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This work and its defense approved by:

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Collected Toons of the Blues Buddha

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of an original collection of poetry by D. Gregory Griffith and an essay on the role of imagination in poetry written in creative writing workshops. The poems are about a character called the Blues Buddha, a figure situated somewhere between myth and cartoon. The Blues Buddha is part Buddha and part tenor saxophone player. His mission is to understand the unique suffering of the contemporary, western world and to offer enlightenment (most frequently through the sound of his horn). The essay examines the writing process, the place of the workshop, and the problem of accessing the imagination or teaching students to access the imagination.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all who helped create the Blues Buddha.
# Table of Contents

A Note to Readers  

**BLUES BUDDHA SKETCHES**

- Metaphysical Blues  
- Blues Buddha Unplugged  
- The Raiments of the Buddha  
- The Many Emanations of the Blues Buddha (A Brief Discography)  
- Parthenon as Symbol of Impermanence  
- Blues Buddha and Duality  
- Blues Buddha Meets the Karma Breakers  
- Blues Buddha’s Revelation to Ray Charles  
- Near Myth Interlude  
- Almost an Aubade in Blue  
- Greenwich Village Crossroads  
- Astronomy as Via Negativa  
- Blues Buddha Stands Too Close to the Edge  
- Blues Buddha and the Bo Tree  
- Blues Buddha Walks on Water  
- Blues Buddha Stops Traffic (with a thread)  
- Tibetan Standards  
- The Nature of Craving  
- Blues Buddha's Duet with the Dalai Lama  
- Blues Buddha Glimpses the Bardo Through a Mushroom Forest  
- Infernal Combat  

**THE BLUES BUDDHA’S CODA**

- Blues Buddha Waxes Dante  
- Blues Buddha Rails Against the Transcendent  
- A Journal of BB's Wanderings (or The Blues Buddha Does a Cold, Cold Mountain)  
- Blues Buddha's Discourse on Christ, Pugilist  
- Blues Buddha Has an Epiphany on Epiphany  
- Blues Buddha Improvises a Jeremiad  
- Blues Buddha the Street Musician  

- The Blues Buddha: A Guided Meditation
A Note to Readers

Herein lie the Collected Toons of one “Blues Buddha,” a figure situated somewhere between myth and cartoon, with every attendant nuance and meaning of that second word at play here—from Superman to the Far Side, from Popeye to South Park. Readers may also remember the cartoon as a process—a full-sized sketch of something to be copied into another work of art, a practice drawing and redrawing of the same figure in order to achieve the final perfected depiction.

Since the figure is presented in lyric glimpses instead of a comprehensive narrative, a few brief words of explanation may be necessary to fill in gaps in the story or omissions in the history and nature of the main character. He is both a Buddha in the traditional sense of that word, and he is also a saxophone player--mostly jazz and mostly tenor, but branching out to all forms of music in order to reach out to and gain experience of the troubled world he was incarnated to save. He is duty bound to understand the sufferings of those he has come to enlighten; as a result he indulges his passions and cravings to excess (the only way to bring upon himself the prevailing types of suffering currently at work in the world). In addition to his more traditional role as a Bodhisattva, he exhibits occasional signs of the holy madness that usually accompanies the trickster figure—a feature not unprecedented in Buddhism, especially Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism, where such figures as Chogyam Trungpa and the Ninth Dalai Lama come to mind for their embrace of sensual temptations as a method of understanding the cravings they sought, as Buddhas, to extinguish.

Like Kilgore Trout, Blues Buddha is a figure “unstuck” in time. He uses a music yoga to transport himself across space and time in service of the Dharma. Uniting himself with the musical continuum, he skips across history, culture, geography, and genre in order to arrive at
times and places of importance to his mission. Sometimes he is there to observe or have a vision; at others he is in pursuit of musical or metaphysical boons he will share at the proper time and place. He has played along side some of the greatest musicians of every genre as a result of his ability to insinuate himself into a particular place or time. His abilities as a musician are supernatural and superhuman. He is not only a virtuoso on the instrument, the sound of his playing neutralizes bad karma, spiritually awakens individuals, and has even been known to spontaneously produce enlightenment in some listeners. BB’s ability to “sit in with history” has the effect of inducing good karma into a past otherwise unavailable for such spiritual recovery.

For resources and precedents that link music to spiritual awakening and growth, and mystical experience, readers should explore Hindu Raga music, the book *The Mysticism of Sound and Music* by Hazrat Inayat Khan, the example of John Coltrane, or the website for San Francisco’s Church of Saint John Coltrane.

May the Blues Buddha bless you and lead you to a unique expression of and end to your suffering!
BLUES BUDDHA SKETCHES
Metaphysical Blues

Blues Buddha was searching for his purpose again; was it in the world navel?
In some far off corner of his youth?
He tried to be mindful of such valuable property, like the mother of the Buddhas taught him, but never had there been so much bell and whistle--just how big can "Big Screen" go? How loud the jet!
And the volume of the info., and mind itself sounding its boggled din...
what with Rock-N-Roll hitting the fan years ago, everything "jazz" seemed to fall apart, leaving him in pieces.
His only hope: cling hard that he might understand the whole, so un-Buddha-like--so he sang this riff to soothe the saw-teeth of his Karma waves: "Oh! Dharma, can this really be the end, to be stuck outside of Mobile without the Memphis blues again?"
Blues Buddha Unplugged

Now like an angel, now like a snake,
like something fallen from the mind of a god,
Blues Buddha remembered his past incarnations
and knew he was more than a harlequin in bar light.
Yet this birth--from the vast Buddha-field into the flesh
he now inhabits--left him in a limbo like no other
Buddha before. Losing his battles to the classic
temptations: he relished the first rush of valium
washed with champagne; he was certain he had a soul
inside his skin, no matter how much emptiness
he meditated on; he felt it well up inside him
every time he played his horn. He was not beyond
acting out his lusts--he remembered trolling
the whore houses of Bangkok with Chogyam Trungpa,
who wrote it all off as a passage through the Bardos.
Yet his sins, he knew, were like the sins of a good man's
brother: more the shame for where his shadow falls.
The Raiments of the Buddha

Obeisance to the blue guru whose skins are like Krishnas, whose elaborate threads are pure blue history. From the blue of his Zoot to the hue of his dashiki, as cool and electric as neon. All blue his pork pie, blue as well the spots on his leopard skin pillbox hat, blue again his little suede shoes, and too the shade of his cheap sunglasses, turquoise rings ornament his fingers, long-ago gifts from Carlitos Santana--el santo de chicano azul--blue the suit coat he borrowed from Trane and sky the color of the tie cast off by Bird one late New York night on the hot band stand of the Blue Note. Even the black cat bone, once the mojo of Robert Johnson, hung around BB’s neck in a blue silk bag. The sapphire dazzle that pierced his ear still flashed the same dawn light that graced Jimi’s ear on that third day at Woodstock as the Gypsy Suns and Rainbows bloomed like one big blue lotus from the Saugerties mud.
The Many Emanations of the Blues Buddha (A Brief Discography)

For certain let us call them personal and professional reasons, Blues Buddha traveled incognito through the Rock-N-Roll universe. Back-up bands or pick-up gigs, and studio work with all the big names, making good bread, spreading the sounds of suffering in blue notes, and watching it all go down.

If you’ve heard the tenor solo in “Rainy Day Dream Away” on Hendrix’ Electric Ladyland, you will know him as Freddie Smith, and if you listen again to the sax on the Doors’ “Touch Me,” from The Soft Parade, you will know him as Curtis Amy, and if you recall The Stones’ “Brown Sugar,” first cut on Sticky Fingers, you will recognize him as Bobby Keyes, play any tune by Janis Joplin backed by the Kozmic Blues Band, and you’ll know him as Terry Clements. Hear him wail on Pink Floyd’s “Money,” Dark Side of the Moon, and call him Dick Perry.

