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Chair: _____

The Moment of Looking Down

A dissertation submitted to the
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requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Department of English and Comparative Literature

of the College of Arts and Sciences

By

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Abstract

The Moment of Looking Down is a collection of poems crafted into book form over the course of my studies. The first and fourth sections focus on poems dealing with fidelity, mortality, and loss. The second section explores memory and perception through a series of poems that use a long, single-line stanza. The third section is a narrative sonnet sequence that follows the brief rise of a young jazz singer as she struggles to reconcile her understanding of herself with the perceptions of those listening to her. The dissertation concludes with the essay “Manmade: Masculinity in the Poetry of Tony Hoagland, Mark Halliday, and Rodney Jones,” which contends that these poets express the male body and male sexuality with a troubled awareness of the complicated political, cultural, and psychological position of American masculinity at the end of the twentieth century, and that their poetry moves beyond contemporary feminist and masculinity studies theorists by exploring new masculinities through directly accessible language.

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Bateau

“When Fonzie Jumped the Shark”

Quarterly West

“When I Think of Janeane Garofalo, I Almost Never Think
of Her Fingers”

North American Review

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I. The Missing Person

When Fonzie Jumped the Shark

that it only happened once,
the myth of adolescence making all accidents

permanent and forgivable, the moment
of looking down into the wide water.

I ask you how many lines we can cross,
your face flushed and expressionless,

thighs taut around my hips but no longer
negotiating space on the couch, our hold

over each other suddenly clandestine,
because this line has slipped behind us,

lingering in the haze of our bodies, the heat
of your cheek against mine—I want you to say

that there are many lines, will be more,
that we are working through each other,

fingers caught in the folds of our clothes,
the snarling blanket of hair beneath us—

no witnesses to acts unnecessary and unkind.
There must have been more for the Fonz,

some evidence of a more complex trajectory,
climaxes and cliffhangers equally daunting

that gestured toward the great changes in our lives,
the descent into merely familiar territory

where our actions are only fault lines
on the maps of our predictable bodies.

Like when you traced the hairline cracks
in the skin along the back of your hand,

and I followed behind with my fingertips
neither to heal nor to remember them,

but to tap them for their assurance
that all of our dangers were still impending.

Meeting for Drinks at the Bar Where None of Our Friends Go

I talk to myself less than usual
on the way home, muttering, drunk
past a single car accident.
March is never as cold as I am
next to you when you burn down
another cigarette and talk
of how your mouth tastes.
I would have lit the next one, too.
This is how men write poems,
one arm after another,
the climb back into being in love
every time the lights flicker out
behind you in the IGA
where we imagined spending all our days.
I'd rather be angry about it,
shake the smoke from my jacket,
pick any other name to repeat
to increase the distance between us.
Your breath is not currency,
shot through with the certainty of a bedroom.
What do I owe you for all the drinks
you bought me, walking back
into the bar just before close?
The confessions wreath around me,
another late snowfall ushering us
quietly out of the city. For a few drinks
more I would have held up
my fingers all night counting
whatever indiscretions you liked.
There's always still one more coming.
One more dollar in the jukebox to ruin
every song I've never fallen in love to.
Do you see it yet, tracing your body
behind you? Lying in bed I draw my hand
along your face, and you ask
what's the worst I've ever done,
like our bodies tucked together
beneath the ground, like the secret
only our blood knows. That we can't
ever remember how we got home.

An Awkward Apology to Almost Friends

Meanness, the way you've demoted me.
In the three days since our fight I've slid
from hugs to handshakes, a knowing look
transferred between ignorant acquaintances.

Your cigarettes born like parakeets, finger-
clung and clawing, no longer amuse,
nor the sobriety with which you deliver
marital advice like a damp poultice.

Who's qualified to grieve for the lovers
of exhaust pipes, whose rattle against
the undercarriages and bumpers bolster
our spirits against the music of the drowned?

Infused with praise, your flair for drama
simmers to paste in the humid nights
of a Cincinnati wasted with hills
that none of us ever sees around.

You imitated Klee on a greeting card
although you'd never observed his work
outside of books. That's no accusation,
just another dull marble.

But I think sometimes you let go
of your childishness long enough to sing
as if you were your sister's mother
in a voice that's all esophagus.

