory. Even when Allen Ginsberg challenges the arrogance of American hegemony in the Postmodern Associative poem “America,” he cannot help but acknowledge his own complicity in America. “I am talking to myself again,” he writes while addressing the country and its ideological excesses. This simultaneous awareness of the diminutive position of subjectivity as well as of the emptiness of grand ideological narratives results in a dismissal by poets of the possibility of discovering absolute or convincing Truths through their work. This, too, is a radically different notion than those
held by the Romantics and the Moderns who, though they differed in tactic and source, seemed to believe such a thing as Truth was possible by way of artistic endeavor. As will become apparent, the Postmodern loss of faith in grand narratives, ideologies, and truths directly contributes to the rise of the Associative mode as a solution to Postmodern metaphysical and epistemological concerns.

Finally, though the Postmodern is the quintessentially American moment, artists during the period are more willing than ever to question and criticize the social and economic framework of America. While the nation itself continually rises to greater levels of hegemonic influence over global politics, economics, and culture, American poets seem to increasingly question the inherent injustices in America’s sexist, racist, homophobic, and classist cultural landscape. This results in a poetry that increasingly acknowledges otherness and seeks to undermine the power structure of American society. This includes questioning aspects of writing including the importance of the literary canon, traditional structural conventions, and conventional poetic subject matter. It is, this line of inquiry that leads Postmodern American poetry to the radical experiments of the Linguistic mode, which not only challenges conventions of poetic structure and subject matter but also grammar and language itself.
III. Four Ways of Looking at a Poem

One of the legacies Romanticism presents the world is the idea that individual experience is relevant to collective understanding. Prior to the period, poetry was mostly a narrative art form at the work of telling historical, mythical, or allegorical stories. The Romantics elevated the musings and meditations of individuals to a place above culture. The individual became a source of knowledge and thus the lyric-confessional became the dominant mode of poetry written in 19th century Britain and America. This is still the case today. While we do encounter some poems that are primarily third-person narratives or eschew a speaker altogether, the bulk of what is written and published in our Postmodern moment employs the first-person perspective of the lyric. Thus, though the Meditative, Discursive, Associative, and Linguistic can be described fairly broadly and distinguished from each other fairly succinctly, they share a common heritage.

The first thing that should be said is that this four-part description of Postmodern poetry takes into account the implications of structuralist, poststructuralist, and Postmodern theory in general. To this end, it favors the study not of poets per se but of individual poems. What this means is that the four modes of poetry presented here do not refer to what a given poet does across all of her work. Rather, these categories attempt to look at the text of a poem without regard for other work written by the same poet. In this, the framework embraces aspects of New Criticism as well as deconstruction. More importantly, this account of the Postmodern rejects the organization of poets into well-known “camps” such as the New York School, Confessional, Language, or Beat groups in favor of classification of individual poems based on their aesthetic features and tactics.
Thus, none of the modes or definitions presented here should be applied generally to every poem by a given poet or to poets whose work is grouped together by anthologists and biographers.

As to the aesthetics of each of the four modes, they are distinguishable first and foremost based on their varying degrees of reliance on narrativity. As we move across the spectrum from the Meditative to the Linguistic, we see an increasing rejection of conventional narrative elements in the poems. The Meditative and Discursive modes most closely resemble the lyric-confessional style of the Romantic period. While they tend to describe the thoughts and feelings of a speaker, Meditative and Discursive poems rely on chronological narrative far more so than do the Associative or Linguistic modes. As to their subjects, Meditative and Discursive poems tend to reminisce or ruminate on reminiscence. Alternately, they choose a singular subject, either an object, person, or event, and consider it in extensive detail. The Meditative can be described as tending to remove from the self a blatant emotionality in favor of a philosophical speaker considering experiences at what feels like emotional and temporal distance. These experiences are generally considered in the context of philosophical musing and inquiry, of other generally older literature, or in the context of the metapoetic which considers the act of writing as much as it considers what is being written about. The mode finds its origins in the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Thomas Hardy, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Frost, among others.

The Discursive mode finds its origins in the tradition in poetry which stretches back to William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Coleridge’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. This
tradition argues that poems should not be overly formal in their linguistic construction but should be written in the cadences and diction of more common forms of language. Poets like William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Fearing, and Frost in his free verse poems advance this style in the Modern. By midcentury, poems by Frank O’Hara, Kennet Koch, and Gregory Corso employ the mode in many of their poems. The Discursive shares the lyric-confessional impulse of the Meditative as well as the latter’s frequent use of familiar narrative structure, but it favors a more conversational tone. The poems tend to meander through a speaker’s experiences via language and tend to include substantial reference to specific people, places, and events unlike the Meditative mode which seems to favor a kind of “view from everywhere.” Discursive poems tend to acknowledge popular culture and the modern moment in a manner that is immediate and direct. Much like the Meditative, the Discursive mode offers a strategy that tends to undercut the self’s raw emotionality. In this mode, the poet disarms the reader by suggesting a speaker with little or no pretension. While Discursive poems often incorporate authentic details of the poet’s own life and experiences, the language play suggests that the speaker is less poet and more persona aware of not only the undefinable nature of experience but also of the sham of “high” culture.

A third strategy, based on the use of associative logic, disjunctive imagery, and a mixing of linguistic modalities from formal to scientific to journalistic, attempts to contextualize the raw emotionality of the self by burying it in a cascade of real and invented images or in surreal and invented landscapes. As such, the Associative mode owes a debt to the tradition of the French and Spanish Surrealists as well as to Modernists
T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. While the Associative does not actively avoid Romanticist melodrama and effusiveness, it tends to bury ecstatic expressions of sentiment within seemingly irrational imagery and wordplay. In this mode, earnestness and truth arises seemingly out of nowhere. In this sense, the Associative tackles one of the most prominent concerns of the Postmodern: the mode acknowledges that truth is contingent, based on context, and subjective rather than objective, but it nevertheless makes truth statements and sweeping metaphysical claims by simultaneously including unrelated or contradictory statements and claims. It might even seem that the Associative owes a debt the Orwellian notion of “doublethink” in that Associative poems often hold two or more contradictory ideas to be true at the same time. However, the Associative’s use of this kind of internal contradiction is far less cynical than its Orwellian counterpart in that the speakers in Associative poems are acutely aware of the limits and contradictions of their knowledge. They are not trying to fool themselves or anyone else. Rather, they are trying to negotiate with the Postmodern idea that Truth is impossible.

The Linguistic mode, on other hand, seems more willing to accept the idea that truth—and at the very least absolute or “grand” truths—is untenable. The Linguistic poem is comprised of distilled wordplay that, though it stealthily includes the spirit of lyric confession, excludes conventional narrative. This mode—employed in any number of Postmodern poems by writers including John Ashbery, Ron Silliman, Michael Palmer, Lyn Hejinian, and a slew of late-century writers—eschews narrativity and even goes so far as parsing imagery into phrasal units. It can trace its lineage to the Modernist work of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H.D., e.e. cummings, and to a certain extent back to the
sometimes impenetrable austerity of Emily Dickinson’s work. The disjunction in the Linguistic mode is less founded on the figurative and lateral logic of the Associative mode and more on pure linguistic association. Here, every word signifies and connotes, and the reader is meant to glean meaning by constructing it himself from those underlying significations and connotations. This last mode, it might be said, is the furthest from the lyric-confession of Romantics and from conventional narrativity, and for many reasons is the most difficult to decipher. It would appear, at least on the surface, that poetry engaged in the linguistic mode is at the work of doing away with subjectivity altogether. However, even the linguistic seems grounded in the experience of the individual. The distinction is that experience is filtered not through the rationality of narrative logic but through the purity as well as the unreliability of distilled language.

There are any number of poems written during the Postmodern that do not fit tidily into the four modes described here but are instead the result of hybridization between two or more of them. However, these overarching categories seem to comprehensively account for most of the poetry published in America since 1945. They all have their origins in the poetry of the first half of the 20th century, and in closely examining examples of each, we might better understand the basic apparatus each employs. The thing that becomes most apparent is that every one of these modes is an effort to address some aspect of the Postmodern problem of the destabilized self, the unreliability of truth and ideology, and the mistrust of authority. A poem’s relative success generally depends upon how well it employs and also innovates upon the conventional tactics of the mode in which it is written. The most successful of poems
written in any of the modes, however, can be regarded as such as a result of their ability to not only address concerns of the Postmodern but also to solve them.
For the purposes of this critical introduction, I will forego a comprehensive account of all four modes of Postmodern poetry. That will likely be the subject of a larger critical text. Instead, this introduction will provide an overview of the Associative mode as this is the mode that most directly influences my own work.

IV. Origins of the Associative

Poets have tended, at least since the early part of the 20th century, to feel a need to qualify the expression of overtly sentimental feelings in their work. The lyric earnestness so prominent in the poetry of the Romantics has long since been undermined by ironic self-awareness or by various kinds of intellectual or linguistic gameplay in Modernist and Postmodern poetry. This does not, however, mean that earnestness and bold sentimentality have vacated the work of contemporary poets. Rather, the Postmodern poet finds herself employing strategies that allow such expression while also evading predictability.

The Associative mode of contemporary poetry is born of the tension between the poet’s desire to communicate sentiment openly and her desire to innovate aesthetically and linguistically. This mode, like the Discursive, features moments of ecstatic declaration, open lamentation, and regular use of the lyric first-person voice. However, unlike the Discursive, the imagery included in Associative poems is rarely meant to be taken literally. Rather, the descriptions are largely metaphorical and only figuratively analogous with reality. This sense of removal from the literal is the principal reason for calling the Associative mode ‘Associative.’ Rather than directly employing
autobiographical detail or describing the so-called real world, poems written in the 
Associative tend to abstract away from lived experience. They certainly use details of the 
poet’s life, perspective, and world as points of departure, but they resist becoming 
directly confessional. The poet’s autobiographical admissions are generally masked by 
imagery that feels nearly freely associated or entirely imagined. These tactics are 
inherited from those employed by Surrealists and Magical Realists and have the benefit 
of allowing the poet to be sincere without needing to be exactly truthful.

It is in this last idea that we see a reason for the particular quirks of speakers 
featured in Associative poems. While the Associative mode does primarily employ the 
first-person perspective, the ‘I’ never seems entirely to be the poet speaking to the reader 
as directly as he does in the Discursive poem. Rather, the ‘I’ is a kind of abstraction akin 
to a narrator in a work of fiction. This should not be surprising. The Associative is 
essentially a fictive mode of writing inasmuch as it does not adhere to the straightforward 
description of autobiographical reality or experience. A helpful analogy here might be to 
compare poetry to prose forms and say that the Associative is to fiction as the Discursive 
and Meditative are to creative nonfiction or memoir. Associative poems occasionally tend 
to push the abstraction of the speaker even further by employing the second-person 
address. The mode seems to do this with far more frequency than any of the others, and 
where it engages in this tactic, it seems that the ‘you’ is generally a second-person 
version of the poet himself. The addressee is not intended to be a specific other. Rather, 
the you constitutes an address of the self at a distance. An additional permutation of this
strategy is in the occasional use of third-person in Associative where that third-person is again the poet himself being described at even further removal.

All of these gestures at abstraction and removal from the world are at the work of allowing the Associative poem to declare “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” in a contemporary context. By creating a fictive rather than literal account of the world, the poet is permitted to veer into melodrama without necessarily seeming self-important. Further, the disjunctive imagery and metaphoric description employed by Associative poems allows any melodrama to be undercut with moments of ironic juxtaposition. Earnest sentiment often arises from unexpected imagery and is followed by surprising turns of narrative or descriptive association.

The risk in using tactics of the Associative mode is that a poem might abstract so far away from a “real” speaker that the reader loses any sense of empathetic connection with the poem. The speaker simply becomes a source of inchoate observations and daffy connections that have little bearing on real life or lived experience. Additionally, the type of lateral logic employed in the Associative mode’s generation of image, metaphor, and meaning can be described as highly disjunctive with the arrangement of ideas at the work of resisting more familiar linearity. Taken too far, this tactic can also result in a lack of connection with the reader, only in this case the disconnect is intellectual rather than empathetic: the reader is simply unable to follow the poem’s barrage of imagery. On a related note, while they are often willing to make bold statements of feeling, Associative poems often resist making any definitive assessment of their subject matter. In this sense, the poems can find themselves in a condition of radical negative capability. The term,
coined by John Keats, advocates for poems to find themselves in a place where, “...man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” While this position is certainly vital to any poetry born out of Romantic lyricism and an appropriate response to the Postmodern condition, Associative poems risk finding themselves too deeply mired in the quicksand of uncertainty. A reader might accept internal contradictions in a poem, but if the poem entirely contradiction without any resolution, it fails to solve any intellectual or emotional problem. Thus, while these poems, on the one hand, risk a dearth of empathy in their readers, they also risk losing readers who are unable to connect with the poems’ oblique or contradictory conclusions.

Despite the risks, the Associative poem offers ample reward for poet and reader. It features a kind of playfulness, both imagistic and linguistic, that is as concerned with entertaining a reader as it is with enlightening him. As such, all manner of disparate language is permitted into an Associative poem, and this alone constitutes an expansion of the emotional and experiential territory all of poetry can reach into. Further, Associative poetry, where it is successful, can charm a reader by a combination of earnestness and sheer surprise, and it can thus be a powerful form of writing that offers readers both empathy and truth however conditional or contingent.

In that Romantic lyricism is taken to be the foundation of all four modes of Postmodernism, it is unnecessary to study the connections between Romanticism and the Associative mode too closely. Suffice it to say that the Associative poem emerges from Romanticism’s insistence on the authority of first-person experience as a source of knowledge about the world. The more significant thing is to understand how certain
aspects of the Modern era allow the Romantic lyric to evolve into its Postmodern Associative form. For this, we need to consider two movements in poetry: Imagism and Surrealism.