The name you know him by matters less than his sacrifice: cred among the “legit” jazz cats. The wider public he reached with these famous tracks helped fulfill his Bodhisattva vow, to work (through the magic of his horn) for the salvation of all sentient beings. The near drowned voices of the jazz elite would not let him live it down, that he traded eighths with some wiggy left-handed cat with a stack of amplifiers and a Sun Ra complex, playing for white boys in long hair and Asian trappings, while Daddy played his horn in exile, for a few francs and a little vin rose.
Parthenon as Symbol of Impermanence

Blues Buddha sat on a hunk of marble, grabbing his belly in laughter at the architects and engineers, archaeologists and surveyors, stone masons and workers of giant machines, the hundred histories consulted, computer models constructed, tables and measurements modern and archaic, all enlisted for one noble cause: to restore the ruins of the ruins to their previous ruinous state.
Blues Buddha and Duality

On New Year’s Eve, 1964, Blues Buddha swore never to whistle “Dixie” no more, no matter who signed the check or how big the tip. He promised to break the “Battle Hymn” all the way down to “John Brown’s Body”—back to the first bridge and last hallelujah.

Blues Buddha vowed never to worship any gods again. Their capricious jealousies and capacities for division and arbitrary creation made combustible combinations. So often they whirled like dynamos around their own dualities: light and darkness, fire and freeze, equal and unequal.
Blues Buddha Meets the Karma Breakers

When the Great Blue Bodhisattva first sat in with the Karma Breakers, they already had that “gone beyond” kinda thing going on, like Monk or Sun Ra, late Trane or middle Ornette, playing it very Zen, laying out their sound like a koan, the deep dissonance an in-your-face command to listeners:

Say this noise is music, and I’ll bust your chops.
Say this noise isn’t music, and I’ll bust your chops again.
Now, what you gonna say?
Blues Buddha’s Revelation to Ray Charles

Blues Buddha boasted he could make any gig, no matter how short the notice. No one in the musician’s local knew how he did it, but he hadn’t let them down so far. When the call came in to get a tenor man with a big front yard, strong on jump blues, onto the bandstand at Newport in under an hour, everyone knew who to give the gig. Over the phone you could hear him sing “I’m there, I’m there, I’m there.” Like an incantation, his singing turns him to music, a blue scale barely audible in the wind, traveling on the wind, finding its way across the musical continuum, coming to rest amid the notes of the piano at sound check, becoming once more Blues Buddha at the foot of the stage, horn case in hand.

The stage manager yelled “you the tenor guy” and “follow me.” As they worked their way behind the stage, picking their way past road cases and crew, the man in charge gave BB the low down: “Ray Charles is due on any minute, but Fathead Newman chipped a tooth on a long-necked Miller backstage, man, and the cat claims it’s changed his embouchure…” They topped the stairs into the bright stage lights, which caught BB just right, bringing out his blue skin tones. The manager’s voice trailed off to a slow “Um…um…um…” as he turned pasty white, staring at BB’s unusual hue. A flurry of whispers rose behind them on the bandstand:

“What did he do to become so blue?”

“It’s like…like a tattoo….”

“…and just how blue was this man’s mother?”

“Maybe he’s a little bit black.”

“Oh, no! He’s no brother!”

“Is that the horn man I called for?” Ray asked, across the baby grand.

“Yeah it is Ray,” came a voice from the horn section, “but dig, I think there’s something you should know. This cat is crazy blue and…”

“I’ll let my ears be the judge of that,” Ray cut in and smiled and sat back a bit.
“But no…he’s blue head to foot, Ray,” the drummer complained.

“That’s what we’re looking for ain’t it? Someone blue as Fathead Newman?”

“His skin, Ray, it’s…”
“None of my concern, man, as long as he can play.”

“But he looks like a clown on stage with the rest of us.”

“Are you making fun of the cat because he’s white?”

“I’m telling you his skin is blue, like he’s dipped in paint, like the sky fell on him, like he’s made of bottle glass, like…”

“Like you’re talking crazy shit, man, besides all that matters now is can he sound blue. We got five minutes before the first downbeat.”

Talking up, so BB knew he was being talked to, Ray keyed the Bluesattva in: “twelve bar, B-flat, your solo follows mine after the second verse. Watch my feet, not my head, for the cue.”

And when BB soloed he came in hard like Trane, became pure Bird for a few bars, before he slipped into a very blue groove. He was like a blue master key, fit for any music box, swing or bop, blues or rock. At the solo’s close, Ray turned his head toward BB’s spot among the horns and said, “That’s real cool, baby, I see you’re blue to the bone.”
Near Myth Interlude

Blues Buddha did a dance with Aphrodite. Never before had he seen such beauty, her blonde hair a shimmer under the mirror-ball, a starry carousel revolving around the empty ballroom. He hummed to her the melody to "Stella by Starlight." The magic in his music and a wave of her hand changed the world around them:

in each other's arms on a gondola in Venice. What was their slight sway on the dance floor becomes the boat's slight rock. Flashes from the mirror-ball, now constellations and reflections from the lagoon. Dare he kiss, dare he risk a further embrace with this goddess who is the power of passion? What more might a Buddha love, whose love is endless compassion? What bright third might their one night make?
Almost an Aubade in Blue

Morning and promises, Blues Buddha
turns toward the goddess, who is no more
than the first light, sky already
showing blue at the horizon.
Could he but reach out his hand,
drag down the sunrise, his Venus
would return as real as ever.
But in this field, he knew not where,
he lies alone, patterns of wild
flowers all around. He hears
the nightingale's last song
before the sun's full rise,
and he whistles, chases the bird's
melody, just a few bars behind.
Greenwich Village Crossroads

Using the power of Musical Dream Yoga, Blues Buddha dreamed himself back in time to the Bop era. Parked on a barstool in one of those dark, downstairs, East Village dives, where the only good thing was the music: trios and quartets on narrow bandstands, counterpoint to a few dirty four-tops and a greasy bar near the stairs, everything stained nicotine yellow.

As the band played, the only two others at the bar, at the far end, were almost audible despite the blast of the horn man, the drummer’s thunderbolt rim-shots and the hard splash of cymbals. Two loud, reeling figures, teetering on barstools, taking sloshy gulps of whiskey.

Between tunes you could hear them: the one furthest away had a refined English accent that the closer one mimicked with a perfection that brought violent guffaws and spittle and the pounding of his “worthy constituent’s” meaty fist on the bar. As the barman opened a frig. door behind him to retrieve two cold ones, the light illuminated two sweaty faces (one black, one white), lolling above two rumpled suitcoats, a dozen empty rocks glasses on the bar before them. “The Bird and the Bard,” BB muttered to himself as the cooler slammed shut, killing the view.

The band kicked into “Ornithology,” and Bird screamed over the intro. “NOW THAT’S MY TUNE,” his companion conducted the band with a lit cigarette, knocking the fire off on his own coat. He continued to smolder till the barman dowsed him with seltzer. Bird fell off his perch laughing, couldn’t seem to find his feet. The pudgy and now soaked poet goes down in a heap trying to help up his friend. They both grab the bar rail and slowly climb their way to drink height, leaning heavy on the bar and each other, they hover over another whiskey a piece and sip and spill and snicker.