In such moments, your shawl wraps
your guitar as well as your shoulders,
and the lyric's too sweet to be a lie
curling its tail around your neck.

In those moments I want to hold you
like I used to, my hands in the spaces
along your back, and a solid distance,
measurable between us.

When I Think of Janeane Garofalo, I Almost Never Think of Her Fingers

My wife looks out from Calton Hill over the valley
of green picnickers and the tourists who sit with her to watch them,

arms propping up backs like easels, the visual
hit of oxygen that tells her life is only pure

in this spot, that though only her second stop,
it is the only place in Scotland she'll go back to.

This hill, the coarse dirt comprising it,
a reliquary for the bones of ancient sheep—

this hill, the definitive pastoral somehow more spiritual
than the cows mulling about the meadows of King's College,

Cambridge, where she'd grab me by the wrist
with both hands, insist that she's found another absolute,

the last pack of cigarettes, her last lover.
As if it couldn't have been the Scottish busker

who, blonde hair knotted in a fist behind his neck,
climbed up on the bar and recited from memory

Mel Gibson's rallying call in Braveheart.
Cheered on by faces sharpened in the parabolic shadows

of the pub's covered lamps, he collapsed
to the floor shouting, "We don't play any fucking

Bob Dylan here." Choose any tow-headed
moment whose consummation proves that destiny

is finally a thing to be controlled. Even her nails
grazing my wrist, each carapace parting skin.

Always Bring Your Ben Jonson

He's drunk again at the party, cheeks
like tomatoes on homemade crusts.
He says the secret is honey and winks,
voice kept low to cheat the ears
of a few poor household spies.
Who does he think might hear him?
The CD skips and he pulls it out,
drops a new one on, just released,
waits for comments. His girlfriend ducks
in the kitchen, knows to avoid the bait
in front of others. No excuse.
He'll follow her after the whiskey stops,
but before the guests have gone, make love
in the room they painted red to match
the look she gave when they first met.
And they are both afraid and not afraid.
No interlopers press their weight to the floor,
catch the ratty tangle of breaths and gasp.
She wonders why he'd touch her again,
and also why she'd let him.

Thank You All for Coming Out Tonight

Your cramped disciples order the bucket special,
five beers for fifteen dollars, and wait at the bar
for you to shimmy out of your long, black skirt
and get your short shorts and fishnets on stage.

The bottles come on ice like body parts preserved
from an accident involving an indefinite number of limes
and the look from you that made them shiver and slice
right out of their skins.

You're a twist, all right,
so I won't quote the instep of your kisses or list
the offenses you've slung at the gods and Apollo,

but you made even the bartender laugh, a stoic
Filipino woman, who, cleaning up empties,
didn't realize you weren't finished.

Burial

Certain things that used to be legal
the county now won't permit,
so when she showed up with grief
shouldered like a bag of keys
we had to admire her temerity,
the way she'd made her face up
with glitter, as if she were a teenager,
and dyed her hair from red to black.
All the bottle blondes turned to look,
remonstrations tooled into their stares.
This was before Woodrow's moved down
from north of town, just a smoke shack
beside the highway where the brush
had been cut back, when the menu
offered only ribs or a chicken
or either of them halved, and beer.
"I come to bury him," she said,
stopped on the threshold, eyes
distant, looking at nobody,
"and then I'm gonna fuck
your men silly." She plucked
an ashtray off the closest table
and walked out into the grass,
the sticks of her heels sinking
a quarter inch or so in the dirt.
We never inquired of her after
whether she did it or not. She didn't
have a shovel, although we heard
her open and close the trunk once.
And a few of us went out looking
for where the ground had been disturbed
and didn't find the obvious signs.
But she made good on the rest
of her word. Lord, she made good on that.

