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Approved by:

Dr. Don Bogen, Chair

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HUMAN ROOMS

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by

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation, *Human Rooms*, a collection of original poetry by Charles Rybak, includes four sections consisting largely of narrative poems. A range of formal styles is incorporated, including sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, prose poetry, and a variety of free verse arrangements. The poems engage many themes, the most central being mythology in both its classical and contemporary manifestations. As the dominant theme, myth is juxtaposed with related themes, such as technology, information, popular culture, family history, and cultural history. In addition, these poems explore mythologizing and demythologizing as meaning-making processes that often fictionalize what is commonly accepted as factual. While these themes are social in nature, many of the poems detail the mythology of the self, focusing on isolated and exiled personas that struggle with the ability to make meaning; these figures often find themselves on the threshold of personal growth and change, yet are unable to achieve metamorphosis.

The dissertation also includes a critical paper, "*Absalom, Absalom!* and the Performance of Literary Modernity." This paper examines two works: *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner and "Literary History and Literary Modernity" by Paul de Man, for the purpose of discussing Faulkner's novel as the formal performance of literary modernism. The paper's main objective is to isolate and discuss literary modernism as it exists stylistically, rather than as a movement merely defined by time period and canonical association.

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Critical Component:

I

Argus

Sometimes I'll drop by the department store,
stare into an open lens and try to locate myself
on as many screens as possible.

A foreign angle, the dull back of my head,
the stranger signaling with the bird flap of arms
that it is indeed me, twenty times over.

I listen to the pitch of fast-paced salesmen
who preach the virtue of devices—
how they mount perfectly on any surface—

or float the phrase "worst case scenario"
to convince me I might lose track of myself,
that today's head scratch and second guess

die in the crosshairs of global positioning.
I suppose I go there to be invisible
once I leave. The threshold of automatic doors

turns me over to the world, the anonymous
parking lot and traffic. But on the road home
I drive beneath perched cameras and imagine

the grainy photo of my passing:
the license plates, my glorious head outlined
above the dash, my mouth framed

in a portrait that proves I'm no lead singer.
Once, when I questioned my bank
about a withdrawal I couldn't account for

I received my photo in the mail.
I sat in the driver's seat, arm frozen
in its extension toward the camera eye.

My tongue pushed from the side of my mouth,
a measure of deep concentration
in the retrieval of forty dollars,

(*stanza break*)

immortalizing that I need guidance
when nickel and diming my way through the calendar.
The note from the bank asked, “Is this you?”

When did the world become so jealous
of itself? Watching for the flinch or whisper
that leads to undoing? At night, I stand

on the balcony of my apartment
and try to separate stars from satellites.
A live feed of my upturned face

scrambles and recomposes across the cold
empty sky where emotions are frozen to facts.
I’m somewhere, waiting to be needed.

What Can You Glean From the One or Zero?

At the end of my street there's a man
anchored by a modem. I see him
when I walk the dog at night. The blue light
of the monitor washes over his face,
while his reach drifts beyond
his shadow, this block—the world
flowing through the fiber optic tendons
of his arm, a current of curiosity.

Tonight, beneath his window, two deer are grazing
on the dark lawn. I've surprised them,
a buck and a doe, so I rein in the dog
and attempt to mimic their stillness, look
as long as I can. But I am the memory
and harbinger of other men,
so the deer bound away
if just to practice for future flights.

Left with the event, its augury,
I replay it in my head. Did I hear
voices before I rounded the hedge?
The secret words of deer reserved
for the solitude of the deep forest?
Does the fact my dog didn't bark
mean they stood invisible? Spirits
visiting the vanished water hole?
I laugh out loud at my thoughts,
leave significance for another time and turn
for the short walk home.

Again I see the man in the window.
He's as still as the deer, staring straight ahead.
If I wait long enough, he'll turn off
the blue light and float back into unlit rooms.
Omens drown in the digital.
What can you glean from the one or zero,
that has no entrails, fears no predator?

Here in Exile

Statistics are the hinges of my life.
That Wayne Gretzky once scored ninety-two goals
opens doors, allows me to feast
on plentiful fact after fact
in the land of the fact eaters.
Patrick Ewing was picked first in nineteen eighty-five,
but who was selected second? Waymon Tisdale.
Movies and sitcoms sit at the bottom
of my mind like paper cups in the trash,
crumpled currency exchanged for memories—
my neighborhood, my friends, replaced
by their neighborhoods and their friends.
My head and shoulders bob to the music
of commercials, while my eyes follow
silver sedans that speed
over the soundtrack of winding highways
like wandering, jazz-inclined missiles.
A cat food's theme song plays in my head,
tucked away in some muscular neuron
too often flexing out of context
in human rooms without hunger. The song
surfaces on my tongue, another marker,
an answer to trivia questions
staked in my brain like flags in a slalom.
These are the distractions I feed to the exile,
who writes unanswered letters from inside
my chest, from a square room
in a square state I know nothing about,
not even the capital, bird, or flower.
He naps on the hardwood floors of unfurnished rooms,
no accompaniment, sweating
product jingles from his pores
as past MVP's threaten to widen
the old, statistical ulcer.
And while he was sent there years ago,
regret occurs to me only now, mixed in the shuffle
of reruns, slashed prices and pennant races—
this year's promises to be closer than ever.

Dreaming of Arson

I dream of the old house
too often. My mind reserves a space
for bedrooms and staircases to rebuild
as they stood, the parents and their son
ready to live whole again, to divide
days leisurely among duties and rest.

I dream of the old house,
the cubby holes and secret spaces,
wide landings between floors, the porch swing built
from the yard's fallen pine. The wife and her son
sit on the swing for hours, divided
from the rain, his broken arm at rest

in her lap. I dream of the old house
while muscles twitch, sweep through the bed's space,
reliving the motions of a newly built
balcony. I sweat through the sheets, his son
sanding hardwood in the heat, divided
from the father who offers little rest.

I have dreamt of the old house
for twenty years, claustrophobic in the space
between dreams, sapped of the strength built
on deep sleep. In that house I am always a son,
always awake, no new dreams divided
between fantasy and mystery, no rest.

To end the dream of the old house
I train myself to move through its space
freely, to know structure can be unbuilt
by a son who dreams of arson.
The flames will catch, advance in divisions
marching without rest, in the name of rest.

The gas can, the matchsticks, the rest
of what's remembered in the garage. The house,
dreamt dark, will suffer through division—
shattered glass, splintered wood, torn curtains in a space
reduced to scraps and tinder. The arson
fuels fast, burns to cinders and ash all that was built.

(*stanza break*)

What was built has been put to rest.
The sleeping arsonist watches the house burn,
clearing space, free from the division of rooms.

Birds That Don't Act Like Birds

I'm no good at identifying birds,
their rapid calls,
brown or gray feathers of a vague shade.
Up close, I still confuse the goose and the duck,
while cardinals and blue jays mean baseball
more than anything.
The only birds I know for sure don't fly:
the chicken, the turkey, the ostrich, the penguin.
I'm embarrassed to know such obvious things,
these birds that don't much act like birds.
I prefer the intelligence of the zoo,
the walk-through cages where I match
faded pictures to the distinctive curve
of beaks, a vivid red, or legs that look like reeds.
That is how I've come to know the ibis and the owl.

On daily walks I'll often see a dead bird,
stiff and small against a curb or wall.
The body remains unsolved, its habits
and migrations—if this were even one to do so—
a mystery. I do know that birds make good metaphors
or omens. In the past, a bird that dove
down on a sunning snake and then climbed with it
toward the crag, the snake still fighting
in its mouth, signaled defeat in battle,
treachery at home, that a god's petty rage
had at last subsided. But this?
What type of bird is this? What type of death?

More than birds, death seems ready made
for metaphors, even harder to identify.
Some deaths are sensational, undeniable
in dynamite plumes and gravity: the earthquake,
the human bomb, the shotgun wielding employee
at the plant, bodies that drop on the desks
of newscasters. Yet, most death lives
unidentified, guarded within
the body, a secret that withstands greetings
on the street or deposits at the bank.

(*stanza break*)

I once asked with a look
Are you dying? The quick swing of your arm
around my neck locked me in the tightest vice
of my life to say, *Does it feel like I'm dying?*
But it was well inside of you by then,
the only symptom being time.
Arriving late, I had hoped to be symbolic
at your bedside. I tried to imagine a bird
flying from your open mouth toward the dim
bedroom ceiling, soaring above the body
that didn't much act like a body.
What I knew of birds,
I could only picture a penguin or ostrich,
awkward on the bed beside you.

Extended Forecast

Fear the worst when words roll
across the set bottoms
and electrify the stakes:
Thunderstorm warning.
Alarm red and sour yellow,
the bitmapped menace advances on the city,
runs the people indoors
where war banners ripple and snap
in the corners of television screens.
Eyes teeter between dramas,
loved ones and the map, terrified
because these colors mean business.

Finally, a word from someone up high,
the Olympian meteorologist,
brave and grave enough to interrupt
one crisis with another.
While this is only an advisory,
it might be a good idea
to grab the kids, round up the cats,
and head down into the basement.
He holds the switch in his hands, the city
at full zoom, the power
to pinpoint your block and your swirling nerves.
He's so sincerely dry in the studio,
with a one-hundred percent chance of empathy,
This hurts me more than it hurts you.

The streetlights dramatize all of this,
a stage for the slanting rain,
its driving force and rage.
Really, it's the type of rain that only appears
to fall hard, blustery with intent,
but proves itself a mist, a beaded curtain
that I easily brush aside and step through
into the room where the world is empty.
This all feels like a secret,
the rain clearing the streets for itself.
Time to empty the cue, to keep
the meaning makers at bay
and reset a bit of what's simple.

(*over, no break*)

Rain—wet.
Branches—heavy.
Ears—hushed of man.
I'll stay out here a little longer,
where nothing seems partly or scattered.
The falling rain means what it should,
and the secret is something I'm in on.

On Being Infatuated In Traffic

Nauseous license plates,
when sun and fumes float off tar
to shake alphabets.

A helicopter
curls above, telling stations
we'll crawl like infants.

My rearview mirror
holds her white shirt, auburn hair
stroked full with a brush.

White straps draped lightly
on her brown, freckled shoulders.
Towels on a beach.

There's a song that moves
on her, urges her to sway,
buoy in the calm.

My look is noticed,
returned and sharply broken,
green lights spread us out.

How like me to love
so much in traffic, boxed up
like conversation.

Knock on Wood

Crosses staked beside the highway carry
first names and painted dates. They glow
then drift from view, a *Kim*, *Rick*, or *William*.
Some wear the signs of upkeep, fresh
paint and flowers, fluorescent ribbons pinned
to a grave miles away from the grave.