The louder they got, the drunker the duet became, rivaling the unamplified quartet on the bandstand. As the drummer smacked one last hard rim-shot, bringing the tune to a close and the house to spontaneous silence, Bird tore back his sleeve, pointed to the knotted scars on his arm, and bellowed louder than even he would want, “This is my home; this is my portfolio; this is my Cadillac!” His associate tottering on his stool shot back: “And I’ve just had eighteen whiskeys, I think that’s a record.”
Astronomy as Via Negativa

Looking up and out at all that nothing between points of light that might no longer be, and thinking of time as the mere measure of decay, Blues Buddha felt much diminished: so much less than one tiny point of light, his mind emptied of its contents, emptied into the infinite, receding, vacuum, distances, and he knew there’s far more darkness than light, and no connection of dot and dot…
Blues Buddha Stands Too Close to the Edge

Blues Buddha thought every thing possible, yet his thoughts left him thinking he was not living at all. All he missed of the moment, he mourned after the fact while his mind wandered.

But wailing on his sax above the water’s high tide music, running changes with the waves, cycling his breath through the horn in one endless solo, he augments the broad harmony of the sea, while forty feet below him, the ocean keeps time on the rocks.
Blues Buddha and the Bo Tree

Blues Buddha grabbed his horn
and swung on the limb of a Bo tree
battling back the minor demons of his age:
every old blues cliché, he faced down
with the face he wore long before
his mother and father were born.
A spontaneous music, fast as a thunderbolt
poured from his horn before his mind
had the time to interfere—a strange meditation,
but necessary in the days when thoughts grew
like monsters, such deep roots, so many sharp teeth.
Blues Buddha Walks on Water

…no, it’s more like he floats, but that’s much more mundane and far too literal. Rather, like a lotus he puts down a deep root in a cool pool. He lays back on the still water, rolls onto one side, head propped by a hand and arm bent at the elbow. At rest on the water’s surface, he plucks and twirls a bit of lily, has a taste, mulls it over, begins to chew, finding a whole garden in the flavor—intense earthy and sour, then semi-sweet, a taste he feels from palate to feet, like ten-thousand flowers at once. His quick shiver at the flavor sets the water rippling, both Buddha and water, clear and shimmering.
Blues Buddha Stops Traffic (with a thread)

Thus have I heard: once on a downtown street, with the light red and traffic heavy, the Blues Buddha stamped his feet in three four time, jumped up on the hood of a blue Lotus GT, played one loud, fast line on the tenor, then spoke these words:

We cut off our heads
and call it wisdom,
but the body feels
for the head, the head
remembers the body.

Ten thousand sidewalk philosophers became instant Arhats. The green light was only a change. Everyone still behind the wheel now wide awake for the first time, they honked in million part harmony to his horn, the Dharma chord perfect and augmented.
"...and coming to you live later tonight from the fabulous Snow-Leopard Room, in our very own Whirling World Navel, the world's highest revolving restaurant and lounge perched atop Mt. Everest, our very own 'High Lama Septet' and all the way from the U-S-A where they just finished a gig at the Apollo Theater: Blues Buddha and the Karma Breakers!!...."

B.B. wasn't fond of the M.C., too much bark in his hype, but he had heard the house band: the "High Lamas" sounded a little like Coltrane in late sixty-six, if you happened to catch them live. Of course the "Lamas" threw in a few more drone-tones, and they had no piano, so you could say their groove was more like Ornette Coleman in his free-form improv period. But the cat on the big horn was unusually flat, and the drummer ham-handed the cymbals; still it was hard to get good side-men these days--ones who could still wail on the old Tibetan Standards and pull off solid solos on "Honeysuckle Rose" or "King Porter Stomp."

B.B. took off his Ray-Ban Wayfarers for a straight-up look at K-2 as it trundled past in the distance. The ceiling to floor plate-glass, the slow rotation of the restaurant and his third Kamikaze seemed to peak his vertigo--or had something gone wrong in the environmental control system that kept the "death zone" a perfect seventy-three degrees and oxygen rich. He looked for signs of deprivation in the bartender's face--were his lips always that blue? Or was it part of the promotion: a blue-gloss lip service in his honor? He couldn't tell. He leaned heavy on the bar rail and ordered up an Edmund Hillary: equal parts New Zealand spirits and Himalayan snow-cap--he loved the swizzle stick shaped like an ice-hammer. Working his way slowly to the bottom of the glass, he staggered back to his dressing room and polished it off, hoping to warm up, feel halfway civilized by the first set.
The Nature of Craving

Blues Buddha liked to brag on his garb, a hempy suit he'd light up at parties when there was no weed to be found. His rope sole shoes were once the finest flowers of Maui's hillsides; at times merely donning such threads would give him the munchies, and he'd have to pass for a hayseed in a grass skirt to get by the cops in Doughnut Land. O the lengths he would go to indulge his cravings! But he loved his hunger jelly-filled, consumed by so much sweet nothing.
Blues Buddha’s Duet with the Dalai Lama

So BB laid it on the DL like this:
life is like a beanstalk, baby, about which we know Jack.
His Holiness merely twirled a lotus, but the Bluesattva
saw they misspoke the same lingo, so he flashed a peace sign
and the Lama’s blossom became the Bhava wheel, “the bluest
lotus of all” BB whispered, and then he sang “Turn, Turn, Turn”
in a great lion roar that nearly blew the DL back to Shambhala.
His Holiness remained undaunted, despite the dishevel of his robes,
and rising, he made the sound of one hand clapping in rhythm
with the Blues Buddha’s tune. In sync they wheeled like Temptations,
and harmonized a perfect silence.
Blues Buddha Glimpses the Bardo Through a Mushroom Forest

At one time, when the great Bluesattva lived above this little jazz dive in the Village, he’d gobble mushrooms, lie face up on the floor, horn in hand, and listen to the quartet downstairs run through their set list every Friday night for months, hoping a great vision might unfold, a magnum opus, or at least a minor key revelation, revealing all, or part, of what he might express in the blue vernacular: that beyond suffering is craving, and beyond craving is an end to craving, and beyond that end, there is a perfect road where Buddhas walk. But due to the imperfection of psychedelic visions, when the revelation appeared, it flashed by in dazzling and disconnected glimpses, leaving poor BB to his own rational devices, watching it all unfold in cartoon colors:

And God? God went down with the Titanic,

Juggernaut and Juggernaut racing to beat

Hell to the marly sea bottom, and what

accompaniment: swampy tunes from the piano

bar, all hands on deck wailing “Nearer My God to Thee,”

the scattered cat-calls from priests, yearning for more

heroic days—“onward Christian Soldiers, and the martyrs

be praised”—not long now…
…all Europe in hot pursuit

of its greatest passions: blood and circuses—the cavalry
dead, horses fodder for the cannons at Ardennes—a smashing
spectacle! Wheels turning on upended carts, the cratered
fields in May, two snakes tangled in a shell pock, mating
unhindered by the various blasts; a pig roots in a nearby
churchyard, a rooster crows on relentlessly in the false dawn
of the perpetual shell flash. Soldiers, Farmers, Refugees…
…“The King’s fatter than hell, man, and he don’t
give a damn about nothin’…still it never really feels
like me anymore, but I’m still ‘The King’ one way
or the other: all the money I can eat, a casino penthouse
at Caesar’s, this Graceland’s mine outright, baby…all
my servants: my own bodyguards—Red and Sonny—
and the Memphis Mob…call downstairs to my cook,
order us up another breakfast, Jack, biscuits and sausage-
milk gravy, bring on the bacon, turn on the T.V….
…it’s almost time for more ‘medicine,’ baby!

