The Public

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ABSTRACT

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The dissertation is divided into two sections: an essay titled "Reality Checks: Direct Questions, Shifting Voices, and the Poetic Intrusion" and a book manuscript titled *The Public*.

"Reality Checks" examines the poetic strategy of posing a particular type of direct question, which often represents a shift in the controlling voice of the poem. These shifts or intrusions disrupt the composed surface of the poem while acknowledging a reality outside of the poem's constructed lyric space. The essay looks at the ways this strategy works to navigate the gap between the world of the poem and the world of lived events using poems by Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, and Elizabeth Bishop.

The Public is a collection of poetry that explores the complex relationship between the individual and the collective and the possibility of shared experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PART ONE: REALITY CHECKS:

DIRECT QUESTIONS, SHIFTING VOICES, AND THE POETIC INTRUSION

This essay looks at the poetic strategy of posing a particular type of direct question, what I am calling a poetic intrusion. These intrusions disrupt the composed surface of the poem while acknowledging a reality outside of the poem's constructed lyric space.[1] The intrusions often appear as a shift in the controlling voice. As a starting point, it will be useful to look at an example of this type of voice and its function. T.S. Eliot employs a self-correcting voice of this kind at the start of the second section of "East Coker."

> What is the late November doing
> With the disturbance of the spring
> And creatures of the summer heat,
> And snowdrops writhing under feet
> And hollyhocks that aim too high
> Red into grey and tumble down
> Late roses filled with early snow?
> Thunder rolled by the rolling stars
> Simulates triumphal cars
> Deployed in constellated wars
> Scorpion fights against the Sun
> Until the Sun and Moon go down
> Comets weep and Leonids fly
> Hunt the heavens and the plains

[1] Lyric as term or genre resists easy definition. Stephen Burt, in a recent review of New Lyric Studies, builds from Roland Greene's definition: "Lyric, in the term's central, durable sense, tends or aspires to replace the live, mortal, present body of one person present in one place at one time (the body of the poet or the body of the reader or the body of the singer or the body of somebody who has been addressed) with something else (impressions or inscriptions or spirits or memorials or 'poetic artifice'), by means of a variety of forms and tropes, to a variety of emotive ends (commemoration, ecstatic joy, frustration, thanksgiving, reflection and so on). Though broad, this definition is helpful in the way that it separates the actual or "the present" from the poetically constructed. The constructed world of the poem as opposed to the lived world of events will serve as a working definition of lyric space.

> Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
> The world to that destructive fire
> Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.
>
> That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
> A periphrastic study in worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings.

After the stanza break, a vastly different voice enters to comment on the lyric description that precedes it, which creates a sense of the speaker as a divided presence. The shift in the speaker's attitude calls attention to the artifice of the poem and its poetic language. The self-awareness of the disruptive voice and its ability to comment on the poem as a poem, suggests that the voice exists somewhere outside the lyric space; it suggests the presence of an alternate self. In effect, it blurs the line between speaker as persona and speaker as poet. Samuel Maio, in his book *Creating Another Self*, argues that, in a poem that features a first person presence, the poet "consciously or not, substitutes for his or her literal, historical self a *literary* self as voice of the poem, one that is sincere but not altogether authentic" (2).[2] The example from "East Coker" highlights this tension between the literal self and the literary self. The intrusion critiques the first passage for its "worn-out poetical fashion," in other words, for its literary construction. The intrusive voice, then, is more closely aligned with the literal self of the poet, as it turns away from the literary persona and toward reality. This division between an external reality and the lyric space is central to the effect of the poetic intrusion. Eliot's intrusion is a moment

[2] While Maio is not unique in investigating the relationship between poet and persona, the first chapter of *Creating Another Self* provides an insightful survey of twentieth-century thinking about the role of persona, including a discussion of Eliot and his "impersonal theory of poetry."

within a larger poetic project; nevertheless, it provides a basis for the discussion to follow and demonstrates the way a shift in voice can introduce complexity that works to resituate the lyric space.

Robert Frost's "The Exposed Nest" relates a past experience between an "I" and "you"—a father and child—as the pair attend to a "nest full of young birds" that has been "left defenseless" in a freshly mowed field. After hesitating over whether or not to "meddle" with the nest, they decide that action is worth the risk and re-cover the nest to provide the birds with some shelter. The speaker of the poem, the father, then disrupts this recollection.

> The way the nest-full every time we stirred
> stood up to us as to a mother-bird
> Whose coming home has been too long deferred,
> Made me ask would the mother-bird return
> And care for them in such a change of scene,
> And might our meddling make her more afraid.
> That was a thing we could not wait to learn.
> We saw the risk we took in doing good,
> But dared not spare to do the best we could
> Though harm should come of it; so built the screen
> You had begun, and gave them back their shade.
> All this to prove we cared. Why is there then
> No more to tell? We turned to other things.
> I haven't any memory—have you?—
> Of ever coming to the place again
> To see if the birds lived the first night through,
> And so at last to learn to use their wings.

This question that moves the poem from past to present may be broadly categorized as what Michael Theune labels a turn, that is "a significant shift in the poem's rhetorical progress" (9). Editor of the anthology *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns* whose contributors examine various types of turns, Theune notes that these poetic turns

"can be narrative or dramatic, subtle or radical. A turn might signal a shift from premise to conclusion, but it also might mark the transition from set-up to punch line or from one emotional state to another" (11). More specifically, the structure of "The Exposed Nest" resembles the type of turn Mark Yakich, in his contribution to *Structure and Surprise*, calls the retrospective-prospective structure. Yakich defines this sort of poem as having

> a two-part structure that begins with a retrospective consideration of the past and then concludes with a prospective look at the present, or even with a prediction or hope for the future. The first part of the structure deals with something that happened in the past or with memories of past events. […] The second part of the structure expands on the first part by bringing the poem into the present moment. This involves some kind of revision, realization, or new action based on the past. (61)

Yakich goes on to claim that the "retrospective-prospective structure provides a strategy for organizing" memories and aligning past selves. The question that moves "The Exposed Nest" from past to present grapples with memory but does not go so far as to recommend "revision, realization, or new action." While it attempts to reconcile the past with the present, it also questions the ability of the poem to provide this type of reconciliation. The question ultimately resists such prospecting and turns toward a more matter-of-fact reality. This movement enacts what William H. Pritchard identifies as Frost's tendency for "turning to other things" (153). Of "The Exposed Nest" Pritchard notes "there could have been as much to 'tell' as Frost the poet had cared to invent. Not

to invent it, but to leave us and the speaker grasping for something more, is another instance of attractive realism" (153).

Moreover, the poem introduces reality and the perception of reality as a central concern from the beginning.

> You were forever finding some new play.
> So when I saw you down on hands and knees
> In the meadow, busy with the new-cut hay,
> Trying, I thought, to set it up on end,
> I went to show you how to make it stay,
> If that was your idea, against the breeze,
> And, if you asked me, even help pretend
> To make it root again and grow afresh.
> But 'twas no make-believe with you today,
> Nor was the grass itself your real concern

The poem can be read as a meditation on the relationship between parent and child as the child grows up, matures, and approaches adulthood. Frost attends closely to this shifting awareness of the world, to the difference between an adult's and a child's perspective. What the father assumes is the child's experience of "play," "pretend," and "make-believe" is contrasted with what turns out to be the "real concern" about the "defenseless" birds that follows. In recognizing this shift in perception, the father qualifies his assumptions about the child's experience: "I thought," "if that was your idea," "if you asked me." These hesitations give the voice its conversational, storytelling feel; they also reinforce the father's initial desire to continue to see the child's actions as child-like. He is ready to join in the "make-believe." He is ready to turn away from reality. In other words, he wants to construct a "screen" between his child and "too much world." The narrative of the pair's interaction with the nest becomes a parallel for the parent-child relationship: the need of the father to protect the child, the concern about too much

interference, the want to do good. As Pritchard observes, it is easy "to imagine the possible kinds of archness and coy self-congratulation a less subtle writer than Frost might have lavished on such materials" (152).

"Why is there then / No more to tell?" the speaker asks. Frost uses the poetic intrusion to avoid potential sentimentality. This shift in voice punctures the significance attributed to the past moment, deflating the lyric space. Frost resists the poem's trajectory toward emotional simplicity. The figurative relationship between the nest and the child and the father could be left intact as a one-to-one metaphor without complication; instead, Frost uses the structural strategy of the question to introduce complexity.[3] The self-aware question recognizes the possible limitations of ascribing easy significance and turns toward reality. Like Eliot's shift in "East Coker," the invocation of an external reality calls attention to the separation between the self as speaker and self as poet. "There is such a thing as sincerity," Frost writes in one of his notebooks, "It is hard to define but it is probably nothing more than your highest liveliness escaping from a succession of dead selves. Miraculously. It is the same with illusions. Any belief you sink into when you should be leaving it behind is an illusion. Reality is the cold feeling on the end of the trout's nose" (qtd. in Campion 423). Frost's idea of escaping "dead selves," avoiding "illusions," and turning toward "reality" is clearly pertinent to "The Exposed Nest." The question that bursts into the poem with "liveliness" intends to leave the past self in the

[3] Kevin Prufer in his essay "Sentimentality, the Enemy?" defines sentimentality as "the enemy of emotional complexity." The essay appeared in *Pleiades* as part of a "Symposium on Sentiment."

past. It resists the impulse to view nature as a reflection of human emotion.[4] The question recognizes the possible indifference of the natural world to the pair's efforts to prove they cared. In this, it resists a literary portrayal of nature and moves to embrace a more realistic view of the world.