I can see a family brake at the cross,
stopping to correct its fatigued lean
into the climbing weeds. Maybe they drive
between this soft ditch and the family plot
because point A and point B provide
the shortest distance between loss.

This feels shallow, me speculating
on a family's grief, when I have had no grief.
I have no wife, no children, and no tragic friends
I discuss with the completeness of a book.
The first death lands you between deaths
forever, an uncertain layover
where those who wait dress up in movement.

I thought once of pulling over to kneel
before a roadside cross, to touch the weathered wood
of someone named Susan, sorry she was
so young, or that I drive for enjoyment,
sometimes with no destination.
Yet even in this fantasy I knock on the wood

instead, paying homage to the idols
of superstition. Murmuring beneath
good intention is the unspectacular mantra,
anyone but me, anyone but me.
I felt sorrow for Susan.
That said, I believe the distance
between here and there is still everyday.

Diving for Tractors
Iowa, 1993

Leaving Iowa, I drive a straight road
paved through an ocean—water crests and foams
on the roadside. Treetops hint at trunks
and roots, while from silver skiffs, treasure hunters
dive for tractors. Have you ever seen
a farmer walk the plank? Plunge
into lofts, biting on a knife because
the levees went down with the ship?
Even the sandbag assembly line,
all hands and swiveling hips, couldn't save
the barn, whose weathervane aims
south in the brown current littered
with the land. Diving into the murk,
pressured at the temples, a farmer
navigates by rote mornings, feels
drowned cows bobbing in their stalls
and gropes for artifacts—a rusty pitchfork,
bridle, tools found still hanging on the wall.
Bales rest on the bottom like boulders,
and there, tire locked in a trench,
the massive tractor. I imagine he works
the handle, enters the Plexiglas cab,
sits and stares ahead while stroking the gears
and steering wheel. I wonder about the strength
of lungs as the farmer chances
the ignition, drives for the surface
behind the headlights' slanted, upward haze.
Crossing the Mississippi into Illinois,
I try holding my breath for the bridge's
duration, fail, and look down at the river.
Up here, my eyes strain for a sign
of return, a small harvest of bubbles.

Seen Below Zero

Encased in ice, road signs stand brittle,
the Minnesota mileage a horn blast
from pieces. The highway decorates itself
in a sudden string of swerving brake lights,
as passengers strain to see
where a car has folded itself
into the back of another. Outside,
a woman shivers in her breath,
in the middle of what is raw, unmarked
by uniforms and not yet a scene.
Red leaks from her hairline—the first warm drop
bridges an eye and splashes her cheekbone.
She stares over rooftops, back toward Iowa.
From the wreck, her golden dog whines,
tangled in leather and metal.

Looking through windows makes this unreal,
a passed vision that fades
into weather, the straightening traffic.
Shaken briefly, everyone speeds on now
and re-tunes radios, hoping for warmth
before silos and fields give way
to the horizon full of frozen lakes.
Riders scrape windshields from the inside
and flakes find the streams of humming vents.
It snows in their cars.

II

Blood Letting

In 1957, man shipped frozen blood
for the first time. Locked in crystals,
the living freight longed
for fingertips, the ins and outs of the limbs,
the whispered secrets through another's skin
as bodies brush during our daily course.
What loneliness resided there? In dull red bursts
separated from the body, subdivided from their own
rush and warmth? This was urgent blood,
delivered to desperation: a wound on a table,
an ambulance slaloming on shattered roads,
a locker kept cold for tomorrow.

When I lie in the bathtub,
head thrown back, ears below the water,
I eavesdrop on my blood stream,
the interval behind my ears, the liquid gear
and push. In this water long cold
I wonder when my blood will freeze,
a confusion of Fahrenheit and Celsius.
This blood has family, miles and states away.
Our talk, a flat stone, skims its surface
with enough bounce to fly
the boundary between ice and thaw,
the vein, the brawl, the family tree—
blood thrives in dark places.

Union Job

She worked the end of a G.E. assembly line until her head hit the conveyor belt that dragged her into death ahead of time, her kids unfinished, her husband not built to last. Her soldering iron melded all radios, televisions, without mistake, circuits and alloy in perfect union.

Hemorrhage: the word locked his jaw, failed to explain how his wife's brain might break from within. Life at a stand still, he emptied the house of electronics, any box that hummed low with hidden current, or held the loose rattle of a fuse.

1952 settled in that house forever, and when his children finally surrendered hidden radios they fled to television, ran to the neighbors' living rooms for Lucille Ball with child, bigger by the episode, 1952 was a cocoon people believed he'd emerge from, rebuilt with resolve at thirty-five, but the house remained silent, her name out of tune, inarticulate through sound or image, *Marion*, floated behind his ears and eyes all day, late into the night, as he lay down for bed.

The same dream descended on him each night, unchanged until his death at fifty-eight: he speeds toward the plant beneath dormant traffic lights, she's still on the floor when he arrives, employees in a neat row looking down on her, *G.E.* sewn in white thread across their backs, Marion has fallen at the end of the assembly line and one by one, unfinished radios and television sets drop from the conveyor belt onto her head, they break open and spill across the floor, one by one they fall and a delicate wire hangs from her ear.

Dead Letter Office

My grandfather enjoyed correspondence and wrote letters for most of his life. He received letters with equal enthusiasm and greeted the mailman as a friend returned, treating him to glasses of sun tea in the hot months. The only time my grandmother ever touched the mailbox, her husband lay in the hospital, his tarred lungs a black anchor that kept him moored to the bed. My grandfather also had a sense of humor. The fact that his gravestone has a mail slot, cut clean through three inches of polished granite, surprises no one. It is complete with a metal flap that has "MAIL" engraved in brassed, block letters—his epitaph reads, "I can be reached at this address."

After his death, my grandfather continued to correspond. He had stockpiled letters for loved ones to be sent out, year by year, by my grandmother. His first wife, his children, his brothers and sisters, their spouses, children that were not yet born or conceived, and who knows how many others, received letters on days that marked no momentous occasion. Even the old mailman received a letter from my dead grandfather.

In grandfather's letters to me, he discussed adult things: chasing Rommel across the desert and dunes of North Africa. How driving a tank provided precious relief from the sun and swirling sand. How the sand ultimately proved inseparable from the body: eye sockets, teeth, gums, and even sleep wore down against the grains. He wrote of his gunner's ticket home, how they sat atop the tank talking baseball when a panzer shell picked off his friend's arm clean at the socket. He recalled driving me out to the small airport during family visits because I loved to watch the planes take off. I would never talk, he wrote, just point toward the rise and fall of twin engines. Because I had once said I wanted to be a pilot, my grandfather held on to that, even testing me in his letters: he fixated on math, said that I must master math skills, above all, in my education. A letter I received 10 years after his death concluded with an equation and the p.s. "solve for X."

The letters finally stopped and correspondence vanished from my life, since I have never been one to write to people. Although he died just before I turned eight, I know him better than any living person. When I drove to my grandfather's grave for the first time since his funeral, I had to ask the manager where to find the plot. Recognizing the name, he said, "Ah yes, the mail slot. Did you know he wrote the groundskeepers a letter?" They had framed it, under glass, and hung it on the garage wall among the shovels and rakes.

(stanza break)

When I found the headstone it stood as I remembered: clean, the mail flap working without resistance. I hoped to sit in the grass and write the first letter of my life, one that would start a chain of endless giving and receiving, that would reach into the lives of family, friends, and perfect strangers. Like a fool, I felt ready to invent conversation itself. I peeked around the stone to find a single letter, recently dropped through the slot by someone surely a stranger to me. It had landed upright and leaned against the stone at an easy angle, like someone who had traveled a long way and was happy to rest for a while.

Scrap Wood

Uncle John raised his house from the curbside trash, from scrap wood and flashlight nights trolling Mattydale, New York in a borrowed pick-up. When the sun rose, John began with the work and always wore a wide-brimmed hat, except when it rained. The droplets would break on the bald top of his head, running down into the spiral of his massive ears. It could pour for hours, even storm, but John worked hatless until the rain stopped and steam rose from his head, when he'd put his hat back on. My grandfather would say to John as they leveled wet beams, "If you don't wear a hat, your brain will rust through."

When Alzheimer's hardened John's mind with a crust, he still lived in the house he'd built. My father, floating beyond the orbit of recognition, flared, said, "Pop told him his brain would rust." John's memories tumbled from his mouth in pieces, the sharper recollections slicing the inside of his cheeks like bent nails until finally spit out. I wrote down everything he could remember and asked my Aunt to verify. When John went to bed we'd check the list at the kitchen table, "He was never in Canada, he doesn't speak French, but without a doubt, Willie Mays was always his favorite."

The house grew tropical palms and decorated generals. John told me he would follow me into battle any day, and turning toward the front yard with the sweep of his arm thanked god the Nazis were out of Paris. When we sold his house to pay medical expenses and moved him in with his sister next door, he didn't notice, said, "I built this house." My father laughed and said, "Well, at least he's not too far from being right about that."

John sat in his chair while the nurse swabbed his ears, the cotton tips emerging rusted and spent before they dropped in the trash. Over his head hung an old black and white photo of his newly finished, unpainted house. Strangers moved in next door. The front porch overlooked the Seine, and not to worry, a train would always be there soon. He died in bed on a rainy day with only the nurse present. She said, "He kept asking me to take his hat off."

Purple Heart

He had saved the bullet.
It rolled inside the purple box that held
the purple heart. When he shook the box
near his ear, the bullet rattled around,
the lead husk of a red-hot insect.
Being so young, I thought bullets
had wings, but when my grandfather opened
the velvet box, it was dark and bent,
stubbed like the butts that sat in the ashtray.
He said the transparent wings had melted away
when it flew into his leg. *Where*? I asked.
He would always say, *Germany* and laugh,
knowing I wished to see the scar.
The purple heart had brought him home,
the three inch scar the only thing
that kept him and his tank out of Berlin.
By then his lungs bled in secret
and my dad once joked, *if you don't quit soon*
with the smokes, we'll have to put a cigarette
butt in with that bullet. When he couldn't
live at home any longer, the purple heart
sat by his hospital bed. He told me
he was wounded, just like in the war.
When my grandfather died my father wept
and chain-smoked on the road to the service.
Hidden in my palm was a cigarette butt
I hoped would be hot enough to burn. I shook
my fist by my ear and listened for the rattle.
I blamed my hands for the silence.

From the Stretch

There's Mantle, Mays, and Robinson
to slide in laminated sleeves
where they'll be safe. You watch me
manage them, remove the cards
from old shoe boxes stored
too long under the cellar steps.

Accuse me as I work through stacks:
Don't jerk me son. You'll pocket
these and hock them when I'm gone.
Performance is a skill we've lost.
Say how my greed wants Koufax kept
in here, rookie, five times preserved.