Calling old Nick, my own private doc, all I need
now is somebody to go to the can for me,
but that ain’t nothin’ ‘The King’ can’t handle…
man, I still have a taste for something, like a whole
apple pie, like the ones I remember when I was just
a skinny necked kid in that Tupelo clapboard shack,
that sweet taste I can’t get back, wanting the memory
sweeter…sometimes it’s hard to swallow when ‘The King’
is this fucked up, but wants another Valium, another
hit…I think ‘The King’ has done his last Vegas…
…all the Gods peaking on Olympus,
lying on their sides paralyzed by nectar,
sated on waking dreams of their own making
and the wide palate of a god’s mind to delight,
as mortals look on in awe, or step out of the choral
public to act like gods, create a human expanse
equal to the psyche of a god, then rock forever
in its amniotic arms, never wanting to let go.
Any semblance of a god will do: tablet, trance,
syllables and smoke, all embodied ecstasies…
…so after the fatal combination of cocktails:

three Jaegermeisters and a triple Stinger

at last call, he limped home in the shaky light.

At the door, all thumbs drunk, he fumbled his
keys and clattered on in, busting shin

bones all over the living room, finally finding

a working light; a little fell through the kitchen
doorway. A fat roach raced over the lit linoleum.

Sobering quick, he grabbed a can of poison, drenching

the bug in a killer clear-coat, and he couldn’t help

screaming: “you live a bug’s life, you die like a bug,

motherfucker…soak it up! Try again! Come back

another time, far enough up the food chain to pick

your own poison!”
Infernal Combat

Blues Buddha was hell-bent to take on the sufferings of the world, having a punch like a bronze idol in a boxing glove.

He had a crucifix to back him should the devil prove too flashy. Still, he took it smack on the chin, and danced away to the tack of Satan’s whip. He parried; he jabbed at shadows; he hung one on ol’ Beelzebub, snatching his own fast feet from the fire.

He had to settle for a split decision: one deep bruise to the devil’s ego, one broken old icon.
THE BLUES BUDDHA’S CODA
Blues Buddha Waxes Dante

Thought I’d died and shot to heaven, 
roadside of nowhere with my thumb out, 
looking for a signpost along this stretch 
of plush apple-wood. Like the whole world’s 
gone garden, and the sky’s my hat. 
I pull the star-brim over my brow 
as a long black ride snakes up beside me— 
suicide Lincoln--the back tint window 
slips away. Smoke bloats from the hole 
and some young girl, not out of high school 
shouts over the thundering engine, 
"room for one more back here, if we squeeze."
She pops the lock, and the suicide door 
swings open, and a long-haired crew 
moves over. I crush in. We peel rubber on the take off. 
Someone up front dials the radio up and 
down the band, looking for something with soul, 
hits a groove--one of those ancient oldies. 
The driver bobs his head with the rhythm; 
the "Little Hellsingers" pump their 
"shoop and doo-wap" through the speakers; 
the young girl smiles, I listen hard.
Blues Buddha Rails Against The Transcendent

Hectored and haggard, I bump
to the rhythm of the circadian
drummer, soul no more than the shadow
pooling at my feet, while the legs
of my journey run out on concrete
and two hair-line fractures.

As my roots loosen and I slowly
fall into the sky, let the maker
remain more than arm's length.
Let me remember my spine's resemblance
to the snake's, knowing the worm
is too soft to suffer; even when cut
it quickens, and if god had wanted us
angels, he'd have given us wings.
A Journal of BB’s Wanderings (or The Blues Buddha does a Cold, Cold Mountain)

Cincinnati,

Stranded. A sudden blizzard before the flight out, every airport within a hundred miles of the Lakes socked in. We turned south at Detroit, leaving me in Cincy through the holidays. I’m bored, doing a little walking despite the snow drifts. Channeling through white city grooves, under the old German churches, the ornate faux-gothic stones, such delicate tonnage, arched and spired into the air, echoing the street noise, a forboding beauty, hanging in mid-fall over me.
St. Paul,

Finally made it out of the drifts
to another gig in the heartlands.
The saggy hotel, the same rumpled drunk
singing every night, singing again at the chained
church doors down the street. No one listening,
no one awake to see him spike each verse
with a swig from a bottle. “Nearer My God to Thee”
still standing him up, but he seems so close to sleep,
his head lolling. If there’s a brain in there,
it’s numb to the stem. He’s useless as the clock
on the church tower—old empty hands, wrong time,
and no bells on the hour.
The Vatican,

A little spiritual tourism in the “Holy See.”
I found the cathedrals empty, nothing but echoes.
As usual, artistry was the only evidence of a god.
Michelangelo’s Sistine calls us to heaven
faster than all the mechanical hand wringing,
wine giving and manipulations. Of all I’ve seen,
his are the only hands to draw Christ from the stones.
The Sinai,

Desolation and angels, one
at either hand. Sands like a harrow
across my back as I meditate.
Who would not be drawn or driven
toward a god in this land—I can almost
feel old Yahweh’s breath rising up,
like a wind from all directions at once,
drawing me toward him
while he blows another challenge
across my path.
Kashmir,

A hundred Shaivists tuning their mantras in the ashram; they find a certain tone and even I (an inferior western instrument), yes, even I feel the hum of harmony with this eastern god, feel a slight samadhi as the “Om” resonates through me, subtle and pleasing when all the voices merge on the same note—a hum through my body like a wind-swept reed.
Kyoto,

Even silence has shape here,
in every ritualized gesture
of the tea ceremony, in the breathy
pauses between the notes of the bamboo
flute—the dove-sounding tones
shaped by the hollow bamboo. I must
learn this instrument. Even the name—
“shakuhachi”—made beautiful by the open
vowels and whispered ends. So many
things go unsaid here, yet received.
One monk understands another
not only in the silent sharing of tea,
but in the emptying of the cup.
Our arms are not too short to box with God, provided we duck God’s jab, move inside and work the body. Remember that classic battle royal, Christ versus Rome, where we learn God is infinitely beatable.

What were his handlers thinking as they sent a thirty-three-year-old, puffed-up middleweight into the arena with the best heavyweight of the day (and the champ at that)? Some say they were dreaming of an upset, another David downing Goliath, the crowd going wild, but Goliath was never more than a palooka, relying on heavy hands and stone chin to see him through. He was already a stumblebum by the time David got his shot. Though he rocked the big giant from punch-drunk to oblivion, everyone knew Goliath was ripe for the fall.

Rome, on the other hand, had considerable combat skills, quick hands for such a colossus. He was a master ring general, and knew how to execute every dirty trick known to man, with speed and sleight of hand. Is it any wonder then, that Christ, hammered without mercy, with broken hands and bloody head, but arms raised, as though in victory, has left such an impression? Even in defeat, up at the count of three, talking in starry tones of a rematch.
Blues Buddha Has an Epiphany on Epiphany

Last night, there was an entire winter at the local “scorching brew,” snow drifted to the sills and still falling. Not even the waft of the Blue Sumatran coaxing a rare pedestrian out of the knee-high snow, none of the eccentric regulars drifting in. I left the gig early to bunk down with my horn. Now, with the city shut down or hidden or smothered, it’s “good morning” to a rare plethora of winter light, for those of us feeling like so much laundry: wrung hard and thrown down wet, a casual drop before a cold TV hearth, we are unwilling to suspend disbelief, soak up that warm phony feeling. Knowing instead the sun and sun angling off the snow everywhere over the street to be more than mere tricks of the light, and knowing we remain too often tethered, we vow to lie in the nearest swath of sunshine for as long as sun and snow will allow—phone off the hook, TV and computer unplugged—having mastered the hard lessons of the blizzard: all that howls in its loneliness is better left unchained.
BB Improvises a Jeremiad

1.