The initial intrusion is followed by a direct address to the child that reinforces the impression of an external reality.

> Why is there then
> No more to tell? We turned to other things.
> I haven't any memory—have you?—
> of ever coming to that place again

Up to this point, the "you" exists in the space of the memory, primarily as a character and not necessarily as a collaborator in the construction of the poem's narrative. Ostensibly, the poem is addressed to the child from the beginning, but when the speaker asks, "have you?" it brings the child into the present moment. Unlike the initial question, which seems more rhetorical in nature, this second question almost expects a response. Frost makes the "you" tangible as a figure that has implied influence in the poem's composition, as if the "you" is sitting at the poet's side while he writes. In the final two lines of the poem, Frost returns to the lyric moment, but it has been recast within the present reality: "To see if the birds lived the first night through, / And so at last to learn to use their wings." The speaker returns to the comparison between the birds and the child within the frame of the question—the child growing up, leaving the nest, gaining independence—but because the poem has been disrupted the comparison gains new

[4] This idea recurs in Frost, for instance "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" and "The Most of it" among others.

significance. It is marked with the understanding that reality, in this case the reality of the natural world, is uncaring and will continue on indifferently. In this understood reality, the defenseless birds likely did not survive the night, yet the speaker allows for the possibility of their survival. Within the situation of the poem, the father is still generously shielding his child from the reality of the world. The significance of this gesture is deepened because of the dramatic shift in voice, which allows for the entry of this reality.

Important to this discussion of the tension between the world of the poem and reality is Robert Lowell, whose poetic career trajectory has been described as "a narrative toward authenticity," "as tracing a course from the heavily clothed and indirect to the naked and direct; from 'art' to 'life'; from the masked to the unmasked; from imagination to memory" (Gray 224), and as a "slow, painful, and sometimes frightening journey toward […] physical actuality" (Breslin 111-112). The final poem of his last book *Day by Day*, "Epilogue," is representative of this ongoing conflict. The poem runs as follows:

> Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme—
> why are they no help to me now
> I want to make
> something imagined, not recalled?
> I hear the noise of my own voice:
> *The painter's vision is not a lens,*
> *it trembles to caress the light.*
> But sometimes everything I write
> with the threadbare art of my eye
> seems a snapshot,
> lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
> heightened from life,
> yet paralyzed by fact.
> All's misalliance.
> Yet why not say what happened?
> Pray for the grace of accuracy
> Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
> stealing like the tide across a map

> to his girl solid with yearning.
> We are poor passing facts,
> warned by that to give
> each figure in the photograph
> his living name.

Lowell creates a dialogue—an argument, essentially, between his past and present selves—with which he seeks to reconcile his poetic process. He can no longer rely on "[t]hose blessed structures, plot and rhyme" nor "the painter's vision." Such poetic constructions seem inadequate, unable to represent reality, to contain life. Lowell bemoans the distance his poetry creates from the real world as its representation appears simultaneously "threadbare" and "garish," "heightened" yet "paralyzed by fact," a representation mismatched to the "physical actuality" of the world. The speaker presents these struggles as a back and forth shifting of depressive mindsets until he reaches a breaking point: "All's misalliance." The speaker is on the verge of giving up, of relinquishing, any faith he has in his ability to align the world of the poem with the real world. The poem pivots on a question that enters the poem as if from an alternate self: "Yet why not say what happened?" The question repositions the speaker's stance. Lowell wants to believe—hopes, prays—that his art, like Vermeer's, can capture life with some "accuracy." The shift in attitude is minimal, but the speaker opens to the possibility that there is value in poetry that attempts to present "the facts." The intrusive voice represents a turn toward reality; more specifically, the voice represents a turn toward a belief in the possibility of presenting reality in poetry. George McFadden describes "Epilogue" as a

> write-off of the 'snapshot' approach, and a recognition that the poet's eye without the poet's ear is a weak resource, and that without memory—the

> dimension of time and life, of identification and meaning—the image is static, fixated, factitious, and unliving. Besides accuracy (sharp immediateness) grace is needed, loving recognition like a caress from the poet's art. (252)

It is not clear that Lowell is as resolved in his poetic approach by the end of the poem as McFadden claims. While he regains a measure of hope, Lowell seems more resigned to the necessity of the snapshots in representing our lives as "poor passing facts," while still allowing for the poet's role in naming or shaping the image. However, the distinction McFadden makes between the static image and the desire for movement as created by the "poet's art" is useful in thinking about composed reality.

A similar division between movement and stasis occurs in William Carlos Williams's "The Right of Way." Here is the poem in its entirety:

> In passing with my mind
> on nothing in the world
>
> but the right of way
> I enjoyed on the road by
>
> virtue of law—
> I saw
>
> An elderly man who
> smiled and looked away
>
> to the north past a house—
> a woman in blue
>
> who was laughing and
> leaning forward to look up
>
> into the man's half
> averted face

and a boy of eight who was
looking at the middle of

the man's belly
at a watch chain—

the supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them
without a word—

Why bother where I went?
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

I saw a girl with one leg
over the railing of a balcony

Williams contrasts the motion of the speaker with the snapshot perceptions of the people he passes. As Heather McHugh writes, "The poem's speaker speeds by in his vehicle, and as he does, he sees the world in fragments, in frames—still-frame glimpses that result from his own motion. The glimpsed people achieve a kind of stillness, becoming almost mythically representative" (210). This ordinary scene strikes the speaker as poignant or potentially poignant. In this momentary perception, he is tempted toward epiphany, to seeing "supreme importance" in the scene, to applying, perhaps, "a caress from the poet's art." The question turns the poem away from this meaning making: "Why bother where I went?" Like Frost's—"Why is there then / No more to tell?"—Williams's question disrupts the lyric space of the poem. It provides a corrective to the applying of "supreme importance" to this image. Even though the question ostensibly dismisses the

commonplace circumstance of the poem's situation, it directs the speaker's and the reader's attention toward reality as reality.

Williams introduces the speaker's state of mind in the poem's first lines, which is important because it frames the issue of perception and reality. The idiomatic description of the speaker having his mind "on nothing in the world" creates a double meaning. It initially suggests that he is unconcerned with the world, and the canniness of Williams's line break, placing the phrase on its own line, adds to this impression. The second meaning is nearly opposite. The speaker, in this sense, is focused on only the moment, the present, the driving. Whatever colloquial informality the opening couplet attains is quickly undercut by the much less casual phrase "by / virtue of law." The phrase suggests he is enjoying "the right of way" as a result of the law or as a consequence of the law. It also calls to mind the more rigid expression "by the virtue of," which implies moral righteousness. In either case, it is fairly strange, if the speaker is to be taken at his word, that he should be driving around thinking of traffic laws. The speaker's attention to the law points to his desire for orderliness. He is comfortable in a world where everything is as expected, where everything is in its place. On this day, on this drive, the world is as it is meant to be: governed by law. More than that, the law places the speaker in a position of power. He enjoys the right of way; in passing he is separated from the world outside his car, which makes him an observer rather than a participant; he is positioned as an arbiter of reality.

"The Right of Way" is a poem, critics agree, about the gaze of the speaker, about looking and seeing.[5] Jon Chatlos argues "the structure of the poem is a 'watchchain': an eyeline match in which the motorist watches the old man, who watches the girl (and the reader watches the motorist watching)" (146). The three figures that the speaker observes are also in the process of looking as they are being looked at. Perhaps the speaker finds importance in this frozen moment in the act of looking, but Williams does not clarify. The final image of the poem, too, in its ambiguity invites speculation but resists convincing explication. McHugh suggests the girl may be read as an "erotic figure," an actual amputee, or a "potential suicide" (213-14). Chatlos acknowledges that "[i]t is difficult to say what the leg over the balcony means. Is the girl displaying herself? Is she climbing over the balcony? If so, why? Is she sitting, poised over the railing? Does she have one leg or two?" (143). However, reading the poem as a turn toward reality removes the necessity of imagining narrative scenarios for the girl, scenarios the poem cannot and may not want to support. What is known, though, after the question disrupts the lyric reverie, is that the speaker goes "spinning on." As he drives, he continues to take in the world "until" he is presented with another still-frame. The "until" does not necessarily suggest a final destination but another opportunity at perception. The lack of punctuation at the end the poem reinforces the sense that the girl is just another perception in a series of perceptions; there is no definite closure. This time a statement of a grand significance does not accompany his snapshot of the girl with her leg over the balcony. This is precisely the point. The speaker wants to see the girl as she is. The line break reinforces

[5] Chatlos surveys a number of these critics in "Automobility and Lyric Poetry: The Mobile Gaze in William Carlos Williams' 'The Right of Way'."

this, allowing the speaker and the reader a kind of double take. It creates an image that is seen and then re-seen, and the sense of the image is clarified. The speaker partially sees her, possibly in a way that suggests "spectacle," but then he refocuses and sees her for what she is, ordinary, with no larger significance.