Real Life

No parallax, no whiteness, no clear view
from where she sits in her classroom, chemistry
a foreign art, beautiful, but not relevant
to what she thinks she sees, some glimpse of man,
some primal hour, the shadow drawn like gauze
across the branches green with new leaves,
eclipse of eyelid, roughly indrawn breath.
If only she could move a little to the right—
as simple as standing up, a few steps—
some glimpse, some other answer might reveal
a second fate, two round, obedient
lovers beneath the tree, a blanket spread
to keep the ground beneath them because they fear
the instability, her bold eye behind them,
urging them on to something new, the faith
that newness can be trusted like skin,
which, breaking, always leaves itself behind,
a renewal whose remains she, too, can feel,
the heel of her hand wedged against her jaw,
her calves gripping the legs of her desk.
With a little more effort, she could break them,
and that would be seeing, truly, a double sight,
so sure of innocence no kiss pressed
beyond the window, however it might reflect,
would offend anyone who observed.

Before Opening the Envelope

This better not be another coy attempt
to get a rise out of me by saying sex
would have been inevitable and made me resent
how easily you could seduce me, turn my erection
against our friendship. Those threats seem less
urgent now that my opportunities to flirt
have worn at the knees. Most evenings I undress
unattended, adding a shirt to the pile of shirts.
Perhaps if our friendship had better survived,
I might thank you for caring enough to keep me
away from your bed, instead of this surprise,
a letter, another intimacy I'll have to concede.
The scent in the damp of the sheets left by your thighs
would at least have been something I could remember you by.

Memory of Saginaw, No Return Address

If I was the slight teenage boy who stood
on the corner outside your house and skipped rocks
across the street and into your hedge, I would
like to apologize for that. I've taken stock
of the women I've failed to love, and you were the worst:
the notes slipped into your folder (which you returned),
stolen socks, the amorous looks rehearsed
to raise your boyfriend's ire once I'd learned
he was prone to violent self-abuse, and the milk
I left in your locker over the long weekend.
I embarrassed you out of love, though now I think
the stink proves there was little there to commend.
Even if you had called, I couldn't explain
the clenched heart's patience, its shifting strain.

As a Wife Across a Lake

After that salesman hit you up for a drink
when Wednesday evening choir rehearsal let out,
you went with him. That's just like you, not thinking
other people's motives deserve much doubt.
So now you've had to change your first name,
as well as your last, to get out of Chicago
and back to, yes, Michigan clear of shame.
Your husband won't look for you, wouldn't know
where to start, but when the weather on the lake
is clear enough, you can hear his voice on the radio.
"Go back to where you went off course and take
the other road. You'll know whom to follow."
When I rewrite your story even he
humbly admits you should have chosen me.

When I Dream of Fucking Ruth, She Refuses to Participate

At least I can die having put an arm around you,
my fingers covering the ground between the small
of your back and side, a slow motion confused
by your frictionless fabric. I want to feel it all,
your hip the only part of you I'll know
with any intimacy, convinced as all men are
your proportions are perfect. The rest of us undergo
the leagues of scalpels, parked on the porch for hours
while you relate the tale of our transformation.
Dear Ruth, whatever secret's marked beneath
your eye shadow's black, whatever church sheens
between your blouse and skin, I will seek,
though I'm never thinking of you, staring out at the street.
Honestly, Ruth, how can you believe such stories?

The Saint of Broken Homes

When you send me your child's picture,
I count back months to the moment
your arm brushed mine and I slid
my hand up your thigh, a gesture of good faith.
Nobody ever won an Academy Award for sex.

We would have only held hands
if you had gone for that sort of thing,
but there was gin to blame it on,
an apology in the smoke you fanned away,
the long wait in low-cuts for whatever lust would come,

like a vigil for the first woman you kissed.
You mentioned her just once as evidence
you'd been here before, damp with summer,
mosquito-black woods, prepared to take
anyone whose hands pressed down your shoulders.

I remember after cutting vegetables
being interrupted by your drunk mother,
now grandmother in the picture I hold.
But the fridge is already covered with photos,
edges fencing out places where lovers go.

Purse

In the pocket of your purse
where your delicate undecideds
unravel into spirals of lint,

receipts with numbers blurred
to florets and signatures
clear as your fingernails,

I found the picture you took of me
with my eyes closed, lying on the blue-
striped couch before we'd stripped

the upholstery and washed it to shreds.
I would like to tell you
that although I don't remember that moment,

seeing myself vulnerable, on paper,
at the other end of you watching,
returns me to early love, but,

warm and embarrassed,
I have to look at the floor,
because although I don't have to tell you any of this,

I was thinking of someone else
while rummaging through your things,
looking for a pen to write about her.