It will have been said we sat upon our kings telling sad tales of a dying earth at a time not even a god was obeyed in office, and it was easier to curse a candle than to light the dark, to know how many pins we might make dance on the head of an angel, to see what lights the fire, not what the fire lights, having found more in our philosophies than heaven and earth might contain, and so each day we built another Rome, certain that each day has its dog and the dog is only best as man’s breakfast and only in the most desperate of times. Our sacrifices were all for the lesser evil, belief dependent upon the bloody nail of truth.
It will have been said the fact of our addictions--blood and circuses--left us wanting our world shaken not stirred, praying “Oh Lord smash us with your asteroid,” reassuring each other that the big things in life are what really matter, singing “A Mighty Forklift Is Our God,” lining up at Mallwart to swipe our SlaveCards for a world of devices to separate the carnage from the lever, calling “Music, Maestro! A little of Nero’s fiddle!” amusing ourselves that there is no separation like sorrow, no greed but fire, that there is no king like Caesar, and in our father’s house there are many matches.
3. It will have been said our oceanic moments were grounded on the rhythms of so many nodding gentlemen, having nothing to do with any sexual quiddity of the sea, origins in an age of laudanum vials on beaches where we mourned our Shelley and pitied our Keats and carried away our sea sounds wound inside a conch, such romantic movements turning us inward with a soporific closing of our eyes, toward the mere dream of an ocean, sounding for all the world like it’s sounding for all the world.
4.

It will have been said we did not know that we did not know those who live by throwing stones should never build glass houses, that only one war wages forever on the world, which takes it for several, severing what peace we make and naming it a waste land, where the weeds thrive because we loathe them, and the flowers die because we love them, and the May queen is no more than a rod for the ever attendant lightning, despite her pitched tents and elaborate awnings, leaving us instead charred spectacles in the grass, a blown parasol tumbled on the yard, the blackened petals of a king.
It will have been said we knew no dark nights of the soul, only dark souls
in the night, looking for questions from the heavens, and yet, already announced
by a departure of angels and vanishing stars, shifty signs in desert sand that only certain
fools could follow, there was unearthed, at the depletion of our journey, what might come
to pass for a miracle, sheltered in a stable, in a town called Bethlehem, a child
swaddled in grave-clothes and buried in a manger.
Blues Buddha the Street Musician

It’s the same old tune.  
And me? Not even a key player,  
making the bouncing ball skip  
a pace with the echo of each phrase.  
And the words, as words go, seem  
no less than the rain, repeating  
its always new music, its small  
ripples, draining away or gathering  
in the drop of a hat already brim  
full of rain that I’m passing  
for a song.
The Blues Buddha: a Guided Meditation

While listening to the hard bop of Coltrane’s *Blue Train* sessions, picture the Blues Buddha floating a few inches above your head, seated in a full lotus, his skin a fine sky blue, the electric blue of his shark skin suit lending a navy hue to his wrap around Way-farers. Imagine the notes of each Trane solo dripping from the Bluesattva’s horn, drenching you in the blue waters of the Dharma, imagine each cool drop as the true transformation of suffering. Hear each note as suffering turned music. Draw and release each breath to the ebb and flow of lines from the tenor. Inhale on a downbeat; exhale slowly as the next riff runs its course—you may strain at first to inhale enough to exhale through the end of each phrase. When you can hold the image of Blues Buddha in mind and match your breath to the bellows of the tenor, you will know suffering as desire and the blues as its only answer.
The Guitar Within: Imagination and the Creative Writing Workshop

by

D. Gregory Griffith

As I begin the composition of this essay, I have entered my second decade of literary study and the end of my second decade as a reader and writer of poetry. Through the Elliston Foundation and Creative Writing Program at the University of Cincinnati, I have had the good fortune to encounter a large cross-section of the literary community, and to have attended talks, lectures, readings, workshops, seminars, and courses by many of the best critics, scholars, editors, and writers of my time. Over this period of time, I’ve also been fortunate enough to interact with a large number of writing students coming to U.C. from other programs for further studies in creative writing. After observing contemporary writing from many angles and at many stages of accomplishment and through the sensibilities of many writers of notable achievement, I finally feel qualified to offer some opinions on what I've observed.

My overall impression of poetry in the United States--its environment, support and instruction, as well as the product itself--is that we need more focus on the imagination. Too often the product--the individual poem--and how to manipulate that product--the act of revision--obscure, ignore, or displace the processes of imagination or inspiration vital to the creation of a poetry of more than technical merit. Gaining access to the materials of the imagination is seldom addressed by the largest and single most beneficial system of support in
American letters: the system of workshops, seminars, and teachers who make up the majority of the body of artists creating poetry in the United States today. Some of our current neglect of the imagination in contemporary writing classes can be attributed to the nature of the imagination itself. Even defining the word can be tricky. In his *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley articulates some of the issues that make access to the imagination so capricious. In that essay he states:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet (761).

This seems to me a fair assessment of the nature of imaginative processes, and in the face of such unpredictable forces, it is no wonder that the workshop is more frequently than not a space for the discussion of what has already (theoretically) been imagined. However, it is no less a problem for all of us who work with or teach other poets; in fact we often encounter the poem and poet in the workshop at the very point where "inspiration is already on the decline," and yet the composition process continues in the workshop as "revision" or considerations toward
revision. There's nothing innately wrong with this except, with inspiration on the wane for the person still composing the poem, the forces of logic and reasoning are focused on the page, when perhaps the true solution to whatever is not right with the words on that page is a return to--a rekindling of--the very inspiration that initiated the poem, and if that specific inspiration cannot be revisited, then a return to imaginative processes in general is warranted. Instead, the workshop seems to discover what is feeble in the "feeble shadow" without the true solution to those feeble elements--a fresh dose of imaginative insight. Of course, the intentions of the members of a workshop are almost always good intentions, but they frequently come absent of imaginative force, and influence the person who is already in that state of imaginative decline.

What can be done about the decline in inspiration if, as Shelley tells us, it is such a fleeting phenomenon, and one we cannot predict? I think there are several answers to this very difficult question, and the instruction of creative writing needs desperately to take a serious look at the problem. First, it is difficult to predict the onset of inspiration, but I do not think that necessarily means a poet cannot at least attempt to catalyze the imaginative process--to fan the coals to brightness, to use Shelley's metaphor. That does not mean success can be predicted; just like starting a fire, inspiration will at times fail to occur, but we can increase our chances of successfully accessing the imagination by understanding how it works, and what best feeds or fuels it, and knowing what can and often does smother it.

Before moving on to discuss the ways in which poets and those who teach poets can focus on and deepen the imaginative process, two important factors need to be established. First, more needs to be said to detail and describe the creative process as it applies to writing artists, and
second the consequences or products of a failure to adequately engage the imagination must be demonstrated. The first of these factors—a more elaborate description of inspiration as it manifests itself in the writer—is best expressed in terms of other types of artistic endeavor to show just how difficult and tricky it can be to create with words, and to show also one of the reasons it is difficult to emphasize imagination and ways to access it in the workshop. Once comparisons with other arts have provided a backdrop, I think it will be easier to overcome those difficulties.

Since I have some experience with two other types of art—music and drawing/painting, I know something of the contrasts among them in terms of training or apprenticeship and how one enters into an imaginative state in regard to both. The most significant difference between visual and aural creation on the one hand, and verbal creation on the other is in the level of physicality in the training process. A musician or painter must literally "come to grips" with something first—a musical instrument, a set of brushes or pens or pencil—in order to begin their training in that art. With writing on the other hand, no such physical training, nothing palpable or tangible, is handed to the novice. The workshop instructor doesn't teach how to hold a pencil nor does that instructor establish typing or keyboard proficiency as part of the training of apprenticed poets. The comparison may seem absurd at first, but the real significance of it for poets—both master and pupil—is that much more of the creative apparatus is inside the individual. Progress in the art is much harder for both individuals to measure, and more importantly skills are much more difficult to impart. In a guitar workshop, a student must practice scales, develop increasingly difficult techniques, and repetition of countless physical exercises on the instrument itself is
required as part of process of improvement. Skills—what writers usually call "craft"—are imparted and usually a body of already made music is taught to the student guitarist. He/she has two advantages over the student poet: one, the aspiring musician has an external device that allows for graded progress as an artist, and two, the person who picks up a musical instrument masters a repertoire of pre-existing songs.