Like Williams's driver, Frank O'Hara presents a speaker in motion in "A Step Away from Them." Critics have noted the connection between Williams and O'Hara.[6] Of their literary relationship, James E.B. Breslin writes,

> Williams is one of the few American poets who meant a lot to O'Hara, but if we contrast O'Hara with Williams, we see how steadfastly O'Hara refused to eternalize his objects. Williams slows us down and concentrates our attention on both the object and the words representing it; his poems present isolated images arrested in an empty space. The object has been lifted out of the temporal flux and preserved in the 'eternal moment.' […] What is preserved in O'Hara is precisely this fleeting, ever changing experience of temporal process itself. (218)

In "A Step Away from Them," O'Hara constructs the present moment, as he records one of his lunch hour walks. The poem begins:

> It's my lunch hour, so I go
> for a walk among the hum-colored
> cabs. First down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty

[6] David Herd's essay "Stepping out with Frank O'Hara," which compares O'Hara's and Williams's prosody, and Paul R. Cappucci's book *William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, and the New York Art Scene*, among others; not to mention O'Hara's faux manifesto "Personism," in which he lists Williams along with Crane and Whitman as the only American poets "better than the movies."

glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust.
                On
to Times square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.

O'Hara delights in the sensory experience of the street and the "hum-colored / cabs," of the people, the laborers, the skirts, of Times Square, of "Neon in daylight." His detailed perceptions and "I do this, I do that" conversational style produce an effect of simultaneity: "Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of / a Thursday." O'Hara locates his speaker in the world of events, in a specific time and place. He deliberately cultivates an appearance of both superficiality and actuality. Superficial in that for the first two thirds of the poem he offers almost nothing but observation, nearly unfiltered perception. There are cues that point to the interior life of the speaker, but they are minor qualifications and judgments, little reminders of the speaker as physical presence in the space. Of the construction workers' helmets he notes "They protect them from falling / bricks, *I guess*." He introduces Edwin Denby and comments harmlessly that a lady should be wearing foxes "on such a day." There is a sense of the speaker's personality, of

his presence, a real person in the real world, but it is an external presence. An internal voice disrupts this reality:

> There are several Puerto
> Ricans on the avenue today, which
> makes it beautiful and warm. First
> Bunny died, then John Latouche,
> then Jackson Pollock. But is the
> earth as full as life was full, of them?
> And one has eaten and one walks,
> past the magazines with the nudes
> and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
> the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
> which they'll soon tear down. I
> used to think they had the Armory
> Show there.
> A glass of papaya juice
> and back to work. My heart is in my
> pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

O'Hara interrupts the poem's associative momentum to reflect on his friends who have died. The nonstandard phrasing and unconventional line break force the reader to pause and consider its emotional significance. The question is almost self-consciously lyric. The elegiac yearning is undisguised, but the sentimentality of the question is offset by the structure of the turn. The turn functions in a way opposite to those in "The Exposed Nest" and "The Right of Way." Here, the intrusive voice carves out a lyric space from a representation of reality, rather than reality imposing itself on the lyric space. The abrupt disruption calls attention to the division between present reality and the interior world of the poet. It modifies tone and breaks the self-developed structure of the poem. It raises emotional stakes in a poem that, up to this point, had operated at a surface level.

The stream of detail picks up again, hesitatingly. The "I" briefly gives way to the third person "one," and the speaker questions the reliability of his perceptions,

remembering that he had been mistaken about the location of the Armory Show. Micah Mattix claims, "the fact that he [O'Hara] becomes interested in other things and is involved again in his experience suggests that, on this particular day, the earth is full of life enough to counterbalance his feeling of loss and that temporal experience is not one of loss and decline" (Mattix 79). The poem quickly concludes as the speaker heads back to work. Breslin suggests that the "weighty issues" of mortality and existential purpose are "simply dropped" (219). The conclusion of the poem may also be read as a reaffirmation of a belief in life and of a belief in art to provide fullness to life even as the speaker leaves the vibrancy of the city and returns to work (Mattix 79-80). What is important to note is the way O'Hara blends the internal and external in the final sentence: "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy." He simultaneously presents an emotional expression and the literal object of the book. Like Lowell in "Epilogue," O'Hara is able to momentarily align his inner world, his heart, with the real world. This simultaneity is made possible by the earlier turn that worked to call attention to the division between interior emotional life and reality.

Elizabeth Bishop's "Santarém" presents another variation of the poetic intrusion. She disrupts the expectation of the lyric space with a question and statement of uncertainty in the first two lines:

> Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
> after, after—how many years?
>
> That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
> more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile
> in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon
> grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.
> Suddenly there'd been houses, people, and lots of mongrel

> riverboats skittering back and forth
> under a sky of gorgeous under-lit clouds,
> with everything gilded, burnished along one side,
> and everything bright, cheerful, casual—or so it looked.
> I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
> Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
> from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
> and they'd diverged. Here only two
> and coming together. Even if one were tempted
> to literary interpretations
> such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
> —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
> in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

The question, underscored by the stuttering repetition of "after," suggests a mind outside the poetic frame groping for truth. Of the opening lines Thomas Travisano writes

> Such self-interruptions and self-questionings, common enough in Bishop, have generally been read as disarmingly candid, off-the-cuff disclaimers, dropped into descriptive lyrics by a modest poet obsessed with factual precision. […] Bishop's opening gesture melds a seductive casualness with a quite uncanny level of self-consciousness and sophistication, creating an artistic resource of great subtlety and surprising power. (181)

If her uncertainty is effective in creating a conversational voice for the speaker, it also raises some doubt as to the speaker's trustworthiness, the reliability of her memory. However, it quickly becomes clear that the speaker has descriptive control over the scene she wants to relate, and the opening two lines are positioned counter to the lyric voice—a lyric voice that is able with apparent accuracy to depict the "mongrel / riverboats skittering back and forth / under a sky of gorgeous under-lit clouds." The self-questioning voice resurfaces as the speaker wonders about the rivers in the Garden of Eden. Bishop

self-consciously calls attention to the poem's artifice, to its literary construction, as she opposes literary interpretations: "even if one were tempted / to literary interpretations / such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female / —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off / in that watery, dazzling dialectic." Essentially, the realness of the river scene's reality resists metaphor or symbolism and interpretation. In this assertion, Bishop questions notions of perception and reality. As the poem goes on, she further questions the authority of the observer, of the tourist, of who finds beauty in what.

There is, in fact, a third voice that can be identified in the poem, not including the bit of dialogue from Mr. Swan at the very end. There is the lyric voice, the self-questioning voice, and the third voice that might be called the factual voice, which seems to have some historical and present-day knowledge of the place.

> Two rivers full of crazy shipping—people
> all apparently changing their minds, embarking,
> disembarking, rowing clumsy dories.
> (After the Civil War some Southern families
> came here; here they could still own slaves.
> They left occasional blue eyes, English names,
> and *oars*. No other place, no one
> on all the Amazon's four thousand miles
> does anything but paddle.)
> […]
> A river schooner with raked masts
> and violet colored sails tacked in so close
> her bowsprit seemed to touch the church
>
> (Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before
> there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd
> been struck by lightning. One tower
> had a widening zigzag crack all the way down.
> It was a miracle. The priest's house right next
> door had been struck, too, and his brass bed
> (the only one in town) galvanized black.
> *Graças a deus*—he'd been in Belém.

The presence of these three voices creates tension as Bishop repositions herself in relation to the scene. Travisano describes this tension as a combination of "conventional narrative elements with the subtle but pervasive evocation of the mind in action, of surreal or dream textures, of temporal multiplicity or simultaneity, of poly-vocality, and of a deliberate acknowledgment of process" (182). Bishop shifts easily between these multiple modes. The factual voice has access to information, sometimes peculiarly specific information; it speaks plainly and with a matter-of-fact confidence as it presents the cultural and linguistic history of the place; it also somehow knows there is only one brass bed in the town. The lyric-descriptive voice evokes the speaker's emotional attachment to the place; it endeavors to capture and convey the beauty of the "raked masts / and violet-colored sails." The self-questioning or self-correcting voice raises small reminders of a reality outside of these voices: "her bowsprit seemed to touch the church / (Cathedral, rather!)." This is the second time the speaker has had to remind herself that it is a cathedral and not a church. This time the correction is made more insistent, and funnier, by the exclamation point. The correction points to a desire for precision, but it also introduces the presence of messy reality just outside the frame. It disrupts the perception that the world of the poem—the lyric descriptions, the facts—can contain and accurately represent reality. Like the opening hesitation, it intrudes upon the composed surface of the poem.

In the final stanza, Bishop turns toward a physical artifact, like O'Hara's book of poems by Reverdy, that becomes a stand-in for her internal emotional response to the external world.