The Associative and Imagism: Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

Previous epochs in literature certainly featured the literary ‘I,’ but these speakers appeared either to narrate a story or to be a source of praise or sorrow relative to specific external subject matter. Where he is personal, the pre-Romanticist speaker was there to offer poems of love and devotion or lamentation in the form of the elegy but without conveying much in the way of autobiography. William Shakespeare’s sonnets are permeated with lyric ‘I,’ but this does not bring us any closer to knowing Shakespeare. It is only after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* that we see the embrace of more vernacular language, and this embrace is what eventually leads to poets writing directly about their own lives. Poetry moves gradually from its position as a medium for storytelling to one for better suited for personal confession throughout the 19th century. In the work of Keats, Shelley, and American poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, we find speakers willing to express openly their own experiences, feelings, and meditations. For the better part of the 1800s, poetry relies heavily on the speaker as a filter for experience. The speaker describes his thoughts and feelings and the world is only described inasmuch as it is a setting for the individual to reveal himself.
This particular brand of authorial importance is upended in the early part of the 20th century by the emergence of Modernist forms of writing. One of the many brands of Modernism that is particularly relevant to the associative poem is Imagism. Ezra Pound coins the term in describing the poetry of Hilda Doolittle and certain of his own poems. He later lays out the basic tenets of the movement in one of his many manifestos by stating that Imagism is interested exclusively in, “1. Direct treatment of the “thing”, whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.” Pound’s recasting of poetry in this way has the significant effect of externalizing the focal point of the poem. If the ‘I’ is the vital filter for the Romantics, the object is the same for the Modernists. This places the onus on descriptions of the external world rather than on confessions of the poet’s feelings. This is not to say that the ‘I’ disappears from Modernist poetry. Rather, that we learn more about the poet’s emotional state by paying careful attention to what he describes, or shows, rather than on what he expositions, or tells. In place of Keats’, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...” we find (again) Eliot’s, “Let us go then, you and I, When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table.” Here, we understand the speaker’s ache and numbness not by his confession of it but by way of his description of the sky which is as pained and numb as a patient awaiting surgery. Eliot himself is by no means a strict Imagist, but this only underscores the point that even where Modernism takes on different forms, it still adheres to the Imagist notion of “Direct treatment of the ‘thing.’”
The Imagists’, and more generally Modernists’, emphasis on the object is not invented out of the ether. It might be argued that it has its roots in poems like “Neutral Tones” by pre-Modernist Thomas Hardy. However, the move towards the “thing” itself is essential in that it is the first step towards the destabilization of subjectivity we see more fully realized in the Postmodern. It is this move away from earnest lyric confession towards a more self-conscious, contingent sense of the speaker that allows for the appearance of both the Associative and Linguistic modes of poetry. With regard to the latter, the turning of poetic attention to the external object contains an implied further turn, which is a focus on language itself; after all, our descriptions of objects are constructed entirely of language. Thus, it makes sense that Postmodern poets pushed the Modernist experiment into more abstract experiments concerned with wordplay rather than with the description of subject and object. With regard to the Associative, this attention to the image offers a cause of as well as a solution to the discomfort with lyric confession. The Modernists make the open confession of feeling untenable in that their rejection of it results in the remarkable variety and vitality of early 20th century poetry. Poets raised on the “genius” of the Moderns—a sense of which the Moderns actively encouraged—were seemingly more inclined to expand upon the Modernist experiment rather than to reject it. To this end, the Associative poems of the latter part of the 20th century seem to agree with the principle of “direct treatment of the ‘thing.’” However, in Associative poems, the “thing” need not be a literal object in the world. These later poems begin to explore what is revealed about the speaker when a poem substitutes, for the real thing, the imagined or associated one.
There are any number of Modernist poems that form a foundation for the Associative mode of poetry. Certainly Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” come to mind, as does H.D.’s Trilogy, but both these poets, along with Pound, so rely on intertextual reference to earlier literatures as well as foreign cultures and languages, that they do not necessarily write what might be called the most influential work for the Associative mode. For this, we need to turn to the poems of Wallace Stevens. Stevens’ tendency to eschew completely the first-person confessional from his poetry in favor of Imagistic meditation is of particular importance. While Postmodern Associative poems do not always follow suit, they do look to Stevens for his poetry’s ability to intertwine highly disjunctive imagery and arrive at metaphysical truths.

In particular, Stevens’ widely anthologized poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is of particular importance to the Associative mode. The poem quintessentially features Imagistic and Modernist tendencies as well as imagery that would not be entirely out of place in a Surrealist poem. More importantly, there is something entirely singular about the poem among canonical writing contemporary to it: aside from the austerity of its descriptions and its numbered sections, there is a near complete lack of a speaker throughout the poem. There is certainly a subjectivity apparent in the poem’s descriptions, but the voice in the poem distinctly departs from the confessional modes of Romanticism, Surrealism, and other Modernist poetry.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird (1923)

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-lims.
In the poem, Stevens takes Pound’s Imagism to its disjunctive endpoint. Each of the numbered sections seem to introduce an entirely new perspective on the poem’s subject without any clear narrative or logical continuity between them. In this sense, the poem foreshadows the Associative poem of the later part of the century. While poets like William Carlos Williams and e.e. cummings employ a similar economy of language and attentiveness to image in their work, Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” takes on an expressly philosophical dimension, and in this Stevens’ poem is particularly important to the Associative mode which, at its most successful, also reaches for the philosophical in its ruminations.

Where Stevens’ writes, “The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds. / It was a small part of the pantomime,” he makes a metaphysical claim regarding the significance of the particular in relation to the general. Seemingly, each individual aspect of the world is an essential part of the world’s totality. Similarly, he makes an aesthetic claim in a later section, “I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after.” While not a direct response to philosophical claims regarding aesthetics, Stevens is in conversation with philosophers in his ambivalence regarding beauty. In these lines, he presents an uncertainty regarding the actual nature of beauty, and though he does not arrive at a clear resolution, the duality of his claim here in essence does provide an answer to the question of beauty: it is born of both anticipation and appreciation, of potential and kinetic energies. Later, he turns to the epistemological in writing, “I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms; / But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know.” In these lines, the poet
begins to account for the totality of his knowledge, at once aggrandizing its scope but also pinning it to the awareness of the discreet and discrete image of the blackbird. These various philosophical “investigations” apparent in the poem find a kind of culmination in the final section where Stevens writes, “It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow. / The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs.” Here, the poem acknowledges a kind of duality of knowledge. There is an oxymoronic logic in the idea of it being “evening all afternoon” and in the idea that “it was snowing and it was going to snow;” but the poem is, at end, comfortable with its own contradictions. This seems to be the culmination of all of the seemingly disconnected sections of the poem: that knowledge itself is contradictory and contingent and largely guided entirely by subjective perspective. The one exception to this basically relativistic claim is the singular image of the blackbird, which here feels like an unmoving truth amidst contingencies.

This vacillation between assertions of truth and acknowledgements of uncertainty are an essential feature of the Associative poem. Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” sets a precedent in canonical poetry that remains influential to this day. One of the advantages the Associative poem possesses over other modes of poetry is in its ability to accept the idea that truth and definite knowledge are impossibilities while simultaneously making assertions that run counter to that assumption. This is a feature that pervades much of Dean Young’s Associative poems as well as more directly philosophical Associative poems by James Tate, both of which will be examined in later sections here. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” seems to be the first poem in
the canon that so overtly situates itself in this liminal space between knowing and the impossibility of knowing. In this, its importance is difficult to overstate.

Further, Stevens’ poem intersperses realities of the human condition throughout its more philosophical musings. Take the section, “I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds.” Here, Stevens allows the image of the tree to reflect the emotional and intellectual condition of an otherwise absent speaker. This grounds the more abstract ideas in the poem to an immediate sense of emotional urgency. Similarly, the lines, “O thin men of Haddam, / Why do you imagine golden birds? / Do you not see how the blackbird / Walks around the feet / Of the women about you?” provide an almost mundane context for other abstractions in the poem. While the blackbird might be an artifact of philosophical inquiry and uncertainty, it also remains bound up with human relationships and more base desires. Once more, in the lines “He rode over Connecticut / In a glass coach. / Once, a fear pierced him, / In that he mistook / The shadow of his equipage / For blackbirds,” the poem provides a tangible context for the image of the blackbird. The reader is given a brief snippet of a narrative and in this sees the blackbird playing its essential and incidental part.

This inclusion of the corporeal or tangible is essential to the Postmodern Associative poem. Where tangible imagery goes missing from such poems, abstractions and musings tend to overwhelm any other aspect. This almost invariably results in a lack of empathetic connection between speaker, subject, and reader. However, when such details are included, even when they are mundane, we are offered a glimpse of the human consequence of the philosophically abstract. While the Associative poem rarely offers a
continuous narrative, these glimpses of lived experience suggest a narrative beneath the abstractions contained in the Associative poem and in this prevent it from becoming a derangement of ideas. However, what can also be said about these narrative snippets is that they too are born of association. As is apparent in Stevens’ poem, there is nothing that necessitates the particular narrative details he includes. They are entirely disjunctive and are generated either by some innate aspect of the poet’s psychology—a source favored by the Surrealists—or by the poet’s desire to force a kind of impossible context onto the poem. This idea of “impossible context” is quite important as it too is one of the advantages Associative poems present over other modes. It allows the poet to juxtapose hitherto unrelated ideas with each other and hopefully expand the general understanding of both ideas. This should not be surprising in that this is essentially the same function a metaphor takes on in literary writing in general, and the Associative poem is in its tactics an essentially metaphorical mode of writing. It relies on substitution and fictionalizing in order to address its subject matter. This is not at all an arbitrary method. Associative poems employ it in order to arrive at truth via juxtaposition so that truth might be possible even in the aftermath of Postmodernism’s dismissal of it as a real possibility.

The Associative and Surrealism: André Breton’s “Free Union” and Robert Desnos’ “The Voice of Robert Desnos”

It is in this exercise of imagistic substitution that the work of the Surrealists, particularly the French, plays so significant a part for Associative poetry. As evidenced by Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s credo, “Ce n'est pas avec des idées qu'on fait des
vers, c'est avec des mots” (“It is not with ideas that we make poems, it is with words”),
French poets of the late 19th century harbored inclinations similar to those of Modernists writing in English in preferring language and tactile description to abstract declaration. In fact, it is entirely plausible if not likely that Symbolism inspired Pound’s Imagist movement—his affection for manifestos might also have been inherited from Mallarmé. By the 20th century, French Surrealists, in part inspired by Freudian psychoanalytic theory and in part simply expanding upon work by predecessors like Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire, find a poetry in which imagistic substitution and a detached sense of self are primary features. While Postmodern Associative poets are less concerned with particular schools of psychoanalytic thought, the tactics favored by the Surrealists are clearly a source of inspiration for Postmodern poets. In order to demonstrate this, it is helpful to consider poems by two early 20th century French poets, André Breton and Robert Desnos.

In Breton’s poem “Free Union,” we see the poet riffing on countless poems of love and devotion, which include anything from Shakespeare’s and Petrarch’s love sonnets to Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” However, Breton departs from a literal description of his wife in favor of, at almost every turn, replacing real images with invented or imagined ones. The substitute imagery is no less tactile or concrete than what it replaces, but it is far more disjunctive:

Free Union (1931)

My wife whose hair is a brush fire
Whose thoughts are summer lightning
Whose waist is an hourglass
Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger
Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first magnitude
Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice over snow
Whose tongue is made out of amber and polished glass
Whose tongue is a stabbed wafer
The tongue of a doll with eyes that open and shut
Whose tongue is an incredible stone
My wife whose eyelashes are strokes in the handwriting of a child
Whose brows are nests of swallows
My wife whose temples are the slate of greenhouse roofs
With steam on the windows
My wife whose shoulders are champagne
Are fountains that curl from the heads of dolphins under the ice
My wife whose wrists are matches
Whose fingers are raffles holding the ace of hearts
Whose fingers are fresh cut hay
My wife with the armpits of martens and beech fruit
And Midsummer Night
That are hedges of privet and nesting places for sea snails
Whose arms are of sea foam and a landlocked sea
And a fusion of wheat and a mill
Whose legs are spindles
In the delicate movements of watches and despair
My wife whose calves are sweet with the sap of elders
Whose feet are carved initials
Keyrings and the feet of steeplejacks who drink
My wife whose neck is fine milled barley
Whose throat contains the Valley of Gold
And encounters in the bed of maelstrom
My wife whose breasts are of the night
And are undersea molehills
And crucibles of rubies
My wife whose breasts are haunted by the ghosts of dew-moistened roses
Whose belly is a fan unfolded in the sunlight
Is a giant talon
My wife with the back of a bird in vertical flight
With a back of quicksilver
And bright lights
My wife whose nape is of smooth worn stone and wet chalk
And of a glass slipped through the fingers of someone who has just drunk
My wife with the thighs of a skiff
That are lustrous and feathered like arrows
Stemmed with the light of tailbones of a white peacock
And imperceptible balance
My wife whose rump is sandstone and flax
Whose rump is the back of a swan and the spring
My wife with the sex of an iris
A mine and a platypus
With sex of an alga and old-fashioned candies
My wife with the sex of a mirror
My wife with eyes full of tears
With eyes of purple armor and a magnetized needle
With eyes of savannahs
My wife with eyes full of water to drink in prison
My wife with eyes that are forests forever under the ax
My wife with eyes that are the equal of water and air and earth and fire

Breton’s attempt here is to ground the expression of the speaker’s sentiment in tactile imagery. However, had he favored a more literal description of his wife’s appearance and attributes, we might find the poem either too reminiscent of any of the countless poems of devotion that precede it, too superficial in its address of physical beauty, or too sentimental in its expression of the speaker’s feelings. As it stands, while the poem risks testing the patience of a reader who might find its imagistic associations tiresome or redundant, it nevertheless embraces imagistic substitution and association to achieve its desired effect, which is an exuberant expression of love. The truth is, Breton’s poem is exceptionally sentimental, perhaps even more so than any of Keats’ love poems. “Free Union” makes even a poem like “Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art…” seem remarkably restrained. This is precisely the point.

Breton uses associative imagery to build his poem into a crescendo of devotion. He does so by replacing what might be expected with an analogous image. Consider the first few lines, “My wife whose hair is a brush fire / Whose thoughts are summer lightning / Whose waist is an hourglass / Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger.” Here, the substitutions Breton makes with his imagery refer to real
features of the wife. Her hair is likely auburn, her intelligence likely intimidating, her waist attractively thin. He continues, “Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first magnitude / Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice over snow / Whose tongue is made out of amber and polished glass,” and each of these lines suggests an obvious literal corollary: her lips are red and bright, her teeth a perfect white, and her tongue as luminous as smooth amber or glass. The literal corollaries themselves are poetic clichés, which Breton avoids entirely by way of his substitutions. His description is wholly original and singular. This is the great profit of this particular Surrealist tactic. It is clear that the substitutions Breton makes are entirely his own. While another writer might mimic the form of the poem, he likely would produce an entirely different sequence of images. What makes these initial moves so accessible to a reader is Breton’s restraint. That the substitute imagery he uses finds such easy literal corollary allows a reader to marvel at his originality without feeling entirely lost in its meaning. The poem asks a reader to work to understand the substitutions but it does not deluge her with completely random imagery. There is, in fact, a fairly strict rationality to the associations the poem makes. This last feature is one that the most successful Postmodern Associative poems share; they all feature a rigid order to their disjunction such that once a reader is able to decipher the pattern, she is able to easily apprehend the poem as a whole.