Apprenticed poets, on the other hand, are expected to reach inside themselves for both instrument and material to have something to work on with their teachers. While the aspiring guitarist is being taught exactly how to finger a riff or chord change in an Eric Clapton tune, the aspiring poet is struggling to find good material to put into some semblance of a poem, and is forced to bring that material in for scrutiny by the teacher and his or her peers. Even if the guitarist is performing the work of another, rather than composing that work, all musicians are encouraged to enlist their accumulated knowledge and skill to individualize or personalize the performance. Moreover, musicians at the pinnacle of artistic achievement in classical music, and those from popular styles such as jazz, blues, rock, and bluegrass improvise part or nearly all of their performances. Using elements from their practice as groundwork for building fresh material, classical guitarists become accomplished enough to interpret a passage or create new cadenzas, and guitarists from popular styles might improvise any or all elements of a familiar song, from the chord voicings to the solo passages. A preexisting song structure or the set patterns of arpeggios, chords, and scales on the fret board become points of imaginative departure for the virtuoso guitarist. Even the dexterity that develops with rote repetition
encourages imaginative development, both because of the positive psychological effect it has on the individual and because of the new possibilities that increased physical ability permits.

There's more pressure on student poets because they might have little or nothing to show for the hours they spent since the last time they were instructed. Since one can't learn to recreate a pre-existing work as part of the artistic endeavor in learning to be a poet, pressure to incorporate and use anything in the composition of a poem often leads the student poet in the wrong direction, away from the interior world of the imagination--where the true instrument of poetry lies--and toward the external world, raw and unprocessed by the imaginative faculty. The guitarist fortunately can be a serious practicing artist by reproducing the work of others, by mastering technique, without necessarily creating songs of his or her own, but the poet has no choice--there is no instrument at hand to master and therefore the poet's identity as an artist depends on what he or she can come up with, and the process of learning craft or technique with words and images must be learned chiefly from exploring the words and images the individual brings into the workshop, though at times those materials are themselves inferior--the products of a beginner and frequently a beginner who has no control over the what I will call "the guitar within," the imaginative generator that all good poets learn to manipulate.

The poet must learn to master the guitar within, for to fail to do so is far worse than to be a musician who learns and repeats what he or she hears, but fails to write original tunes, improvise, or even embellish a piece of music--each of these processes requires some creative response to what one hears, rather than mere repetition of the song as written. The poet who cannot access the guitar within, who cannot find the music there, or cannot process the raw
sounds of experience into music on that guitar is not an artist at all because there is no other creative endeavor possible for that art form. The musician can take solace in playing the work of and working with the materials of others. There is still value and validity as a creator. You may call such people who can write poems with great craft but little imagination makers of verse or skilled rhetoricians, but if they do not touch the guitar inside, if (to quote Stevens) they do not "patch [experience] round" into something of imaginative intensity, they have only touched the page and never the inner instrument. They have not even technically developed craft on their supposed chosen instrument; instead, they have worked on a text.

In his essay "The Irrational Element In Poetry," Wallace Stevens discusses the imaginative quality essential to poetry and which I will admit is (like everything connected with the imagination) difficult to ascertain, describe or define. What Stevens calls the "irrational," I call the imaginatively processed, and he defines it as "the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet" (TPW 48). The true poet and the true poem stem from the irrational as Stevens calls it--the place where reality is processed or "transacted." Without that transaction, true poetry cannot be created. To continue with the descriptive model of Stevens' essay, poetry is distinguished by two elements in tension: "the true subject and...the poetry of the subject" (TPW 52). It is my contention that often the "true subject"--the ordinary world, experience, reality--winds up alone or nearly alone in contemporary poetry written in the United States. Often absent is the "poetry of the subject," the transaction of the imagination, the "irrationalization" of the materials of reality, from the minutest image to the most encompassing experiences. It is very difficult to provide evidence for the assertion I make above because there will always be
disagreement about what is imaginative. The issue of definitions is, as I have said before, part of what makes this aspect of poetry so difficult to discuss, impart, and access. It is also tough to give adequate evidence for the lack of something--something already ill-defined--in a body as vast as American poetry and to do so in the space of an essay. I can't possibly offer a cross-section or representative sampling of recent American poetry, and any evidence I offer will therefore look like a straw poet, perfectly propped up to be knocked over for lack of imagination. I can only address that difficulty by using examples I feel certain are under-imagined, selecting that which has received some acceptance as professional, artist-quality work, and finally, balancing that example against work that's adequately processed by the imagination.

When I dip into any prominent literary magazine, I can usually find at least several poems like the following work by Nin Andrews which appeared in the Spring 1998 issue of Ploughshares:

The Dying
When Grandma was dying
in the rope bed, no one said much.
I had pinworms, used to wake up
and hunt for then in the sheets.
Dad taught me rummy and chopsticks
on the piano. Mom took turns
with Aunt Sarah wiping Grandma
down. Mostly I wasn't allowed in
but I peeked anyhow, seeing how
she picked at her skin,
trying to pull it loose.
Last thing she said was
she was going for a cool swim.

Sarah closed the curtains,
left the ballgame on the radio
and went out to pull onion grass
in the cow pasture. Said
no one wants to taste death
and sour milk in the same week.
In the night dogs woke me.
There were car lights in my window
and heat lightning.
I flicked on my light.
Mud daubers made nests
on the ceiling.
They were kind of humming. (182)
Here is a good example of a poem that has not adequately processed experience through the imagination. I don't want to disparage its writer; I'm sure Ms. Andrews is a talented and capable poet, and this work is not without craft. It avoids sentiment successfully, for example, and it does so while dealing with a "true subject"--the death of a loved one--that is difficult to describe while avoiding sentiment. That said, I would ask what in this poem is new, unique, or even imaginative? Scenes have been arranged for effect, but these scenes are to me nothing more than raw experience, if not the direct and nearly unchanged experiences of the poet or a speaker like the poet, then the common materials of the world, observed and reproduced in the poem, but again untransformed by imaginative processes.

Though the poem avoids sentimentality, and the language and imagery have been arranged to accomplish this through deflation, a sure sign to me that this poem is underimagined is the sense that the furnishings in the poem could be deleted or exchanged--that they are nothing more than trappings, not uniquely charged images. The light sources in the last few lines of the poem are all stock material: "heat lightning," "car lights" through a night window, and the nondescript "my light" that the speaker "flick[s] on" (21-3). Three sources of light illuminate the poem in as many lines, but the language and images are without a single distinguishing feature. One might think that the circumstance of three separate sources of light in a poem about dying might generate some charged language--a description of the unique situation or setting of heat lightning, car light, and bulb light--or at least more detailed imagery than what a reader encounters here. In fact none of the three lines in question contains enough information to qualify as images per se; the flat statements are devoid of adjectives or other modifiers. Nothing distinguishes the scene as imaginative, and without this ingredient in a poem, there are no images. The two related
words, “image”/”imagination,” are also indicative of the relationship between the product and the site of production. Without imaginative processes, there are no images, and that is precisely the case with the poem above. It contains in its most fertile moments nothing more than inert language.

The poem remains a collection of human experiences, many of which are generic, and nothing has been done to meditate or contemplate them into the poetry of the experience as Stevens might describe it. I take no pleasure in saying so, but the work in question is nothing better than everyday experience, and any interest the "poem" generates is due to the occasional quirkiness of living, and not due to the intensification of "experience-made-song" on the guitar within.