> In the blue pharmacy the pharmacist
> had hung an empty wasps' nest from a shelf:
> small, exquisite, clean matte white,
> and hard as stucco. I admired it
> so much he gave it to me.
> Then—my ship's whistle blew. I couldn't stay.
> Back on board, a fellow passenger, Mr. Swan,
> Dutch, the retiring head of Phillips Electric
> really a very nice old man,
> who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,
> asked, "What's that ugly thing?"

She admires and receives the wasps' nest from the pharmacist as a reminder of this town on the river, as a souvenir. Even as it is "exquisite," it seems plain compared to the earlier descriptions of the "sky of gorgeous, underlit clouds, / with everything gilded," the "dark-gold river sand / damp from the ritual afternoon rain," and the "violet colored sails." The wasps' nest is "matte white"; it has none of the living color which the lyric voice uses to describe the river scene. The speaker sees beauty in the wasps' nest, but it is not the same lofty beauty as before. After the shifting attitudes of the poem, she has settled on a more realistic perspective. She turns toward reality, but does not fully release her attachment to the poetic beauty of the place. She still values and finds significance in the wasps' nest. Bishop gives the last blunt word of the poem to practical-minded Mr. Swan: "What's that ugly thing?" With this question, he flattens any lingering lyricism the speaker might retain. In effect, Bishop takes the poetic intrusion a step further than Frost, Lowell, Williams, or O'Hara. She situates Mr. Swan's intrusive question within the speaker's turn toward reality, a turn within a turn. Bishop calls attention to what the poem has in some ways been grappling with throughout, the subjectivity of individual perception. But by using Mr. Swan for this final intrusion she puts the reader in a position to choose a side:

Is Mr. Swan to be judged as a tourist lacking any ability to appreciate beauty? Is the speaker exposed for her trivial attachment to what very well may be an ugly and impractical souvenir? Perhaps it is enough to be made aware that both might be true. The poetic intrusion serves as a reminder that ugliness lurks just outside of beauty and that reality hovers around the edges of the lyric space.

The poetic intrusion is one strategy for navigating the gap between the world of the poem and the world of lived events. The direct question tests the limits of a poem's artifice; it has the potential to blur the line between poet and persona, introduce complexity, and resist sentimentality. As a structure, its abrupt appearance functions on the level of content and also as formal interruption. The poems discussed in this essay each use an intrusive turn in slightly different contexts: Frost confronts the distinction between a moral act and an indifferent natural world; Lowell between poetic belief and despair; Williams between motion and stasis; O'Hara between grief and the surrounding city; and Bishop between beauty and its appreciation. However, the end result is similar. The intrusions acknowledge the presence of a reality outside the composed lyric space of the poem, creating tension, making the poem more immediate, shrinking the gap between the poem and the world.

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PART TWO: THE PUBLIC

Waiting Near Traffic

Three cars go by with ladders
tied, strapped, tethered to
their roofs, not a caravan—
the cars don't appear to be
together as a group with a
common destination—but
they pass within a window,
say ten minutes, close
enough to make the small
town morning feel industrious.
The implication is clear – today,
we're striving; we're reaching
for the unreachable. Well,
ladders only reach so far, so
we're likely reaching for clogged
gutters, burned out bulbs,
peeling paint, dead and dying
branches. With our ladders,
we're maintaining, which can
sometimes feel like striving,
but it's not. Before long
a trailer truck goes by
with a load of picnic tables
stacked up on its flatbed—
maybe eight tables, wood,
unpainted, benches on both sides.
The message is obvious—
life's no picnic. The picnic
and its tables are being hauled
somewhere away. OK,
that's not quite right. There are
sometimes picnics, or even
often picnics, to be had while
maintaining, while doing our
best to keep life's gutters clear.
And if the picnic is being hauled
away it also will have to be
somewhere delivered. The truck
has to stop. Maybe it has stopped
already, up the way a bit, not too
far, waiting, just within reach.

Adult Children

Not another day, not another day,
my brother-in-law likes to grumble
in the morning dark, with closed eyes,

as the set alarm calls for some kind
of waking response. My sister tells me this
while we're home together for a week

visiting my parents and the way she tells it
is funny, as it's meant to be, as my
brother-in-law means it to be because

we're fine—my sister, her husband, myself—
in our early thirties our worries are mostly
comfortable about the jobs we have,

the children we still hope to have. From where
we sit in my parents' house, we can watch
the waves on a winter Lake Michigan

move thickly, as if we can see the water
reassembling itself into ice, caught
somewhere in the process of becoming.

From where we sit, it would be easy
to see significance in this, to see
ourselves, adult children home with our lives

to be again family, reflected back in this
reassembling, in this in-between state.
Our dad likes to say, time is not

a renewable resource. If we weren't
worried about obvious sentimentality,
this too could be layered onto the lake

between shore and horizon, as we age,
as our parents age, as the water
continues as water does. Actually,

I'm not sure that I've ever heard
our dad say this, but we like to repeat it
as something he once said and we laugh

because it's sad and urgent. On different
shores at this very moment there are lives
being lived that are much harder than ours.

We know this. Just as we know that it is
hard to consistently act on this knowledge.
We say, how do you think Dad's doing?

We say, about the same, which we realize
is not as good as it was. Of course,
Lake Michigan is big enough that,

if we were so inclined, we could imagine
it stretching on into the distance forever,
we could allow ourselves to believe in

what we know is not true. If we were so
inclined I imagine we could find
comfort in an expanse so terrible.

Production

On television, the crowd boos their team
in collective dissatisfaction;
they are upset as fans together,
unified in their importance,
in the game's importance.
The commentators say something
about a *chorus of boos* because
there are only so many things to be said.
A wide shot of the arena establishes
the size of the crowd and captures
the swell of displeasure, and
then the camera cuts to a close-up
of the bench, a player, a coach.
In this moment, and just for a moment,
there's an imbalance in the audio that pulls
a single booing voice into focus. The boo,
secure in its assumed anonymity,
now isolated sounds strained and nothing
like the whole. In its passion, if it seems
angrier and uglier, then also more pitiful,
unaware that from the many small voices
joined together to be heard, it alone
has been exposed, and, as the broadcast
breaks for commercial, erased.

Late Fall, Late Afternoon, Late Light

And I want to be in the middle of a field
throwing a football, playing catch. I don't know

who's on the other end, feathering passes
back and forth. I want it to be everyone.

Maybe we'll get a game together. I picture myself
as myself, not younger. Not as a kid with my dad

after he's raked leaves and cleaned the storm windows.
Not in Andy Hondorp's big front yard. Not in

Prospect Park between trees or in the low empty
lot on 26th Street next to the creek that cut through

the neighborhood. Not anytime but now.
The cloudless cold presses a little on exposed

skin. We'll warm up. Someone will say *go long*
and I'll run a lazy post, a half-step fake to the outside

then turn it in and turn to look back. I'll raise an arm
to let everyone know I've shaken free. I'm open.

I'll find the spiral in the gathering sky and begin
to run, to really run, to sprint, sure that I'll

cover the distance, that I'll put my hands out into
the emptiness and pull something back.

Lesson

It used to be when washing my hands
that I would turn on the water, wet
my hands, reach for the soap dispenser,
return to the sink, wash, dry, and be
done. I guess it was this way
for a long time, a routine, done without
thinking. Now, when washing my hands,
I sometimes think of this encounter
with a custodian in a bathroom
in a university building in North Carolina.
It happened to be just the two of us. I was
in graduate school. The custodian was
a black man, thin, in his 50s maybe.
Does it matter that he was black?
I don't know. It's just that he was.
He was sweeping up, with a broom
and one of those dustpans at the end
of a long handle. I was at the sink.
Not like that, he said. *You all do it*
the same and look it, a mess
all over the counter. You get the soap
first and then get your hands wet.
Soap then water. Soap water.
He had set the broom and dustpan down.
He mimed the action twice for me.
It would be too much to say he was
angry. *And you don't get water all*
over everywhere. I would say he was
insistent. I don't think I said anything
more than OK, and I meant it. He tore a strip
of paper towel from the dispenser on the wall
and began to wipe the counter clean.

Grace

I fell down the other day
for what felt like the first time
in a long time, like skinned elbow,
skinned knee, fully stretched out
on the ground fell down. I was thinking
about basketball in Bhutan. I was running,
not fleeing or chasing, just exercising.
I had read an article earlier.
Basketball in Bhutan started as a royal sport,
a sport for royals, and has only
recently gained popularity with citizens.
Because of this no one plays much defense.
There's little contact. No one wants to
foul the king. How lonely this must be,
I thought. I was running on a path that follows
the river past some Little League fields
and an obstacle course where a man
was pulling himself up a rope. I used to play
in a weekly pickup game at a Mormon church.
I'm not Mormon, but we'd gather
at midcourt of the carpeted activity room,
a hoop at either end, and one of the guys
that was Mormon would say a prayer
before we started, some combination
of thankfulness and keeping everyone safe.
It felt good to have this idea of protection
as we played, as we scuffled our way
through rebounds and elbows and screens and hands,
convincing our bodies of their resilience.
One of the last times I played
in that game, the guy who led the prayer
sprained his ankle; before that it seemed like
he called everything a foul
whether he'd been touched or not.
As he grabbed at his ankle,
having caught his foot on the carpet
while going after a loose ball,
I wanted to say, Was *that* a foul?
Are you ok? is what I said. He was helped up.
Ice was found. He sat out while we finished playing.
See you next week, he said,

as we left. Good, next week, I said.
If I run for long enough I can almost forget
about the solitary effort of motion
and it becomes a gliding kind of absence
that is not lonely but also is. I had been running
for almost an hour when I turned a muddy corner
back toward town and sprawled out
onto the paved path. Almost as quickly
I was up, mostly reflex, mostly unhurt,
mostly surprised at the unexpected contact,
at having fallen down in the world, at how good it felt.

