Thank You for Visiting
Collected Poems with a Critical Introduction
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the Creation of *Thank You for Visiting*  

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Finding the “I” in Contemporary American Poetry:  
the Creation of Thank You for Visiting

In the last twenty years, contemporary American poetry has seen an explosion of voices and styles. Shifts led by reactions against the past as well as new opportunities in journals and MFA programs have created a surge in experimental poetics. The poet Tony Hoagland, in his essay “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment,” sees this aesthetic shift as a kind of crop rotation, where one field is plowed and cultivated while another is left to rest. Whereas in the 1940s and 50’s, the Confessional poets were the creators of style and form, that field has been tilled dry. The current aesthetic field in poetry is experimental and discursive, both in form and subject.

In his preface to Legitimate Dangers, an anthology of contemporary American poetry, Mark Doty describes the efforts of today’s poets to write poems that never existed before: “They are concerned with the creation of a voice, a presence on the page meant to be an experience in itself, not necessarily to refer to one that’s already taken place,” he writes (xxii). Doty justifies the use of experimental forms and uses of discursive language as a means to create an experience on the page for the reader. Since form creates the voice of the poem, the voice of the poem takes the burden of the reader’s experience. As far as the subject of poetry, Doty believes poets “presume the biographical stuff of selfhood is pretty much uninteresting, and favor instead the representation of temperament/subjectivity/thinking in the moment” (Dumais and Marvin xxi). Contemporary poets, Doty leads us to believe, stray from memory and personal experience as subjects and instead lean toward a
reflection of the current moment. Hoagland agrees with this, suggesting that the current style is one of great invention and playfulness, but adds that the current aesthetic is one of self-consciousness and emotional removal.

Indeed, a contemporary poem can be thrillingly challenging at its best and annoyingly esoteric at its worst. The subject can seem far removed from the poet and the reader can be left wondering what the desired effect was. The answer to the emotional removal and complex of contemporary poetry is personal poetry—writing from one’s own life experiences. It is ironic to note that several of the poets included in *Legitimate Dangers* go against the urge Mark Doty describes to avoid autobiographical subject material. Jeffrey McDaniel in his “post-confessional poetry?” provides a substantial list of poets writing currently from personal experience, including Nick Flynn, Joe Wendwroth, Rachel Zucker, Terrance Hayes, Olena Kalytiak Davis, and Rachel Zucker. All of these poets are anthologized in *Legitimate Dangers*, which purportedly collected the work of poets presumed to find the “biographical stuff of selfhood pretty much uninteresting” (Dumais and Marvin xxi).

Rachel Zucker, in her article “Confessionalography: a GNAT (Grossly Non-Academic Talk) on ‘I’ in Poetry,” coins the term “confessionalistic” to describe those poets writing the autobiographical stuff of selfhood. The term is interesting in that it reflects the Confessional school Plath, Lowell, Sexton, and so many others writing in the early 1950’s. Zucker’s term differentiates her and other contemporary poets from that school and modernizes the movement (Zucker). Like Zucker’s, McDaniel’s definition of post-confessional poetry is closely related to those who were the first
to do it. McDaniel refers to the present urge to write poems of self-disclosure as “post-confessional” and explains that the term post-confessional “would apply to poems that enter into a place of psychic fracture, often involving family, and elaborate on or develop techniques used by the confessional poets” (McDaniel). Those techniques include the first person “I” that actually refers to the poet, instead of an ambiguous speaker. Another common technique is the narrative poem, in which the poem tells a story, either from personal experience or borrowed from myth to reflect truths about the self. Another poet, Gregory Orr, defines his work in much simpler terms, and doesn’t compare it to the work of his predecessors. He calls his poems personal lyrics: “by personal lyric, I mean a poem that usually features an ‘I’ and that focuses on autobiographical experience or a personal crisis of some sort.”

In the years that followed the Confessionals, writing the poem of the self became intensely popular and a way for young poets to voice their grievances with the world. However, sentimentality became overbearing, and poets began to turn away from the “I” speaker. It seems appropriate in this age of self-exposure, in the age of Twitter and Facebook, that our poetry mirrors that cultural trend, only in a more artistic form. I chose this form of poetry for its essay-esque style, which allows the writer to reflect on their lives and reshape past events and memories. It is not a school of mere recollection, it is a school of reshaping and reforming memories and experiences to project answers onto the questions that plague our everyday lives. I do not come to this style to rewrite my life, that’s what the memoir is for. I come to this style to reshape memory. This idea of reshaping also assuaged my fear of
approaching this style as a young man. Only 21 years into my life, I come to the writing table with half of the life experiences many other post-confessional poets do. However, I feel legitimized in that this project is not a telling of stories; it is a retelling of them.

Post-confessional poets have their own unique challenges to overcome when writing personal lyrics, such the unstable nature of memory and the desired degree of sentimentality. However, this style is an important venue of self-discovery for a developing poet, and I had to learn through the course of this project to create an “I” that could reflect me as well as reach for the universal. To help me, I selected two contemporary poets to act as guides through the world of post-confessional poetry. Matthew Dickman and Marie Howe are both poets who write from the self and share similar familial losses that act as their subject matter. While I do not share their personal crises, studying both how they play with narrative and their individual poetic voice has provided a productive apprenticeship throughout this project.