The Apartment

Would it reveal too much of our future
for me to nudge you quietly awake,
remind you that across town a stack of pans
molds on your stovetop, a garden you planted
and forgot, like your ex-lover's rose bouquet?
The cat batted its petals, amused for a time.

You cooked a meal. We ate on the floor.
We left the bed sheets wrinkled and clothes
we'd want but wouldn't go back to get
until I thought to feed the cat.
I dangled some nylons you'd worn that night,
then knotted and tossed on the floor in guilt.

I think back on this as a romantic time,
the phone calls at four a.m. to wake me up
and bring you coffee from 7-Eleven,
hazel-flavored. You worked all night.
And when you came to bed late,
what did you think you'd wake to?
Strips of sun through the blinds?

It's night again. The neighbor's stereo kept low
lulls you further away. In the dark
a mirror comes unstuck, a flat fall.
The cat jerks awake, drops from the stove,
its fur matted with soup.

Your Obsession Poem

You pocket your cigarettes,
wink at me and ask,
“Are you coming, or what?”

Of course not. I watch
your jeans wrinkle,
gather and release

behind your knees and up
and know it doesn't matter,
your open disgust, the twist

your lips make when you kiss
my cheek and I pull away.
The sex would still be good.

Our expectations differ
because we need them to.
I need to elevate your skin,

the clothes that fall away
as if I've slipped them off
and become someone new,

a part of you that flexes
when you bend and thinks
only the thoughts you allow.

You need to drive home
full of nothing else,
your hair infused with sweat.

No fingernail need trace
the line of your dark cheek.
Both our lives end here.

Where you rest your tongue,
I'll cordon off with ropes,
and nobody else comes in.

Come Down

The headlights flash behind us on the road
to rouse us, lulled to sleep by steady rain.
You with your head against the door,
a pillow curled around your neck, your face
the paler white of dreaming, even breaths
the counterpoint of mine. I imagine
we have different destinations, homes
where someone else is waiting, other lives
with other lovers, she whose empty arms
define us, whose matted hair curls
around her darkened face, the hidden shame
of choosing her to be the nameless one,
who in my thoughts thinks only my name,
and out of them is only real to herself.
It pleases me that while I drive you sleep.
You're making better time while I wait
and count the lagging hours until we arrive.
But what the hell, without you I can play
my music, twice, and only stop for gas.
For moments at a time it's almost like
I'm on my own, some man's man traveling roads
that might lead all the way up North, a light
left on outside a cabin, firewood piled
up high, the snow a blizzard filling in
behind my taillights' dimly fading red.
My fingers settle in the molded grooves
along the steering wheel, its curve a spine,
then balance car, momentum, motion, all
of these in one hand. I lay my right
along your thigh, fingers pressed against
your denim leg, the cushioned seat, your weight
and pressure anchor for the plummeting
as we lurch together down the highway.
What vision, what electric fortune sweeps
motes across the windshield, insects, crust
of mucous gathered in its beveled eye?
Not ours. The greater good of vagabonds
or harmless tailgate urging us ahead,
attended by the old indecent love
that visits us in daydreams and in dreams.
In some hotel where stairways only lead
to certain floors, some flame you can't forget
is passing you on his way up. You raise
your hand and with your finger lightly tap

his pinkie finger. It entwines with yours,
that touch we too quickly call regret,
when really what we need to say we've said.
The one I always come down for is you.

Sunsets Over America

If your sunset were painted less red
and unloaded from its U-haul by men,
thick-gloved and hoping for quick pensions,
and nestled between the walls of your garage,
we'd sit on the lawn in spite of mosquitoes
on the blanket you knitted for our anniversary
and press the remote again and again
to make the colorless slats of the door
descend and rattle up again, each bend
an eruption, and then the full-on burn
of sunrise. I'd ask if you remembered
the way the sunsets in Cambridge seemed
cool by comparison, how they seared
the skies into darker blues, and the wind
carried them, puffs of cigarette smoke
over the roofs of the houses. Not so exotic,
really, roofs and houses and smoke and wind,
all things we have in Ohio. And yet
the sunsets here are always orange or ochre,
so when Jack Gladney insists there's no
description for the way our pollution has made
them beautiful, we know he still sees
reds mixing with yellows. Shut the book
on all of our worrisome, sad adventures.
Our neighbors are peeking out of their windows
to hush their dogs, barking in wonder.