Delivered

I'm traveling and need to travel
lighter so I ship a package
across the country to myself.
I fill out my name twice. Neatly
creating two versions of myself:
one here and one there, eventually.
Somewhere behind me in line,
a woman sneezes. The man
behind the counter says, "I salute you."
"Thanks," the woman says. "See,
I'm not religious," the man says to me,
"So I don't say *bless you*."
"I see," I say. I guess I do,
but I see it mostly as an opportunity
for the man to announce
his position on religion,
a small explanation offered
with every sneeze, a small
claim of identity with every salute.
He appears satisfied. It takes me two days
to travel home. It takes the package
three. I don't think much
of the package as it goes, as I go,
parallel paths at separate speeds.
I don't think much of sent and received,
of who's arriving where and when.
I don't think much of the difference.

How It Works

The older man in the bathroom at the South Carolina rest area
lets me finish up at the urinal before he says, “Pretty hot
out there today, huh?” It seems to me the heat is less here

than it was on the coast; we’re inland but still on the coast
compared to the middle of the country somewhere, and
I don’t know which direction the man is traveling from or to.

“Pretty hot,” I say. The conversation goes as these conversations
go through hand washing and drying, an interaction
with clear edges because soon we’ll both walk out into

the relative heat and sun and get into our separate cars and
merge into fast traffic as if we’re experts, as if our destinations
are assured. I push open the bathroom door then follow the man

out into brushed sunlight. He walks with a shuffle, and his hair
is white beneath a baseball cap that doesn’t represent
a team but an organization. Our small talk is not disagreeable.

“What’s your name?” he asks. There’s no hurry. “Patrick,” I say.
“Patrick, can I ask you something.” It’s not a question.
The highway traffic feels not too far off. “Patrick,

can I pray for you?” The question doesn’t change much
about our passing relationship as strangers, so I say, “Sure.”
He says, “Hold on, let me write your name down.” He pulls

a small notebook and short pencil from somewhere, flips
through pages filled front and back with names, finds
a partially blank sheet, and begins to scrawl unsteadily

at the end of the list. The skin on his hand looks too thin
as if blood might push its way to the surface.
“Last name?” “Swaney,” I say. He sort of grunts.

I spell it for him. He finishes. There’s no blood on the paper.
“I’ll pray for you,” he says. “All right,” I say, walking away,
ready to be out of the sun and the heat that is not so bad

as it was on the coast and moving again, to join up
with the anonymous stream, all of us getting somewhere.
“Will you pray for me?” the man calls out. This is how

it works— we’ve engaged in some kind of commerce,
bought and sold— every name in his notebook, a prayer
in exchange for another prayer. The man is stockpiling,

saving up. He’s surrounding himself in a protective layer.
Will you pray for me? We will continue to move apart,
from this moment to other moments each without

the other, collecting names, swapping small talk,
believing what we can, more or less convinced that what
we mean will be understood, so there’s no need to say no.

Make Sure You're Right

I found the cornhusk Davy Crockett
figurine, at a country store.
I carried the figure to the register
and the woman working said,
"Oh, how nice! Daniel Boone.
Would you like a little bag for him?"
She began to wrap him in newspaper.
"Sure, a bag," I said.
There's a moment
in one of the old Disney movies,
the ones where Fess Parker plays
Davy Crockett, when Davy says,
"Make sure you're right,
then go ahead." He probably
says it with a squint and an affected
Tennessee drawl, all blackberries
and pebbles—the way he says
purzackly instead of exactly,
and *reckon* in just a such way,
and *tarnation*. If I remember
correctly, Davy's been volunteering
for the army, tracking Injuns
through an alligator swamp, and wants,
more than anything, to get home
to see his wife and kids for a while.
But the army captain needs his services,
tries to stop him, lines up
a row of uniformed soldiers with guns
and at least one cannon aimed at him,
curses him as a backwoods devil
as Davy calmly rides out of camp
with his men and his mind made up.
That's Davy for you all right.
Pretty much
all I knew about Davy Crockett
came from those Disney movies.
But I reckoned I knew enough. OK so,
I didn't know the first time
I watched the one where Davy
joins the fight at the Alamo
that as the movie fades to black,

to *The End*, as Davy swings the butt
of his spent rifle, trusty ole Betsy,
at General Santa Ana's men
who just keep hauling themselves
over the mission walls, as we look
up at him from below and he's looking
stubbled but handsome and certainly
not defeated—I didn't know the closing scene
meant death, that Davy was dead at the Alamo.
My mom had to tell me.
For a few years
I wore a buckskin-looking outfit
that my mom sewed for me, fake
coonskin cap and all, for any available
occasion. On Halloween, of course,
I went door to door and was
crushed a little bit each time I held out
my candy bag and the adult inside
the door said, "Who do we have here?
Daniel Boone?" For a history presentation
in school: "Come on up here,
Daniel Boone," the teacher said.
Not Daniel Boone purzackly, I wanted to say,
but I didn't. I just gave my speech
on some aspect of America's
past that only vaguely warranted my attire.
As if Daniel Boone was the only
frontiersman to wear buckskins
and a coonskin cap. Wasn't Davy Crockett
a congressman? Wasn't he a friend of
the Injuns and the white men alike?
Didn't he race a riverboat down
the Mississippi? Didn't he have
a friend named Georgie who sang
songs and spun yarns about his
adventures? Didn't he kill himself
a b'ar when he was only three?
The hell with Daniel Boone and his
Cumberland Gap.
"It's not Daniel Boone,"
I said to the register woman, polite but

with my mind made up, “It’s Davy Crockett.”
“That’s just fine,” she said, handing
me the little bag with the little
cornhusk figurine inside, “just fine.”

Bathtub for a Giant

We walked into Lake Michigan until the water
was chest high. We ran in place, and twisted
and churned the soft sandy lake floor, clouding
the clear surface, carving out individual craters
until the water was neck and chin deep.
We caught a little water in our mouths
and spouted it out in no direction.
We stepped out of the holes and stepped
back in to feel how it felt and we agreed
from here that the shore and the horizon
looked different than they had before.
We stepped out of the holes and feigned
falling off some deep edge, oblivious.
We feigned struggling, one arm and hand
above water, briefly a head. We were kids.
We said help and save me. We laughed.
We said the lake could be a bathtub for a giant
and this was not funny but also not not funny
to picture the world on a more manageable scale.
We wondered how long it would take
for the small waves, if they stayed small,
to fill in the small holes we were standing in.
Not long, we decided. Less time if the waves,
as they threatened to do, became big
and then bigger waves. And if the waves
became so big that they spilled over
the container of the lake, what could we do?
We'd call this new bigger lake the lake, the new
shore, the shore, the horizon, the horizon.

We Love the Animals

At first the squeaking sounds mechanical
like it might be the refrigerator or the box fan

in the window or the dehumidifier in the basement
until I find the cat I'm keeping temporarily

pawing at a baby-like mouse as it hugs
the wall of the living room.

I briefly wonder if I should let her kill it.
For the cat, for now, the mouse is just a game,

so with a bowl and a flattened cereal box
from the recycling I capture the mouse,

still alive and intact, and let it out into the night
where it either survives or doesn't.

//

The burdened hero tells the group of survivors
they will have to use knives to kill the already

dead on the zombie show I'm watching. No
more guns. Ammunition must be conserved. Yes,

I think, nearly nodding in agreement from my couch,
this is prudent. Another zombie is gored through

the eye with a kitchen knife – blood, skull, sucking
flesh sounds – I wince a little but empathize

with the tough decisions and the instincts.

//

Ben and I are drinking beers in his July backyard.
A guy he knows comes by; he's an artist,

and he's excited because he just bought a handgun.
"Here, check it out," he says. "I'm all right," I say,

but he holds it out to me anyway. “Don’t be afraid of it,”
he says. I don’t move to take it from him. “What’re you

going to do with a gun?” I ask. “Protect myself,” he says.
“You’re going to shoot somebody?” “Yeah,” he says, as if

it’s obvious, which maybe it is, “if I have to.” Ben agrees,
“If someone messed with my family,” he says.

“I don’t know,” I say. The gun gets put away and we go back
to just drinking. Eventually we leave the safety

of his backyard and head downtown to meet some friends
because what’s there to be afraid of anyway.

//

I know one mouse means more than one
mouse, and after the cat moves out, I ignore
the mice until I can’t anymore.