“Sudden flecks of blood”— The Poet Behind the Curtain

A poet borders many temptations when writing poems of self-disclosure. Through poetry, we can cling to memory and give substance to our ephemeral existence. However, one of the most glaring dangers of writing personal poetry is cloying sentimentality, often derived from the speaker of such a narrative. The “I” speaker can easily impart the odor of indulgence and narcissism to a poem if not carefully controlled by narrative and voice. Zucker in her article writes that good poems make the lives of their authors cease to matter. In her trademark GNAT, she uses the metaphor of a space shuttle:
A good poem is like a space shuttle. It enters the reader’s mind and heart like a rocket. On leaving the atmosphere it drops the launching gear of experience that served for its creation. Who wrote the poem, the life the person lived or is living, will not matter once the poem takes on a life of its own. (Zucker)

In order to drop those launching gear of experience, Zucker writes that material should transcend autobiographical tendencies to reach for the universal. The poet should embrace particularities and risk. An autobiographical poem features facts of the poet’s life, but is at best merely a story of what happened. Even if it takes the risk of content, it misses the opportunity to risk a splitting open of self. A post-confessional poem should contain facts and analysis but also risk an in-depth analysis of the self, for this is why we write it, not to tell the reader what our life has been like, but to show the reader how similar we are to them.

Silvia Plath, a landmark poet of the Confessional School, agrees that the experience needs to be transcended. In an interview with Peter Orr, Plath says her poems come from her real life experiences, but they are not in the raw form. “I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is” she says, adding that a poet should control and manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind (Zucker). This control comes primarily through the imagination, but formally through the voice and structure of the narrative in the poem. This is how sentimentality is reigned in and autobiographicality is transcended.

Both Zucker and Plath argue for a transcendence of the poet, even if the material derives from that poet’s biographical experiences. Billy Collins disagrees. In
his essay “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box: the Limitations of Memory-Driven Poetry,” he writes that readers need a human being behind the page. The more we read a poem, he says, the more a human poet begins to develop. We understand “Paradise Lost” without the living and breathing John Milton, but The Odes somehow lose a degree of meaning without “the white handkerchief, the sudden flecks of blood” from a tubercular John Keats (Sontag and Graham 91). The poet of the self now walks a fine line between establishing a human sense of the writer without sounding like, to borrow from Rachel Zucker, “New Age mantra posters or 12-steppers or people in asylums” (Zucker). Controlling the sentimentality through narrative and voice is of the utmost concern, for these are the tools the poet has to trigger emotion.

First, when using narrative, it is necessary to consider the path the story will take, whether linear or more discursive. Hoagland writes that the distracted, screen-based age we live in is too simultaneous to be confined to linear narrative, no matter how well done. For Hoagland, the changing aesthetic of contemporary poetry represents a sense of boredom with straightforwardness and a too-organized narrative. Poets and readers find them “simplistic, claustrophobic, even unimaginative.” He commends so-called “elusive” poetics because they distort previously established systems of meaning and offer a new energy and charisma. These poems, in his words, “playfully distort or dismantle established systems of meaning, to recover mystery in poetry and offer multiple, simultaneous interpretive possibilities for the energetic and willing reader to “participate” in (Hoagland).
The Traveler—Matthew Dickman’s Ambulatory Narrative

It is no coincidence then, that Hoagland was selected to introduce Matthew Dickman’s first stand-alone collection of poetry, *All-American Poem*. In Dickman’s poetry, narrative is playfully distorted. Although often extending for more than two pages, Dickman’s poems travel—that is to say, the poem ends in a very different place emotionally and physically than the beginning. However, Hoagland explains, Dickman’s poetry refuses to have ulterior intellectual pretensions. He writes, “clever indeed, they are not ‘wickedly’ clever; they are not trying to credential their own postmodernism or to prove the acumen of their dislocated linguistics.” His poems are driven by a constant returning to a base established at the beginning of the poem. “I am thinking of” or “There is a picture of,” for example. These ideas serve as the foundation of the poem and are augmented by, in the words of Hoagland, “lamenting, bragging, fantasy and exhortation” (Dickman xii).

The poem *Some Days* is a prime example of Dickman’s energetic and ambulatory narrative style. “It’s winter here in Oregon,” it begins, then the poem focuses on his brother in Michigan. Thoughts turn to his brother’s kitchen, “the sun breaking over the ladles and knives like water.” A mysterious “you” takes over and goes to work drunk, like Dickman’s friend Mike, who stocks vending machines at a university. Dickman hovers over Mike’s thoughts here, “a book or two in his head/and some car in his heart,” then turns to his own job making croissants in the early morning. Carl, a regular, comes in, reads the newspapers and is “not thinking of how much he’d lost/or who he would love desperately/with nothing by wind/moving through his hands like a rope.” Dickman finally returns to his brother,
and explains that he always does when he is broke and hungry. His brother is a lucky charm, for as he thinks of him, the speaker finds a ten-dollar bill on the sidewalk, which allows him to have lunch, “a bowl of onion soup, a pint of dark/beer, the bread was free” (Dickman 8-10). A number of characters are introduced and touched on with description, which gives the poem a sense of a buzzing crowd. The poem is literally a story of finding a ten-dollar bill on the ground, but the reader is given autobiographical backstory that allows us to understand it’s not about that at all. The friend now working where they both went to school, the successful brother he still loves and thinks of while he is working in a pastry shop. These characters from the writer’s life create the story’s meaning and sorrowful tone.