Poems like the one above, with a dearth of imagination, are common in American poetry, and even the most successful and well-known poets are producing them. In the following poem by Dana Gioia, the same underimagined quality of the Nin Andrews work already discussed is evident. What is different is the poem’s conventional rhyme and meter, extending the phenomenon of imaginative underdevelopment to both free and metered American verse. The poem’s difficulties begin with the generic title “Summer Storm” and continue through out:

We stood on the rented patio
While the party went on inside.
You knew the groom from college.
I was a friend of the bride.
We hugged the brownstone wall behind us
To keep our dress clothes dry
And watched the sudden summer storm
Floodlit against the sky.

The rain was like a waterfall
Of brilliant beaded light,
Cool and silent as the stars
The storm hid from the night.

To my surprise, you took my arm--
A gesture you didn’t explain--
And we spoke in whispers, as if we two
Might imitate the rain.

Then suddenly the storm receded
As swiftly as it came.
The doors behind us opened up.
The hostess called your name.
I watched you merge into the group,
Aloof and yet polite.
We didn’t speak another word
Except to say goodnight.

Why does that evening’s memory
Return with this night’s storm--
A party twenty years ago,
Its disappointments warm?

There are so many might have been,
What ifs that won’t stay buried,
Other cities, other jobs,
Strangers we might have married.

And memory insists on pining
For places it never went,
As if life would be happier
Just by being different. (RA 50-51)
The poem is almost devoid of images. The person who seems to be so memorable, so significant to the speaker in his reverie is not physically described at all. One even has to guess the gender of this person. The physical surroundings are rendered in such clichéd and “near-fetched” analogies as “rain...like a water fall” and an evening “cool and silent as the stars”. The speaker and by extension the poet can come up with nothing inspired in an event about someone he does not care to recall for the reader. How can such emptiness add up to the seemingly poignant question and speculation of the poem’s final three stanzas? The poem is trapped not so much in a mundane reality as it is between reality and melodrama. In this case, the lack of imaginative charge has to do with a reliance on conventions of television and cinema. The entire scene reads like a clip cut from the movie version of a Brad Easton Ellis novel. The turn in the poem at the phrase “why does that evening’s memory/ return with this night’s storm—“ is a stock reflective return to the present common to movie scenes and voice-overs for television documentaries. In fact, the memory does not return in any substantial way. The poet forces this sentiment on the reader, tells the reader rather than shows the reader.

My final suspicion about this work is too frequently poets are encouraged to write from “what they know” and pour even their most average experiences into verse forms without much proper contemplation over those experiences. If I were to encounter this poem in a workshop, I would encourage the writer to begin with the heart of this experience and depart from it. What imaginary futures do each of the principles have after their one brief meeting? Would it not be possible to get at something more poignant or intense by building separate detailed lives for these people? Would it not be more interesting to have them never meet again, but have intersections or connections in the details of each life? The differences that the final word of the
poem suggests are the potential tension of the poem. As it is, the sentiment in “Summer Storm” is not much different nor more profound than the one found in Bob Seeger’s hit song “Night Moves” (which the poem reminds me of). I would choose the song over the poem because details are more prevalent and less clichéd in the popular song. I also think it’s a sad comment on what currently passes for poetry in our magazines and anthologies when a top-forty radio hit has more “thunder” than a work in a compilation heralding a new movement in American letters.

I'm willing to entertain the notion that life itself is occasionally poetry, but I think that the everyday reality and experience of middle-class American life is seldom poetry. The lives of Blake, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Akhmatova, Ginsberg are all poetic lives for one reason or another. Such tragic figures as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath have made their experiences directly into the poetry of confession, but the experiences of these individuals was intensified by and focused on psychic struggles and traumas that have their place in close proximity to the imagination. Unfortunately, the poetic legacies of these and a handful of other poets are part of the problem. The first person experiences of the so called “confessional” poets (and the tremendous fame and success they enjoyed) have encouraged a subsequent generation of poets to stick too closely to their own experiences or to experience itself when not every life, indeed when so little of the day-to-day experience of the average poet in America rises in and of itself to the level of poetry. Unfortunately, that day-to-day experience cannot even rival the intensity of most of our television shows. The tidy middle-class life makes for dull poetry, particularly when the particulars of reality and experience are lifted whole and raw from that experience and posited in or as poetry.

I do not mean to disparage the lives and lifestyles of my colleagues, friends, teachers, and other fellow poets. In fact the best trappings of the life most writers in America aspire to--lives as
writing teachers and editors chiefly—I would also like for myself and have to a certain extent lived as a graduate student, teaching various university literature and writing courses. My point is most contemporary American life is mundane or shallow or both. Few of us live a life worth recounting directly into our poems—confessions of the most petty and venal sins, or the least misdemeanors, or the slightest psychic tensions are the leftover impulses of those poets deemed confessional. You can pick up any of the best literary magazines and find poems of this description, poems like the example above, and I think the only solution to and redemption from this mediocrity is turning or returning to the imagination. If anything in the ordinary reality and experience of American middle-class life is of use in our poetry, it must be first passed through the portal of the imagination. The other possibility is to turn completely toward the imagination for material—to create a character, a place, a story, a reality, a cosmos, or even a pure poetry not grounded in or gleaned from day-to-day experience. We aspire to lives that nurture us as writers—lives that do not break our bodies and spirits through grueling manual labor or dehumanizing and mindless tasks, working lives that dovetail with our lives as writers, lives that allow us large blocks of time to read, study, create—and the most fortunate aspect of such a life is the opportunity it gives each of us to turn inward, to find the guitar within, to learn how to access it regularly, to practice on it, and hopefully to master it.

It takes a great deal of open time and combinations of contemplation, the particular catalysts that inspire a particular poet—his or her favorite literature, music, art, intellectual or spiritual discipline, environment, etc—and a way to keep out the flashy distractions of contemporary life in order to cultivate the inner guitar. The poet who takes a career path as a writing or literature teacher, editor, publisher, etc, has or should have more time to devote to the imagination and its cultivation than the average manual laborer or skilled professional outside the "language related
careers” that I just mentioned. However, for the reasons I have already outlined, too much of what passes for good poetry—published in books, magazines, and anthologies by members of academic institutions with extensive credentials as writers, and long lists of publications to their credits—is deficient in imaginative intensity. Our contemporary personal lyric often suffers these days from a failure to meet the "one goal" or convey the "one message" that Donald Hall notes is the goal and message of all lyric poetry in his essay “Goatfoot, Miltongue, Twinbird: the Psychic Origins of Poetic Form”: "to urge the condition of inwardness" (CFP 142). Instead, a lyric of the external trappings, activities, and experiences of the poet, unprocessed by the internal workings of imagination, has taken the place of that inwardness. In his essay “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” Robert Bly expresses this dilemma in the observation “a [poet] cannot turn his face at the same moment toward the inward world and the outer world.” Bly decries a poetry where “the imagination has to exist as best it can in a world of objects,” and traces that emphasis on objects as far back as Eliot’s “objective correlative” (CFP 17-22). His differentiation of objects or details from images gets as close as is possible to the essential differences between the world described with language and the world reinscribed by the imagination. Bly argues:

an image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy’s “interior seas lighted by turning eagles,” it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective “real” world. “Petals on a wet black bough” can actually be seen (CFP 26).

I would add that at least “petals on a wet black bough” are worth seeing in a poem whether they are objects or not, but more than forty years after Bly’s prophetic essay, the objects themselves
have become more mundane. The increase in entertainment options, increasing homogenization of life from the bloat of suburban, shopping-mall uniformity and duplication leaves very little in the external American world worth looking at. The distance a poet has to reach in order to make such contents add up to something increases, and the impulse to force profundities on the reader as a byproduct of an already mass produced world increases as well.