You say: “You should buy the no-kill traps.”
I say: “Then what? I release them somewhere?”

You say: “Yeah, drive out, outside of town, and let them go.”
I say: “Yeah, I’m not going to do that.”

You say: “I worry they’ll suffer.”
I say: “It’ll be fine.”

//

The man on the reality show in the exotic desert location
kills a snake, peels the skin from the flesh, ties off

the skin sack at one end, pees into the open end
then ties that off so he has some sort of snake-skin-

tube-sock-bota-bag that he drapes around his neck
like it’s a small towel from the hotel sauna

and walks through the desert for the day until the threat
of dehydration has been demonstrated and he sloppily

drinks his own urine. And I think, well, if I had to.

//

This time it sounds like someone rattling
the shower curtain's metal hooks. And then

nothing. Rattling. And then nothing. I get up from bed.
In the kitchen, the mousetrap is flipped

upside down so I can only see the tail and the back
legs of the mouse. I stare at it, unsure, confused

with sleep. My hands feel empty so I grab
the broom and plastic dustpan and hope the last

rattle was the last rattle. I prod the overturned trap
with the broom bristles. The mouse flits and twitches

and the trap rights itself and the little white belly
breathes in and out and in and out and I understand

that I'm supposed to kill it because I'm trying to
kill it and I don't know what to do.

//

Jillian and I drive from Denver to Phoenix
for a friend's wedding. There are road signs

that say *Winds May Exist*. On our way home
we see the Grand Canyon and get pulled over

and let go in Utah. I'm still driving somewhere
outside of Grand Junction on the backside of the Rockies,

near two in the morning, not far from the exit where
we're planning to stop for the night, on the three lane

highway that tips over in front of us like an empty cup
when a coyote flashes in the headlights. It stands

in our lane for an instant, and then it doesn't anymore.

I let out a scream and Jillian says it’s ok it’s ok it’s ok,

but we don’t stop because there’s nothing to be done.
When we get to the hotel, we both creep around the front

of the car, crouching low, afraid of what we might see,
what might still be attached. The license plate

has been ripped away but that’s all. When I tell and retell
the story, the punch line is the way I reenact my scream,

a rising, wide-eyed, open-mouthed wail; I hold it
for a while extending the absurdity, and everyone laughs

and I laugh and laughing I say, it was awful.

If Dogs Run Free

A caterpillar outside my bedroom window lifts
half of its caterpillar body from a fence rail.
In a fuzzy twirl and thrust it pokes and jerks
at the air. I stop watching. I meet you later
and we walk uptown past the girls in tight pants
and boys with no sleeves to see a not-so-bad movie
about a woman with multiple personalities.
She calls them *alters*. The disorder is now
called dissociative identity. The movie
is a student film, a thesis screening,
not finished yet. We have some suggestions.
The student and the woman are there and
take questions. *What was the process like?*
someone asks. *Was it therapeutic?* We take
pictures on our way home, and you say don't
cut your hair just yet, and I say, ok. We step
around broken bottles on the sidewalk.
We know that someday we will look young
in these pictures. We make dinner. On the stereo,
Dylan plays in the background, "If Dogs Run Free,"
and I remember my friend David—he never
liked the album version of the song, thought it was
ridiculous. Why did he think that? David lives in
Mississippi now. I want to call and ask him
about an alternate take. When he sings
Why not me? it almost seems like he means it,
right? But I don't call because I haven't talked
to David in years and he probably wouldn't answer,
and, anyway, sincerity is difficult to define.
It's tempting to cover earnestness with
strangeness. It's going to be sunny all week,
you say, before we fall asleep, which seems
like something we can plan for. If it weren't
already dark, I would look for the caterpillar.
It could be wrapped up in a cocoon by now
and well on its way to becoming a butterfly.
It could be, but it is probably still a caterpillar
certain that it can be anything it wants.

Little Household Things

It's been an evening of little household things
after a day of rain, hard rain sometimes,
sometimes thunder. I finish washing dishes,
empty the kitchen trash, take the garbage
to the curb. I'm in the basement pulling
laundry from the dryer when a tree branch,
dead and sodden, rumbles through green
leaves and living limbs to my driveway
where the trash cans and I stood
minutes earlier. Upstairs I look and see
broken leg-length pieces of branch.
I consider chance. I fold my laundry. Before
I can worry too much about fate and possibility
I find myself fighting with a drawer as I try to close
t-shirts into the dresser, and frustrated
because it's come out off-kilter, half in, half out,
and not on its track, and stuck and jammed up,
fucking drawer motherfucker, and, well,
I eventually get the drawer closed. I calm down.
I feel fine or foolish or distracted.
I think tomorrow I'll wear my favorite shirt.
The trash will be picked up in the morning.
I'll clear the dead branches from the driveway.

Errands

I'm at the Kroger in Athens, Ohio buying
Budweiser and the cashier in the express
checkout lane looks at my ID
and she says "I remember your birthday."
Well, I'm not sure how this is possible
because I don't know this woman
so I say, "Yeah?" "Yeah, I do," she says.
She kind of mumbles it
and then is quiet and then
tells me the total.
All I'm buying is the beer
so I'm paid and well on out of the chute
past the rental carpet cleaners
near the newspapers when I realize
that her memory is not me.
I stop. I have an urge to let her know
that I get it, that I hope what she remembers
is something good. But did she mean
the exact date, day and year and everything,
that she remembers a particular day
thirty-two some years ago?
Can that be right?
I try to think of a specific date
when something really good happened
to me. I try to think of any date at all.
She must not have meant the year. But
she didn't say, "You have
the same birthday as my son,"
or daughter or husband
or whatever, or "Your birthday is my
wedding anniversary." "I remember
your birthday" must mean
some kind of personal
tragedy. It was almost
involuntary, like the memory
was faster than the impulse not to share.
Or she wanted to share and wanted
a response, wanted a response from me.
I said, "Yeah?" which sounds uninterested,
impolite, possibly insensitive.
She looks up.

Have I been staring?
She gives me a muddled look, squints,
or she gives a squinting look in my direction.
I shift the weight of the beer.
I hear the sliding doors sliding. She turns
to pull the next customer's groceries
from the rolling belt.

Saturn

The rocket pinned to the edge
of Alabama has been to outer space,
has propelled men to the moon. No,
that can't be right, not this exact rocket,
but a rocket exactly like this one
has been to space, has burned
its way into orbit. Leftover
and donated, this real rocket
stands as a symbol of other
more real rockets. This one
is here rising straight up over
the tall pines, but no farther,
welcoming travelers traveling
north to south. Some people stop,
get out of cars, and in awe-filled
voices say, *Would you look*
at that goddamned rocket?
These people take pictures
and read the plaques, learning
about a corner of the lives
that were tethered to rockets
just like this rocket, the missions,
the exploration, the bravery.
These travelers walk up
to the chain link fence
topped with concertina wire
that separates this rocket
from the world. They look
and in looking they almost see
the rocket as it was, as it might
have been. They see *USA*
streaking up its side, ready to
launch; they try to imagine
its heroic size and weight
leaving the ground behind,
riding an impossible line of fire.
They hesitate, disappointed
by the reality of the rocket's
sedentary condition. They see
the weather stains, dirt and
weak spots, a steady drip of water

from some unseen source;
they see the cables that keep
the rocket bound to its concrete
slab. *Sure is a lot of bird crap,*
they say, turning back to their
lives, their cars, taking a last look,
unsure of what it is to be remembered
like this, of what it is to be
remembered. Back on the road,
they travel alongside the people
who didn't stop, who passed
only with curiosity that a rocket,
any rocket, should appear
in this place, and the people
who, through learned familiarity,
saw the rocket as no more than
landscape, all of it seamless
and unremarkable, everyone
hurtling toward a destination.

Lonnie

Lonnie welcomed us
when we arrived
at the French Market Inn
in New Orleans. He moved
our bags from the lobby
to our room. He didn't
make it awkward as we all
stood inside our room and
I tipped him in what I hoped
was not an awkward way.
He gave us a voucher
for a free glass of wine
at a nearby restaurant
that we didn't use.
He did this because it was
his job. He seemed good
at his job. We liked Lonnie.
Our eight-year-old, Sehr,
in particular, liked Lonnie.
For the few days we stayed,
he said *I hope Lonnie's working—*
do you think Lonnie
will be working? as we came
and went, and when
Lonnie was working
he was friendly in return.
Lonnie mussed his hair
and called him buddy
in a clumsy cadence
that seemed to leave out
the *little* from little buddy:
How's it going today…
buddy? You just call Lonnie…
buddy, if you need anything.
It was a practiced kindness,
but it was also kind.
Lonnie gave Sehr
a couple of plastic toy army guys
he found behind the front desk.
Sehr told Lonnie about
the beignets we ate. After that

Lonnie would say *Hey there…*
buddy, you bring Lonnie
any of those beignets?
which made Sehr laugh
and next time we were out
Sehr said *maybe we could get*
Lonnie a beignet? but Lonnie
hadn't been working that day,
so we didn't. One night
I came through the narrow lobby
alone on a quick errand.
Lonnie was there. I raised
a hand to wave, started to nod
hello, and we looked at each other
and then nothing else,
no pleasantries, no Lonnie smile,
blank, abrupt, nothing.
Lonnie turned back to whatever
he was doing behind the little
podium welcome-desk as I passed.
I knew not to feel disappointed,
tried not to feel foolish
for expecting the same greeting
he gives to an eight-year-old.
I knew there were so many
possible reasons why this
exchange wasn't anything
more than it was. I also knew
that I didn't know anything
about Lonnie as a person.
I never would know Lonnie,
which sounds so horribly
naïve, so obvious in a how-much
-can-you-really-know-anyone?
kind of way. If I tried to imagine
Lonnie's life it would only be
guessing: Lonnie as a black man
in New Orleans, in his forties?
who works at a hotel
in the French Quarter, the nightshift
sometimes, who is friendly
to eight-year-olds, who maybe has kids
of his own, maybe a wife, maybe
he's divorced, separated, doesn't see

his kids much anymore, I don't know.
I could've asked him. Should I have
asked him about himself? I didn't.
I was left feeling a kind of regret
I knew was silly to be feeling.
Some sadness that I had to be
reminded of what I already knew:
that Lonnie was the doorman,
that we were guests, that this
is how we knew each other.