The Essayist—Marie Howe’s Narrative Style

Howe’s poems are much shorter, and the narrative much more focused, but still certainly not linear. If Dickman has a bounding, dog-like energy, Howe is cat-like, with the ability to give the reader a slight scare as she brushes up against your leg. Often her poems seem like essays, wandering thoughts revolving around a simple declaration or observation. “Reading Ovid,” from her most recent work, Kingdom of Heaven, begins with the observation that, “The thing about those Greeks and Romans is that/at least mythologically,/they could get mad.” As prosaic and colloquial as poetry gets. Thoughts turn from Ovid having characters eat a stew made of family members to a wish that she could tell her husband that the hamburger he just “gobbled down with relish and mustard” was his truck.
“Remember that story of Athens and Sparta?” she asks, as if the reader was across the table at dinner. She tells how the a boy stole a fox and hid it under his cloak, “the fox bit and scratched; the kid didn’t walk/and he was a hero.” Spartan morality, a cab driver explains, dictated that it was permissible to steal but not to get caught. She then muses on the golden rule of Christianity. Then the poem ends almost abruptly, as many of Howe’s poems, with a question: “And the spiked wheel ploughed through the living centuries/minute by minute, soul by soul. Ploughs still. That’s the good news/and the bad news, isn’t it?” (Howe 18). What begins as an observation travels through two autobiographical notes and what begins as a discussion of ethics comes to the realization of the inevitable passage of time since the Greeks and the Romans. “Reading Ovid” serves as an example of Howe’s ability to bend the linear narrative, but in a more colloquial manner than Dickman.

**Another Mouth to Speak From—How I Handle Narrative**

My poems generally resist Howe’s urge to end somewhere completely different. Instead, I followed Dickman’s tendency to end the poem where the narrative began, only either the “I” or the reader’s understanding of the “I” has changed. In “The Local Watering Hole,” a story of returning to civilization from the wild, my brother Stephen and I, of course suburbanites ourselves, enter a Starbucks feeling like Gods or cowboys, “the ghosts of Clint Eastwood.” We are tattered and burned from our time in the wild, and we feel roughed and tumbled. The customers in suburban Peoria stare at us open‐jawed; “You would have thought we were the reckoning—the atonement for their sins,” based on their looks. However, the image
of ourselves deflates, “Our snow prints long since melted. Our routes re-climbed,”
we stride up to the cashier and become just another customer in Peoria, Illinois. We
are not only returning home back to a truer version of ourselves, we also take a step
back to the suburban lifestyle we came from. We really just needed coffee. This
rambling form of narrative allows for serious rumination on the subject. In
“Biography of Dust,” what begins as a story about my grandfather hitchhiking across
the country to chase a girl becomes a musing sequence of why and how we collect
stories.

Another musing example is in “Blue,” a Howe-esque, essay-style rumination
on the color blue. Looking at the use of blue in my life became a side-door for self
exploration. For example, “the majority of my wardrobe is blue/as if to say I am safe
and loyal and calming/yet fiery and energetic.” The color also takes an
autobiographical turn when it references my grandmother’s journal as she describes
my grandfather’s Alsation blue eyes “so blue and inviting.” The poem is a nautilus
shell of images and discoveries, tied together by the fixed base color from which the
detours commence.

A surprise for me while reading and writing was the discovery of historical
narrative. Dickman’s Mayakovsky’s Revolver is rife with allusions to beat poets such
as Jack Spicer and Bob Kaufman, as well as the Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and
Vladimir Mayakovsky. In “Akhmatova,” Dickman remembers touching anemones in a
tide pool, thinking of the Russian poet’s “dark windows/Akhmatova looked
through/to see if her son had been let out of prison.” A nun then chides him for his
wandering mind, and he comes to the realization that no matter how long he puts
his hand into the natural world, “Akhmatova’s son will still be chained/ against a wall...and a part of me will be sitting near/a window in my homeroom” (Dickman 7). This rumination ties together the distant past—the 1930’s—to a less distant past in which Dickman was in the third grade, to the present time in which he remembers the memory and writes it in the poem. Here the reference not only connects his early education to that of a Russian gulag, but also serves to bridge the gaps of memory and time.

However, Dickman’s historical allusions are, at best, references. I used historical figures to spin entire narratives around. “Our American Cousin,” on the surface level, tells the story of John Wilkes and Edwin Booth, John’s actions and death, Edwin’s career, and finally, Edwin’s admission of love for his brother. On a secondary level, the poem is very personal. Much has been written on John Wilkes Booth, less of it has concerned his relation with his brother. Even less of it is concerned with his relation to his brother professionally, as they were both actors. I fill this literary deficiency, because both of my older brothers were actors as I grew up. The poem is then personal in the parts of the story that I choose to tell: the crushing sadness of Edwin losing a brother or the final fact that even after denying his brother’s existence, Edwin still had a strong filial love for John Wilkes, in fact, “a picture of John still at his deathbed.”

The move toward historical narrative is also present in “Press Conference for Neil Armstrong” though in a different way. Here I was able to project my feelings of a boring, inadequate, suburban Ohio upbringing into the mouth of Ohio’s greatest hero. When the speaker asks “was it that you secretly wanted a dialect?” it was
actually me who is tired of the Midwestern base accent. When the speaker asks “Did the stars at Indian Lake call to you/ over a dying bonfire in the summer?” it was me again who continues to be called by the elsewhere outside of home. The poem allowed me to explore myself by comparing my experiences with someone who may have had similar ones. The repetition of the questions and the “press conference” feel create a hyperbolic tone that attempts to transcend the idea of interviewing the former astronaut and reach for a questioning instead of the concept of home.