I would like to make clear that I do not mean to suggest that even the most quotidian details of living cannot make their way into a poem, but like the sounds that come from the strings of the guitar, they must first travel through the resonating body of the guitar and emerge from the sound hole as music. The raw noise of the world must touch the strings, move deep within the body and emerge again. In the poems I have already used as examples, I contend this has not happened, but in the following lines by Charles Wright, the least experience, the insignificant surface details of the poet's life and surroundings, presented as nothing more than Wright's observation, have been transformed into highly imagined poetic objects:

Sun like an orange mousse through the trees,
A snowfall of trumpet bells on the oleander;
        mantis paws
Craning out of the new wisteria; fruit smears in the west...
DeStael knifes a sail on the bay;
A mother's summons hangs like a towel on the dusk's hook. (1-6)

These lines from the poem "Dog Day Vespers" in The World of The Ten Thousand Things offer objects from the real world, but they have imaginative value that's immediately apparent—in fact Wright transforms them into imaginative objects before our very eyes. The sail of a distant boat
is immediately a stroke from DeStael's pallet knife--signifying both its transformation by Wright's imagination and the degree to which the poet sees in imaginative values as he exchanges the real world for something else that is an imaginative act: the stroke of the painter's knife imaginatively interprets the sail of reality. Everywhere in Wright's work the everyday details of sitting in his backyard become imaginative departures. Nothing in his work remains mere objects or details from that life. In the case of Dana Gioia, the mundane does not even retain the energy of the mundane. Instead, the rain is dissipated as an image by replacing it with the near-fetched or stock imagery of waterfalls and “beaded light.” No imaginative leap takes place here because the qualities of water and light already present and implied by the “floodlit” rain are merely restated, and associations anyone might make (with little effort) are offered in the analogy “like a waterfall\ of brilliant beaded light.” In Wright’s poem, on the other hand, even the least detail of “a mother’s summons” is completely transformed into a “towel on the dusk’s hook.” Sound is transformed into substance. Wright’s imagination has traversed a categorical distance that requires a prodigious leap by readers, and that is thrilling in its own right, but the component parts of the image convey the experience of a summer evening near the ocean in ways that are as familiar as a mother’s voice or a welcoming towel after a day in the surf.

Wright has become so well known for his inventory and observation of his "own backyard" that he has made it the subject of jokes at his readings and has ironically titled a section and several poems from his latest collection "Looking Around" (A Short History of the Shadow 1-11). If all Wright accomplished in his work was a sort of looking around his yard, readers would soon tire of him, I'm sure. Rather, it is due in large part to the consistent highly imaginative quality of his work that readers keep coming back to Wright's backyard--they know each visit
will yield a new destination in imaginative ground. In the Gioia poem above and in others like it, the opposite impulse predominates. The speaker of the poem and the poet by extension cannot even formulate detailed fantasies of this quasi-“ships-in-the-night” story. Empty phrases like “what if” and “might have been” and empty generic nouns like “city” and “job” are as detailed or daring or different as this poet can muster. Nowhere does the language or imagery of the poem exceed its surface context. A throwaway experience is vaguely recalled, and if the reader wants something imaginative, he or she must supply it in abundance to fill in the generic place-holders in the poem. The reader is even asked to supply the content that should be offered by the poet and speaker. The missing “what might have beens” are the source for any poetic energy the piece might have, and readers are asked to fill in every blank.

Since I criticize the poetry and the methodology of the workshop system in this essay, I want to also offer some brief steps toward a solution, and to say these steps toward a more imaginative poet, poem, and poetry in America are in large part derived from the best experiences I've had in workshops and approaches I've seen, read about, or heard as anecdotes from other poets and apprentice poets. To focus on finding the guitar within and increase one's odds of accessing it on a semi-regular or frequent basis, some time must be spent in every workshop on imaginative access. Exercises are a good way to achieve this, if they are in fact imaginative exercises. Suggestions should be offered for experiments with the various aspects of writing such as voice, form, character, setting, detail, use of metaphor and rhetorical figures. Students must learn early on to practice as writers not necessarily by starting out to write finished or accomplished poems, but starting out only to practice working with words, as the beginning guitarist would begin by learning how to do a few things each week and would practice exercises designed to build facility. This is the case with the beginning poet as well. These exercises can be diminished in
more advanced workshops, but initially I think this is a very freeing process. The beginning poet can feel free to do or go anywhere if the right prompt is given--a hypothetical where there is no right or wrong response (one I will always remember from an early workshop to experiment writing in the voice of something that does not speak, a house, a plant, an animal, etc). From the level of the word, a teacher should encourage play at the level of objects. Since I have argued (along with Robert Bly) that objects are not images and even elaborate description and detail is not necessarily imagery, I think it is important to somehow train the student poet to transform objects—to pull them out of reality and do something with them that won’t allow them to be reintroduced into the context of reality that Bly says distinguishes the object from the image.

Such imaginative prompts allow the student to play scales on the guitar within, to find material other than immediate experience--the stuff of everyday life--to create with. It gives the beginning poet a foundation or grounding in generative play--a sense that they can sit and improvise on the guitar of the imagination and just like the musician, improve because of the amount of time the hands are engaged with the instrument. Prompts are also potentially liberating because they can remove any potential performance anxieties that either block the writer entirely or force the writer to use what’s at hand (the near-fetched as I like to call it) to insure a “poetic product” will emerge. When guitarists have such anxieties, they can at least rely on the instrument, their training and the base music over which they will improvise. With poets, no external apparatus exists to assist them. There are no tools to grasp at the moment of the creative act. The result, particularly in the beginning writer, is an anxiety over what to write about. Offering the beginning writer an opportunity to respond to a variety of exercises, prompts, and challenges that the individual knows are not going to be scrutinized as artistic products
leaves that writer free of the pressure to have a significant product after the act of writing is over. If this process is repeated, it will eventually become part of a writer’s natural creative process. Once a writer becomes accustomed to the experience of imaginative play through external challenges, he or she will automatically internalize those challenges, and much more frequently will reach inside for inspiration or allow the things of the external world to pass through the imagination before they make it to the page. In *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo has described this process as learning to “recognize the real subject” of a poem (4).

I do not make any claim that this approach is unique; in fact it is one that is employed to varying degrees by many writing teachers, but we need more of it, especially for our least experienced poets. The pressures of the current fad in poetry whether it be confessional, formal, free verse, first person, narrative, language, etc; and the way poets/teachers naturally emphasize both their bias for one mode of operation or another and the simultaneous emphasis on product in the workshop often narrow the inexperienced student's notions of how he or she might create poems and what they might look like and contain. The performance anxiety I describe above is often mixed with a focus on current poetic products, so that students feel they must try to produce a work that looks or sounds like other poems in that vein. When a teacher offers challenges to the student’s imagination through exercise or prompt or suggestion, it returns the focus to the student’s internal resources. Poets and teachers of poets should also be familiar with as many ideas and writings on imagination and creative processes as possible in order to retain or reinforce this focus on imagination until they thoroughly understand the instrument they wish to master. A history and anatomy of that instrument is as essential as the history and anatomy of poetry itself. If works about imagination are more widely used in the workshop, they will help counterbalance the emphasis on products and the schools or traditions they come from.
The attitude I suggest we cultivate in the novice and reinforce in the proficient and the master is one preferred and described by William Stafford: "receptive, and careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it." The whole process, as Stafford explains it, should "be like practice....in writing [one should] launch many expendable efforts. A result of this free way of writing is that [one does] not write for others, mostly; they will not see the product at all unless the activity eventuates in something that later appears to be worthy" (FG 2-3). I not only agree with that approach, but I would go one step further to say that when the writer learns to compose upon the guitar within, much more of what comes from that activity eventuates in something that is worthy.