Sure, I notice what they're worth—
how your Clemente has no crease,
how Gibson's stretch is mint. I pick
this album's crew, finding men
who must be saved—Aaron and Spahn,
Williams when he hit four hundred.

You ask if mother's *with that man*.
Yes, they've been married for twelve years.
Count. He's ahead of you by four.
This Drysdale you could sell today
for two-fifty. Since sixty-one
went down, Maris would fetch much more.

Remember the birthdays you didn't come?
Always with your friends, playing
ball? I sift through dates and old
logos. I think of those you've
estranged: one son, two uncles, three
brothers, friends dying out of reach.

The flawed are set aside, faces
marred by water, team colors
blended and bubbled, soft edges
frayed and fanned. Who's this?
A name that's dull and unattached,
his legend brief, filled with zeros.

By the Way Nick, How is Laura?

> "How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year?"
> "Going on a year and a half," Laura said, flushed and smiling.
> "Oh, now," Terri said. "Wait awhile."
> Raymond Carver—"What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"

Terri was right when she said, "Just wait awhile."
When Laura broods, questions me at dinner,
I wish I didn't have to change the subject.

I still flirt with the firm's new hire, her wild
curls and appointment tan. We've had coffee.
Terri was right when she smirked, "Just wait awhile."

Laura asks about work and I disconnect,
mention the garden, talk about the peppers
turned green—I'm no good at changing subjects.

Our easy moments are far gone—miles
walked on Saturdays, grilled dinners and a drink.
Terri was right when she said, "Just wait awhile."

Laura climbs on top, takes me half-erect
through these motions, no sweat to flavor us with salt.
I picture someone else, a change of subject.

When Terri says, "That's marriage," I try to smile,
tell her I dream of sitting alone on beachfront decks—
for drinks, I never have to wait awhile,
with waiters, never have to change the subject.

Waterfront Tithe
Buffalo, New York

I

Lake Erie muscles into Buffalo.
Off trains and rusted buses, downtowners
are mugged—ties whip over shoulders, skirts
blast inside out. Angled for balance, bodies
drive, all hitch-step and stumble.
Fabric wraps around bone and cinches
nakedness in fluttering casts. A lobby
fills with cheeks, stung and burned.
Unfolding on an escalator, the bruised
don't look back at glass doors that rattle
with the bully, or at the current,
churning with headlines and hats.

II

Each year, a man is blown from the skyway.
Lured out by dash lights and steam,
he'll flash hazards, curse one more thing
to worry about, then walk the route
that sprawls over downtown.
Hooked at the armpits, he panics
when shoulders puff like sails, a navy
blue kite lifting over the guardrail
and no cord to reel him back. He knifes
toward the parking lot below, flails
over windshields before the impact
drowned among howling graffiti pillars.

III

On a brick plaza's periphery,
the custodian, old and hunched, waits
in a wind corner. Broom in left hand
and dustpan in the right, he looks up
at fifty feet of centripetal debris,
watches the littered funnel
twist his scraps of paper
higher, and further away.

Reaching the Pacific at Night

Reaching the Pacific for the first time
I left my friends buzzed and spent in the car
and walked out fully dressed, the black and brine
rising cold up my chest. When almost far
enough to have to hold my breath, the black
stayed the same, consistent inviting sheet,
and from the distant beach friends called me back,
cursing, laying towels down on the seat.
Once home, my clothes sat heavy in the hall,
soaked through. By morning they would flake with salt,
pruned and exhausted in the sun. I hauled
myself from bed, stared over the asphalt
of Oakland, and drove numb toward what I knew
from postcards: people, waves, the utter blue.

III

The Mile

On the track near my apartment, I run circles
around a soccer field. Four turns to a mile—
one by one I bend my fingers to mark the laps.
It is raining tonight, and someone steals
onto the track, suddenly in the lane behind me.
Is that you, Achilles? Come to give chase
in front of those who care for me? Feet storm
the puddles—cracking whips that sting me

forward for pride, for reasons other than my own.
This runner coasts in my wake as a hawk might,
so I no longer invent easy home stretches
to victory and sun-burnt praise. To fight him off,
I open up and quicken the pace—there's no time
for the questions I usually ask on these runs.
Who is the woman I love? Why am I sickened
by some who were friends? Shall I embarrass myself

further in thinking I carry this city
on my shoulders? For the first three laps
I remain ahead, able to open gaps when breaking
from the turns. The splashes of water always
return, sound off my heels, and on the fourth lap,
in what might be the fastest mile I've ever run,
I spit and gasp to thank the gods he's not Achilles,
who will ruin me in the dirt some day

for borrowing his armor, for dressing
in his excellence. In the final turn he takes me,
an ordinary man who speeds past without a glance.
Why go around? Why swing to the outside?
You could run right through me, build enough momentum
to crash through my back and stride forth
from my ribs. I could pass my heart to you,
a pathetic relay of goodness. Run away with it.

Wildfire
Colorado, 2002

Anything that bears our name seduces us,
yearns to be handled and deciphered as if
it were a carved, ancient glyph that once meant
water or *pause*. And it was her name, *Venus*,
typed on the envelope with no return address
that lay across the table in the far forest.
People will make guesswork of packages,
so she fancied the fresh woodcut of a columbine,
conceived the charcoal sketching of a lark,
sent from her mother to add to the mantel
of her log home. Lures work this way.
Inside, a letter from her ex-husband opened
Dear Whore: I hope this letter finds you well.
She saw her name captured, snared in cords
of ink that threatened to tear through
the paper. Vulcan's net had tightened again,
this infinite rendition of tangled intention,
a mesh and filament so fine,
hammered thin across charred stones,
that only the water of the cooling barrel
could disguise fury as luxury.
You are as much mine as the tools on my wall.
It is said the net was made of fire, that it started
in her hands. Venus rubbed the sheets together
like stones, ink and accusation
moving over one another until sparks fell
from her fingers. They popped and smoked
on the ground, flame fashioned into knotted links.
The glowing net spread over the grass,
the dry leaves. It lifted at the corners
and engulfed her rooted lovers, the blue spruce,
surprising them in the act of living.

Atlas on the Stairs

When we plucked the table from the curbside trash,
one you had eyed and imagined
in the corner of a sun-lit room, you asked,
Will you carry this? I can't deny that soon
my neck burned and my thin arms shook,
that I counted the steps of labor and wished
for where they would level with the landing.

But the table wouldn't fit through the doorframe,
the wide, round top too perfect for finessing angles.
We paused, weighed leaving it for the night
in the hall, as if we'd dream an elegant plan
to turn it through, a pajama callisthenic
between breakfast and the Sunday paper.
The thought of its wholeness left outside
troubled me, proof of failed hospitality,
of checked intention—better to live
in pieces, with the tools in our hands.

I passed the screws to you, the single legs,
the table's weight transferred between us.
You looked over my shoulder as I knelt
for the tabletop and rolled it through the door,
searching for your ex-husband who might hide
in the way I stand, turn a phrase, or pour coffee.
The past is everyone's gorgon: the head of snakes
that might turn us to stone, the hiss that lines our lives
with statues. I looked back as well,

hoping I hadn't brought him there,
that I wouldn't petrify you and watch you
carry the world of another man on your neck.
The ruined table spread across
the hardwood floor. *Let's not wait.*
Let's piece it together, starting now.

The Sleeves and Necks of All My Shirts
Agamemnon

When anti-freeze pooled on the street
and toes poked through the holes in my sneakers,
I lost faith in contraception and lived
abstinent with her the last year. I dreamt
that newborn children learned to take my life,
slaughter me behind the gas grill and flower boxes.
By August, the air conditioner choked
on itself and turned into ice.

Her friend arrived shirtless,
a ceiling fan in his arms, easy with the knowledge
that they'd slept together long before I mattered.
Together in our bedroom, they unpacked the cords,
the golden screws and long wooden blades.
That night, the sweat on my exposed back
cooled me, evaporated as I slept and dreamt
of waking in a shirt that wasn't mine,
the dressers and closets filled with men.

I have to invent the rest because I can't remember
the woman I lived with. When people ask me
about the end, I tell stories, have formulas
for everything, and they somehow all add up
to where I am now. There's a mystery to why
my chest and arms are naked, and have been,
all through the winter. I walk around shirtless,
and hopelessly try to recall the way I felt,
try to place a single kiss from her, anywhere.

The truth is, I can't remember
anything, but because blame seems in order,
I tell those around me I was afraid to go home
one night after running because she'd sewn shut
the sleeves and necks of all my shirts.
But that never happened. Because just as
I was the type of man to set pride loose
in his own veins like arson, I am
also the kind who, after the long campaign,
is sure to die in his home.

Ready to Run Faster Than Men

The phone off its hook dangles
above the curb—slight
twists, left to right, the last

reverberations of someone's anger,
already sped around the corner and away.
You smile and gently set the receiver

back in its cradle while someone listens
and waits on the other end. Mercury,
how can you leave messages undelivered?

Is it that every confidence you've carried
has been the cause of legendary woe?
Is that why you sweat only while waiting

for your duty? The unfinished call races
in your head, runs beneath your thoughts until
your breath comes quick and short.

What message haven't you sent?
Whose name can't you place just yet?
Touch your pockets. File away your steps

just in case, so when a good word
finally comes you can make it back
to that corner, ready to run faster than men.

Whether it's heard or not, there will always
be bad news, and not all of it belongs
to you. Today, be more than your charge,

and as you lift the waiting receiver, hand firm
on your racing heart, your voice rises
through traffic and history to say,

Yes, I know we haven't met,
but that one thing about you,
I really love that.

Inferno Dispatch

I

Wired to frequency and anticipation,
Johnny gets word that someone's home
is on the burn down. He calls the engine hall
where old friends play poker and eat midnight
pot luck. Some spring from second-floor cots
and dress on the fly as the dispatch sends them out.
A popping beam, three weeks in the ward,
and a limp have long made Johnny's fires
second hand. Anything to be there tonight,
in strapped-tight helmet and fluorescent yellow,
to feel his burning lungs sucked shallow
and his cheeks glazed black. Now Johnny waits—
the call presents itself in pieces of radio
while he listens and twitches with memories
of motion. Tonight, he bursts
into reenactment. On the wall
his shadow fights the fire—it leaps from the truck,
subdues a bucking hose, axes the first-floor
windows, and sprays the neighbor's walls.

II

Through the police band's mild static,
Johnny's voice crackles, floats
from the kitchen and curls through the house.
At these moments, Linda isn't alone
anymore—she answers, "Hi, Johnny."
She can't remember making love with the sun down,
always giving herself in the waking numbness
before work. At least the daily worry's gone,
though nightmares still linger—an open coffin,
Johnny's features charred to obsidian. Calmed
by his dispatch, she walks their rooms with bathrobe
and bourbon. She runs the shower, door
open, so his voice mingles with the nozzle's
hiss. Steam clouds billow into the hallway,

(over, no break)

and again she envisions herself dialing
the emergency number that calls him home,
urgency in his skin. Pressure works
on her body until candles burn down
and the water turns cold, like the pipes.
What warmth remains is held in the wrap of towels.