Music But No Notes—Poetic Voice

In a poem in which the material is drawn from experience, the voice of the speaker is essential. According to Sydney Lea, in “Making a Case; or ‘Where are You Coming From?’,” the danger of personal poetry is when the poet, by merely claiming that title, lays claim to an interesting inner life. “I” is only interesting if it proves to be, she claims, and adds that the reader needs to have a sense of who the “I” is. In short, “pronouns are not people” (Sontag and Graham 38). Zucker adds in “Grossly Non-Academic Talk” that readers are familiar with the poem that has failed to rid itself of the person who wrote it: “Sentiment, cloying love of the self, and damages done to the self cling. “ A poet herself, Zucker adds, “I trust the language of poetry, its rhetoric and its figures to distort the literal and remove it from the realm of lived experience.”

The voice of a poem is the sound, the tone, the music of the notes. The two contemporary poets under whose wings I have written these poems have drastically different voices. Marie Howe is a quiet whisper in your ear at night; Matthew Dickman is a wild-cowboy-poet-of-the-west. It is worth noting that in interviews
and readings, they both are drastically different from the voice of their poems: Howe is outgoing and funny; Dickman has a quiet and sharp wit.

**A Whisper in the Night—Howe’s voice**

In *What the Living Do*, Howe’s poetry is at once colloquial and provocative. She writes about her brother John’s slow death from AIDS juxtaposed against her sometimes perverse recollections of childhood. Howe makes a place for the bad thoughts in her poetry, the ones that blip across our minds like stock tickers. A *Publisher’s Weekly* review of her book calls the “I” speaker, “engagingly wry while it discloses a fallible self” (“What the Living Do: Poems”). These deeply personal reflections are tapered by the calm, lyrical quality of the speaker’s voice. Howe uses conventional syntax and everyday words in long lines that stretch across the page. Lines are more often than not paired off in couplets, which offer a curt and accessible form. Often Howe’s poems could be removed from their form and stand alone as prose. They are accurately punctuated and the language is not at all digressive. Her tone is calm and quiet, as if her poems were meant to be whispered, even if they are about the biting pain from the loss of a loved one.

However, these poems are anything but elementary. Howe creates tension by near photographic images and unexpected poetic endings. In “The Copper Beech,” she describes a tree in her front yard: “Immense, entirely itself,/it wore that yard like a dress” (Howe 34). She climbs the tree to “practice being alone.” What Howe does best—and what I looked to her to teach me—was how to end a poem. Whether through an image such as someone standing by the window, “moonlight shining on his face and throat,” (41) or a figurative line such as, “Then he felt himself awake in
the dark alone” (24). “The Copper Beech” ends with the schaudenfraudic admission that as she was watching the rain “darkening the sidewalk,” she was happy, “watching it happen without it happening to me” (34).

I stayed close to Howe’s voice throughout the project, but it manifested itself particularly in the early poems. In “Late August, Fading,” the enjambment occurs at the natural end of the line, where the thought ends. Syntax is logical and coherent, word choice is clear, and the tone is twilight-calm. Unlike Howe, my rhythm is often set by opposing line length, such as in the 10/7/2 syllable count of “Just like that summer, that school year, that house/and all the people in it./All set.” The repetition of the word “all” with its long “a” lengthens the two short lines so they sound drawn out.

The tension in the poem is created by the voyeurism of the younger brother watching his older brother and father throw a football after he has been sent to bed. A second layer of tension is added by the more mature narrator with his knowledge of the inevitable passage of time. The ending, inspired by Howe’s unexpected endings, returns to the boy at the window, to suggest that the now—even if it is a memory—is more important than the philosophical musings of an older poet-speaker-narrator. These types of endings serve to combat Mark Doty’s idea that contemporary poets are concerned with thinking in the moment; even if “Late August, Fading” is based off a memory, it returns to the moment of the poem, the now of the then. The missing period at the end was a purposeful choice meant to blend that memory-moment with the now-moment, in which I—the-poet am writing about me-the-child.
The Wild Cowboy Poet of the West—Dickman’s Voice

Another force that inspired the voice of this project was Matthew Dickman. Dickman’s twin brother Michael is also a poet, lending the familial overtones I sought to focus on in my work. Matthew’s collections *All-American Poem* and *Mayakovsky’s Revolver* are filled with such energy and tenderness, such personality, that I immediately took him on as an influence. In “All-American Poem,” he writes about America, its “Public Parks,” and the Southeast Portland neighborhood, “Lents District.” In *Mayakovsky’s Revolver* he writes from the experience of losing his older brother. A Portland, Oregon native, Dickman’s voice is at once breezy and coarse; his poems read like a smoke-break conversation outside of a bar in winter. In a review of *Mayakovsky’s Revolver*, Evan Hansen writes, “he shares the banal, sweet, ugly and idiosyncratic details of his life with his readers, curating and modulating them with a conflicted internal monologue.” Compared with Howe, Dickman’s voice sounds distracted, with less of a linear progression, but with much more energy. If Howe’s poems are a whisper, Dickman’s are a shout in the street.

Take for example his poem “All-American Poem,” from his collection of the same name. With 258 lines, it is a short epic that encompasses references to all 50 states and much of American pop culture:

*We were young and mean*

*and thought it was funny. You can go from one town square to another and never fall in love.*

*Even in New Hampshire where people *Live Free or Die.**

*What kind of life is that*
when you’re on the road and the woman
next to you is hardly there hardly speaking, her feet
on the dashboard like two very different promises.