As the poem continues, Breton increasingly pushes the boundaries of his logic. Eventually, his descriptive substitutions rely on more abstract associations of musicality in the form of anaphora, alliteration, and rhyme: “My wife whose neck is fine milled
barley / Whose throat contains the Valley of Gold / And encounters in the bed of maelstrom / My wife whose breasts are of the night / And are undersea molehills / And crucibles of rubies.” These lines, while remaining relatively concrete, do veer into abstraction in ways that those preceding do not. However, this is precisely the liminal space Breton’s poem tries to inhabit; he wants to test the limits of the sensical. The consequence is a devotional poem of quite epic proportion, but also a remarkably taut portrait of the wife. She becomes far less of an object of devotion and is imbued instead with a fairly ample subjectivity.

The sense of the wife as a wholly formed individual is brought to fruition in the final movement of the poem. Here, we see the wife not as a beautiful thing but as a subjectivity comprised of contradictions. The sequence begins in the description of her rump and then careens into her “sex,” which can be read either as her figurative sensuality or, more accurately, as a figurative description of her sexual organ. The descriptions here are in keeping with the poem’s overall sense of worshipfulness and objectification, but the final turn to her eyes is at once surprising and humanizing.

Breton seems to be evoking the cliché of eyes as the window to the soul, but does so in a singular way. It is odd that though the speaker so worships his wife, his first account of her eyes is of their being “full of tears.” This ascribes to her an autonomy of feeling and a source of sorrow that feels as much a mystery to the speaker as to the reader. Then, in keeping with the poem’s use of radical juxtaposition, the speaker immediately undercuts his description of tears with a description of his wife’s eyes as being “of purple armor,” suggesting a definitive strength in her. This is reinforced by her
eyes being “a magnetized needle,” a reference to a compass needle which suggests that she also has a clear sense of direction. Finally, her eyes are dry as savannas but also are a source of water to the imprisoned. Finally, her eyes are as forests being constantly destroyed but are also entirely elemental. These juxtapositions are at the heart of the successes in the poem, which include its furious energy and essentially comprehensive portrait of the wife. While the poem certainly risks objectifying her, the portrait here is complex and brimming with psychological complexity, and it is also utterly original. A poem written in this way might be regarded as poetry’s version of a fingerprint in that any poet engaging in the tactic would arrive at an entirely distinct series of images. In this, the poem’s subject becomes a truly unique and perhaps more human portrait. Further, the reverence the speaker shows towards his wife borders on religiosity, and there is in this a kind of honesty that reaches for an absolute kind of Truth rather than the narrow truth of a more controlled lyric confession.

This final point is the consequence of Breton and the Surrealists’ experiments with “automatic writing.” The tactic actively attempts to free associate from one image to the next and in doing so hopes to mine the psychology of the writer to find a deeper psychological truth. In this sense, the Surrealist mode is still guided by the Keatsian idea that “Truth is beauty and beauty truth.” The Surrealist experiment, like Keats’ negative capability, mistrusts reason in the pursuit of truth and beauty. Contemporary Associative poems are in a similar pursuit of Truth. Though the Postmodern undermines the possibility of ever finding anything so absolute, the associative poem attempts a kind of end run around the problem by attributing Truth not to the rational, academic mind but to
the inventive, intuitive, creative one. This might explain why Associative poems so often employ Breton’s tactic of juxtaposition as well as the anaphoric form of the list.

That said, it is important to note just how “hyper-rational” Breton’s irrationality really is. While he insists on the free association of automatic writing, he never veers from its essential logic of illogic. The risk of doing this is that poem becomes a “one-trick pony” after the initial charm of the style wears off. In its redundant use of associative imagery, the poem never really explores anything much deeper than the surface. Where it has depth, it is up to the reader to uncover and do so based upon our own understanding of the connotations of the language in the poem. This is a tremendous risk for the contemporary Associative poem as well. The mode at its least successful generates work that simply presents a sequence of images without ever delving more deeply into them. These flawed attempts seem simply to be a kind of Rorschach image that tells the reader to find whatever truth they can without any active guidance from the poet. This can and does result in what was earlier dubbed a loss of empathy in the reader. The loss of intellectual connection to the Surrealist as well as the Associative can arise from a similar source. When the poem descends into a position of essentially being a linguistic inkblot, the connections between its various component parts are in danger of being so solipsistic as to completely alienate a reader’s desire to understand it. Breton’s poem is far nearer the one-trick danger than the inkblot one. We do understand the poem’s tactics and imagery rationally. However, it might not be the case that we empathize with the deeper Truths it is after. While this is a concern, “Free Union” avoids succumbing to this fate by
way of its internal contradictions. Though not every reader might agree, the descriptions in the poem are filled with a deeply compelling tension as a result of those contradictions.

Robert Desnos’ poem “The Voice of Robert Desnos” employs tactics that are quite similar to those in “Free Union.” Desnos’ poem features anaphora, listing, and disjunctive association as well as plenty of contradictory imagery. However, it also features an additional complication in that its subject is the poet himself. In this, rather than an “other” being objectified, we see the ‘I’ itself turned into an object. This move, which turns subjectivity literally inside out, is crucial not just to Surrealists but to the Associative poems written much later in the century.

Much like Breton’s poem, “The Voice of Robert Desnos” is remarkably effusive. The expressions of feeling in the poem are on par with the most unrestrained Romantic poetry. As might be demonstrated by both Breton’s and Desnos’ poems, in the Surrealists we see an embrace of emotionality that is quite the opposite of some of their Modernist contemporaries in England and America. However, what Desnos shares with at least Eliot is the tendency to objectify the poet by making him the subject of his own poetry, though “The Voice of Robert Desnos” does so even more directly than Eliot does in poems like “Portrait of a Lady” or “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which hides Eliot the man beneath the persona of Prufrock.

In his poem, Desnos is juxtaposing ego with other. While his voice takes on proportions as epic as those of the wife in “Free Union,” the speaker defines himself by “the one [he] love[s].”

The Voice of Robert Desnos (1926)
So like a flower and a current of air
the flow of water fleeting shadows
the smile glimpsed at midnight this excellent evening
so like every joy and every sadness
it is the midnight past lifting its naked body above belfries and poplars
I call to me those lost in the fields
old skeletons young oaks cut down
scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and linen drying in farm country
I call tornadoes and hurricanes
storms typhoons cyclones
tidal waves
earthquakes
I call the smoke of volcanoes and the smoke of cigarettes
the rings of smoke from expensive cigars
I call lovers and loved ones
I call the living and the dead
I call gravediggers I call assassins
I call hangmen pilots bricklayers architects
assassins
I call the flesh
I call the one I love
I call the one I love
I call the one I love
the jubilant midnight unfolds its satin wings and perches on my bed
the belfries and the poplars bend to my wish
the former collapse the latter bow down
those lost in the fields are found in finding me
the old skeletons are revived by my voice
the young oaks cut down are covered with foliage
the scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and in the earth
snap to at the sound of my voice like a flag of rebellion
the linen drying in farm country clothes adorable women
whom I do not adore
who come to me
obeying my voice, adoring
tornadoes revolve in my mouth
hurricanes if it is possible reddn my lips
storms roar at my feet
typhoons if it is possible ruffle me
I get drunken kisses from the cyclones
the tidal waves come to die at my feet
the earthquakes do not shake me but fade completely
at my command
the smoke of volcanoes clothes me with its vapors
and the smoke of cigarettes perfumes me
and the rings of cigar smoke crown me
loves and love so long hunted find refuge in me
lovers listen to my voice
the living and the dead yield to me and salute me
the former coldly the latter warmly
the gravediggers abandon the hardly-dug graves
and declare that I alone may command their nightly work
the assassins greet me
the hangmen invoke the revolution
invoke my voice
invoke my name
the pilots are guided by my eyes
the bricklayers are dizzied listening to me
the architects leave for the desert
the assassins bless me
flesh trembles when I call

the one I love is not listening
the one I love does not hear
the one I love does not answer.

In Desnos’ poem, we see the associative imagery, presumably also born of Breton’s tactic of “automatic writing,” increasingly aggrandize the voice of the poet. The voice begins quite humbly, described as “So like a flower and a current of air,” but the description quickly escalates. It is important to note at this point that Desnos starts the poem with a simile because both Surrealist and late-century associative poetry tend to abandon the use of simile in favor of the directness of the metaphor. This makes sense in that both modes move from lived experience into more fictive accounts of that experience. The words ‘like’ and ‘as’ in the simile are too much a tether to the literal world, a tether which the Surrealist and the Associative aim to weaken.

Like Breton’s poem, Desnos’, while associating quite disjunctively, does so in a systematic effort to elevate his subject. The poem continues, “...the flow of water fleeting...
shadows / the smile glimpsed at midnight this excellent evening / so like every joy and every sadness,” and so the voice moves from association with the somewhat humble image of a flower or with something glimpsed in darkness to a position equivalent to “every joy and every sadness.” Gradually, the voice rises “above belfries and poplars,” and begins to call out to others. This is a clear escalation and movement in theme that is absent in Breton’s description of his speaker’s wife. In that poem, the wife essentially remains static on her pedestal, but for Desnos’, the subject of his poem needs to be aggrandized if only to be undermined later. The poem continues on this trajectory as the voice calls to the dead and the living, to natural disasters, to gravediggers, assassins, hangmen, pilots, bricklayers, and architects. The voice, then, is speaking to a universal humanity which includes all manner of occupation. Those included in the list variously evoke mortality, politics, warfare, industry, and art. The listing ends on the repeated line “I call the one I love,” giving us our first sense of this poem’s position between a speaker and a specific other. Though he is calling to all of the natural and human world, it is his call to his love that supersedes all of this. Thus, the poem achieves its first point of tension. We do not know the love’s response at this point.

From this moment of high lyricism, the poem turns to describing the effect Desnos’ voice has on that which he summons. In this sense, too, “The Voice of Robert Desnos” departs from Breton’s moves in “Free Union.” Breton never returns to any image after he initially presents it. Postmodern Associative poems, face a choice along these lines, and they generally tend to choose Breton’s model rather than Desnos’. The decision represents an important difference. Poems which choose the former’s tactic
generate a sense of momentum, though they also risk losing that momentum to diffusion or randomness. Poems which choose Desnos’ approach benefit from reiteration and revision which generates new meaning and significance for their imagery. However, they also risk becoming too openly formulaic and, perhaps, predictable, a quality that would seem to be the bane of the Associative.

Desnos’ poem does not fall victim to the risks it takes inasmuch as it is able to re-present its imagery in ever surprising ways. “The scraps of cloth rotting on the ground” in the early lines are revisited in the lines, “the scraps of cloth rotting in the ground and in the earth / snap to at the sound of my voice like a flag of rebellion.” This sudden invocation of militaristic image alters our sense of those scraps in an important way in that they suggest the sense of power Desnos’ voice wields. Similarly, the linen drying in farm country turns into linen that “clothes adorable women whom I do not adore / who come to me / obeying my voice.” Again, the recasting of an earlier image has the effect of expressing the power of the voice. The same can be said of the list of natural disasters that constitute much of the first half of the poem. By later lines, those forces of nature are under the control of the speaker’s voice. Finally, the list of occupations in the early part of the poem seems to be variously guided or defined by and in deference to the voice itself.

That the power of Desnos’ voice escalates throughout the poem allows for the final irony of the last three lines and only accentuates their poignancy. “The one I love” reappears at long last in the poem and, as with his revisions of other imagery, Desnos’ recasts his relationship to his beloved here writing, “the one I love is not listening / the
one I love does not hear / the one I love does not answer.” The voice, which has so forcefully commanded every other aspect of the speaker’s world, fails to achieve any similar response from his beloved. We assume the beloved is a woman based on details of Desnos’ biography, though the poem could easily be written to a man, and were it not for the title, it could easily be delivered by a female speaker. In any case, that the speaker earlier thrice repeats the line “I call the one I love” suggests that her response is of utmost importance to him. When at end she does not listen, hear, or answer, we understand that the voice of Robert Desnos is futile in spite of its apparent power.

The poem’s ironic undercutting of the speaker is vital to the its success. This precise kind of undercutting might explain why Associative poets, concerned with the implications of Postmodern theory, are so drawn to some of the tactics employed by the Surrealists. In the Postmodern, we come to view the author and subjectivity as constructed and contingent, a product of language, social norms, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and sexuality. This makes any poetry which expounds certainties or truths suspect and essentially untenable. Desnos’ poem offers Postmodern writers a solution to the Postmodern problem. It suggests that a speaker may express certainties but can revise and undermine those certainties at later points in the poem. In this way, two truths may be true: that the poet possesses an authority of voice and that the poet doubts his own authority. Similarly, the overall strategy of Desnos’ poem, which turns subjectivity inside-out by making the self the subject of the poem, offers Associative poets a convenient way to counter the idea of the self as a construction. Later poets can employ the strategy to openly acknowledge the constructed nature of the self and examine it.
Additionally, once the Surrealists and Modernists begin to describe themselves, either directly or fictively as Eliot does in “Prufrock,” Postmodern writers have an avenue to move even further into fictionalizations of the self as John Berryman, John Ashbery, and others do later.

The mid- and late-century poems described here as Associative are occasionally referred to by critics and reviewers as “surrealist.” Contemporary poets like Dean Young and Charles Simic are often described this way. This is testament to the influence the French Surrealists have on poets who regularly engage in the associative mode. However, a poet like Young should not be expressly described as Surrealist in that his poetry is not grounded in psychoanalytic theory. Breton in particular was deeply influenced by Freudian thought as was Desnos, though the latter eventually abandoned the Surrealist mode for more direct engagement with political and personal topics in his poetry. Young is far less directly concerned with psychoanalysis in his work. Further, Young is as influenced by the experiments of Modernist poets and the discursive elements of the New York School of poetry as he is by the Surrealists. It is in this fusion that he generates his own original voice. Tate, too, is far too engaged with Modernist and Discursive modes of writing to be accurately labeled “Surrealist.”