Sirens

On the phone, my friend tells me how he's fallen in love
with a woman he can only have for now. *I'm out there*,
he says, *untethered, drifting right for the rocks*.

His open window welcomes in the fire house
across the street and sirens rise from under his voice—
to me a soothing cry that can only kiss

your neck from a distance. But I imagine his stacked
plates rattle, picture a sliver of red that catches
the corner of his kitchen wall, swirls on the ceiling.

I know this myth, realize that even if he runs
the shore, a siren waits, sure to tear at his arms
while singing roughly in his ear—a different song,

from a throat gorged with fish and mold. She'll hold him up
for others to see, humiliate him for how much he cares.
We live no more than ten blocks apart, straight shot,

and I believe that soon the sirens will speed
into my neighborhood on wet, black wheels.
I put him on hold and tie myself to the mast,

rope cinched around my waist so I'm able to survive
in the sounds of others. I beg my friend to do
the same. He remains open to a self-fulfilling song,

right now, like a breath. When I ask him about omens
he tells me of birds, of dried oranges on a window sill,
and of dreams that a sea hag lifts his head toward the clouds.

I've never heard that story, only feared it from the deck.
What's it like to arch your back over a sharp rock?
To scrape your sides when turning in bed?

When the engines turn down my street and bring their noise
and hoses, I still cling to the mast, bound tight
because that's the way it's done. Odysseus

(*stanza break*)

was a coward. Real heroes go quietly,
embarrassed by their hearts, so happy when
every embrace pops the tendons in their shoulders

as a reminder that this just might be it.

Stripping the Armor
Ajax

I
Defeated limbs quivered like egg whites
while I howled at the falling sun
and thought of how to decorate my walls.
From bodies in the dirt, I'd peel away
shields and breastplates, jackets and polo shirts,
painted with crescent moons and fierce horses.
Most evenings, before settling down to watch
a late game, I looked to the wall above
my television and gave thanks to the armor
and the defeated, for the opportunity
at glory and worth. Poets will sing about me.

II
Why won't you ever talk about these things?
a lover said, holding two hands toward me
again and again. *Hang this neglect on your wall,*
this abuse, these things that have happened to me.
Somewhere along the way, the world began
to strip its own armor. Before bed,
she'd reinforce herself with pills,
fly thick-skinned through her dreams,
and wake battling the sunrise.

III
I met a woman who stood naked
in her tattoo. Billowing across
her back, a dark hieroglyph,
intricate and senseless. We went to bed
and I clenched her skin, the folds
in my grip, trying to twist her
into something I could make sense of.
She lay silent in the dark
and wouldn't tell me a single secret.
Her laughter sent me to the shades
faster than my suicide. Her last words
to me, sleepy from down the hall,
"Make sure the cats don't get out."

Almost Ovid

Understand that explanations come hard.
Your thoughts, you say, run through power lines,
stolen by the black tendons strung for blocks
in all directions. Fatigue. Fatigue
is asking one mind to power the appliances
of an entire neighborhood. No wonder
you're so tired—microwaves drain you, heating
leftovers while you try to live, while logic
dims and surges on the tip of your tongue.
It's all right in front of us, you say, encrypted
in the city's license plates.

Weeks and appointments out of the ward,
you're pinned beneath the humidity
of blue pills. The seed inside of you,
sluggish in metamorphosis, fights for bloom,
enlists the daylight hours for bending
toward the sunlight. You say a change
will come soon. The doctor summarizes you
as having "renounced all coincidences."

Even Ovid must have left some tales unfinished,
where voices and fever pound
the temples, slip from the mouth and tick
beneath the skin. The woman chased by lusty gods
won't bleed her toes into the soil or throw
branches toward the sky in relief. She suffers
the permanent madness of another's desires,
mumbling for the reinvention of her body.
Unfinished, the human fragment is almost Ovid,
somewhere between the heart and those who are in on it.

Later, we see a squirrel on the sidewalk, shocked
rigid from its run on the power lines. Frightened,
you stroke the warm fur and ask me to play oracle,
What the hell is going to happen to me?
Eager for safety and blindness,
I pretend not to see a half-naked man wade
into the Maumee River after pouring a rainbow
of gasoline on his sleeping wife—a six hour stare-down
with lawmen on skiffs, icy water and aimed guns.

(*over, no break*)

The paper quotes the “deranged fugitive” in fragments,
something about how “frozen blood won’t boil.”
The sheriff is heard to say in response,
“Okay, but the wait until dark trick isn’t going to work.”

Icarus at the Power Lines

The rules were almost simple:
pass through the backyards of the block,
jump on the top of every garage along the way,
unseen. We swarmed,
hungry as locusts,
and threw block after block down
the open throats of our appetite. Bored
dogs, fathers seated in kitchens,
tomato spikes in the garden,
all waited and wanted
to sink a point into us.

I once lay on a tree branch for two hours
while a man tinkered under the hood
of his car. Not once did he lift
his head from the range of the hooked light.
Each twist of the ratchet tightened my nerves
and I raged against adult concerns,
about what could possibly foul up
the engine shrouded below me.
I dozed off and fell
into a dream where he started the car—
bills and receipts coughed
from the exhaust pipe in a paper cloud.
I took the risk and crawled
over his head and onto the garage.
I never set foot on his ground.

We grew out of patience and into speed.
We hopped all the time, a neighborhood plague.
We overwhelmed the garages, backyard fields.
We outdistanced anything that barked or yelled.
We laid claim to space and squared property lines.

On a clear night with a high moon
the garage hoppers stood on a roof,
staring over the required leap—
five feet, six at the most.
Strung between structures, two electrical wires,
one above the other,
invitingly spaced. They asked

(*over, no break*)

for a perfect jump,
not too high or low.
We would have to fly the middle course.
The bravest jumped, graduated to the grace
of birds, flying through the wires.
They landed safely and waved, *come on*. They knew
I wouldn't jump and looked as Daedalus
must have, who took effortlessly
to the sky, expecting his son to follow.
The garage hoppers moved on, left me
sitting on the gutter, gazing through the wires.

The story of Icarus rooted me,
taught me about safe things, made sure I'd be alive
to do more safe things.
I never go near the sun without sunscreen,
and I never go in the water by myself.
But I love to talk about the garage hoppers,
lead people into the maze of nostalgia,
where a story's corridors bend and twist
back on themselves, where there is pleasure
in walking the same stretch of ground again
and again. At the protected center,
where all ways meet and too far from me now,
I will insist the past preserves one truth:
I once was dangerous, I will say that.

The Space That Grows Around You

After four knocks on your door,
I recall the exhale of handing in my last key—
a time when the city was tight to me,
spent and closed. The old ring in my pocket
has since opened itself, allowed the heavy wrench and arc
of keys. Even those outdated are saved
against the memory of empty hands.

When your weight supports me on the couch,
my chin rests on arms folded across your chest.
It's your life that pushes from the faint rise and fall
of ribs—a hull that floats me over your trouble,
your long days, this dark room,
what it means to have your own locks again.
I've read about the carriages of black ships,
of heroes who sail for reasons that force me to look
away from you, embarrassed of my easy complaints—
no wind, flat water, nothing in the current but voices.

Yet I float now on the swell of your breath, listen
to what I can't rewrite or remold without struggle,
going under with the ache and cramp that comes
with trying too hard. Often, a look in your eye diverges,
sends me to the plants that rest in the corners—
life on a schedule of air, sunrises and water.
I wish we were that simple, that I didn't have to
adjust this weight that crushes you, hide this hip
sharper than the flesh that conceals it.
We rise and fall through the hours of this night,
through the hours of the few before it. I know
I'll be tired come morning, that I'll use my keys
to get home. There, I'll sink into a nap
while you scramble through the day.

Maybe tomorrow I'll again find the brick
you've wedged for me in the entrance to your building.
I'll put my keys away, knock on your door
that won't give against the turn and try of my hand.
I'll wait, knowing that you haven't heard me.
Come and go as you please, lock me out
for the pleasure we both can take from it.

(*over, no break*)

I'll delay the next knock just to listen
to your walk, your steps through the kitchen,
your secret hum, the space that grows
around you. I can spare this minute.

IV

Girl Noir

All right, hard guy, get up and bleed on the rugs.
How'd she get mixed up with this louse? Bent
at her knees, a washed-up crook
who couldn't shake her down for a dime.
Broad through the jaws, she dons her black derby,
smoothes the suit, and tells him to come clean
or suffer another boot in the mouth.
I got the gun at a speakeasy, he mumbles,
The Havana Club. A gungirls' hangout,
a blackjack behind every back, run
by a woman with wicked eyes.
And his face? Who put the lick on his face?
My momma beat me, he whimpers. *On the level.*
A floorboard creaks from the hall, so she clamps
a hand across his mouth and listens hard, spilling
gin over ice with her free hand.
She knows its Studsy, who left her
with a bullet ache in the shoulder, tough
in this world of dark, damp streets.
She locks the nippers on one wrist,
fastens the other end to the doorknob, telling him
to shut up as she drops a swell knock
on his head. It's not Studsy,
but the front-desk weasel with a telegram
from the lobby of the new millennium.
It reminds her that she's just fiction,
that somewhere on a desk between novels
and newsprint lies Marlow Mack, ball buster.
She won't see the man rising behind her,
a heavy doorknob in his hand. Each dawn,
the lobby doles out newspapers
where women die of formula, make a career
of disappearance. Wipe the pulp from the telegram:
MARLOW MACK
A WOMAN BLUGEONED TO DEATH STOP
EX-BOYFRIEND WAITED OUTSIDE WORKPLACE STOP
WILL YOU TAKE CHARGE OF INVESTIGATION STOP

Failure to Zigzag

Risk scrubs a ship's basins, changes stations
square on the minute, building itself
on the bone of routine like a round deposit,
or spur that has winced its edges
into the mechanics of motion.

When you can't see the hand in front of your face
you'll surely miss the urgent waves
of radio, the slight paper mist
and peripheral secrets whispering,
it's your hulk at the bottom of the ocean.