The voice is a bastard child of Dickinson’s sharp revelatory wit and Ginsberg’s “Go, go” Beat attitude. I tried on that voice in “Thank You for Visiting,” a poem about a cross-country camping trip I took with my brothers. I used the dash mark to keep the rhythm suspended. It divides the images but also continues the flow of the line. This was meant to evoke the feeling of images blurring past the window of a car on the highway across America: “We raced the Illinois coal trains into the clouds—finger-traced the veins of road through/America—drove the seams of your quilted farm back—took sunset photos of wheat-gold hills.”

Dickman uses apostrophe to address a mysterious second person with whom he will travel to the 50 states he names. The “you” serves as a fixed base on which to revolve around—a place to return to after each state. I used apostrophe to address the state directly, both as a way to challenge the limits of poetry, but also to bring out the short-comings of the state without facing repercussions: I can call Indiana “tall and skinny with/nothing to say” and tell Nebraska that it is “nothing but flat night,” in a way that the reader understands the fact that the goal was Wyoming and anything in between just wasn’t good enough.

Dickman’s “In Heaven,” the introductory poem to Mayakovsky’s Revolver, is a litany of negated details breathlessly paced with only commas as road signs. “No dog chained to a spike in a yard of dying/ grass like the dogs/I grew up with, starving overfed, punched in the face.” The poem is a continuous list of dissociative images
that swirl inward like a chambered nautilus until the epiphanic ending: “no north/or south, just us standing here together, asking each other/if we remember anything, what we loved, what loved us, who/yelled our names first?” (4). The poem expands outward with a universal blank setting, supposedly heaven, and then changes the personal pronoun to “we.” It is appropriate that the poem ends in questions that lead the reader to find them in the poems that follow.

Because I found Matthew Dickman’s work so early in the writing process, I pilfered heavily from his “In Heaven,” and mirrored it by replacing images with those from my own life experience. Whereas Dickman’s “In Heaven” is a continuous litany, mine became a conversation between lyrical images and literal language. My poem begins with “No more village of stars;” and the second stanza changes tone with the less figurative “No more slipping beers after parents fall asleep.” This dichotomy allows the poem to work on two levels: the aesthetically pleasing imagery and more jaded experienced voice. Additionally, the literal tone change evokes a deeper, more mature voice; this speaker has grown up since “Late August, Fading.”

All in all, the voice of the poem is meant to reflect the tone. In “Without sense enough to stop,” the form echoes the falling sensation that is the subject of the poem. What begins as longer lines, up to five syllables, becomes letters per line by the end of the poem:

I fell

knowing what comes
after

You
and the dark pocket
I
was falling into.

The form and spacing affects the reader on a subconscious level, and makes the reader understand the falling sensation; not only is he or she reading it, the reader is also feeling it. In “Staying Alive,” a poem about resuscitation, short punchy sentences reflect the chaos of the moment in direction-like detail: “Find the sternum, press 1-2 inches, rhythm of staying alive, staying alive.” Here again, the hurried voice creates a visceral yet subconscious reaction in the reader to help evoke the sensation of the moment. This kind of evocation of “Without sense enough to stop” and “Staying Alive” is precisely what Doty refers to in his preface, a “presence on the page meant to be an experience in itself,” which can still be created if the subject is derived from personal experience.

*Thank You for Visiting*

The title of the work comes from the poem of the same name, the first in the collection. It recalls the signs on a highway when entering and leaving a state, and evokes a feeling of simultaneously looking forward and backward. “Visiting” implies leaving, but of course the traveler is crossing a border into another state, thus entering a new one. For me, this title captured both the colloquial and travel-energy tone of the collection, as well as the sense of looking back and my time spent “visiting” everything I’ve known as home so far in my life. There is also the promise
of a new state, a new place, a new home, as I am on a similar border between states of my life: looking back before making a leap forward.

At the risk of divulging too much, the section titles “A Sense of Place,” “America's Son,” and “Staying Alive” all group together similar poems under the themes of home, masculinity, and resuscitation, respectively. “In Heaven” contains one poem to close the collection with its last lines that promise a gentle untethering: “Away from all the things that keep us tethered here to keep us from slipping back into whatever dust or darkness or light we came from.” It ends the collection not speeding off into the unknown, but slowly, like a hot-air balloon rising.

I would like to thank Jody Rambo, whose patience and insight breathed life into these poems. Also my Honors Thesis Committee, Professors Mike Mattison and Brenda Bertrand, who provided a constant promise of readership. Finally to my family, to whom these poems are dedicated and who are such willing and unknowing subjects of my writings, and thoughts.
Works Cited


for bob, steve, robert and ruthanne.
A SENSE OF PLACE
Thank You for Visiting

Ohio, it took less than 45 minutes to leave you.

Indiana, you are so like the girl from Fort Wayne I dated for a weekend—tall and skinny with nothing to say—we three Werner brothers hadn’t even changed drivers when we left you too.

We raced the Illinois coal trains into the clouds—finger-traced the veins of road through America—drove the seams of your quilted farm back— took sunset photos of wheat-gold hills.

Arched over the Mississippi for the first time not in a plane on a white bridge listening to the While Album—Found dinner and I-80 in Davenport and contemplated jazz—whether Yoda could beat Obi-Wan in a light saber match—Iowa, we finally ran out of road-signs to spell the alphabet with.