For Modernist writers in Britain and America, their Surrealist counterparts represent an important part of the conversation among poets. However, none of the Modernist poets whose work we view as canonical ever fully embrace the Surreal. Poets like Eliot, Pound, H.D., Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens certainly write poems with what might be dubbed dream-like or associative imagery, but
these writers never seem to engage in experiments with automatic writing or associative substitution. Where they use especially figurative imagery, they explain it as simply a more succinct way of describing the literal. One story about Eliot, which may very well be apocryphal, claims that when asked what he meant by the line in “Prufrock,” “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,” he replied, “I meant, ‘The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes’!” The Modernists were interested in undoing the idea that imagery in poetry should be understood as symbolic. Symbolism, by the Modern, had become a relic of more antiquated styles of poetry. It is no surprise then that the Modernist might resist the Surrealist experiment. The Surrealists believed, after all, that their freely associated images were symbolic or representative of something else. Symbolism is incredibly important to Freudian theory, which suggests that dream imagery and accidental substitutions of language are symptomatic of some underlying psychological cause. Where the Surrealist poets attempt to access the subconscious with their experiments with automatic and associative writing, they are taking for granted that the imagery generated by the tactic will be symbolic. The Modernists were not similarly inclined, preferring a more succinct description of the conscious world based on the succinct and original description of objects. This is the great legacy of Pound’s and H.D.’s Imagism: it makes the poet’s task one of observation of the world rather than of the self as is the case with the Surreal.
V. Postmodern Associative Poems

*John Ashbery and John Berryman*

While a more detailed study of the Associative mode would absolutely engage in a deeper examination of midcentury, Postmodern variations of it, this account of the mode requires only a brief overview of contributions made to it by midcentury writers. Because this paper proposes that our attention be focused on individual poems rather than on broad, generalizing accounts of a given poet’s entire oeuvre, it may seem counterintuitive to speak so generally here of a few poets. However, it is more economical to speak of John Ashbery and John Berryman this way here. Ashbery’s work sets precedents which include an attentiveness to conversational language, to popular as well as “high” culture, and to the advancement of earlier aesthetic innovations put forth by Modernist and Surrealist writers. For his part, Berryman’s *The Dream Songs* represents a further permutation of the application of psychoanalytic theory in poetry. In this, he shares an attentiveness to psychology that was so important by his Surrealist predecessors. Both of these poets afford late-century and contemporary Associative poems any number of tactics that constitute important elements of the mode.

In many ways, Ashbery is an endpoint of the Romantic. His poems so wholly lack a clearly defined speaker and subjectivity that they seem to upend the lyric impulses of the Romantics completely. His are poems that are less constructed of subjectivity than they are of linguistic association. In this sense, Ashbery is vital to the Linguistic mode as well to the Associative. However, the contemporary Linguistic poem tends to disregard
conventional sentence structure, a move that Ashbery himself only rarely makes. In fact, much of his work makes conventional grammar indispensable. Ashbery’s poems experiment not with dismantling language into its component parts but with juxtaposing various “levels” of language, from informal slang to detached exposition to ornately emotive declaration, against each other. There seems in his work to be a disregard for autobiographical detail in favor of an attention to the varied ways in which we express our perspectives on and interpretations of experience. In juxtaposing these various modes of linguistic expression, Ashbery strives to make the poem its own lived experience rather than the recounting of such experience. His tendency to eschew clear subject matter and a distinct subjectivity often results in poems that resist interpretation. For good reason, readers may find his tendency towards obfuscation alienating. That Ashbery’s linguistic associations propel some of his poems into impenetrability actually provides a model for what the Associative poem should seek to avoid. Because the Associative poem is essentially lyrical and seeks to transform a speaker’s experience into an alien but comprehensible form, the mode needs to avoid Ashbery’s tendency towards complete disjunction. Nevertheless, he offers the Associative poem a significant point of reference.

Without arguing for or against the merits of particular Ashbery poems here, his tactic of linguistic juxtaposition, itself born of a form of associative logic, is undeniably important to the Associative mode. Ashbery reminds his contemporaries of the opportunity presented by employing and juxtaposing various linguistic structures in their work. His poetry, even where it is indecipherable, is constructed of easily recognizable linguistic structures. While we may not be able to fully describe how his various
sentences relate to each other, we can certainly access his poems on the level of the individual sentence. That Associative poems tend to adopt Ashbery’s associative juxtapositions of language, they are afforded a broader linguistic palette to choose from than that available to the Meditative poem which relies so heavily on a contemplative tone or to the Discursive poem which necessarily uses idiomatic language and a conversational tone. Without Ashbery’s linguistic associations, the Associative mode would not have at its disposal one of its most fundamental elements, which is the use of a broad palette of tonalities.

For his part, Berryman’s *The Dream Songs* engages in juxtapositions of language but, more importantly, the poems juxta pose highly figurative imagery and expressions of sentiment. Berryman seems generally to be described as a Confessional poet inasmuch as the poems in *The Dream Songs* so frequently refer, often obliquely, to elements of his own biography. The poems have the air of autobiography, but more important that this is their tendency to engage in the precise kind of “fictionalizing” that later Associative poems engage in. That Berryman relies so heavily on shifting personas and shifting perspectives along with highly disjunctive sequences of imagery in any number of *The Dream Songs* suggests a clear relationship to the Associative mode’s reliance on similar rapid-fire shifts in perspective, subject, and image. What the latter also has in common with the former is that despite these shifts, Berryman’s poems remain grounded in *subjective* experience. For the same reasons that he is considered Confessional, Berryman might also be considered Associative inasmuch as the Associative mode relies so heavily on subjectivity even where it seeks to obscure it. Any radical dismissal of subjectivity
would push an Associative poem far closer to the Linguistic mode, and neither Berryman nor those more recent poems referred to here as Associative ever earnestly attempt this type of dismissal. However, Berryman does abstract his subjectivity into the third-person character of Henry, and this shifting of the subjective into a position of third-person removal is a tactic employed in Associative poems by Dean Young, Matthea Harvey, David Berman, and Claire Bateman as well as in poems by James Tate and Charles Simic. Berryman and his predecessors may owe this technique to earlier incarnations of it, most notably in Eliot’s Prufrock, but this does not undermine the idea that his work is an essential part of the Associative poem’s heritage.

Late Century Associative Poetry

While the origins of the modern Associative poem are relatively clear, what might remain unclear is how the mode is distinct from its historical precursors. Partly, the distinction is simply a function of its temporal context. Contemporary Associative poems are simply not engaged with the same aesthetic arguments that constitute the Modern. At this point, poets have mostly synthesized the lyric confessional impulses of the Romantic with the various concerns of the Modern including its emphasis on attention to imagistic description. More directly, the Postmodern Associative poem is not so directly engaged with Freudian—or any other—psychoanalytic theory and in this is clearly distinct from the Surreal even though contemporary poets engaged in the Associative mode are frequently labeled Surrealists. If critics are inclined to use the moniker at all, it would perhaps be more accurate to employ the lower-case ‘surrealist’ than the formal
designation ‘Surrealist.’ However, it seems best that we avoid such labeling altogether in that it unnecessarily restricts a given poet to a mode of writing that he or she might not exclusively engage in. Once again, we are better served by considering individual poems than we are by attempting to categorize poets.

In the Postmodern, poets seem to be concerned with the implications of theory for our understanding of subjectivity and but also concerned with the attempt to achieve earnestness and uncover truths, however contingent, in spite of the destabilized self. This final point in particular is what makes the Associative such a powerful solution for concerns of the Postmodern period. Its rapid shifting between imagery, language, and narrative and lyric elements allows poems which employ the mode to make truth statements and metaphysical claims with utter earnestness and emotionality because these assertions are often immediately undercut or camouflaged by a rapid shift away from earnestness into description or ironic comment. The Associative allows poets the raw emotionality of the Romantics while still acknowledging the ways in which the Modern and Postmodern problematize subjectivity and truth itself. This desire for earnestness is, in fact, what distinguishes the Associative from its precursors. The Surrealists might be content with the free associations of “automatic writing” and the Modernists might be content with the absence of subjectivity in favor of strong descriptions of image, but the Postmodern Associative poem has as its utmost concern the expression of earnest subjective feeling even as it often risks undermining or burying that feeling with disjunction.
James Tate’s “Poem (I Can’t Speak for the Wind)” and Dean Young’s “Frottage”

James Tate’s “Poem (I Can’t Speak for the Wind)” is a quintessentially Associative poem. While Tate is often called a surrealist, the label does not really help us understand his poems or how and why his poems succeed or fail. This is the principal problem with categorizing poets in broad terms rather than studying individual poems and the ways in which they adhere to or violate their internal logic: we are never given a clear sense of how to read poetry when we label it Surreal or Confessional or as written by a member of the New York School. We simply have a vague sense of what those terms mean in the most abstract sense. By understanding that “Poem (“I Can’t Speak for the Wind”) is an Associative poem with discursive elements, we realize that Tate sets up certain expectations for the poem by way of the structural requirements of the Associative mode. We are then able to better decipher how and why he leaps from one idea to another and can at least posit why the leaps make better sense of the poem’s subject, which in this case is the speaker’s sense of powerlessness and disintegration in the face of the changing season:

Poem (I Can’t Speak for the Wind) (ca. 1976)

I don’t know about the cold.
I am sad without hands.
I can’t speak for the wind
which chips away at me.
When pulling a potato, I see only the blue haze.
When riding an escalator, I expect something orthopedic to happen.
Sinking in quicksand, I’m a wild appaloosa.
I fly into a rage at the sight of a double-decker bus,
I want to eat my way through the Congo,
I’m a double-agent who tortures himself
and still will not speak.
I don’t know about the cold,
But I know what I like I like a tropical madness,
I like to shake the coconuts
and fingerprint the pythons,—
fevers which make the children dance.
I am sad without hands,
I’m very sad without sleeves or pockets.
Winter is coming to this city,
I can’t speak for the wind
which chips away at me.

The poem is a lament. It overtly engages concerns of the Postmodern, most notably the notion of a destabilized and unreliable speaker. Also, as in some of Ashbery’s poems, its seemingly disjunctive imagery seems to be generated by linguistic association rather than any attempt at deliberately introducing an easily decipherable catalogue of related images. That said, the images here are neither random nor guided by Breton’s tactic of “automatic writing.” They are deliberate though not immediately contingent upon each other.

The poem’s opening lines quickly establish the speaker’s condition by way of highly figurative description. We do not assume that the speaker is literally “without hands” or literally being “chipped away” by the wind. Rather, the statements that constitute the first four lines assert a speaker whose knowledge is limited to the immediacy of his own perspective. He does not offer any assertions regarding the cold, nor does he speak for the wind, and in this the poem is immediately anti-Romantic in that it offers a speaker disconnected from the natural world. What the poem has in common, however, with the Romantic is its bald statement of feeling. It is somewhat remarkable that a poet writing in the latter half of the twentieth century is able to include the phrase “I am sad...” in a poem at all. What permits this kind of direct assertion of feeling is the
way in which Tate’s poem immediately augments the statement by offering the figurative
description of being “...without hands.” The lack of hands suggests a lack of control, and
this offers an explanation for the speaker’s emotional state. In a sense, the associative
image here “earns” Tate the ability to openly express his sadness.

It is from this point that the poem becomes more apparently Associative in the
proper sense. The next seven lines of the poem are comprised of rapid shifts in image and
attention. What the reader must do here is solve the internal logic of the poem knowing
full well that this logic will not correspond to conventional linear or causal logic. This
knowledge is a consequence of understanding the poem as Associative, and in this way,
the four-mode framework posited here demonstrates its advantage over other
frameworks. By becoming aware of the basic strategies of each of the four modes of
contemporary poetry, we are better equipped to augment our expectations of a poem and
not inadvertently resist what it attempts to accomplish. Simply labeling the poem
‘surreal’ would only tell us that the imagery in Tate’s poem is not meant to be orderly.
However, labeling it Associative suggests that while the images are not orderly they are
guided by a strict internal logic.

In this case, the poem employs a logic of opposition: the speaker is describing
situations in which his impulses run in direct opposition to the circumstances he is in. He
writes, “When pulling a potato, I see only the blue haze.” Someone pulling potatoes
ought to be primarily focused on the earth, on the dirt in which the potatoes are buried.
Yet, this speaker concerns himself with the airy limits of the sky. Similarly, the claim that
“When riding an escalator, I expect something orthopedic to happen” suggests a speaker
who misunderstands his circumstance. He expects a device meant to be a substitute for the physical effort of walking or climbing to actually correct an aspect of his physicality. This reinforces the logic of opposition and misunderstanding in the poem, a logic that is further reinforced by the next line, “Sinking in quicksand, I’m a wild appaloosa.” The speaker, when irretrievably sinking, resists in the manner of a wild horse. Conventional wisdom about quicksand tells us that this kind of violent motion will only quicken his sinking. All three of these lines reveal the underlying logic of the associations in the poem and allow us to better understand its meaning and its motives, something that simply labeling it ‘surreal’ could not accomplish. Because we understand that the Associative poem necessarily contains an underlying logic—unlike its Surrealist precursors—we are able to actively uncover that logic. In this case, the first four lines of the poem establish the speaker’s condition, and the next three provide us a sort of personal history or psychological portrait of him.

The ensuing lines, then, further the portrait. “I fly into a rage at the sight of a double-decker bus,” presents an iconic image of London, suggesting that the city the speaker is in is either London itself or reminds him of the climate of the British capital. We also understand that his response to being in such a setting is to fly into a fit of rage. In keeping with the oppositional logic of the poem which pits the speaker’s desires against his setting, the next line offers the polar opposite of London in the Congo. This reassertion of the speaker’s contrary desires helps to make sense of the next lines, “I’m a double-agent who tortures himself / and still will not speak.” The poem is rife with a sense of double-agency, so this notion of the speaker as a figurative double-agent makes
sense here. That said, the poem comes off its rails a bit at this point in that it does not previously establish that the speaker is incapable of speech or expression. Certainly, he lacks agency in the absence of his hands, but he has said so much already, it feels disingenuous for him to claim that he “will not speak.” This points to a moment of weakness in the poem in that it violates the internal logic of its previous imagery. Violations of logic are not necessarily always problematic in the Associative poem. It is only a problem here inasmuch as the poem so clearly establishes a prevailing logical structure to its associations and only violates them in this isolated moment.