In the dark every direction is head on,
so turn and face the coordinates,
the calculated longing of torpedoes,
live and malignant, making unpracticed procedures
more urgent than the spreading fires, peeling flesh,

the captain leaping into the water
with his eyes squeezed closed and his hand on his hat.
Time to get about the business of surviving,
consult the manual for where you are now,
yet, of those on the *Indianapolis*,

who knew the sea had so many mouths?
No one will miss you because no one expects you.
So survive in place, tread and churn
until someone looks from a window and spots
an empty dock, waves curling above the planks

with will enough to reach the doors and shake
men by the decorations, asking them to sip the salt
that shrivels those who drink of that desert.
When rescue drains the last man from the water
like a blister, marvel at what awaits on land:

an indictment, a fate so ridiculous
it sounds like a schoolyard game—*failure*
to zigzag—the textbook movement away
from grim possibility, the *what if*
of peekaboo nights and their coy moon.

(*stanza break*)

Confess to breaking routine, even while
your enemy provides witness against you.
He'll prove escape was impossible, that your whole life
is protocol with danger gliding just beneath.
Zigzag all you like, to the horizon and back

if it pleases you. Zigzag across your kitchen tiles,
leagues of carpet, the front lawn flowing to the curb.
Zigzag down the roads you've charted for years
and pretend torpedoes don't know the course you're on.
Zigzag as if you'll be arriving soon.

James Bond, at 50, Trying to Change a Flat

Torn rubber, flat and pinched beneath the rim
of his Volvo, grants no gift of malice,
no saboteur's gold bullet—*damn*. Damn the rain,

the rust that bleeds onto his fingertips. Lug nuts
won't budge, locked by the dark, dead orange
that flakes from his thumbs, empties from familiar

grooves: ID, James Bond. The new millennium
and his first flat tire—it was never like this.
It used to be he'd just ride the rims, let them spit

sparks across cobblestone streets, drive them
glowing to the water where they'd steam
like suns and cool into gadget rudders.

Now, this plaza parking lot and the heavy
rain, this sweaty race against the silent
whirl of yellow lights and a portable crane.

From the tow-truck window an arm extends,
bare and pale, palm up toward the sky. At last,
the sign he's waited for, calling him back in

to be made fresh again. He squints for the secret gesture
that means, *Good work James, your knees are soaked for the queen*.
The finger points in his direction. *Remember, that tire iron*

is more than it seems. Was this always the plan?
To leave him out so long among the upgraded,
who encrypt even their Christmas shopping

beyond the reach of East and West? A cell phone
vibrates in his pocket. The man in the truck
has dialed his number from five feet away.

His hand from the window revealed no sign,
just tested the rain, its ability to soak,
withdrawing itself for the task ahead.

Blade

I

A saw, taller than its pilot,
cuts lines across a newly-dried sidewalk.
The jagged teeth, hidden in spin, bisect blocks
as mist hisses from a nozzle, cooling the blade.
With drawing drawn, home and comfort are welcome
by now, but the blade remains rapid, whirring
above the pavement because today he asks,
How long? How long can I hold the blade?
The pilot's forearms, worked since dawn, falter,
and the blade drops out of place, sparks again
on the sidewalk and grinds a sharp apostrophe.
The pilot glances at his fault, dismisses guilt
and renews his trembling grip. The blade
might whirl free, the unleashed
momentum efficiently slicing a tree,
or bystander, perfectly in two.

II

Another restless walk, the pilot strides
across his blocks when a woman, in rhythmic heels,
clicks her path into the lamplight. Aware
of him, her senses spark—her shoulders
slightly lift, her head tilts down yet stays
defensive. He concentrates, walks straight,
checks every muscle that might twitch
and intimidate. Passing him, she cuts
toward the edge, as far right as possible,
one heel click hushed by the grass. He wants to help,
to hardly touch the sidewalk. Her rhythm
builds quickly behind him, not yet relieved
of this walkway. He wants to turn around,
apologize for these few seconds, say hello
and comment how pleasant it is
that tonight no one needs a jacket.

News from the Oasis

American Owned and Operated
glows above the marquee's guarantee:
cleaner sheets and a smile.
Candy manages the *Motel Oasis*,
confides in the East Coast interviewer,
People find comfort when they can
understand what you're saying.
She poses for photos in a halo
of aerosol, spot checks the blue shag
carpet, the oil painting of the Canyon
sunset: *Will this be in color?*

The Bengali across the interstate
researches Candy's rooms,
replicates their cotton, their miniature soaps,
the precise turn-down of the sheets.
When Candy's gone he pays to sleep in her beds,
handles the single-wrapped cups,
and purchases front desk postcards.
He understands the idiom *rule of thumb*
to mean more than width, to exceed
the dark skin of his hand.
For fifteen years he's wanted guests to feel at home.
He condenses his experience through a ring
of cigarette smoke, tells the interviewer:
Small town, small motel.
I charge thirty-one dollars a room.

The day after government checks, they both walk
their straight row of rooms, cleaning out
the hangovers who forsake what shade there is
in Winslow, Arizona to drink in the streams
of air conditioning. After the article
Candy's marquee reads:
CORRECTION:
BECAUSE OF AN EDITING ERROR
IT WAS OMITTED
AMIT BHATT GOES BY "AMIS"
TO SOUND MORE AMERICAN

Strangled Over Coffee

A table back from me
some bum shouts
the list of Reagan's sins
at folks who can't wait
for change and covered cups
to go. Again I lose
my place, put down
my book and pray for him
to shut up, to sink
inside his ruined coat
and knit cap. Revolutions,
Marx, Mao—he never
stops—Germ wars,
LBJ. He talks to
breathe, mouthing words
while inhaling, as he did
on his fall to city streets.
Silence has not occurred
to him in years. I might
have turned around to give him
my scarf because it's cold,
and leave feeling better.
But I could easily step
behind him, wrap the length
around his mouth, pin him
gently, keep him down
and wait, whisper a pardon
he wants more than any
coat, "Stop, it's okay.
You can stop now, really."

Bottom Sheet Love Letters

Blank paper adorns her room,
the square, white sheets keeping secrets
openly, like the single brick of a wall,
or a leaf on a green, unspectacular tree.
Those are my love letters.

A closer look in the soft light,
squinting eyes and an angled head,
reveals the writing, its impression
neat and full, running margin to margin
in loops, *I only kept the bottom sheets*.

Lampshades smoke through the paper.
This woman, beyond the chase of a boy
won't be coaxed to the floor to sacrifice
herself, reach out from the center of this room
and divine the mute pages on the walls.

Look at the letters, their message unsolved,
and let warnings bite fingers that try the grooves.
Sometimes the heart finds graveyards
spelled across the thinnest ground. In this light
the epitaphs are present tense: *They press hard*.

Friends Who Play Dead

Drag them so they don't knock their heads.
Avoid doorframes and table legs,
manipulating stiff joints with care, bending
the bodies of friends who play dead.

Tempt them to life with microwaved food,
and plot their revival with care. Shine
the light in their eyes, tickle them,
and hope that their lips quiver and turn.

Threaten to drag them outside, down the path
to the road, shirts pulling from their waistbands.
On the blacktop, let the day's warmth release
into the pale skin of the dead ones you love.

Games have the need for continuance, clocks,
so stare down warming frogs that take the shade
of pavement and lie down beside the bodies, wait
for the headlights, the petulant weather.

Wait for the photos of one place
to be divided among two locations.
Wait for a friend that plays dead, with fresh life,
to stand between you and your songs, you and old shoes,

standing with a stiffness that won't be massaged,
made to make due. Think about these things
in the road where survival is silent,
look back toward the house with the open door

and working lights. Turning toward the friend
who plays dead, whose eyes have opened at last,
ask, *Will you drag me back inside?*
Will you drag me as if I were alive?

Acoustic Shadows

When Grant squeezed Vicksburg
the siege outlasted trees, the Mississippi men
burrowed into bluffs, even the river itself.
Spectators huddled together on the hillsides,
Sunday dressed, passing umbrellas
and stale tobacco, a set of glasses
to spot the Yankee General
who'd tied a private to a cypress trunk
for punching a horse. Cannons
scorched the nights and pockets of onlookers
looked to one another in silence,
found they were deaf to the war while they watched
it rage below. The slightest breeze
drowned the battle, the cracking timber,
the latest charge. These reprieves came to be called
acoustic shadows, where whispers remained
possible. Those higher on the hill
wore something different on their faces,
who heard every yell, a choking cry
for Jesus, a twenty-gun barrage
honoring a distant battle's union dead.
In the shadow threat is a pantomime,
elaborate and cool as a sunset.
We'll watch it in peace while the sound
of terror travels over our heads.
The dangers, real and marching in,
can be read on the faces of those who stand above,
wondering how it is that we can smoke,
laughing in a place we cannot leave.

The Voyage of the Beagle

The clocks in my house are blinking.
None can measure how long
the power had been out. Thunder without rain
murmurs like a parent in a distant room,
just beyond the shelf of understanding.
I'm on the couch reading Darwin,
who's finally left Tierra del Fuego
and sailed to the Galapagos.
Another lightening strike jumps the room
into darkness until the circuits reset.
This time, the surge raises voices
from the answering machine, which has rewound
its years-old cassette to dig through messages
like geology. Voice layered on voice
bleeds into the next, a cross-section
of speech and tone, of ore and sand,
no meaning its own. My mother asks
Do you need anything? A wrong number:
And if this isn't the right place, ignore me
completely. Pretend I never happened.
An old friend jokes, *Did you watch*
the Wife Carrying Contest? The record
is Eight minutes. That is all it takes these days.
And finally, your voice,
that seems further away than any I've ever heard,
calling from a phone booth that still connected
for a dime. *I wish you were here*.
Where? I wonder. How long until
I was left behind in a city that was never mine?
Again, the lightening strikes and the messages play.
I wish you were here. I wish I were Darwin,
who read the world without effort: rocks
and life always spoke with a little prodding.
But, I'm more kin to the massive lizards he saw
dozing on the rocks, the ones he seized
by the tail and tossed into the water.
I'll sit here, wet and blinking
under the high ceiling light
waiting for all of it to happen again.

Critical Component:

Absalom, Absalom! and the Performance of Literary Modernity

Absalom, Absalom! and the Performance of Literary Modernity

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is a "masterwork" because, simply put, it is primarily about mastery. The novel's plot, themes, style, and structure involve violent struggles between competing forces, and in all cases, mastery is the final objective. Thomas Sutpen struggles to manufacture his heritage and subsequently master the racial purity of his descendants. Quentin Compson bitterly resists the implications of his Southern ancestry in hopes of mastering his own life and destiny. And Faulkner himself, on the sentence level, wages a battle against conventional syntax and meaning-making in order to achieve authorial mastery. Through the retrospective lens of literary history, the conflicts enacted in Faulkner's novel have been classified by critics as "modern." Paul de Man is one critic who succinctly defines "modernity," and he does so by juxtaposing this term with another concept central to Faulkner's novel: "history." For de Man, modernity is an actual creative process, not a specific historical era engaging specific themes. De Man's perception of modernity as a creative process, I believe, best accounts for *Absalom, Absalom's* spirit as a modern novel and its varied representations of mastery.