Nebraska we drove your corn-straight roads—passed the trucking company that shares our last name a little past 4:00 a.m. in a celebratory wail of caffeine, loud music and cold air—Stephen asleep in the backseat, face on the window fogging, dreaming of med school—I drove, taught Bobby constellations through the moon roof, Gemini the inseparable twins—Nebraska you are nothing but flat night.

The sun rose at the foot of Wyoming—Overnight, truckers became cowboys—we traversed, red-eyed, the great red dirt—Wyoming, your pronghorn lined the highway to welcome us, we had waffles in Cheyenne—crossed the Great Divide like the Oregon Trail and nobody died of Dysentery.

America I am thinking of cold camping mornings, moose sightings, and 10-day beards. I am thinking of the wide expanse of Tetons, brothers of stone, behind us in the rear view mirror, the 30-hour drive home, and what long and separate lives lay ahead.
The Local Watering Hole

You would have thought by the faces of the women in line, who clutched their purses a bit tighter, who eyed us over sips of the Grande Mochachinos,

soccer mom SUV’s tethered to parking lot lampposts outside, that we were ancient deities of a forgotten mountain tribe,

halcyons of the immense bluebird sky, worshiped in cathedrals of stone, or the ghosts of Clint Eastwood—the good, the bad, leave the ugly.

Mountain fur on our chins, hands calloused from rock, chalk stained pants. Our hair sweat slick. Arms and faces burnt red. Rope burns wrapped tight.

You would have thought that we were there to shoot up their Starbucks—Exit 13 off 1-74, Peoria, Illinois, home of the middle of nowhere—You would have thought

that we were the reckoning, the atonement for their sins, forgetting to take the trash out, missing a PTA meeting. Our snow prints long since melted. Our routes re-climbed. The tent refolded. Still wet, in the trunk, that immense sky now contained

in memory alone. We became just two brothers in line for coffee as we saddled up to the cashier. Two venti lattes—three dollars and fifty cents each.
Press Conference for Neil Armstrong

Mr. Armstrong, this Ohioan wants to know: was your childhood really dull enough to want to leave earth for the moon?

Did you tire of explaining where Wapokaneta is— Just south of Lima on 75?

Did the stars at Indian Lake call to you over a dying bonfire in the summer?

Or was it that you secretly wanted a dialect? To hear and imitate the silent star speech— Something to come back to show you were different now?

Were the woods not easy enough to get lost in after school that you had to go 238,900 miles just to not see the homes in your neighborhood through the trees?

Was your suburban upbringing universal enough to speak the first moon-steps of man?

Could you look over your shoulder on the rocket, watch the barns become flat roofs become forests become clouds become a green and brown geographic map become a globe become a pale blue pea?

As you stood up there blotting out the Earth with your thumb, did Ohio look still like a heart?
Ohio Means Hello

is what they tell us in 4th grade Ohio history,
wear paper headbands, feathers sticking out.
It sounds surprised—we are shocked that you are here!
The state motto is “With corn all things are possible,”
the state tree, the corn tree.
Our first words are knee high by the forth of July
and should we ever stumble into a highway diner just outside of Circleville,
that is exactly what we say to the regulars.
To say that Ohio is flat would be to say
the oceans are merely drops of dew on the land.
Just to be different, we made our flag a pennant.
We’re like that. We are the heart of it all,
or so our license plates tell us, and when America pledged its allegiance to itself, right-handed
Michigan covers us like a mitten.
Thus was born the rivalry.
If you forget how to be from Ohio,
we built in a failsafe:
the color of our state university is blood. If you don’t like the weather, stick around,
it’ll change soon enough.
The highway construction though, you’ll have to get used to.
The three biggest cities all start with “C,”
to make up for the fact that we only border a lake. Which is eerie.
I am telling you this because it could have been different.
Maine or Massachusetts might have raised me—
I might have leaned into a nor’easter wearing a yellow poncho in rain boots.
But as it is, I am inclined to do gymnastics in my yard on the first day of spring,
when things begin to look alive and construction begins again.
Let us all have a sense of place.
Let us all be from somewhere.
AMERICA’S SON
Portsmouth Naval Hospital, 1959

If you could see me,
looking over your shoulder now as you write
I would say there's no “j” in “surgery.”
You’ll need to know, it’s what you’ll do someday.

And since you asked, your sisters are fine—
One will admit later
she missed you while you were away.

Your mother is fine too, for now
I’m sorry, but you’ll need to get used
to missing her.

For now you need to close your letter—
the doctor will soon be in
to check your spelling and stitches.

and not even I, your son the poet
could have written in simple child-scrawl:

“Yours,
until the ocean wears pants
to keep it’s bottom dry.”
Foreign Wars

After twelve years, the treehouse he built
had become a Forward Operating Base
for so many imagined Green Berets.

The window he cut was angled just so,
To offer sweeping views of inbound enemy targets.

But of course he would have known that,
Having been a radio Marine in Korea.

It would have come naturally
As he sawed the wood, to imagine
soldiers invading our Ohio woods,

only it was my brothers who were invading
with water balloons and toy guns,

wearing his nameplate on a green shirt—
tattered from three Korean winters.

Twelve years later,
the greying wooden planks now littered
with Ohio snow and metallic bb pellets—

spent shell casings
of our own foreign wars.
Because This is a Poem

There is a picture never taken of my grandfather
forever in Navy blues on the back of a submarine at sea.