As the poem continues, it returns to the speaker’s desire for warmth that is counter to his setting. “I don’t know about the cold, / But I know what I like I like a tropical madness, / I like to shake the coconuts / and fingerprint the pythons,— / fevers which make the children dance.” These lines reiterate the speaker’s desire for tropical climes and underscore the irrationality of those desires. This latter point is particularly apparent in the python image—we know pythons, like the speaker here, do not have hands or fingers—and also in the image of children compelled to dancing by madness—an idea that implies the speaker’s ideal condition is one of madness.

The poem returns to its starting point in the lines, “I am sad without hands, / I’m very sad without sleeves or pockets.” He thereby doubles-down on his lack of agency by not only lamenting his lack of hands but also his lack of appropriate places, like sleeves or pockets, to put them. Finally, we understand the impetus for the poem and the source of the speaker’s sense of powerlessness in the line “Winter is coming to this city.” There is a sense here of foreboding and inevitability that provides a clear explanation for the
speaker’s angst. This line, in conjunction with the final two lines of the poem, gestures beyond the literal coming of winter and subtly evokes the specter of death. The wind “chips away” at the speaker. If his diminishment is physical, we understand that the passage of seasons is evocative of the passage of time and the chipping away is literal, it refers to the microscopic decay of the human body. Thus, like most Associative poems, Tate’s arrives at the existential concern about the subject’s powerlessness in the face of death. While the poem does not necessarily offer a clear solution to that problem, it does resolve the isolation of the Postmodern condition by offering readers a description of the speaker’s experience of it. That description permits an empathetic connection with the poem’s speaker, and this sense of empathy exudes a lyric earnestness that is so sought after by the Postmodern. The poem achieves all of this while avoiding embarrassing sentimentality or predictability.

Though this reading of Tate’s poem certainly is technical in its manner, the important thing to take away from it is its the application of the quadramodal description of Postmodern poetry. By focusing on the poem itself and recognizing that it will be highly metaphorical, fictionalize the speaker’s experience, and engage in a logic that is generally nonlinear, we have a set of expectations in place as we approach the poem that allow us to understand it much more easily in spite of its apparent disjunctions. Prior to even reading the poem, we can guess that the poem’s internal logic will be an oppositional or contradictory one inasmuch as the logic of opposition is most obviously and directly contradictory to linear logic. Our understanding of the conventions that are
important to the poem allow us to both understand and evaluate it, a task that grows even
easier when we compare it to other Associative poems.

For that, we turn to Dean Young, a poet who regularly returns to Associative
tactics in his work. While he does not do so in every one of his poems, a fact that labeling
him a surrealist or “third-generation New York Schooler” ignores, Young does favor the
mode inasmuch as his work is clearly influenced by the very Romanticists, Modernists
and Surrealists that constitute the origin of the Associative mode. In reading Young’s
poem “Frottage,” we see that he too employs an oppositional logic similar to the one used
in Tate’s poem. Despite this very significant similarity, we see Young’s use of the
Associative mode establishing a unique subjectivity with a different response to the
Postmodern condition. However, a reading of the poem in the context of Tate’s also
allows us to determine how each poem succeeds in or falls short of its ambitions.

Frottage (ca. 1995)

How goofy and horrible is life. Just
look into the faces of the lovers
as they near their drastic destinations,
the horses lathered and fagged. Just
look at them handling the vase
priced beyond the rational beneath
the sign stating the store’s breakage
policy, and what is the rational but
a thing we must always break? I am not
the only one composed of fractious murmurs.
From the point of view of the clouds,
it is all inevitable and dispersed—
they vanish over the lands to reconstitute
over the seas, themselves again
but no longer themselves, what they wanted
they no longer want, daylight fidgets
across the frothy waves. Most days
you can’t even rub a piece of charcoal
across paper laid on some rough wood
without a lion appearing, a fish’s umbrella
skeleton. Once we believed it told us
something of ourselves. Once we even believed
in the diagnostic powers of ants. Upon
the eyelids of the touched and suffering,
they’d exchange their secretive packets
like notes folded smaller than chemicals
the dancers pass while dancing with another.
A quadrille. They told us nearly nothing
which may have been enough now that we know
so much more. From the point of view
of the ant, the entire planet is a dream
quivering beneath an eyelid and who’s to say
the planet isn’t. From the point of view
of the sufferer, it seems everything will
be taken from us except the sensation
of being crawled over. I believe everything
will be taken from us. Then given back
when it’s no longer what we want. We
are clouds, and terrible things happen
in clouds. The wolf’s mouth is full
of strawberries, the morning’s a phantom
hum of glories.

The poem’s opening statement, “How goofy and horrible is life,” clearly
establishes that Young intends to engage in a logic of contradiction. That the poem
begins in contradiction is our first clue that it is Associative, a suspicion that is confirmed
almost immediately by the next few lines which include mention of lovers nearing
“...their drastic destinations / the horses lathered and fagged.” The image is not causally
related to the opening statement, and it is made clearly figurative as soon as the poem
places the lovers and their horses in a department store. At this point, we understand that
we are in the realm of the rapid-fire leaps of image and logic of the Associative mode, a
point underscored by Young’s interrogative assertion, “and what is the rational but / a
thing we must always break?” Because we know that the poem, as a consequence of its
selection of mode, will not engage in conventional narrative, we should not be surprised that the lovers and the passing glimpse the poem gives us of their story will likely not be the primary subject of the poem. The lovers are essentially an image meant to serve as evidence for the claim that life is both goofy and horrible. The image of them handling so delicate an object as a vase beneath the store’s breakage policy as they apparently approach some “drastic” endpoint—which we can infer to be either the end of their relationship or death itself—is meant to offer the juxtaposition of the mundane and goofy with the dramatic and drastic.

In comparison with Tate’s poem, Young’s initial image is more disjunctive relative to our initial understanding of theme. The next few lines confirm that the poem is engaging in a logic even less linear than Tate’s: “I am not / the only one composed of fractious murmurs. / From the point of view of the clouds...” We are associating here from breakage policies to metaphysical statements about humanity’s relationship to reason to a metaphysical claim about the nature of the speaker to clouds. While this progression of images is apparently random, we need only uncover the logic that guides it in order to understand what the poem is offering and where it is going with its meditation. The pattern here is somewhat oblique, but the poem seems to be governed by vacillations between far-reaching and quite bold philosophical assertions and tactile examples of these. This pattern is initially established by the poem’s move from its very first statement to the image of the lovers quite literally handling an embodiment of rationality. That it follows this with two more metaphysical assertions and then moves to the visual image of clouds further establishes the pattern. From here, we expect the poem to
engage in this same bipolar shift from the abstract and philosophical to the tactile or visual and back again.

Sure enough, this is precisely what happens, “...it is all inevitable and dispersed—
/ they vanish over the lands to reconstitute / over the seas, themselves again / but no longer themselves, what they wanted / they no longer want, daylight fidgets / across the frothy waves.” The ‘they’ here refers to the clouds, and we see that Young claims that “it,” meaning existence itself is “inevitable and dispersed,” a juxtaposition which echoes the earlier goofy and horrible one. He follows this abstraction with the concrete image of clouds vanishing and reconstituting themselves over land and sea and then follows this with an abstract assertion about desire which is, in turn, followed by the visual image of daylight shimmering off of waves. As the poem continues, it continues engaging in its juxtaposing of the abstract against the concrete. One thing that we can predict about this pattern based on our earlier reading of Desnos is that Young’s poem will likely riff on the redundant structure of the poem to gradually advance its themes away from his initial presentation of them. If it is successful, the poem should clearly demonstrate that life is indeed dichotomously “goofy and horrible” and either clarify how understanding this dichotomy better equips us to contend with it and/or establish an empathetic connection with the reader, the way Tate’s poem does, that augments our experience of life’s dichotomous nature.

We can see the poem attempting to advance its themes in the following lines, “Most days / you can’t even rub a piece of charcoal / across paper laid on some rough wood / without a lion appearing, a fish’s umbrella / skeleton. Once we believed it told us
Here, Young takes on Surrealism and psychoanalysis directly. The imagery in these lines is meant to stand in juxtapositional relation to the description of the clouds reconstituted as themselves though no longer themselves, what they wanted no longer what they want. The description of frottage here hopes to explain the poem’s title but also to demonstrate the way that the mind invents something out of nothing, that desire for meaning and meaning itself are in a constant state of flux. The claim “Once we believed it told us something of ourselves” directly invokes the psychoanalytic use of the Rorschach and then dismisses it. The poem thus implies that the mind and its meanings are random illusions, thereby directly acknowledging an aspect of the Postmodern understanding of the self and Truth.

The dismissal of the Rorschach is completed by the poem’s equating of it to what sounds like a shamanistic use of ants as diagnostic tools, a practice which the poem suggests is useless when it concludes of the ants, “They told us nearly nothing / which may have been enough now that we know / so much more.” Here, the poem has moved on from psychoanalysis to bluntly take on the Postmodern epistemological paradox. This paradox might be described as such: our understanding of the existential and metaphysical is inversely proportional to our accumulation of theoretical and scientific knowledge; the more we learn about the world, the less we know about our place in it. Young’s poem then expresses the Postmodern’s understanding of subjectivity as insignificant in the face of everything else, an idea which is further reinforced by the poem’s sudden shift in perspective from that of clouds to that of the ant, “From the point of view / of the ant, the entire planet is a dream / quivering beneath an eyelid and who’s
to say / the planet isn’t.” As in Desnos’ “The Voice of Robert Desnos,” “Frottage” repeats sentence structure but re-presents the structure in ever augmented ways. We move from the point of the view of the clouds to the point of view of the ant to the point of view of the sufferer. This repetitive phrasing should tell us that “point of view” is of significant importance to the poem, and this should tell us that its final metaphysical account will likely present a relativistic view of the metaphysical condition.

At end, the poem does precisely this. It continues in its pattern of offering philosophical assertions and juxtaposing them with concrete images all the way to its concluding sequence, “I believe everything / will be taken from us. Then given back / when it’s no longer what we want. We / are clouds, and terrible things happen / in clouds. The wolf’s mouth is full / of strawberries, the morning’s a phantom / hum of glories.”

What is interesting here is that though the poem readily and repeatedly makes bold philosophical assertions, it does not end on one, resorting instead to two unrelated and discrete images of the wolf and morning. It is as though the poem has backed off of its initial dismissal of the Rorschach inasmuch as its conclusion presents what are essentially inkblot images and allows the reader to see whatever she wants to see in them. They are not evaluated by the speaker of the poem nor is their specific role or value here clearly established. The poem thus contradicts itself. Additionally, that the concluding images are so disjunctive, the reader is left at a loss in terms of what to make of them. Thus, as to the question of whether the poem successfully offers a solution to the Postmodern condition, we can definitively say no. It resigns itself to contradiction and contingency.
However, much like Tate’s poem, Young’s relies on its reader experiencing a visceral, empathetic connection with its account of its themes. This response is contingent upon whether the reader believes the poem’s bolder assertions. Unlike Tate’s poem, Young’s takes on a much larger subject matter in choosing the human condition itself rather than something so manageable as a change of season. With this in mind, it is defensible to say that the poem does present a number of believable and resonant truths, the most prominent of which is the final, imagistic “We are clouds and terrible things happen in clouds.” The claim here seems indisputable at best and only mildly contentious at worst. When considered against the ambitions of the claim, we can argue that “Frottage” is, at end, successful in its succinct and earnest expression of the Postmodern condition. What it fails to do is offer an alternative to the condition. It also fails to deliver on its initial premise that life is indeed goofy and horrible in that it fixates more on small aspects of the horrible than it does on anything particularly goofy. It is this shortcoming that might make the poem frustrating for some readers. It so clearly presents an argument at its outset that it seems something of a letdown when we are not given clear evidence that the claim is correct in the poem. That said, the claim of life’s horrors and its goofiness, much like the metaphor which presents humanity as clouds, rings somehow indisputably true. This again suggests that the poem’s real success is in its expression of the Postmodern condition even as it fails to resolve it. Thus, in contrast with Tate’s poem, we can say that the latter’s is a more successful poem in terms of its systematic expression of the speaker’s subjective experience of the world. However, Young’s poem is more successful in its philosophical description of that world. The difference is that
“Frottage” relies so heavily on agreement with its metaphysics and so readily evades delivery on the initial expectations it sets up that it is far more likely to alienate a reader. This is not necessarily a bad thing. As evidenced by the themes in “Frottage,” Young is a poet of tremendous ambition, particularly when it comes to the philosophical. This ambition risks as much as it gains. While his poems might alienate some readers, where they find readers who connect to their worldview, they often find tremendously loyal devotees.

In both Tate’s and Young’s poems, we see demonstrated more recent incarnations of the Associative mode. It should be fairly clear that these poems are deeply connected to the poems from previous periods in literary history described here. A more complete study of the Associative mode would certainly include readings of a larger sample of recent poetry to demonstrate ways in which the mode itself is a significant aspect of the landscape of Postmodern American poetry and the ways in which it remains as vital a poetic mode as ever.
VI. *O, Enduring Sun* and the Associative Mode

I have spent the bulk of this paper avoiding direct reference to my own work. This is an intentional choice in that I am far more interested in considering broader trends in poetry than I am in expounding upon my own writing. However, inasmuch as this paper should function as an introduction to my manuscript, I will briefly say that what I dub the Associative mode is deeply important to my poetry. Its conventions have offered me a solution in *O, Enduring Sun* to the problem of how to express sentiment and autobiography earnestly. My poems tend to fictionalize real events and experiences in much the same manner as some of the poems I study here. They also tend to make broad metaphysical assertions paired with concrete descriptions. Further, they hope to express a clear and distinct subjectivity without necessarily needing to be factual or literal. My hope is that the account presented in this paper makes all of this readily apparent.