Red Red Wine

On one of the coldest days,
the men come in from some
kind of steady outdoor work—
surveyors for the city maybe
or maybe working on the water
main—for lunch in the almost
empty bar. They unlayer and sit
six across, order burgers
and sodas—no beer; they
will have to be back at it before long.
They send minor talk of the world
up the bar and back, pay some attention
to the TV near the ceiling and its
soundless analysis of off-season
baseball. They eat. They nod
to the bartender for separate checks,
reach for wallets, lay cash on the bar,
and as they wait for change
to be made one of the men begins
to sing along to the music that's
been playing unnoticed in the background.
He sings softly to UB40 singing
Neil Diamond, just to himself—
don't let me be alone,
it's tearing apart—singing that's
careless in its earnestness, singing
because he knows the words
and there must be a reason
he knows the words.
The man next to him notices
and this awareness spills
down the bar, but before they can
form a reaction, the man catches on.
He turns the song into a small
performance, an exaggerated
closing-time shuffle for a few
measures. The men laugh, satisfied.
The man stops singing; he's in
on the joke. The light reggae carries on.
The group leaves tips for the bartender.
They gather their gloves and things to go.

Pressure Connections

Inventory

The factory is a factory near other factories,
in a stretch along the highway. The lettering
on its sign flexes like knuckles on a fist:
Pressure Connections. The factory
manufactures, well, pressure connectors, little
metal threaded valves in brass or stainless steel,
adapters, fittings, barbs, that adapt, fit and flange,
seal, groove and swivel, that connect pipes to
other pipes, pipes to hoses, hoses to other hoses,
and so on. This, in every variation, in three ceaseless
shifts, is all the factory makes. The factory supplies
what the churn of the modern world demands.
Because the modern world for all its
technological modernity is industrial, after all,
and even if it wasn't the demand for something
unified against external forces endures.

Grease Gun Whip Hose

He listens to the factory foreman talk about
the three-legged stool, again: process, people,
equipment. The man tries to picture himself
as a stool. He is not a stool. He tries to picture
himself as a leg of the stool, not a whole leg,
one small part of what makes up one leg. One leg
that is only one part of one stool. There must
be other stools. This stool must be made
to bear weight. He is not a stool.
Process, people, equipment the factory
foreman repeats. A job on the factory
floor is the work of blunt accumulation.
There is precision but the precision
is in the machine. The man does not
feel precise. The factory floor agitates.

CAM AND GROOVE UNPLATED IRON DUST PLUGS

At home, away from the shake of the
factory floor, there should be
less disquiet. And there is.
But there seems to be
more dust, more family.
A light layer that dulls
surfaces. The man wonders if he has
a condition that prevents him
from seeing the gloss of the world:
a shimmer deficiency, burnished
blindness. If he were tested
would he see the shiny dots
hiding alongside muted circles,
shaped into numbers and patterns.
Would he trace a reliable route,
jab a rough finger at the test, say
there, that's got polish, would
he lie not wanting to be a liar?

STAINLESS STEEL O-RING FACE FITTING UNION CROSS

The man has days.
Sometimes he thinks he won't
but then he does and as he drives
to the work all the world
blurs stainless steel like an
o-ring face fitting union cross:
the car in the next lane, the driver
of the car in the next lane, the lane
lines, the radio saying *last days*
offer, the impact attenuators, the bridge
the antenna, the small dead
tree, the dirt, the skyskyskysky,
the air searching out the loose
window and making his ear
hurt and pulse and pulse and the pulse
says *do you know these days*? These
days that turn washed out stainless
steel like an o-ring face fitting union cross?
The man does.

Flareless Swivel Nut Run Tee

The highway route he takes
to work takes him to the first
exit past the factory
and its bulging sign,
which means every day
he faces a choice that's
already been chosen
until he chooses different.

High Pressure Hydraulic Quick Disconnect Coupling

He starts skipping work. Where he
goes when he doesn't go to work
is a guess. If we guessed we'd probably
guess lonely. Maybe open fields with
far edges or a bar stool where he can rest
his elbow or the mall. Would we be surprised
if it were the mall? We could guess the man
just wants to close the loop of commerce,
the sale, the other end of production, to watch
all types of consumers and a specific
type of teenager temporarily fill a small
need in their lives. We could guess
the man into the food court with a
coffee that he drinks slowly while
the day builds. We would guess him
pensive because pensive fits nicely
with lonely. We could guess that the
mall feels enough different from the
factory or enough the same.
There's no one to tell.

Stem Body Parallel Plane Swivel

So the end? So it's all airtight.
So what. So the strain. So
made to bear. So close.
So pressure. So what. So what

happens next. So disconnected
from inside out. So from
the beginning. So unavoidable.

More or Less

For a moment the branches on the two
trees in the front yard look like they are
dotted with small blossoms, like they are
living and on the edge of becoming more
alive, like it is spring. It is not spring.
It is November and the branches
have only nubs where leaves, dead now,
once clung, living. The dead leaves
fallen to the yard have already been
mowed over or raked to the edge
of the street where a machine
making a grid of the neighborhood
vacuumed up almost every last one
and then continued efficiently on.
It must have been the morning fog,
strange and southern seeming, that made
the scene appear for a moment not as it was,
or some trick of the mind as it searched
for significance, some hope flickered
and suppressed. What remains are details
that in their description need not mean more
than they do. What remains is what
happened and then more after that
and after that happens, more still.

Fortune

We were just talking at the party
about the narrative of childhood,

the strange feeling as a parent
that you are someone's mother.

Your son's mother is you.
It is only this way. For so long

we grow up thinking the world
is as it is; eventually it is as

we remember. Someone
had an idea about sheds,

sheds with saved, stored, lost,
forgotten things inside. The sweet

obviousness of things
in their place. We grow up.

We learn the work of sheds.
Someone suggested we write

fortunes. We found
paper and tore it into

fortune-sized scraps. The rule
was that you couldn't draw

your own from the pile.
How did we decide on this?

No one thought to question.
It was a game. There were only

so many fortunes to choose from,
only so many were possible,

but nobody wrote *your spouse*
will cheat on you or *your life's work*

will be inconsequential
or *you will die of hepatitis*.

Branded

The woman in the window of Big Mama's
is wearing a *Spiritual Gangster* t-shirt.
She's waiting for her burrito, writing in a notebook.
Spiritual Gangster, the phrase feels declarative and enigmatic
in a way that makes me wonder if I need a mantra—
Holy Hustler or *Metaphysical Criminal* or *Transcendent Desperado*—
something that evokes daring and enlightenment.
The woman doesn't look so much like a badass,
but spiritually how would I know.
In her notebook, she might be writing
about the violent journey of the soul toward light and peace,
or she might be writing *I love you all* and
spiritually *I love you all* would be kind of gangster,
even if it can only be true in a limited way.
I imagine if I believed in her slogan
I might feel moved to stop
and to say to the woman that on certain days
I too feel like a scribbler
waiting for my spiritual burrito to be ready,
and we might commune, without irony,
over the cosmic rightness of this comparison.
It's hard to love everybody, we might say knowingly.
But don't you also sometimes feel, she might ask,
like a *gangster* waiting for your spiritual burrito to be ready
and ready or not you're going to get up
and fucking take what's yours,
spiritually speaking?
You know, sometimes I do, I can imagine myself saying,
while feeling concerned that our meaning making
has gone too far. How do you choose a slogan?
I would want to ask her. Is it permanent?
She would be clearly concerned
at my flimsy commitment to our motto.
No, she would be upset, angry, more gangster than spiritual.
It is hard to love everybody, I might try again,
before leaving her to her burrito and notebook.
In my imagining, I imagine that I shouldn't have stopped.
I don't stop. I leave the woman and her notebook
and Big Mama's behind.
The woman in the window of Outer Glow

is wearing a *Keep Calm and ... Whatever* t-shirt,
waiting for her appointment at the salon,
turning the pages of a magazine.