II. Until I Could Not Carry You

Post-Op: Spay

The uterus suspended between your fingers, a cat's cradle, plump and purple and red and brown

Yours, I think, but not your own

Your surgical mask hangs flatly beneath your neck, lop-sided jowl

You think there can be no more elegies, but the word you think is "funeral"

You imagine the cat's last dreams in a room of cats who sleep the sleep of cats

When you whisper to me in dreams, my paws twitch

The scrubs print blue, the wall yellow, and your gloves clean white

You insist that you have outgrown my sanitized portrayals

The uterus looks large, looks leathery, looks purple, and you assure me it is none of these

When you bring your wallet of photos home, you try to hide this one because I am squeamish

You press your fingers against the subdued pulse, which in the cat's dream is another cat

When the stitches are adequate, you pass

When the cat slips back from dreaming, you pass

When you dispose of all organic materials, there are no more cats, and this is also a form of
passage

I take up your implements: needle, scalpel, hand

What is the uterus held out from your body, but part of my still dreams?

When I tell you to smile, all you think of is parts

The Calendar

The Matildas all share the same dream, to be perfect cylinders erect in a field of white flowers

How I find you again, a black and white calendar photo, not the girl in my back yard

Your cropped foot, your reconstructed ankle, your athleticism *in absentia*

Wet hair crowning your shoulder, the dagger of one lock dividing an eye into thirds

As an Australian soccer star, you're two years younger, one more athlete-supermodel in the
pantheon of hyphenated celebrities

Like my thumbs tugging your belt loops, in the sprinkler after dark

Your first international goal: to stand naked in Canberra on a windy day, the only point in a
devastating loss

Body as complementary angles, your perfect equilaterals, the pyramid between your breasts

When I tried to kiss you, a whisper that missed your ear by a centimeter

No mother wishes to be a soccer mom, one nipple pointing downward

You mounted my back, and I took you around the house until I could not carry you

Once upon a time under the electric scoreboard you took off your shoes and gave them to me

Middle child between my body and the grass, lips black above your belly's telltale curve

You lie in the hazy grays of the foreground, an eye rhyme that tricks the ear into believing

A handful of oceans away you lace up your shoes and your bound chest

What the Story You Tell Looks Like from the Street

After your titanic wisdom burns orange, annealed in the light around me

What did you think would happen, your hand close to my face?

The curse of the Sagittarian is her madness

Your language widens around you, enough to slip your limbs between letters

Go west until you reach the pine mountains, my favorite spine

Your boyfriend doesn't love you. Neither your muse, nor your skidding legions

Your hands jockey your breasts around the field of your body

Sadness somersaults like rabbits around you. I have to explain this

Bathed in sap, talons purpled by shadows from passing cars, and you think I'm obscene

Every shot: redeye, redeye. For fuck's sake, that's a fire

Every time the phone rings, answer it

The carp shivers down your skin, west and west

The shoe, the handcar, the isolation booth, a dog park

Tell me again what you want to know until you've anticipated what I'll say

Bring a star to a party, she's sure to wrong your wine list

You shouldn't have come to these mountains; these mountains are mine

The letters caught in your hair, their serifs tangle and squirm

Every lie you tell goes into your beer and body

Before time stopped, miles as big as dinosaurs walked the earth, praising your elocution

Stop pointing your finger pistols at me, planet

Go west until you see stars, until you hit the rail and plummet

Graduation

This is your white star, the glimmer in the corner of my eye that is the corner of the photo I stole
from your best friend

The skittish merlin perched on your arm, nail-deep in your wrist, the centers of your eyes, two in
a string of lights

You tempt none of the boys, but the men can't keep their hands off you, your hips laced with
their fingers

Your hair dyed red, even in Spring you're remembering Autumn

In a suitcase between pages of *Portnoy's Complaint*, secreted in some manila file, stuck between
pages of some

Everyone's back to you, the crazy one, hand pulled back on a bow string

Lights out of focus, "Class of 2004" says "Class *or* 2004," black fingernails, midnight blue dress

God pardons the girls in floral prints who refuse to expose their skin

Where is the blood from the cutaway, the vacancy in her mind when she misses you?