Hopefully, a reader who has familiarized herself with my description of the Associative can see it at work in my poems. The only qualification I would make to this understanding of my work is that it is also fairly deeply influenced by poems I would describe as Discursive. I tend to write in a conversational manner that intends to offer infuse serious subject matter with an occasional light-heartedness of tone and humor. The poems in *O, Enduring Sun*, also regularly make the “thinking out loud” gesture of the Discursive, though this is often juxtaposed with moments of high lyricism. Though I have not provided a full account of the Discursive mode, my hope is that even the brief one given here makes its importance to my work apparent.
VII. A Qualified Conclusion

The four-mode account presented here is meant to more clearly establish the conventions of Postmodern poetry. The establishment of convention allows this framework to not only decipher poems, but to comment on where they are strongest and weakest and also to consider their successes or failings relative to other poems written in the same mode. Thus, the four-mode framework offers a critical apparatus for evaluation as well as for understanding, and in this it solves one of the largest problems facing poetry today, which is that the criticism of poetry is becoming increasingly subjective, an odd fact considering the Postmodern’s apparent dismissal of subjectivity. Critics and poets alike often admire or dislike poems based on their own petty allegiances to any of the various factions of poetry that are the consequence of the “school” framework. This is a rather unfortunate development that threatens to delegitimize poetry completely in that a field without any agreed upon objective frame of assessment allows quite literally everything to possess an equal value. While this might be a democratic sounding condition, it actually has the effect of more deeply factionalizing poets and critics alike in that, in the absence of an objective framework, we must become more deeply entrenched in our subjective evaluations. The four-mode model is not interested in establishing any kind of tyrannical ideological framework nor does it hope to express a grand narrative of poetry. Rather, it is an account of the Postmodern based largely on features generated by poems themselves rather than by a loyalty to any particular poetic, theoretical, or critical camp. In this, the hope is that the four-mode framework eventually helps uninitiated readers to better understand poetry and poets to innovate further on the conventions of the
Postmodern. Naturally, what is presented here is only a small portion of the description necessary to establish the credibility of the framework. Thus, though the study will conclude here, it is by no means the end of the investigation. That will hopefully take place in a larger critical text that more fully explores all of the assertions made in this paper.
Works Cited


O, ENDURING SUN
Make Believe

We will eventually be archaeology, but now in America

I tell my young daughter the new headlights are a bluish-white instead of the murky yellow of my upbringing.

She’s busy with her bubble-making, her dig in the flower bed, her pantomimed banquet, phantom guests
dining on her small handfuls of weeds and grasses.

Precisely, the lit up jackrabbits appear in a peculiar blue candor under the stoplight dusk,
pigeons hued reddish, garrulous and incomprehensible as drunks at the end of the cocktail hour.

It’s that time in America when the air is overgrowth.

The piquancy of coriander the neighbors allowed to flower so it isn’t any good anymore mingles
with fragrances we douse our clothes-lined laundry in each week to cloister the body’s reeking.

Truck smoke from the interstate.

I’m out-of-doors, which is to say nature is hemmed in by doors, which is to say nature is a category of my making, and I can’t say why the skittish,

black bugs flit into the house when there’s so much turf afforded them already, but tonight I’ll crush a few with a *Newsweek* before sleeping.

Now, it’s that time in America in the out-of-doors beneath tree and trellis
and vapor trails of overnight flights
fare-thee-welling to London and Morocco.

Brandy in soda water, a xylophone jingle of the ice, I sit in my Adirondack

without my minute, Midwestern wife
who Tuesday returns from her summit in Cleveland.

It’s that time when I’m alone in America with my young daughter who startles

herself realizing the woodpile beneath that black oak is itself formerly a tree,
and she wants to know whether these trees have feelings.

It’s this acquaintance with death she so improves upon annually.

It’s in this precise moment in America that I realize this acquainting, this becoming familiar, this cordiality with death is the entire task of her growing older.

Next year her ficus will die, and the next year her minnow will die, and it’s in these moments

in America when my daughter’s plump lip quivers, a preface to bawling, and I’m alone and can do too little that I say,

I’m sorry, life is too much, my love, I’m sorry, my love, it is not enough.
In my life as a novel, you'd be the haberdasher in tweed closing up shop in October on Oak Street who I nod to while I stride urgently to meet with urgent others.

Or maybe, my knapsack riding the conveyor, you'd be the woman at Heathrow security inviting me through the metal detector or the attendant admitting me when I arrive, breathless at the gate.

You ladle soup into my bowl in the hospital cafeteria.

You're Iowa in the novel about Chicago, are background radiation, invisible and pouring out of the perforated night onto the pier I walk to the edge of. You are the pier.

You're someone I mention in a story about my industrious past or you're lounging in the afternoon of my industrious future on a boat on the water I wave to, and though you don't know me, you wave back because you're the sort who waves to strangers.
In my life as a novel I hasten and blur

past you on the hotel escalator,
or I shiver out of focus beside you

in the frigid evening of the Argyle Avenue Elevated
on my way to a shindig at Tate's place or Enrique’s place,

or I’m dull flotsam in your proximity in the saloon,
days without eating, days without Polly.

Or the other idea that you're not in the novel at all

but are somewhere over where you are
where life is like what life is really like

in conversation with others in amusement
or in consolation in the elsewhere of your real life

where you're doing so well and so much without me.
The Anthology of Lost Causes

Here’s to the gracious and eminent genius I never heard of, this crack statistician and significant player of polo, his opera opening in Minsk, his art exhibition in Zurich, his graceful field theory and double album of great hits. Collegiate bohemians must tack poster-sized portraits of him thinking deeply to walls over their futons, their secondhand BarcaLoungers, above scented candles and ashtrays collected on stacked cardboard boxes doubling as end tables. Their instructors no doubt desire his endorsement, and their boyfriends probably swoon, but I never heard of him.

I’ve read dozens of books but never once his sequence of fractured sonnets. Never his instructional manual. I never rode in a Bentley or wore a TAG Heuer or had his skill for dismantling critics so magnanimously. I suppose I never will, and this theme of not doing, of not achieving, is one I return to certain times of the year.

I think of it most driving past the squat motels that flank the tollway west of the city or when I’m deliberating between heads of lettuce in the Albertson’s grocery store. I think of it digging into a pouch of peanuts on the shuttle to Annapolis. I think, just once I’d like to emerge from an airliner to a chorus of organs and acknowledge the horde regally.

I suppose it’s good to realize one never will have cause enough to purchase a tuxedo. That this is true for most of the lot of us. That most of us are fungible, like a body thrown at the problem not entirely certain what the problem is. As in war only less heroic. As in revolution only less righteous. No confetti or bunting will greet you.

I suppose it’s good to arrive at this early in life so as not to be surprised by it at some critical juncture. As when you’re greasing the palm of a maître d’ or when you’re late and certain a traffic cop will absolve and hurry you through traffic to an atrium where many experts await your expert opinion. Or when your children are watching.

It’s this idea of feeling finished with the self I return to most on warm, overcast evenings in my minor apartment listening to the small, high-pitched locomotive of cricket noise, buzz of the high-tension wires, the neighborhood of intermittent elms, how far away everyone is.

I think of it while gorged on a cheeseburger some afternoons nearly dozing on the sofa while the ball club drops another one to Houston, the squat shortstop up for a day or two to take the place of one of the extraordinary wounded. Then, back to the minors and the slow crawl of bus travel across Kentucky. Then, back to a spot on the bench in a rainout, spitting sunflower seeds into a puddle. I think of it most when I’m spitting seeds into a puddle. I think, here’s to the right and eminent genius who never heard of me and to the good and gracious consolation that I never heard of him either.
Portrait of the Self

The self wakes up extruded of whimsy.

No tango in its Rorschach,  
no mermen in its sea.

Just the self with its dull appendages,  
all radial arm and ulna, no wing.

Dark face of the self in the reflective dark  
of the microwave door,

the self so somber no-one would hold its hand  
at a roller rink any longer than two revolutions.

Basket case of the self  
with its penchant for gloom.

Beneath its accoutrements,  
the self swears, it’s not so dumpy.

The self insists there are fairer editions of itself:

radiant in a dance hall or expert  
on a call-in radio show,

executive self on the board of directors,  
drunk and fond self  
so earnest and so futile it’s necessarily beautiful.

Like a photograph  
lying in a field of snow.

Fragile little self, hid animal in a cap and a coat  
in the damp cold of the solstice.

Turbine of the self exhaling phantasms  
of steam. Something escapes it.
In death, it’ll want only to be itself again.
In life, it wants only to conquer itself,

the self in its honest hovel honestly attempting
to void its desire.

Self as the pagoda and also the deity
cross-legged and worshipped there.

The self with its mule and its bindle already
yearning for so little.

Only the gig in Boca and a bungalow on the shore.
Only vision and dental

and the modest attention of a bashful cadre of devotees.

Only to grow tomatoes in Boca beside
a humble but ample veranda.

Only this and then, the self tells itself.

Then, it would abstain from longing.

Then, the self would desist in its hut of contentment,

bronzed and blithe self,

there on its porch with a vermouth and a tomato
in the early or expiring light.
Portrait of the Memory

in an Oldsmobile in thick boots bearing a gift
of papaya in what resembles an Oldsmobile what
resembles a papaya the last of January three versions
of ice on the electric lines and elms the memory
stepping out of a green or brown car out of a Buick
in rough boots bringing home a papaya or a gladiola
or macaroons the memory bringing home its factory
scent of lubricant and steel shavings in a Ford
the memory home from its shift machining
hydraulic cylinders at the factory the memory home
in its scarf with macaroons or in its parka which was
the color of papaya maybe this is July the humid
memory maybe the memory not bringing any more
than itself in shirtsleeves the too-warm memory
in a Cutlass arriving without any gift at all
This Room, with Arsonist

If you believe in the soul, you’re the thing inside the other thing,

half corpus, half ethereal light, the idea the body’s only necessary
so the soul can inhabit the world.

If you don’t believe in the soul, the idea of the body
inside you is a scratchy racket, a sizzle and rotor hum, as faulty machinery.

Tom says his mother’s body couldn’t sustain the idea of itself.

The inside of an idea is axons rapping dendrites.

Inside, everything is verging on rupture.

Inside my blue shirt is the undershirt with a tear in the shoulder, inside the tear,

the skin inside which is a network of capillaries blooming when the shoulder catches an exposed nail in the hall.

Even so, we want to sit and sip our mojitos in sun.

In the muggy run of summer,
our faces irradiated until the skin flakes.

Inside my face is another face come to take its place. It too is my face.

It’ll never grace the cover of *Vanity Fair.*

It will not be inaugurated.

And this inside the already large and growing catalogue of things I’ll never eventually do.

No go spelunking. No passing calculus.
No sub-orbital space flight or cocktails on the Queen Mary.

Inside the membrane of what-won’t-happen-again are organelles of the what-happened-before.

Inside, says Tom, is the image of his mother’s face,
luminous and holographic in xenon beams of approaching headlamps
or luminous and holographic strolling in sun
but not a lucid sense of what she looked like.

The lucid sense of the pier is stuck into the roiling murk of the lake.

Inside the lake are ions in undulation, and inside undulation, phonemes meaning a thing billowing with gravity which is invisible but pervasive inside everything.

Tom says after his mother’s body undulated with cancer,
it smoldered in the crematory
until all that was left was the idea of his mother’s body. No more strolling.

Just axons and dendrites inside Tom,
memory as a room with an arsonist inside it,
her face in dissipation,

as inside the match head, the bright idea of fire,

and inside the flame, the dark idea of luminosity

as a thing consuming itself.
Elegy Barcelona

I believe there’s an epic, labyrinthine narrative concluding among the rolled, yellow folds of the nation’s fortune cookies.

I believe the oceans are swelling and Barcelona will one day be lost to the sea.

Silver fish, sparked flint in the silver river, the salmon are aluminum. In sun the sunburned skin sloughs off the sunburned shoulder.

Most folks believe this is the body’s slow mend. Most folks believe in the good yolk of the soul.

I believe whales were exiled from the air, so their mournful, Byzantine songs resound over the Texarkana of ocean bottom.

I believe, in autopsy lingo, of natural causes should be replaced with of long-term exposure to the dim unwavering radiation of the morning star.

The afternoon they burn your body, I step into the garden to arrange a crooked line of birdbaths and skip stones across them until a bell tower tolls its eight arguments against daylight and the skyline illuminates ragged and unmended like a poem turned on its side.

The evening they burn your body, I step into the living room and believe I’ll be greeted by you or by someone who could play you in a movie.

The curtains are an aurora of earthly proportion. You don’t exist.

A flash igniting the paned glass is the silent lightning outrunning its noise. You’re on fire.
Portrait of the Village

The air in the village is clear. We and the children are abundant
and named for saints and angels, the boulevards labeled
after famous bays we haven’t sailed to.

Theresa terrorizes Gabriel with a bullfrog commandeered
from the thick muck that borders the river.

Lailah is dyspeptic, Ezekial horny.

I own a bungalow on Guantanamo Road.
Helena is a boarder at the women’s inn on Bengal.

To witness her arrival daily at banquets in the village
is a deluge of the sensory,
a bottle of Chablis cradled like a musket in her right arm,
her fingernails the hoods of ten red Edsels,
her floral print, her black Pumas, her cardigan clearly.

I’m her devotee, in love in the village and with the village,
which isn’t to say life is so much better here than elsewhere
but that it fits together,
a prong in an outlet, silent and electric.

Our bodies cruise around in cars
the way the mind cruises around in the body.

We drive through the drive thru and get what we came for.

We believe in God the way the blind must believe
in color, the deaf in rondo,

while the war we wish would end in some bodies
smooching exuberantly is a resonant hum in the offering
like gears of an elevator buzzing beneath the Muzak.
Here in the village, the sun sinks when we finish with the sun,
the catered moon arrives at our convenience,
and I’m content to be part of the problem.

A snow shovel lounges
in the too late, too warm weather

until the winter others are afraid won’t arrive brutishly arrives,

and Helena emerges out of the avenue
out of a snowfall so thick it’s as if

the whole scene’s coming in over a faulty antenna.

Her face in white noise. The village in a crystalline rainfall.