And because this is a poem and I have never met him,
I climb through the frame and am behind him at the hatch.

We make our way to the bridge and dive
through oceans of time,
48 years of dust,
back into his existence

because the ocean is a darkness he can rise from.
And because this is a poem,
we are both smoking.

We surface in his greenhouse in Cincinnati
in a watering can left amid rows of hyacinths.

I will pretend to be a customer in need of flowers
for a birthday—my mother’s,

and he will point me with his cigarette fingers,
his hair curly like mine to the lilies,

“They are my wife’s favorites.”

My not-yet mother will be there too,
wearing jeans as always and my brother’s red hair.

“They're my favorites too,” she’ll whisper,
not recognizing my eyes because they are my father’s,

excited to pick me the ones already in bloom.
Recipe for a Father

Because characters are made of contradictions—or so a professor once told me—I am getting out a blender and in it I will put

A tablespoon of that illegible handwriting on a lunchbox note, “Go for greatness” we thought it read, With your delicate hand for cornea surgeries.

The recipe says 3, but I will add 2 cups of your meticulous diet and, just for you, an extra box of your favorite brownies: Betty Crocker red box, 9x13.

I will add one teaspoon of the following: Your skin cancers and sunscreens, 50 s.p.f at least. Your daily Diet Mountain Dew and the history of alcoholism in your family.

Your kidney stones, the scars that removed them, and your daily three litres of water. Your hatred of Indian food and weekly trips to Skyline Chili.

Your love of Tom Brady and inability to sit through a football game. I will hold the button then pour you into a mold that I can recognize you in,

frustrated at the computer, struggling to download a Peter and Gordon song off iTunes.
Biography of Dust

I never realized until I sat here, dust falling like snow on my desk, that the reason we never knew that my grandfather thumbbed across the country chasing a girl was because of my grandmother, who was not that girl.

And when she had died, and when we had buried her, and when he finally left the house, we slowly gathered stories, swept them into a dust pile life.

Unmentioned are the truck bed conversations and diner dinners, even the name of the girl, all snow prints, slowly melted out of his memory, swept away.

Only the simple cinematic fact remains that it was done, a plaque of a paragraph to record its completion. And if you were to, like a curious young cousin,

drag your finger across this dusty desk, your finger could contain a cross-section of a life: the front door kicked in by a drunken father. A marble lost in a sewer. A rejected proposal.

You could even write your name in it, say I was here, and watch more story flakes fall lazily into the little clean lines your fingers left.

For this is why we collect dust, let it settle on bookshelves like stories in those pages. So we can write our name in it. Say that we were a part of it. We were here too.
Our American Cousin

I.

They waged the Civil War over the breakfast table, and in their only
time onstage together, Edwin, the depressive older Booth, the northerner
by blood and birth, played Brutus. Johnny Reb, fire-feathered
with the ambition Casear died for, played Antony, friend to the tyrant.

But it was John who stood behind Caesar and shot him with a .44
who fell to the stage in his father's spurs, shouted “Thus always to tyrants!”
It was John who died in a blazing barn whispering “Useless. Useless.”

II.

After April, it was Edwin who was and was again 100 Hamlets,
drowning the stage in tears with more than just what seems.
Caul-bearer, born under a shower of stars the Prince of Players, marked
by the brute of a brother. Anyone anyone would know him better.
One night crushed Yorrick's skull—Here's rosemary for remembrance. I do not,
do not, do not know him. In vulture hours he chewed his heart, a self induced madness without
method to it. I am not, am not, not his brother.

III.

After thirty years without mentioning his name, let “John” slip
at a Christmas party, displaced the mirth, and returned to his room.
Edwin died ten years later, a picture of John still at his deathbed.
Late August, Fading

they toss a football in the purple not-yet-night.

Still bright enough for the brother to watch from his window, sent to bed twenty minutes before.

Before the fireflies came out to blink and the stars after them.

Even stars, billion-years old, are pulled westward and slip gently over the horizon

Just like that summer, that school year, that house and all the people in it.

All set— the boy to wake up the next morning, the sun so the moon could rise to take its place.

But for now the boy watches from behind the blinds and tries to hear their conversation
STAYING ALIVE
Staying Alive

I am thinking of the way a man's body flails through the air when ejected from a motorcycle, like a doll with flailing arms, the thud like a rag flung soggy to the floor.

The way he laid lifeless on our lawn, unmoving as the mannequin my mother taught me to do CPR on, his head convulsing with her compressions, a crowd of boy scouts leaning over, focused, hoping someday for a voluptuous blonde in dire need of resuscitation.

My blonde was a 43-year old male with alcohol on his breath. Dad ran from the house like a California lifeguard, Stephen behind him. Still unmoving, ambulances still 2 minutes out, Stephen cut away the grey Bengals t-shirt and took over compressions:

Find the sternum, press 1-2 inches, rhythm of staying alive, staying alive.

One hand over the other, Stephen's thumb-scar on top, slit by a Spaghettio's lid, skin glued back together by doctor Dad. A pool of B positive blood and Spaghettio sauce. Who knew our blood would be the same shade of red?

Tell you what, the policeman said as they wheeled him, shirtless but now breathing into the ambulance, he sure did pick the right yard to land in.
Life Studies

Anne Sexton started her car in the garage and got to the afterlife without hitting afternoon traffic. Robert Lowell. In a cab. From a heart attack.