To allow an aerialist into the prom, where every girl must dance with the boys to keep them
touching

You are hunting what they cannot see, in your smile the certainty you will kill a terrible thing,
indeed

Shawl like a cape, like the arc of the bow, like a crown of myrtle, like a princess with

Your body underneath the shadow of feathers, the hairdresser made your head a nest

Where is your mother to tell you not to wear that ring, to call a chaperone, constrict your
frightening body?

What creatures already are at your feet, the brittle collection of corpses whose juices you have
taken, what bitter feeding

When god forgives you for calling back the merlin, what will you offer that you have not already
sacrificed?

Your hair in jesses, hood off, and you will not come down

If I Wake Up on a Bus

Nothing to remember you by except your legs like plastic beneath my fingers

Some guys from church in a card game for licorice twists

You said you'd never compromise the perfect health of your body

I always knew you on a bus, the corrugated flanks of steel, my sister staring back at us

"Wake up and kiss me," I should have said

Count the cost of love before it breaks your heart, henck henck henck

The letters you wrote afterwards, longer than your shorts and on whiter paper, and flirty

The seat next to you recently taken by me and recently abandoned

If I had been sixteen, I would have driven across the state to see you

You would have taken me to prom if I had been there. An athlete of what?

That's what leggy blondes do to men on their own time, and so I picture you on crutches

"Do you like my legs?" You could have given me more specific instructions

At night the bus's windows blacken to walls and I push you against them

And again in my head for nights after, my softer skin exchanged for your hard body

Last year I thought you were a runner. This year I hope you are a basketball star

Don't say you heard it, too, the roar in the wheel well, the way the journey together draws us
away from each other

If I had been in control of myself at any point in human history, you would have taken me with
you

Who were you to make me the superstar?

I could have at least signed your cast and teased the coarseness around its edges

Everyone I have ever loved has been to Detroit, and most have lived in the suburbs with you

The grime worn into your hair, your concrete, the tar, the purified moment

Your fingers tracing mine, your taller arms, a warm-up for, an afterthought before

The myth of yours and mine, the distant, dark fields gone by, eclipsed by the lamps of late night
readers

Prom with Motorcycle

My rock and roll dreams don't include you or a festival of stems, the heads of your tulips broken
with rain

Field of tuxedos against the glittered blue, the step in and instep of every thin, misfit shoe

Arm stiffened along the leather seat, unprepared to strike the trashy pose

After I tuck my fingers into your sash, the headlights grow familiar, rocket the gods rode down

The sun boils twenty-four hours a day on this hog and her go-hungry children

Girl, I like your tires, the way you jewel around

Here is your circle, the lens where I put the shirt you borrowed and will never give back

The motorcycle wants a black vest, to wear your legs as lapels

You shout endearments of gravel over the deafening memory

No mud for miles, you know our vanishing point, remember your stomach, full of soap

I can remember my hair so long, I couldn't tell it from yours in the dark

How my arms dangle, less important than where they settle, waists and hips, a fingerprint on
chrome

You're wearing the red dress, and so you must ride. Your choke, your throttle, your suspension

When absence intervenes, its mirrors omit lovers as objects too far behind to deserve concern

Among the hash marks, a series of dresses, hybrids buried just before the freeze

I should consign you to what pegboard, to what file folder, to what shoebox, to what album

A motorcycle only knows itself, its heart, its esophagus, its exhaustion

I could barter a disco ball for wind and still refuse to take you home

Post-Op: Breast Reduction

What I wrote in your diary, an invitation to sex I imagined having with you

Your face close as an echo, I can find on you no gentlemanly place to put my hands

From shoulder to elbow, union of birch and leaves, your breasts a blur

The silence when I stroke my thumb along your spine is what it means not to believe in what you
have never seen

In the blue office with swags of dried flowers, your new body is determined by committee: you,
your mother, the doctor

When I think of your breasts decided by me, I have healed the nerves and left the scars

Everything in your arms' circle is yours, and when we are dancing that is also me