The snow as the atmosphere falling out of suspension.
Schrödinger’s Cat Variation

if she calls tell her
the tan blanket in sun splayed on the sofa is not her torso in repose

if she calls tell her beyond the radiant bulge of the evening star
are pulsars of the flipside

if she calls tell her I’m awaiting the return of the laundry
delicates returned from an indelicate absence

a broken bottle is ground for months on the sidewalk into sand
in The Age of If-She-Calls

I might find resolution if she calls
the variable at the end of the equation exposed and comprehensible

horizon in crisp air
if she calls tell her I’m maintaining my disastrous momentum

the sun appears and disappears rapidly
so shadows hit the ground intermittently

like feet in a tantrum
I won’t have anything to do with her if she calls

if she calls tell her she’s the cat in the box
and I am the box

tell her I’m having my portrait taken in wind
to give the impression I’m moving very quickly

I’m not running toward the airport
but I’m willing to provide her with posies if she calls

tell her I’m the wolf approaching the boy
and she is the boy and I won’t believe her if she calls

but I’m willing to give her
the smashed up sandwich I was saving for dinner

I live in Ifshecalls Arizona
it is not the saddest place on earth

but the weather is awful
is struck lightning or thunder without any lightning

unchanging a bird nailed to a tree
if she calls if she telegrams if she dispatches a pigeon with a message

if she calls tell her I’m awaiting no signal out of the ether
no body in the phone booth

no two tin cans
and no taut string between them
Quad City

My cleft lip tweaked
to my flattened nose,
my goiter, my two-headed,
a lizard gestating inside me,

the firmament entwined
with the steel mesh
of girders, the industrial
bridge I’m not leaping from.

No reflection’s reflected
from the brown water.
My reflection is
the brown water.

The moon scarred
with shingles at dusk
the sun’s mustard glow
through a sulfur cloud,

my ‘73 Montego’s combustion
breaks external.
There’s a tooth growing
from my shoulder.

My belly-folds bound
outward, my curled hair
like stitches, stitches like hairs,
my ears flow gummed wax,

crossed eyes cross the sides
of your face so it looks
like two umbrellas colliding,
wings of an Asian beetle
taking to flight.
You’re the tattooed eyebrows
on the geriatric face
of a degenerate lady with cats.
We’re in Moline in motel light
and motel mirror.
We’re in shuddering Bettendorf
in fertilizer haze, under the dull hum

of sodium lights that halo
the salt silo. A propane flame
waves its pale blue banner
above the landfill.

I’d like to escort you
to the monster truck rally.
I’d like to show you
to the wrestling show.

I want three nights with you,
and after, I want.
The wake of my lame
arm parting the lazy pollen

of afternoon, the river hideous
and enormous, flies half dragon
half motor hum, hills as warts
above the water.

Honestly, Anna,
what are all these tourists photographing?
Portrait of the Horse

Sometimes the horse is just a horse.

Sometimes the horse is a stalwart bearer of bodies.

Sometimes the horse is stubborn, refusing to ford the river,

or the horse is a mistake

in the vapor, what looks like a horse

emerging out of a thrust of fog on Telegraph Avenue.

The fog is chaos.

I often mistake chaos for order
or order chaos into

something comprehensible as a horse.

There’s the perpetual feeling of being

overdressed for summer
and underdressed for spring.

I’m variously sweat or shudder.

I mistake the strange bodies
for those I owe apologies to,

oversleep and open my eyes on the clock radio, the time a typo,

the apartment a disaster.

Sometimes the horse is disaster
or the horse is time in a trot or a canter.
Sometimes the horse is a boy
growing in time into a man

who often laments,
*A horse, a horse, my kingdom, etc.*

But there is no horse.

Just two days good and one day bad
without any hint of a horse.

Until, in morning beside the bed,
suddenly the horse!

Sometimes speaking about the horse

is a means of avoiding
speaking about myself which is lousy.

Late last night myself
regarding another carelessly.

Late last night my body
with a temporary body.

The horse is the taut metaphor for sex

but sometimes the horse is the taut silence after.

Sometimes the horse is the silence
after her body rises

in the embarrassment of morning
and leaves,

and this silence is filled
with less than remorse

but with more than indifference.

This is a feeling there is no word for.

What I decided in place of what I needed.
I should eat better.

I should vacuum more often.

I should settle down and raise
a young horse.

The horse is unspoken,

the horse is this feeling
that will be forgotten,

is the self unable to alter its ineffable horse.

Late last night, a pervasive clopping
of the horse on the hill.

Late last night, the horse as a foghorn
over the Bay.

I should not be forgiven.
I should be rained on.
If I Persisted for Seven Lifetimes, I’d Spend Six of Them with You

but something in me would
desert you

the way I lie
awake and wait for the turbine

of your breathing
to whir steady and deep

until in your sleep
I feel simple again

like myself
and reckless again

outside the road is the apparition
of a bridge deck suspended

by cones of light
from the lampposts

a drone of rotors and axles
semis about

the slow groan
of departure

but our two snifters sit
in the sink

so a prowler come
purloining might picture you

glad and drinking
beside me

the toothbrushes dally
and crowd each other
in a cup in the bathroom
so he might wonder
at our life as trajectory
pristine and decoded
and on hearing the warp
of a floorboard the murmur
of a body stirring above him
he might know
to drop deftly out
of a window
with a few relics to sell
or to barter
for airfare and a room
overlooking a square
so he might step out
of that room
and onto his balcony
in a foreign light
and feel simple again
feel reckless and modern
and himself again
Apologia Matilde

I made thirty-seven false statements before the barrister, Matilde. I was a trite trombonist who shouldn’t have been entrusted with a sublime and delicate melody, Matilde. I hung, for instance, a left at the White Hen Pantry when I should’ve gone right.

I stranded the bishop and too early brought out my queen. It’s true I voted for Nixon.

I abandoned you, Matilde, on the trolley to Milwaukee.

I said so many things aloud I should’ve left mute as fog, I thrice broke your heart, it’s true, I’m an agent of error, Matilde, of slips and of blunders.

Even so, that black fraction of a grackle left in the road is not the catastrophe of myself and America made manifest on the asphalt of this of all possible worlds. It’s not the earnest memento of my broke affection or my token of poignancy.

Those mopey willows don’t mope for me, Matilde, this tattered country is not my diorama

though it’s true nothing here is quite so correct as it ought to be.

The sun in morning is more white than yellow as if the sun of some alien planet’s alien-wild elliptic, every interior is an absence, Matilde, in the architecture, and when I arrive at the arboretum without you,

the oak trees are so denuded, I don’t have nerve enough for a saunter through the barren hour.

There are the several months I spend each day recanting, Matilde.

There are the dopey spiders in the box spring, the ceiling fan whining nightly, and the droopy fern in the corner there
you gave to me, Matilde, I go on neglecting. I apologize for this

and for everything, for how I wrecked
your September and torpedoed your May, for how I ruined

three weeks in August and made ten mistakes, Matilde,
and how only eight of them were accidental.

I’m sorry for this and for everything, for the clangor of the tollway
when you are driving, the brutish heat of the city

where you roil unsleeping, for your turbulent landing,
and the chill of the boulevard when you await your tardy ride.

I’m sorry there will be days unlike these in their misery and ardor,

that there will be the optimism of summer after
seventeen weeks of sleet and rain, and I’ll inhale the posh scent

of ragweed and think of you, Matilde, tossing your tattered coat
onto a chaise lounge in a seven-story walkup

or I’ll see a tattered coat and think of you in a seven-story walkup exhaling.

I’m sorry the frayed and patched object is imbued with the subject,
and the flawed subject is an aggregate of all its scuffed, precious objects.

I’m the little brown mascot of indefensible things.

I’m sorry you still think of me, Matilde, but me like a composite sketch
based on uncertain eyewitness testimony.

I’m sorry I wronged you so deftly and sorry still, Matilde,

that the impartial platelets go on clotting, oblivious tissue
goes on healing, that the reticent stars still deliver

themselves one photon at a time, the comets still near
in oblong, unhurried approaches, and I’m not the only one,

Matilde, at the mercy of the gorgeous and lethal aurora,
and I’m not the tallest tower,

Matilde, beneath the pink and blind lightning.
I’m grateful for the man now sleeping with my ex-lover.
It’s true I loved her, but it’s right that someone be with her now in the dark hour of our republic. Life is no good anymore.
There are no jobs and no money, and it’s good that someone be with her now under street lamps filtered through sheer curtains at night, the pale approximation of daylight illuminating the outer slope of my ex-lover’s left thigh and the asymmetrical birthmark located there I thought resembled the bust of Martin Van Buren, which that man should smooch now and cherish as I did those tender hours on the other side of time and the republic when in the opulence of waking I’d move to the window to squint at the dapper bodies passing which seemed then to know where they were going in morning. What awaited when they arrived there. No job, no money, I’m grateful for the man now with my ex-lover, how she survives with him the dark hour, the sad redundancies, the human condition so like a phonograph skipping, which is the condition of urging the same thing over anticipating a different result. How dull it is, its mimeographed disasters, dull the way the bankers are offing themselves now in morning again, leaping from windows again, the republic fretting as though it’s the first republic, the first dark hour. The dull way the man drives daily at daybreak away from my ex-lover in an extravagant light believing that, if he does, that when he does, he’ll be the first to hurt her. O, enduring sun.
All My Darlings

I’d only just been thinking of you very deeply.

and recalled that summer we spent driving.

I’d seen a Corvair rusting on a Tuesday

I noticed a drawbridge drawn tall and, naturally,

remembered you drinking a Pete’s Wicked,

arguing the relative merits of the founding fathers.

How you lauded Alexander Hamilton.

How your eyes accounted.

Even now the drunk seeming sway

of birches evokes you

collecting leaves for your dictionary,

a you, so vaguely you

in a top hat and the sleek sheen of vinyl boots.

That funny little cross atop every steeple in town

makes me think of you

thinking of the birds as crossing a crosshairs.

You were a woman of so elegant a candor.

You were a man of such good measure.

Blue was the light of your hi-fi display.

Green, the distortion of your tv screen.

Soft, the dilly-dally of your hairdo.
I contain you still like the ringing ear
retains the thunder clap of the blast radius.

Do you still eat three cuts of meat on marble rye?
and tear down the corridor scattering
so no-one can know you or tell you apart?

Do you still get rowdy on Arbor Day
your dossier all over

No-one can know you or tell you apart.

Even now, all the ratty hipsters become you,
and all the blonde diplomats become you,
a you with domestic accoutrements,
through a vapid fog.

You who merengue without me.

You who see me when I don’t see you
among the dithering crowd on the parade ground
in your new pair of shoes.
All through the quick and early hours of our daffy affection, 
the city was the city in a calendar’s photograph of the city, 
the streaking snow a wire-frame model of the wind. 
I grew unable to distinguish your spirit-fish from my idea-bird. 
I became convinced our municipal banter played a critical part in the federal narrative. You’d claim you didn’t photograph well, 
and I’d counter, Darling, O, my darling, but what photograph could contain you? You’d declare, I feel industrious
in the grocery store. I’d blurt, I feel patriotic on the tollway! 
and beam at you handsomely. So it seemed the national anxieties quickened then slowed to a saunter, congressional strife blossomed and then faltered. All our coffers swelled, and I’d insist unto morning that these were the first days.
I’d proffer, These are the first days in the new life, 
as though the statement was a gift of rice and morning a broke and wretched country. I’d say, I am born again
in the new life, but not in that arcane, religious way. 
I’d declare, Forget Jesus. I’m amazing in the sack.
I was an enlightened animal. I was a delicate bear. 
The afternoon tinted honeydew, the afternoon a balm 
that spread itself over the empire, and in the breezy loft on Catalpa in afternoon you’d study your reflection in the stainless steel of the toaster, hold the glint of the box with one hand and solve the jigsaw of your hair with the other so that you and I and America must’ve been thinking, This goes here, or, This goes here. And how certain this seemed. And how certain this seemed.
Street lights swing elliptics in the wind, so shadows of the nation cast wobbly. I understand how near you are to the tipping. I understand how the sensation is of moving very quickly

as if along a high scaffolding where the danger is in becoming too conscious of the simple, animal rhythms of walking. You’re trying not to over-think it and you’re trying not to not think of it either.

Bacteria in the headwind, free radicals in the cola, there are double agents in the cannery. You feel small and you remember the nation. You remember how you sat once on your porch beside the bracken patch in front of the house, how the katydids regaled you.

You remember the reeds as fuzzy exclamation marks lining the creek, your mother’s love, how the ice cream truck ambled by singing its clumsy, headless song. You didn’t even think of germicide.

When you grew large and employable, the nation employed you. When you spoke, others feared and adored you. When you ventured, everywhere there was fear and adulation. When you were young and that was the nation.

But lately, the cicada hum sounds for you. The lamppost in vapors stands for you. A
tilt-o-whirl is your erratic sense of interior. Lately, you think you are nearly no longer the nation. You hear a constant and tinny noise, the wind is a wall.

Lately, the oak trees are entirely emptiness in the way emptiness is heavy and wooden, the nation a hallway all vanishing point, no conclusion.

I’d convey you out of the dusky corridor. I’d deliver you as if into the tree-shaded backyard of old friends you haven’t seen in many years, the sensation like waking to a warm rain or walking in the damp radiance of sun after rain,

the nation flawless and naked and crooning beside you its pledge of fidelity, its ripe promise of industry, its missile silos vigilant under the prairie, its warheads waiting in the sea.
If I'm going to be attacked, let it be by a rare pathogen
not some yokel hurling
sand nigger at me
from a beat-up Cutlass Sierra at seven a.m.
If I'm going to be attacked,
let it be by asteroid or metastasis
not the toothless yaho of my expectations.
What I can't understand is
who has the energy to be a xenophobe at seven in the morning.
Not me anyway, though I had energy enough to think of language.
Anyway, I don't mind being attacked,
just let it be by precision guidance
or satellite track, a line item in the budget
instead of dead diction. Sand nigger,
he hollered hoping for a rim shot maybe
or maybe meaning, Go back where you came from!
How could I explain I had nowhere to go,
no other way to get where I was going,
and I hadn't meant to trouble his morning
and hadn't meant to make him uncomfortable,
but if he thought he was uncomfortable,
I mean the guy howled,
Sand nigger! at me,
and there were people around.
I was so embarrassed for them
looking so uncertainly to me and what I might do,

so I set about explaining
how he'd gotten the country of origin wrong,

how my folks are from green fields
and there isn't any sand there,

and sure I'm brown, but I'm harmless.

I mean, I don't even believe in God.

Then I thought of all the people he meant
when he offered, Sand nigger,

and thought of all the people
he might've foisted sand nigger upon

just that morning even, and how even now
he's probably somewhere in his Cutlass Sierra

shouting, Sand nigger! Sand nigger!

at over-baked socialites stepping out of tanning salons,
squinting into the sun,

and how all us sand niggers are in this together.