In this paper I will show how modernity's distinctive characteristics, or tensions, addressed by de Man in his essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity," manifest themselves in the language of *Absalom, Absalom!* Building upon de Man's definition of modernity and his assertion that all language is tropological, *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals itself as the master trope of modernity. As modernity's master trope,

Faulkner's novel specifically addresses issues of mastery on three important levels. First, it enacts and masters de Man's "paradox of radical renewal." Second, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a psychological narrative that adopts the structure of a conflicted mind attempting to master itself. And third, by invoking the trope of autobiography and its relation to apostrophe, Faulkner creates a battle for narrative mastery waged between the living and the dead.

In his essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man tries to illustrate, or expose, how the perceived binary opposition between history and modernity is actually a false dichotomy. Historically, this opposition manifests itself in literary discussions like "The Battle of the Books," and other heated clashes between the ancients and the moderns. False or not, this dichotomy's existence is perceived by de Man as crucial to the artist's endeavor: authors always aim to be modern, to "make it new" and break free from the influence of those writing before them. According to de Man, this effort leads authors outside of literature's specificity, or the characteristics that specifically define something as literature, into some realm of "newness." (A contemporary example might be the emergence of hypertext, a realm that many still hesitate to designate as literature.) This existence "outside" of literature makes that exterior space the prime terrain for modernity. Going outside literature's specificity might create this "modern space"; however, this endeavor ultimately fails because written documents are historical and result in modernity's return, or "folding back" into history. For de Man, these recurring failures are what produce literature. De Man emphasizes that modernity does not exist chronologically

because chronology is historical. Rather, modernity is self-fulfilling and happens within a work everywhere and "all at once," even at the level of a single word. Therefore, history and modernity are not in opposition; they actually unite to form a creative process described by de Man as the paradox, or process, of "radical renewal." In other words, a violent departure from literature is followed by a traditional return to specificity. In many ways, de Man's description of modernity is also a description of a struggle for mastery and the ownership of expression. In my opinion, *Absalom, Absalom!* may be read as the novelistic performance of de Man's argument. For de Man and Faulkner, performances of modernity develop around one solitary, troubled figure.

De Man's "Literary History and Literary Modernity" includes a number of major "characters," yet none as significant as Nietzsche, who stands as a striking example of "the complications that ensue when a genuine impulse toward modernity collides with the demands of a historical consciousness or a culture based on the disciplines of history" (de Man, 145). Rhetorically, de Man invests much in Nietzsche, and the paragraph that opens his discussion of the German philosopher reveals much about his attraction to such a figure: "exceptionally talented," "eccentric," "passion," "rebellion," and "violence" are all used to describe Nietzsche and his endeavors. Paul de Man expresses his attraction to Nietzsche as a young, romantic, rogue philologist. I find this interesting because, as will often be the case, an investigation of modernity seems to require a specific engine: a solitary, intellectual martyr. For Faulkner, Quentin Compson performs the same function as de Man's

Nietzsche: Quentin, barely twenty years old, struggles against a firmly entrenched, historical institution. Much as Nietzsche inherited, then disowned, historical methodology, Quentin resists his inheritance of Southern, aristocratic ideology as a way of life. Quentin's modern impulse, his desire for "newness," clashes with an institution erected upon notions of domination, racial purity, and patriarchal inheritance. Given these similarities, I read Quentin and Nietzsche as analogous tropes; the will of both characters is the subject of a battle for mastery, and their presence in these texts sheds much light on modernity as a concept. The desire for self-mastery, to resist an unsuitable yet entrenched way of life, produces a modern rhetoric that supports isolation, tragedy, and eventually death as the price of fighting this battle. At its heart, this battle has much to do with the conflict between remembering and forgetting. In order to travel successfully the road of the modern, Nietzsche and Quentin must learn to forget.

For de Man, history and modernity exist as a false dichotomy because of modernity's status as a temporal concept—if modernity can be inscribed and recorded, it is historical. Modernity, like Nietzsche and Quentin, proves tragic because it continually performs a doomed task: it attempts to deny historical temporality. As a result, genuine modernity involves forgetting, which for Nietzsche parallels the perpetual condition of animals in nature. After quoting Nietzsche's description of ahistorical life as "the most important and most original of experiences," de Man describes modernity in terms of "genuine humanity":

> Moments of genuine humanity thus are moments at which all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting. Although such a radical rejection of history may be illusory or unfair to the achievements of the past, it nevertheless remains justified as necessary to the fulfillment of our human destiny and as the condition for action (de Man, 147).

In the above scenario, mastery of one's own will is realized only through a violent break with the past, and I read *Absalom, Absalom!* as a massively deployed version of this remembering/forgetting conflict. This claim might seem odd in reference to a novel so overtly obsessed with remembering, formally illustrated by Faulkner's narrative as a series of dialogues serving to reconstruct/remember the story of the Sutpen family. Yet, I'd suggest that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel equally, and by necessity, about the desire to forget. Donald Kartiganer writes, when discussing the whole of Faulkner's work:

> Faulkner's texts clearly demonstrate what Paul de Man has called the "deliberate forgetting" of the modern, its "desire to wipe out whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present….To read Faulkner is to attend to this dialectic of remembering and forgetting, and to realize that it is located not merely between but within each pole (Eliot, 889).

This dialectic is a struggle for mastery, and if this struggle is both between and within the opposing poles, the result is a feeling of doubleness, or "being torn." Quentin Compson, early on defined by Faulkner as torn between history and modernity, exemplifies this condition of doubleness while listening to Rosa Coldfield's rendition of the past:

> Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentin's now-the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled

> ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as [Rosa] was—two separate Quentin's now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage…(Faulkner, 5).

Here, modernity reveals itself as especially important when one is implicated by his history. Ghosts and ghost-times haunt Quentin, much in the same way de Man says literature itself has always been haunted by the quest for modernity. The tension between the "two Quentins" again shows how the desire to forget tends to express itself in Romantic language, or in this case maybe that of Gothic Romance. De Man describes Nietzsche much in the same way when he writes, "Nietzsche's ruthless forgetting, the blindness with which he throws himself into an action lightened of all previous experience, captures the authentic spirit of modernity" (de Man, 147). Once again, when de Man describes the hero of his narrative, the language effects a rhetorical shift, adopting a tone of heroic martyrdom. While Quentin "listens" to ghosts, Nietzsche "captures" a spirit, all in the name of historical resistance and self-mastery. What is to be gained by resistance? As mentioned earlier, de Man indicates that forgetting/resistance is "deliberate," and aims to "wipe out what came earlier" in order to carve out one's own "true present" (148). The only way to master the present is to be free of the past. While this "new departure" sounds hopeful, it is the violence implied in "wiping out" that raises ethical questions for de Man, and generates a narrative dilemma that plays itself out in Quentin's life.

The ethical issue at hand, as made explicit by de Man, is whether or not a deliberate wiping out of history might result in its dishonest, deliberately inaccurate

rewriting. While de Man doesn't pursue this question beyond its possibility, Faulkner's novel actually offers competing, creative versions of the past. At the very least, the presence of these competing versions in *Absalom, Absalom!*, versions that revise and challenge each other, serves to ensure the foregrounding of history's status as a textual production. In Faulkner's novel there is definitely an "event"—the death of Charles Bon—but his novel eliminates a one-to-one correspondence between event and textual representation, opting instead for a massively deployed plurality. For both authors, plurality is a safety net, a way to ethically anchor themselves and avoid the dictatorial dangers inherent in modernity/forgetting as a creative project. Plurality also allows history and modernity's battle for mastery to fully play itself out. Rather than provide a conclusive document, an official version of history, Faulkner opts for a narrative that paradoxically moves forward by delay and digression, even at the sentence level. Fully engaging de Man's paradox of radical renewal, Faulkner delays his return to literature's specificity for as long as possible, hoping to master his engagement with modernity. Yet, if de Man's formula plays itself out, this delay merely waits in the face of the inevitable.

In both *Absalom, Absalom!* and "Literary History and Literary Modernity" the desire for a clean break will only exist as such: a desire or aspiration. Thus, modernity does not exist phenomenally; it exists only in representational terms that express the hope for such a condition. Neither Quentin nor Nietzsche can ever free themselves from history: the more Quentin expresses his desire to do so, the further he is inscribed in Faulkner's historical document. The traditional binary opposition breaks

down, revealing both terms as necessary in the paradox of radical renewal. Put differently, modern literature has always been the performance of its desire, yet inability, to be modern:

> The distinctive character of literature thus becomes manifest as an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable. It seems that there can be no end, no respite in the ceaseless pressure of this contradiction…(de Man, 160).

If this is true, then the next logical question is, What does failed modernity look like? If a text like *Absalom, Absalom!* merely pursues an unattainable end, how does that pursuit manifest itself in the narrative?

If modernity is merely an aspiration fueling the paradox of radical renewal, failed modernity must still exhibit its own unique narrative characteristics. In addressing this, de Man writes:

> No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness and has to be included in a definition of the specificity of literature. The manner in which this specificity asserts itself, however, the form of its actual manifestation, is curiously oblique and confusing…a curious logic that seems almost uncontrolled, a necessity inherent in the nature of the problem rather than in the will of the writer…(de Man, 152).

The above passage accurately describes Faulkner's writing, especially *Absalom, Absalom!* The novel is an overdetermined effort at self-fulfillment, its basic details replayed over and over by multiple narrators. For example, the story of Charles Bon's murder acts as a refrain, frequently being told and referred to. This precedent is

established in the novel's opening scene, where Rosa, in the tradition of the epic, "summarizes" all that is to come. Of the novel's central incident she says:

> …and the nephew who served four years in the same company with his sister's fiancé and then shot the fiancé to death before the gates to the house where the sister waited in her wedding gown on the eve of the wedding and then fled, vanished, none knew where (Faulkner, 6-7).

At the sentence level, subjects and objects repeat in close quarters, with "sister," "fiancé" and "wedding" turning the sentence into an echo chamber. While Charles Bon's story will be frequently recast, Faulkner indicates that the story was being told before we even picked up the novel:

> It would be three hours yet before he would learn why she had sent for him because this part of it, this first part of it, Quentin already knew. It was a part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man (Faulkner, 7).

A battle for mastery, between history and modernity, has been inherited by Quentin, as well as the novel itself. Faulkner, after introducing this volatile struggle in his novel, detonates it at the sentence level, resulting in a radical, experimental, and disruptive fiction.