Your shirt the color of mustard, your dress of seeds, there is no danger of me leading you
anywhere

The song reminds you of some old boyfriend, the flavor of his neck, his hair, his eyes something
like mine

If the room were spinning, you'd be its center, my fingers twined in your ribs

No quiet in your head after the surgery, now everything you take pours out again

In the end, they cut you one tissue at a time, cropped your edges just so

What I hold back from you, I hold back, the overexposed excised by light

Your hands on my back indifferent as children, one indiscrete gesture from intimacy

In each still moment your eyes shift slightly, sifting candlelight into color

The scotch I left has disappeared, and everything else pulls into focus

The motion of your hair a mismatched crown, our bodies with a border in common

The Wedding Photo

How in the photograph, enlarged, your face is turned into sun, and into shadow

My face, the embargo of light, blockades my head

Your mother's voice on the phone, the shopping list of family gossip, pauses

The sunlight resists, finds the shade easier to hold

And silence multiplies slowly, working the figure out on its fingers

Easier to hear the voices of shrubs planted around the patio

You want to gather the greens from the background and arrange them in the corners of our living
room

The nail you bite to remove an unpolished edge is invisible

I will never ask you to pick up some cokes and you will never ask me to pick up some cokes
either

In the foreground your friends blow soap bubbles. Glitter and rise. They have good advice.
Change the cat litter, they say

What your mother will say now, you cannot guess

You cannot guess what color your fingernails would be in the picture, so you put them aside

I hold your fingers in my fist and they tickle my palm, and I will do this again

Come with me into the margins where your mother sits on a stool in her kitchen

We mourn the plastic pig that sat on her stove, legless

Perhaps your mother stands behind me, forward from the plane of the picture, holding up a white
umbrella

If we are in the shadow of the blue glass frame, we lose the marginalia

The patio bricks picked up and bound in books—what would she say about that?

When your mother copies our address down with a felt-tip pen, she inverts two numbers, puts it
on the fridge

Her life descends around her like rings, ill-stacking hula-hoops

Let that linger *in medias res*—what do you expect her to give you now?

The photograph not focused on our kiss at all, but on the heads of oceaia flowers

III. Spotlight Girl

Star-Spangled Banner

“At Talladega you want to wear the red
lipstick, sweetie, red as Satan’s tits,”
a well-tanned woman tells her. Already sweat
has soaked the pink bandana around her chest.
*Oh God, she asks herself, how did I
get here? My agent is so getting a phone call.*
Beers bounce from hand to hand and the sky
grumbles with jets. Soon the snarl of cars.
For holy Christ’s sake, she sings jazz!
She’s not some country floozie, liquored up
and bedding cowboys in her RV. She’s got pizzazz.
And soul. No butter-blonde, this girl. She pulls
her red hair down and whips out sparks of red in the sun.
She was born in Texas, and Texas is where she’s from.

Coast

“Just for shits and giggles, darlin’, let’s walk
to the end of the pier and back.” Her mother swings
her beaded purse over her shoulder and talks
about the good of the salty air for singing.
“It also does wonders for the complexion, dear,
except the sun brings out your damn freckles,”
an automatic hand to the cleavage to clear
the crumbs of pigment covering her neck like pimples
of water or sand left by the spray of waves,
minute deposits of minerals. How will they look
in a dozen years? In twenty? Embedded in shale
as red as dirt, or as black as a coat of soot?
The seagulls circle above her, return to the ocean,
as the prairie grass shores the beach against her erosion.

Smile

Monthly trips to the Smile Enhancement Studio
make her teeth a limerick, slick as leaves
exchanging news from further up the tree,
how at the top they've turned to expose their versos.
Yes, this is what she looks like at the bone,
a nervy girl, coy, compulsively neat,
plying her gums with cotton when she bleeds.
These cavities are sealed, oh subtle shrimp, oh know.
And still she prefers to smile without the teeth,
clean as they are. Her lips allure and kink
at their ends, unfold, unsquirm, and vilely curl,
or violently submit to being seen
like children raw with wants. Their faces skin
her secrets, how she craves to kill the world.