Anyway, he shouted sand nigger,
and the others I told this to all agreed

it was just hideous the way he shouted that at me,

so the signifier hideous signified that

which signified sand nigger
which had meant hideous all along,

but I could barely blame him,

all that concrete and glass
having fallen out of blue September,
the god-awful, sand-nigger sky,

how it was his sky, and I wanted then
to embrace him

and murmur, I understand, or, I’m sorry,

or, I want to stab you in the heart,

meaning, How easy it is to wound,
how much easier to be the wounded.
In My Bright Autocracy

Hallo, Dave! David, Hallo!
I’m having so good a day, I don’t need you
and don’t need the hulk of you sulking into
my dance hall with mud on your boots.

I skip up the courthouse steps
vindicated and free,

lift up my robes and issue exquisite decrees,

so no, I don’t need you, your grass roots and counsel.

When I pour water into a wine glass,
it’s one kind of miracle,

and it’s too good a day, Dave, and I don’t need you
or dour Faisal or any of the grim Ethels,

your protests and woe!

The soldiers stomp onward,
and they stomp onward with glee,

so no, they don’t need you, Bertha,
your washcloths, your pathos and honey.

I indulge extravagantly in legumes and peaches.

I ask my spleen for nothing,
but on it goes with its spleening,

so no, I don’t need you, Chester, I don’t need
you, Marie, your picketing and screeds.

The wan girl standing on the corner with a clipboard
and a bandage on her back

covering a new tattoo is another I don’t need.
I don’t need to know her name

or in which tearoom she partakes of oolong, making delicate gestures.

Darfur is far away, and Pyongyang is far away, and the gum-rot, rusted armpit of the city

is a glinting mosaic of broken bottles of Yoo-hoo! and Pabst and is fed and is sated and free,

so she doesn’t matter as you don’t matter.

Aw, Dave, I’m having too good a day, I don’t need you and don’t need you,

and if you should come this way by a buggy, hybrid and electric,

or by a wide, purposeful stride,

you’ll find my face is the face on the coinage,

my voice is commanding as the ping of a fork striking a crystal decanter,

and I’m presiding under the meniscus of night sky, luminous and solitary as a firefly

beneath a field of stars, unconstellated.
Postcards

You’d love the stories they tell so often in these parts in which the fish monger dies and for weeks his dog doesn’t eat until eventually the dog also dies, everyone murmurs, of a broken heart. All the rickshaw men tell that story and young women in bonnets tell that story; it makes me feel so attached—like a ligament—to the whole shebang of human experience which is so much less complicated here.

___________

No need to wire money, everything’s fine, I’m having a wonderful time dawdling for hours on the mall among noble truckers and pharmacists on Sundays or at the café beside the barracks where the artillery men indulge in spirits and brie.

___________

Somewhere, I found this photograph of the city in black and white in winter at night or this copy of a print of a painting of the city in sunlight refracted through the smog I’ve come to regard as lovingly as the egrets here regard their river homes, and I thought you might have it for the door of the fridge or for your cubicle wall.

___________

The weather’s been just gorgeous, and I feel just awful for the folks who work here through all this gorgeous weather, but they do work and do work hard so they all acquire the same sort of expression indicative of a quiet, native nobility even though they wear such silly hats and tend to their rutabaga patches with an almost religious fervor.
Religion’s very big here. As are tulips. They say this is suggestive of the something of divinity inherent to tulips, but they say it in a way impossible to translate, so forgive me, I won’t bother.

On the mesa the other day I looked down on the tracts of umber hemmed together by rows of mangled vines and noticed some kids ditching school to neck in the fields that seem so much more lush than those I remember of home, the kids courting each other with such refreshing schmaltz: *I love you. Here is a tulip. Do you love me also?*

It’s all this fresh air here. I can feel myself changing. It’s all the red mosses and hand-crafted hubcaps and moving walkways I glide down. I can feel myself deeply altered being here which is so unlike being there where everything’s so complicated.

I drink an aperitif distilled of wormwood every morning with a breakfast of baked bananas wrapped in palm fronds. I listen to the mayor on the radio making his daily pronouncement regarding crop height and the anticipated rainfall. It hardly ever rains, but when it does, it rains for months straight, so you never need carry an umbrella except for times when you must always carry an umbrella. You see how much simpler everything is?
I wish you were here you’d love it. We nap all through Tuesday and eat horsemeat marinated in lime juice and marmalade.

___________

Listen, I have to admit I wouldn’t believe any of that baloney about the dog dying of a broken heart either, but they tell me it died at this very highway exit or in this very barn converted into a dance hall or behind this very epitome of a Gothic cathedral, so I thought you should have this picture of a dog.

___________

Why I even thought of you I don’t know, it’s so perfect here, though I did think of you and thought I’d send you some piece of my pristine life without dentistry or tax shelter.

___________

And just so you’d know that I and everything are really much, much better and life can really be so absolutely simple, I wanted to send you this postcard of lightning on the plateau, of this cut tulip in the bonnet of a young girl, of these regal horses en route to so quiet and so noble a butcher.
You’ll See a Sailboat

See the punk-haired bush as a stout little argument between trees and grasses. See the bonny women in skirts the color of a hatchet wound blooming. See what differs between what you’re awaiting and what approaches, breathing fire. Nothing is ever resolved, not to a sufficient degree of accuracy. Not speed or location. Not the numinous image of the dead soul ascending the stair. Not beauty. See the bearded prairie, the plain, a plane crumpling into the ganglia of hills at the feet of the mountains. See 72 yellow balloons above the used car lot. See the soul floating, strung taut to the body, but fumbling for shears. On Tuesday, I awake announcing aloud, *Tuesday is a day in which something will reveal itself to me!* On Wednesday, I buy a toothbrush. Thursday, my parrot hugs every fine turn of phrase and we two spend afternoon reiterating, *I hate you. I want a cracker. I hate you. I want a cracker,* until the parrot flies from me and returns to the dense forest of my imagining. I’m alone. You’re with me. I’m giving you all this as a gift: conifers as metonymic California, pasture as the overwhelming sense of Nebraska, the way I remember Denver. I remember Denver. It was her slight nose in profile below the bright space of her forehead. It was a wrinkle in America. But you were awaiting a messenger carrying his satchel of tidings. I see a circus tent. You think, why does he keep doing this? Presenting ideas this way, and abandoning them so eagerly for others? In the flood, it’s better to flow like water. In the gunfight, it’s best to avoid absorption. In the launch window, I make like a rocket and chase my satellite head. The trinkets on the mantel jingle their crystalline jingle. See the photon trespassing the wide pupil. See the soul reiterating to the wide expanse of the ether, *I want a cracker.* But this is frustrating, you think, all these ideas and nothing developing clearly. Not her face, not the stake in the tall grass securing the tent to its billowing sense of interior. Relax. Allow your shoulders to sag low from the blinking pod of your head. You’ll see the hatchet arcing through the murky air. You’ll see the dragon reciting his song of fire. You’ll see a sailboat.
The Young Man with the Moth on His Shoulder

in his thirty-first year the young man is rounding a corner on 12th Street when

a moth yellow and unassuming
lands easily on his right shoulder

though curious the young man goes about his business
bussing tables and pouring foundations

his business lugging his wagon down to the dock
and up from the dock

though curious the young man carries

about his business cataloguing
recent endowments to the apiary and updating the donor directory

through weeks and months
the young man grows entirely accustomed to

the yellow moth unassuming and resting on his right shoulder

nights when the young man returns to his ruddy garret and removes his white shirt
to sleep after long hours laboring in the city

the moth settles to sleep on the nightstand beside him

when some nights the young man brings a young woman home to lie down
beside him the moth flies

respectfully out the window
to fixate on the delicate

light of the dogstar

when he arises and bathes in morning the moth preens itself outside
on the doorknob of the bathroom door

until the young man readies himself and proceeds into the municipality
and the moth resumes its post upon his shoulder
the young man strides deliberately
in rain and the moth drinks rainwater

the young man marches headily
in the nuclear yellow of the nuclear sun

and the yellow moth radiates nuclear yellow

others upon seeing this wonder at its meaning
why this moth residing so steadily on this young man’s shoulder

others ask him on the trolley
and others ask him under the subtle light outside the cannery

others ask him in the frigid halls of the wax museum
and others ask in the square

for them he has no answer

the moth is no bother
and the young man breathes easy

neither needling the moth nor questioning what law of nature permits
such a thing to rest so easily on his right shoulder

the young man makes and settles his debts
indulges in his inquiries and dalliances

though others remain unsettled

in the African Quarter they ask him in Afrikaans
in the Thai Quarter they query in Thai

everywhere others interrogate and ponder
for what is this a symbol this moth and the young man with the moth on his shoulder

the moth he insists
means nothing

is symbol for nothing but the moth

but why’d it land there on his shoulder
and why does it remain
the others posit it must be mechanical or an artificial moth
or a mechanism of the young man’s making

illusion of a moth

no he insists it’s just a moth
perhaps a preternatural moth but little more than a moth

the young man is thinking how the mind is so unwilling
to relinquish meaning

though meaning has such little use for the mind

and there are stranger questions than these
he thinks

literal moth literal moth

the young man reiterates to himself and others
but the others’ minds are unmade

and the days go by and the young man grows older

the fortnights and small eras go by
and the young man grows older

still the moth which is not the soul and the moth which is
not the essential essence of the self

or theodicy or fear

the moth which is not the fluttering arrhythmias of
I-love-you-I-know-not-why

simply the moth
yellow and unassuming

rapt at the young man’s shoulder instead of the tugging sun

literal moth literal moth

it’s true I love you
I know not why
One Day, Androids Will Have Pudgy Arms and Hug Us Like Mother, but Still I’d Reach
for You, Dear Reader, which Is Why I Have So Much Faith in Us as a People

For nothing but throwing bottles or bodies into, the ocean is overkill.

I haven’t seen an ocean in years,
but I know one’s out there, poised

like a cassette tape tucked into an answering machine
no-one is calling.

I speak low, a foghorn diffusing on ocean,
carry home, a barge carrying on ocean home.

Stuck on the tollway or ambling around under the forest canopy,
I imagine ocean as an undulation,

like traffic, like trees, what appears heavily
then recedes again into itself—

There’s so much more I could tell you.

I’ve told you too much already and am tired of disclosure.

I can’t trust anyone anymore what with poor God dead,
but still I reach for you, dear reader.

You don’t answer for so long, you become useless to me,
and this only mimics the old-fashioned kitsch and flow of prayer,

but still I reach for you and your mute face,
wanting only to connect with you

cleanly as the electricity that arcs from the thunderhead
to the crease in the brain where guilt accumulates.

I want to tell you, I’m guilty of so many things,
but these aren’t the worst of me.
I go floating out into the city like flotsam over surf.

I go careening over summer’s muggy surface,
under winter’s blanket renunciation.

Here I go by no means meaning to complicate the issues any further,

meaning only to send you these things
and let them wait for you

unobtrusive as clean laundry
in a quiet apartment

on a quiet corner of the city where no-one is waiting.

You see, my story is long
and filled with moments of absolute irrelevance.

Every morning, I wake up
and tell the mirror, I’m the one sent to replace you.
My Face Instead of the Virgin Mary

In an oxidation stain beneath the highway overpass
and in a smudge of oil on the window pane
and in the scorched surface of a slice of toast,
my face instead of the Virgin Mary.

My plain face in Lourdes and in Clearwater
and in Finca Betania.

The sun is not a rose,
red helmet of evening,
the sky is not a cornea.

My drab face instead of the Virgin Mary
unable to relieve or to heal you.

The constellation above me
is winking beacons of the radio relay tower.
The constellation beside me is just the fizz
in a ginger ale catching some light.

What appears cradled in my arms
is only a loaf of rye.

Why would you tell me the things that hurt you?
Dénouement

no rogue airliner’s sinister trajectory descending
or mushroom of vapor
ballooning over the nation

not the rifle in fury
seized from its station above the mantel

no up goes the ozone
down comes the glacier

no seismic rupture
just the rifle already unloaded

not a breathless embrace in a dim garage
while evading the invading army
just the lovers lying asunder
in the sudden certain post-coital disinterest

the dwindling instead
of the impending downpour

the mourners going through the motion
of ricocheting wearily out of the crematory
their apocalypse over

just the continental drift
the rain falling
a one-trick pony

all plummet no rise

can the drawbridges lowered
instead of trained on dull heaven

a fat finch settles
a rotund little comma stuck in the dark statement of the bough

dust motes mingle in the daylight

just wing beats
and the discarded

the way life ends the way life doesn’t
Parking meters click the strict minutes until America need move his Buick. *We are tectonic and glacial*, offer the hours. *We are unrelenting and rapid*, counter the fortnights. America is floating facedown in summer in the deep end of a pool when his fear of heights overwhelms his fear of drowning. America is lounging in shade, he can’t believe how far he is from the sun. America is brown-skinned, slender, of unremarkable height and blue-collar origin. He was born in Chicago in 1978. He was afforded broad tutelage in the liberal arts and sciences, the diligent promise of America, but lately he’s running at 63% peak efficiency. Lately, he frets his arrhythmias and dyspepsias, his throbbing Manassas and swollen Tuscaloosa, his early tulips tormented by a belated Noreaster, his woods which whisper, *We’re the last of the lumber*, all his Mississippis draining into the sea. Evening materializes like a photograph does in its chemical bath. In the gathering twilight, America regrets his fanatic and unyielding, his idiocy and ego. America thinks of his spent lovers, their bodies fluorescing in illuminated precincts, in foreign apartments, how they’re naked there eating mangos and reading Rousseau and need him no longer. America is far from the nurturing heart of the tribe. America is a little sad today. Tehran abhors him. Bonn and Avignon can’t stand him. Shenzhen will never forgive him. Midnight and America is midway between the expiring and arriving sorrows. He worries he’s becoming less than himself. He’s in his olive and old coat in the year of the life of America in which he accepts the idea of death the way the falling body accepts gravity’s hard conclusion. America’s afraid of death because he fears he might miss something. Cold fusion and the flying car, hegemony and mother. He fears he’ll be unraveling in some Tripoli or in some Grenada, his epics unwritten, his telegrams undelivered, his daughters missing him and him not permitted to miss his daughters from the hermetic womb of nonexistence. The bright pageant of morning arriving in the absence of America. Luminous the kitchen, luminous the rafters, luminous the hour. America wants the light sent back to its sun, America wants the rain stuffed back in its cloud, America wants the errors returned to his mouth, and the hours, all of the hours, put back in the bell.