The "confusion" and "curious logic" indicated by de Man manifest themselves in experimental writing. The curious logic of Faulkner performs itself stylistically in his long, winding sentences and compulsive inclusion of parentheticals. A typical Faulkner sentence explodes with its desire to be modern:

> Ay, grief goes, fades; we know that—but ask the tear ducts if they have forgotten how to weep.—Once there was a summer (they cannot have told you this either) a summer of wistaria. It was a pervading everywhere of

> wistaria (I was fourteen then) as though of all springs yet to capitulate condensed into one spring, one summer: the spring and summertime which is every female's who breathed above dust, beholden of all betrayed springs held over from irrevocable time, repercussed, bloomed again. It was a vintage year of wistaria: vintage year being that sweet conjunction of root bloom and urge and hour and weather; and (I was fourteen)—I will not insist on bloom, at whom no man had yet to look—nor would ever—twice, as not a child but less than even child; as not more child than woman but even as less than any female flesh (Faulkner, 115).

This passage reads as a narrative paraphrase of de Man's paradox of radical renewal, and an intense battle for mastery, between remembering and forgetting, unfolds at the sentence level. The first sentence immediately positions forgetting ("fades") against tear ducts that weep when remembering; the dash acts as the equals sign in an equation, separating, yet associating, the operative terms. The second sentence, which attempts to root itself in time ("once there was a summer"), is disrupted parenthetically by a claim for newness. The third sentence functions in exactly the opposite way: the effort to collapse time, to effect a structural synthesis of all springs and summers, is ruptured by a parenthetical, temporal anchor ("I was fourteen then"). The trope of modernity, of radical renewal, welcomes the seasonal metaphor adopted by Faulkner. History ("irrevocable time") is "repercussed," pressured by an exertion that eventually folds back into itself ("bloomed again"). The pattern of renewal continues: the vintage year is such because it includes an atemporal "urge." The assertion once more of one's age, the temporal anchor for specificity, is countered by a denial of repetition—the "look" will never happen "twice," and each look Rosa receives is thus self-fulfilling, complete in its moment. The quoted passage stutters its way to completion, always repeating itself, always believing it is finished, yet renewal

occurs and propels the sentence forward. This sentence is structured as countless others in *Absalom, Absalom!* (An entire chapter actually takes the form of a parenthetical): repetition, parentheticals, and dashes all illustrate the syntax's clash with modernity as paradox.

This struggle for mastery extends itself further because inherent in the paradox of radical renewal is literature's need, in the name of modernity, to go outside of its own specificity. Readership and the process of interpretation demand this. Paul de Man claims that the modern project is not one that overtly reveals its intentions, but must be interpreted and recognized as such. It takes readers to do this, readers willing to exist outside of literature's specificity. Thus, de Man describes a process with three components, which might be read as the workings of the modern mind:

> It soon appears that literature is an entity that exists not as a single moment of self-denial but as a plurality of moments that can, if one wishes, be represented—but this is a mere representation—as a succession of moments or a duration. In other words, literature can be represented as a movement and is, in essence, the fictional narration of this movement. After the initial moment of flight away from its own specificity, a moment of return follows that leads literature back to what it is…(de Man, 159).

The moment of return is what Faulkner describes as the "irrevocable time, repercussed," that "blooms" as literature. The ninth chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates what the fictional narration of this movement might look like, and also shows how this metaphor of flight is absolutely necessary for the paradox of renewal. Only this chapter details Quentin as agent rather than listener; the chapter also stands as the only one that provides extended narration freed from the enclosing quotes and italics of Rosa, Shreve, or Mr. Compson. Quentin, after hearing the Sutpen family's

historical narrative, is much like de Man hypothesizes: haunted by the necessity for action. This plays itself out in the fact that Quentin, from his dorm room at Harvard, is actually remembering his own actions, yet the chapter reads as if it were in the present. This is as close as Faulkner can come to representing de Man's "flight," a representation that, oddly enough, is the only chapter that reads as if it were a realist novel. Open to almost any point in the chapter and it will read differently than the rest of the novel:

> He moved along the gallery, guiding himself by the wall, moving carefully since he did not know just where the floor planks might be rotten or even missing, until he came to a window. The shutters were closed and apparently locked, yet they gave way almost at once to the blade of the hatchet, making not very much sound—a flimsy and sloven barricading done either by an old feeble person—woman—or by a shiftless man; he had already inserted the hatchet blade beneath the sash before he discovered there was no glass in it, that all he had to do now was step through the vacant frame. Then he stood there for a moment, telling himself that he was not afraid, he just didn't want to know what might be inside. "Well?" Miss Coldfield whispered from the door. "Have you opened it?" (Faulkner, 294).

I find it ironic that the impulse for modernity, which has manifested itself in more experimental, disruptive narrative forms, now, on the return to specificity, makes its greatest effort to be realist. Paul de Man addresses this very issue when he writes of Baudelaire:

> Baudelaire's text illustrates this return, this *reprise*, with striking clarity. The "moi insatiable de non-moi…" has been moving toward a series of "themes" that reveal the impatience with which it tries to move away from its own center. These themes become less and less concrete and substantial, however, although they are being evoked with increasing realism and mimetic rigor in the description of their surfaces. The more realistic and pictorial they become, the more abstract they are, the slighter the residue of meaning that would exist

> outside of their specificity as mere language and mere *significant* (de Man, 160).

I believe that de Man's schematic is somewhat complicated by Faulkner's narrative. If I am following de Man correctly, he seems to say the writer's flight, which is tied to "radical" rejection, provides the instances when the text is most disruptive, experimental and plural; the return to specificity involves a narrative shift toward linearity and shuts down plurality. I think chapter nine of *Absalom, Absalom!* shows the radical "flight" to actually be expressed in more realist terms, and that Faulkner's most modern moment in *Absalom, Absalom!* is this realist section of his narrative. Robert Pinsky, when discussing John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, makes the same point in a different context. Pinsky reads Berryman's most experimental and radical moments as those that reembrace, rather than overtly reject, poetic tradition. Yet, by the same token, chapter nine, bound up with Quentin's remembrance of events, could be seen as the post-return, fictional retelling of the flight, hence the realist tone. That said, Faulkner and de Man did agree that the return to specificity involves not only realism, but also an active minimalism. If Quentin in chapter nine is merely recounting his modern "movement," then Faulkner's vision is still consistent with de Man's. De Man, when describing the realist tendency of literature's return to specificity, uses Baudelaire's thoughts on Constantin Guys and the theme of carriages:

> Baudelaire insists that in the paintings of Constantin Guys "the entire structure of the carriage-body is perfectly orthodox: every part is in its place and nothing needs to be corrected." The substantial *meaning* of the carriage as such, however, has disappeared…(de Man, 160).

I'd suggest that Faulkner provides an even better example of "disappeared meaning" in Quentin's return to specificity. After entering the Sutpen mansion, Quentin and Rosa discover an aged, bed-ridden Henry Sutpen, who has not been seen by anyone since he murdered Charles Bon almost fifty years earlier. Since "return" (in this case, that of Henry) is the central theme here, it is revealing that de Man's and Baudelaire's observations apply. The following quote completely details the meeting between Quentin and Henry, the mythical figure who he has only experienced through incessant historical narration:

> *And you are——?*
> *Henry Sutpen.*
> *And you have been here ——?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you came home——?*
> *To die. Yes.*
> *To die?*
> *Yes. To die.*
> *And you have been here——?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you are——?*
> *Henry Sutpen* (Faulkner, 298).

Quentin, unable to extract meaning from the situation, repeats his line of questioning in the form of a near-perfect palindrome, with the lines "To die. Yes." and "Yes. To die" acting as the palindrome's fulcrum. These lines also represent the shortest collection of sentences in the novel, which further serves to illustrate how the return to specificity necessitates a death, a minimalism, or a loss of meaning. Henry Sutpen was exhaustively detailed by everyone except himself. This scene, often labeled as anti-climactic, fits de Man's description of modernity as a passing fashion:

> Fashion (mode) can sometimes be only what remains of modernity after the impulse has subsided, as soon—and this can be almost at once—as it has changed from being an incandescent point in time into a reproducible cliché, all that remains of an invention that has lost the desire that produced it. Fashion is like the ashes left behind by the uniquely shaped flames of the fire, the trace alone revealing that a fire actually took place (de Man, 147).

Here the tragedy of modernity is most evident: it always results in death, or phrased differently, "modernity always turns deathward." In Henry Sutpen, Faulkner surrenders the hope for modernity to its dying moment, a death that is always reproduced upon the return to literature and signification. This would seem to indicate that in every literary text there is a modern corpse, which, like Henry, can only provide a limited account of itself after losing the battle for mastery and returning to the cold reality of fashion, or history.

This built-in corpse, the remaining trace of the modern impulse after it folds itself back into an enveloping history, necessitates the deployment of "martyr-like" rhetoric. The modern impulse is a struggle for mastery, and a sacrifice is made upon "the return." This sacrifice isn't painful for those who successfully forget, or who, like Henry Sutpen, have spent all the energy the modern impulse provides. Yet, if history and modernity function as a self-sustaining relationship rather than an oppositional dichotomy, this might not always prove comforting for those who are hyper-aware of the need to remember. This is surely the case for Quentin Compson who, in an instance of overdetermined denial, still clings to radical rejection. After the revelation that Charles Bon was forbidden to marry Judith because of his black ancestry, thus showing Henry to be more tolerant of incest than miscegenation, Quentin is

implicated in the racist history of the South. Quentin's roommate, Shreve, says to him:

> "Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"
>
> "I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (Faulkner, 303).

These famous last lines reemphasize Quentin's commitment to modernity and forgetting. Quentin has never told Shreve he hates the South, yet Shreve asserts this anyway. Quentin's first response, said to come "quickly, at once, immediately," still clings to the adjectives of a self-fulfilling modernity. This is of course reinforced by a repetition, vocal and mental, that has characterized most of the novel. Because remembering proves an unpleasant project for a young man implicated in the South's history, I'd suggest that Quentin's suicide (which fittingly occurs in *The Sound and the Fury*, outside of this text's temporal chain) is the misguided, yet ultimate symbolic act of modernity. This might seem a gloomy prospect, but the rhetoric of the literary figures discussed thus far has shown modernity to be inherently tragic. It stands as the only way for Quentin to win the struggle for self-determination and mastery. Quentin is an example of form embodying content: his suicide is a misguided repetition, or imitation, of the modern trope.

Absalom, Absalom! engages, right down to the sentence level, the process of modernity and its paradox of radical renewal. This engagement is a battle for "mastery," that in Faulkner's case was the freedom to develop new meanings and

alternate, creative histories. In an attempt to make new meanings, Faulkner continually creates narrative space that eventually becomes part of literature's specificity. However, it is not only via the paradox of radical renewal that Faulkner performs a drama of mastery. This drama also unfolds on a psychological level, with *Absalom, Absalom!* as the ultimate psychological narrative.