A Clumsy Ark

Some days ago the man who lives down the street
was puttering in his front yard, digging a small
hole here and there, working on a project.

After a long winter, the weather was fine,
and as I passed he waved and I waved
because his light labor suggested

that we were in it together—some version
of sunshine and the American Dream,
tending to property, improving our place,

working for leisure, etcetera. Simply
by walking past I was included,
and this fellowship felt satisfactory.

Today, a few days before Easter,
instead of a new fence or shrubs or other
inconsequential landscaping three eight-foot,

unpainted wooden crosses have materialized.
When I was younger, my parents took my sisters
and me to church for a time. In Sunday School

I carved a boat out of a bar of soap, with
a toothpick mast and a construction paper sail.
All I really did was hack off two corners,

angling one end into a lopsided prow,
a sort of clumsy ark, that failed to float
upright in the bathtub. I wasn't disappointed

when we stopped going. My dad at the dinner table
told of how he had run into a friend
from church who asked why we hadn't been

recently, was someone sick? Yeah, sick
of church, my dad said. I don't remember
if I thought this was funny. For a time,

my mom took my younger sister and me
to a doctor's office twice a week
not because we were sick, but for allergy shots.

In the waiting room we liked to page
through a worn children's illustrated Bible
because the people were drawn in robes

and sandals in front of rust-colored desert
landscapes which conveyed to us some
secular sense of adventure and discovery

like cowboys or frontiersmen. Now
my family—my mom and dad, my sisters—
goes to church fairly regularly, I think.

When we're together we don't talk
about it much. The man is not in his yard today.
I try to suppress my flashed *Fuck off* feeling

at his public evangelizing.
His work is done. After spring's false
start, only the cold has returned.

Of, Say

The photographs that some people show
show themselves at paint and wine parties standing
behind a painted canvas they have put paint on

next to other people behind other painted canvases
with paint applied in very similar patterns and
styles producing very very similar images of, say,

a water and light scene that has the look
of something that might, if it were similar
enough, in some small way, recall Van Gogh.

The photographs show the people who have
applied the paint as clearly satisfied to have
produced paint in a variation of recognizable

pattern. The people appear so certainly
unconcerned at the difficulty presented
in each creation that resembles the creation

to its left or right which itself is an imitation of a
reproduction of, say, art, as if only all attempts
were equally fine, unbothered and satisfactory.

Sex with Strangers

We drove through the night four guys
in a borrowed two-door Dodge Probe
for spring break from Ann Arbor to Daytona
because we lacked imagination my fake ID
said I was twenty-eight and from Arizona
it got me drunk and into clubs that even at the time
felt like discouraged places with low lights
and then colored lights and then strobe lights
that wandered over mostly empty dance floors
to thumping music and shots in test tubes
sold by indifferent girls in short skirts but it was
someone's idea of a good time and anyway
there was one night that week my friend and I
met two girls and then we were in a cab the four of us
not wanting to go to our hotel or theirs
only it was clear in a functional lustless way
that we were supposed to do what's done
on spring break so the cab dropped us at a 7-Eleven
near the ocean my friend bought condoms
and went with one girl down the beach
in one direction I went with the other down
the beach in the other until we were separated
enough by the dark we did our best the girl and I
to approximate desire there on the tide sand or did we
there were cops and people we worried about
hurry up the girl said hurry up how I said
later when my friend asked what happened
what did I say what would I have said
I don't remember if he asked or if I asked
did you fuck her or if I said we never even started
in the end we didn't do anything

Authenticity

Between songs the lead singer stirs
the audience. *Who knows what it's like*
to feel a little different? she asks,
a question already answered. *Have you*
ever felt like you don't belong, like you
don't fit in! The orchestrated lights
flash from the stage to us, hundreds and
hundreds of bright faces. At this four-day
music festival we have all, in some form
or another, been able to afford the cost
of admission, and we're doing our best
to feel like individuals in the crowd.
Together we cheer, collectively singled
out. Yeah, we feel different! We all feel
different the same. We seem to be
unironically untroubled by this. All right,
but couldn't it also be true that we all
feel different differently? And anyway,
isn't it about the shared experience,
the, you know, *music*? That connection,
that illusion of intimacy. The performer
performs and the audience performs and
we let ourselves believe in the performance.
So when the singer shouts, as she does
night after night to similar crowds of
similar misfits in similar cities, *This song's*
for you! she might, in the moment, mean it
like we might when we all think *you?* me.

Power Ballad

It seems like a day to believe
in narrative, so the perfectly
whistled tune that reaches
me on the street, from behind
a screen door across a porch
and then a yard is just another
example of it all fitting together,
a moment of personal connection
in the world—shouldn't we all
be whistling today?—
                of course,
it becomes quickly clear
that the whistle belongs
not to a person but instead
to the Scorpions' "Wind of Change,"
which I'm pretty sure is about
the Cold War and Glasnost, and
I'm now not sure what this means
for my day, but then isn't
there someone inside
that house and didn't this
someone open their doors
and turn up a song from twenty-five
years ago just loud enough and
aren't we now connected by
the "Wind of Change" and
isn't that somehow better;
isn't that more or less human.

Semantics of the Dead and Living

We drive up to the graveyard
on the hill toward the top
of town just to see the evening sun.
“I don’t think people
call them graveyards anymore,”
you say. You say, “I think
a graveyard is part of a church.
People buried in the yard
of a church.” I suppose you’re right.
This is not a church, but it’s not
without ritual. We drive up
to the cemetery filled with
graves on the hill toward
the top of town. A new section
has been cleared of trees,
a toothless pocket ready
to be filled. We park and
imagine the sun will set beyond
the ridges spilled with green
into the ocean instead of more
Ohio. Turkey vultures circle
in the pines, their shifting like
a sail’s dry flap in a falling wind.
Below we watch three deer leap
headstones and then open space
making for the redrawn edge
of the cemetery separating something
from something from something.

Semi-Static Figures

The wet and empty streets were
surprising in their emptiness and
wetness, at least that's the way I
remember them as we stepped off the
bus that had taken us into Detroit
to see a show and now dropped
us back on campus—the feeling of
having arrived somewhere familiar
to find it momentarily unfamiliar.
Like when removing a blindfold
the first sensation isn't sight
but the absence of the blindfold,
the pleasant, soft impression of
absence. She was wearing boots
and a dress. I was wearing the clothes
I wore when I was eighteen. We didn't
know each other much. It was
a first date, arranged by a friend
of a friend. We walked to her dorm room
because it was just off State Street
and I lived up on the Hill and hers
was a single. In her loft bed we lay
side by side, clothed, in the lamplight.
We talked. When she asked me
to sing her a song, I did. It's not
that I have anything of a singing voice,
but I rattled my way through nearly all
of "Only a Hobo," a song about
a homeless man dying in the gutter.
It was sweet, I think, the moment.
When she asked me to stay,
I did not. I remember wanting to
walk across the empty campus
to my bed and feel full of its
emptiness. Somehow I never
saw that girl again. We just faded
into our lives, leaving behind
these semi-static figures
too easily remembered or not.

Catch and Release

I visit my friend Nick in Asheville.
We go fishing. We go drinking.
We trade stories about people
we used to know when we used to know them,
what they're doing and have done.
Nick's a writer and a fly fishing guide.
His clients tend to be men, older, well off,
doctors or CEOs or something, and they see
Nick as a younger man, though
we're not that young, and they want
to tell him how much the trip means
to them, how this is the one time of year
they get to do this, be out of the office,
away from a life that from this river and
from these mountains looks somehow
limited. They want to tell him
how good he has it. Yeah,
we don't disagree exactly,
but it's a cheap kind of regret,
we think, a confession these men
can afford. We get a beer
from the cooler. We catch fish
and release fish. Driving back
into town we see a truck parked
in front of an old train station,
a for sale sign in its window.
The truck has been lifted
four maybe six inches,
its normal sized tires replaced
with enormous sized tires.
We try to imagine a need
for these tires, but they seem
unnecessary in a way that must
reflect insecurity. Nick says, tires
like that fuck up the odometer,
as if we now have a logical reason
to find the truck ridiculous.
He says they have a longer rotation,
so the odometer needs to be recalibrated.
I've never thought about that, I say.
I think about being young and riding

in the front seat of my mom's white mini-van
while she drove me to some kind
of lessons or camp and I tell Nick
how one morning we pulled up
behind a car with an unfamiliar
license plate, out of state somewhere,
and about the possibility and
strangeness I sensed in this. I mean
they could have been driving for hours
across so many states
and here we were, my mom and I,
only five minutes from home
at the same intersection at the very
same time. Nick says, yeah man,
all right. We let it go.
Maybe it's not the same. Still,
I think how we are all
improbably arriving at some present,
alone or together, with pasts
that need to be justified or not.
I don't mention this to Nick
or don't feel I have to. Behind the truck,
the windows of the train station
have been bricked in, a staircase
has abandoned its purpose.
The tracks run along parallel to us
for a while and then fall away.

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