On his way to see his ex-wife. I have never been to an asylum. Then there’s Nicolas Plath who hung himself in Alaska, though Sylvia saved him from the gas when she put her own head in the oven. Haven’t been to Alaska either. The bottle led John Berryman to the Washington Avenue Bridge and pushed him off.

I’ve never been to Minneapolis. Sharon Olds, I have not lost my father. Marie Howe, I have not lost my mother. They are both in Cincinnati and we call on Sundays.

Matthew Dickman, my brother did not cover his body with pain-relief patches, he is with you in Portland. Maybe you will meet him and his brown dog, Lucy.

The other is studying medicine, life saving, how to pull Berryman off the bridge, resuscitate Sexton, talk Plath away from the oven.

And I am writing poetry, putting my head in the oven to retrieve a warm casserole.
Lefties are Alright

I want to ask Da Vinci how he learned to play tennis, or how he learned to write backwards because when my father tries to teach me, his hands are opposite and my ink-blue wrist never finds the right grip.

Maybe Toulouse Lautrec can solve my scissor problem, but the prostitute he is sketching is tapping her toe across the room, already impatient from work.

There’s Bill Clinton, but he’s no role-model for how to hit a golf ball without the wild spin pulling it to the right, while my right-handed brother shoots straight every time.

Franklin and Jefferson are too busy pointing at a statue of Napoleon, his unused right hand in his jacket. Twain is packing his pipe with an untold joke, Goethe scribbling mad German beside him, Kafka took a wrong turn in Prague.

Surely one of them will know why my mother put the spoon in my brothers’ right hands and why they can open a can on their first try.

Still, it was her left hand, undeterred by her nuns’ rulers that turned the pages of books she read aloud. And now it is my left hand that writes these poems, smearing them with ink as it passes over the words.
Dinner with the Shakespeares

A few scraps of pot roast soak in the juice on their porcelain serving plate. Mary, simple and plain as her name, burps a one-year old Edmund on her lap. John threatens Richard with a spanking for spoon-flinging his peas. Richard denies any involvement. Joan and Gilbert, only three years apart in school together, are fighting, neither knows what about.

William, the oldest at 16, peas in his water cup, ink stain on his hands, wants to go back to writing his brothers into infamy.

But he sits and politely waits for the ghosts of his three older sisters in the corner to finish eating their eternal daily bread, Soup-gruel lifted from the afterlife, spoon to lips, spoon to lips.
For a Winter, Waiting

For a winter a box sat on a shelf in the closet.
Red and lacquered with a gilded gold latch, I wanted to open it,
I wanted to see what it contained— the bits that never burn,
like memory and teeth, which do not scatter in any wind or grief.
More than once that winter I thought I felt a wet nose prod my hand, curious,
Or saw her black shadow in an empty room.
For a winter, while we waited for the ground to thaw—
she was right where she should have been.
Not in the closet but under the table as we ate,
the brush of her tail a phantom tinge of a limb now missing.
Ordinary Time

It is the third Sunday in Ordinary time
you are in the first pew, congregation watching
The priest in front, behind him a crucified Jesus.
Mary looks down from the right, snake at her foot, crushed.
Your father is riveted, whispering along to the prayer,
But he stretched out his hands and endured his passion
Your brothers fight for elbow space on the other side of Mom
and you are flipping through the thin pages of the missalette,
wondering what it would be like
to be a turtle in a shell hit by hailstones.
**Blue**

Night is not black, but blue
which is why we pull it up to our chins and rest in it.

It is the hottest color of flame
and the color Mary wears as she coddles her infant.

She is calm and tranquil and soft
but on the visible light spectrum,
Blue uses so much energy it is invisible.

It is the color of my eyes
and my mothers’ too,
and according to her grandmother’s journal,
our Alsatian ancestor as he takes off his hat to wipe his brow,
so many years before us, ‘so blue and inviting.’

Blue is the ink that writes these poems,
slowly, word by word.

It can be brightened or dimmed but stays always the same,

blue is a feeling we get, and what we sing
to no longer feel it anymore.

The majority of my wardrobe is blue,
as if to say I am safe and loyal and calming

yet fiery and energetic,

like the sea, and the sky
as the sun drops into a deep blue night.
Without sense enough to stop

I dove—
and not into the deep end.

Sank
into the Marianas,
pulled slowly
under—

felt
the sawing
tide force its resistance,
tugging and heaving—

the weight of it
all, irresistible,

the coldness of the depths
that have never seen
light—

without enough oxygen
or even understanding why

I fell

knowing what comes
after

You

and the dark
pocket

I

was falling into.
IN HEAVEN
In Heaven

No more village of stars, no more impressing girls by knowing them. No more impressing, No more girls—we are the stars and the girls too.

No more slipping beers after Dad falls asleep, no more Hallmark cards on holidays, no more reading all the cards at Meijer.

No more bees staggering drunk into summer Solo cups to drown—We are the bees, wings wet and sticky, drunk in a pool of our own choosing, but never alone.

No more kitchen never big enough, no more dust on the low keys. Piano music through the vents. Cadence of our father coming down the stairs ankles cracking, clear his throat. Fur Elise or Beatles playbook so used that “Let it Be” fell out.

Or poems, no more elegies or odes thrown down like breadcrumbs to the birds, no more. We are the bees together leaving the hive. Away from beneath the stars and in Solo cups drowning. Away from Hallmark and “Let it Be.”

Away from all the things that keep us tethered here to keep us from slipping back into whatever dust or darkness or light we came from.