Absalom, Absalom! centers on the modern mind at work, divided and in conflict with itself; accordingly, a psychoanalytic approach well suits this text. Faulkner was very much interested in what Freud had to say, especially his attempts "to distinguish between a historical sense that duplicates a completed past and one that reexperiences the past, recovering from it or projecting onto it meanings that have been first realized only in the present" (Eliot, 898). Both Faulkner's novel and Freud's practice of psychoanalysis involve a modern rethinking of the past, a creative and "new" experience with it. However, *Absalom, Absalom's* attempts to do so prove painful and difficult, and de Man's descriptions of modern narratives incorporating curious logic and "experimental" ends sounds very much like Freud's definition of neurosis. If for de Man, an author moves toward modernity because he is haunted by the desire/absence of such, then it is possible to read this condition as a trope of neurosis:

> Where the unconscious is most damagingly at work, however, is in psychological disturbance of one form or another. We may have certain unconscious desires which will not be denied, but which dare not find practical outlet either; in this situation, the desire forces its way from the unconscious, the ego blocks it off defensively, and the result of this internal conflict is what we call neurosis. The patient begins to develop symptoms which, in compromising fashion, at once protect against the unconscious

> desire and covertly express it. Such neuroses may be obsessional…hysterical…or phobic. Behind these neuroses, psychoanalysis discerns unresolved conflicts…(Eagleton, 137).

The internal struggle for mastery, between the ego and the unconscious, parallels that of history and modernity. Modernity, like the unconscious, wants "the run of the house," but must defer to the social, historically conscious ego. At the roots of modernity lies "abnormality" or madness, a tropological conflict that reveals itself "narra-somatically" while vying for mastery. This might help clarify Nietzsche's rebellion and eventual madness, and Quentin Compson's suicide. The obsession for modernity, a mild form of neurosis, colors the language and imagery of both writers and critics alike, rhetorically positioning them as romantic, solitary, tragic/martyr figures.

Neurosis may result from the inability to forget a traumatic event that constantly replays itself in the subject's mind. Quentin more than fits this description. I contend that Faulkner has structured *Absalom, Absalom!* using the mind in conflict as his model, specifically the neurotic mind. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the narrative representation of neurosis. There is little doubt that Quentin battles internally with a great psychological disturbance that he tries to deny. Quentin, in attempts to censor and master the characteristics he sees as intertwined with his heritage, is obsessive, paranoid, and finally hysterical, as evidenced by the novel's concluding paragraph. He throws himself into yet another paradox—he tries to simultaneously repress and express the modern, which is the rebellious unconscious of history. As modernity and history have united to form a process, the unconscious

and the ego unite to form neurosis. Quentin's head fills with the voices of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and he is faced with the near impossible task of sorting them out. In this manner, Faulkner's fits and starts, the "curious logic" described by de Man, are the nervous ticks of a deliberate narrative neurosis. Paul de Man's paradox of radical renewal, the modern impulse always folding back into history, reads much like a psychoanalytic, Oedipal narrative: one accepts separation with the promise of a future reunion. Quentin was unable to achieve and accept separation from the implication of his heritage. The voices of the dead win the power struggle within Quentin's mind. This battle is lost because Quentin ultimately fails at separating himself, his own living autobiography, from the historical narratives of the dead. This third conflation of opposing poles—autobiography and fiction—involves *Absalom, Absalom's* third and final battle for mastery.

Death as a built-in mechanism, or closure, for modernity is interesting when regarded in light of de Man's discussion of death in "Autobiography as De-Facement." Again, it is my feeling that as a narrative, *Absalom, Absalom!* expresses the "fictional" or novelistic version of de Man's reading. To summarize briefly, de Man's strategy is to collapse the distinction between autobiography and fiction. For de Man, autobiography is granted the illusion of authority because proper names are misinterpreted as having "uncontested readability." Like modernity, a process is at work. Autobiography is the radical flight from fiction, yet a return follows, with autobiography folding back into fiction. De Man envisions autobiography as having the rhetorical constraints of "self-portraiture," and I'd like to argue that as a narrative

Absalom, Absalom!, specifically Quentin, operates under these same constraints. The two Quentin Compsons (referred to in the quotation on pg. 5) reinforce de Man's claim for a "double specularity" that is purely tropological. The key statement de Man makes about autobiography serves to collapse boundaries:

> It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable….Autobiography, then, is not genre or mode, but a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject (de Man, 68).

This is of course the structure of Faulkner's text, each chapter narrating a conversation or exchange between two people or subjects. I relate this to the issue of history and modernity by suggesting that Quentin is mastered by the conflation of history and autobiography. History masters his desire for individuality. If de Man is right, and all Southern history is in some respect autobiographical for Quentin, Quentin fails to maintain a plausible boundary between the two. If autobiography and history converse in the mode of mutually reflexive substitution described above, Quentin completely collapses all distinctions. Then in some sense, when Quentin hears the story of Thomas Sutpen—a man obsessed with domination to the point that it crumbles his entire family structure—he is implicated, listening to the narrative of his own autobiography. When de Man writes "But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, by the same token, none of them is or can be" (de Man, 70), we are to understand Quentin in the same terms. The indictment

leveled against Quentin by autobiography *is not necessarily so*, yet he fails to make the same recognition as de Man—that what's at stake is "not reliable self-knowledge"—and this makes Quentin all the more tragic.

That said, death is the concept that serves to unite the projects of autobiography and modernity, and this is effected through the trope of prosopopeia, or apostrophe. This trope is an essential element of *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel that in many ways doubles as a séance:

> It is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of the apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech….Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name, as in the Milton poem, is made as intelligible and memorable as a face (de Man, 75).

This might not always prove harmful, yet de Man has a tendency to seek out harm, and prosopopeia is no exception:

> "Doth make us marble," in *Essay upon Epitaphs*, cannot fail to evince the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the [dead] speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death. The surmise of the "Pause, Traveller!" thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one's own mortality but our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead (de Man, 78).

Prosopopeia, in just this "sinister connotation," is *Absalom, Absalom's* master trope. The text provides a present dialogue (the year 1910), in which Quentin and other characters give voice to the dead—they reconstruct the history of the Sutpen tragedy and provide all dead figures with voices, which they use to speak autobiographically. Thus, chapter five appropriately recounts a visit Quentin and his father make to the Sutpen graveyard. They enter and read the five headstones that are present, filling in

a narrative for each one. For example, when they come to Judith Sutpen's headstone, whose fiancé, Charles Bon, was murdered by her brother Henry, it reads:

> *Judith Coldfield Sutpen. Daughter of Ellen Coldfield. Born October 3, 1841. Suffered the indignities and Travails of this World for 42 years, 4 months, 9 Days, and went to Rest at Last February 12, 1884. Pause Mortal; Remember Vanity and Folly and Beware* Thinking Quentin…(Faulkner, 171).

"Pause, Mortal" readily calls to mind "Pause, Traveller!" and what follows the words "thinking Quentin" is his performance of prosopopeia—he gives life to both Judith and Rosa (who wrote the epitaph) because he has just received a letter informing him of Rosa's death. Also telling is Faulkner's direct running of the Epitaph into Quentin's thought process, actually infecting Quentin with the tombstone. In this manner Quentin has been prefiguring his own death all along (Faulkner includes a chronology with the novel that indicates Quentin's death). Quentin, almost always the passive ear, has been "struck dumb" for most of the novel. I'd also suggest that Quentin has a disposition, or death drive, that attracts him to this trope. Oddly enough, it seems that everyone must die before Quentin so he can later call them into being and assume the role of the dead. Hence, it is only after Henry dies in the mansion, and Rosa's death after being in a c oma, that Quentin, "the sun," can finally set.

I include this brief section on "Autobiography as De-Facement" because it sheds some light on the nature of history and modernity. Quentin, in his aversion to remembering, opts for a death in modernity because, much to his dismay, prosopopeia auto-narrates the nature of his implication in the Southern tragedy.

When Quentin reconstructs the past, he gives voice to the dead while he is simultaneously taken over and De-Faced by their narrative. The past strikes Quentin dumb and inscribes itself on him. The inscription is *Absalom, Absalom's* narrative, a narrative about domination and racism, qualities that Quentin, like it or not, is mastered by and gives voice to. This is further incentive for Quentin to illogically and neurotically pursue modernity, which, as mentioned earlier, reaches fruition when he drowns himself. In Quentin's mind the watery grave provides no earthly plot or gravestone from which he will be forced to speak. Faulkner ensures this by having embedded the account of Quentin's death, his grave, in a different text. In that sense, Quentin himself is a ghost at *Absalom, Absalom's* very inception. It is known that Faulkner had much trouble structuring *Absalom, Absalom!*, and he finally decided on resurrecting Quentin in order to do so. America's modern "masterwork" requires a ghost narrator. American literature's modern texts are filled with Quentin-like ghosts, characters and narrators obsessed with the past. Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, Jake Barnes, Hurston's Janie, and Jason Compson, all are obsessed with remembering, recapturing, and even recreating the past.

Literary history and literary modernity, when conceived of as one system, reveal themselves to be a self-sustaining operation that benefits from the forfeit of one of its own terms. It always offers one of its children for sacrifice. As a novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* is the trope, or performance, of this very operation. Quentin proves to be the storytelling, modern engine already sacrificed in another novel. The rhetoric used in modernity's presentation, critical or literary, shows itself to be obsessed with

forgetting as a blissful and generative state; therefore, the discourse of modernity, when still perceived as a binary pole, lends itself well to those "haunted" by a traumatic or problematic past. Any text contextualized by a turbulent past, Faulkner's Civil War narrative being just one example, finds itself on a ground where history and the modern impulse reconcile only by means of a violent struggle for mastery. Much to the credit of writers like Paul de Man and William Faulkner, the intensity, and frequency, of this conflict's performance indicate a willingness to complicate one's own relationship with historical events. This complication might be the working through of a guilt or trauma, which is why modernity's fragmentation exhibits so many psychoanalytic parallels—in many ways, the issue of modernity can be read as another trope of the conflicted, split-subject. Like the unconscious, modernity denies direct access and control, forcing us to settle for its metaphors; this exile from modernity evinces a despair that surfaces in its own rhetorical, narrative expression. I read de Man and Faulkner as in many ways "playing doctor." By exposing the viscous nature of the binary and re-envisioning modernity as part of a necessary paradox, these writers manifest linguistically that modernity is a dream. Faulkner, in allowing the tropes of modernity to fully play out their binary's struggles for mastery, creates in turn what must be called a masterwork. If modernity truly is an elusive, unattainable concept existing only in the mind, then Faulkner has taken the appropriate step to master that dilemma. He has written a novel that is a mind of its own, and all one has to do to put their hands on "modernity" is open the book that seems to change and creatively rewrite itself upon every reading.

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