Hotel

A lobby full of business women in suits,
each of them an agent or go-between,
talking on cell phones, just being loud—
a girl could get lost in this crowd, recruited,
pushed through a rack of coats and never seen
except by other hostages lost for good.
She passes quickly by their skirted legs,
a ripple of silk from which she pulls her own
wireless and dials. After the distant ringing,
“Mom, you said you’d meet me here. I’m begging.
There’s like a business convention going on,
and I can’t find where I’m supposed to sing.”
A briefcase catches her elbow, and the phone flips closed.
It’s razor thin and goes wherever she goes.

Cab

“Mom, can you stay on the phone? There’s this guy across the street. I think he’s watching me.”
She can’t tell if it’s in her head, or if his eyes are following her, two black bubbles freed from the hundreds glued to the stage that night. In a crowd they seemed harmless, like fireflies caught in the jar of her throat. But out in the streetlight they’re sinister. Maybe a fan, but maybe some sly crazy who doesn’t know she’s someone who matters, someone people would miss. She turns the corner and listens for steps behind her, spots a cab at the curb ahead. “Hey Mom, I think he’s gone, and I’ve got a cab. I’ll see you at the hotel!”
The cabbie’s heard of her and gets tipped well.

Workout

In the weight room everyone has a bottle of water close by, an iPod, and often a trainer keeping the count with such enthusiasm the spotter, who looks like his arms are full of birds swaddled in muscle shirts, can hardly keep from laughing. Her Hollywood beau is clumsy under the bars, a stringy boy, a scrapper bulking up, mashing his palms against the metal. He's got a part as an action hero's son. She usually keeps to spinning class, but today she's decided to stay to imagine herself atop him, inserted between the bar and his body. She thinks of the love they'd make, the feathery tease of her gym shorts over his leanness, the work of his thighs between her angled knees.

License

She's old enough now to drive herself
to rehearsals with B. B. King and Billy Joel
when Warner Bros. doesn't send the limo.
It sometimes makes her feel like someone else,
the warmth of imported skins kissing her neck
and some designer's dress that makes her whole
body feel its slinkiness past control.
Inside, her bones jangle against themselves.

Much better to wear the jeans she's broken in,
and better to have her own hands on the wheel.
No one's listening here as she warms up
to the radio, belting between the staves of wind
whatever harmonies she chooses to throw her secret
throat open, until she commands them to stop.

Poker Face

A half-smile like when she's singing sometimes,
a couple of fingers slipped in the folds of her dress.
She sometimes closes her eyes a good long while.
Around the table, nobody thinks her wise
enough to fold a pair in the blind, the loss
too much to bear. She loves to collect her stash,
the tickle of felt on her arm in motion across
the smooth table. Sometimes she has to laugh
out loud in the middle of someone else's joke,
the careless trickle of chips. Her daddy taught her
not to play with her hair or twist it like rope.
"You think you're cute, but those are your tells, right there."
She pulls her hair and winks, then smiles sadly.
These men around the table ain't her daddy.

Solo for Lovers

She'd like to sing in front of a red curtain,
in its curves the undisclosed crack of the snare
to accent her finger snaps, her outstretched arm,
a little wrist to say you're here to see
her upstage cross and curtsy, not the men
in white suits who flash their brassy bells
with the beat, who bob and sway beneath her,
the little razz that licks up into a swell.
Make no mistake, the world drifts, afloat
on her, the gents with their polite erections,
all those trumpets and drums, their wives flushed
and unspooling while she salts the good places.
You have to take the opportunity, young lovers,
to be that sequined, spotlit girl, to be her.

Mistakes

Paws up, she's jimmied free of the blouse,
has got her dress robes on in fine flight
past the union guys winding cable, and right
into the arms of her mother, eyes soaked.
Her mother knows not to ask the trouble.
It must have been a terrible performance,
a miscue, or a sustained note broken by chance
intervention of memory, a bruised arm bubbling
up from her melodies' soporific drive.
"I made so many goddamn mistakes up there,"
her sobbing gutters to breath, a smooth purr.
Her mother bandages her with a hug and sighs
into hair curled and hardened with sprays and mousse,
"The only one who notices is you."

Wisdom

Through the blood of ether, a gag of copper gauze
collects in her throat. “Oh God, these cheeks, they’ll say
they’re ‘ruddy,’ or worse, ‘sanguine,’” words she can’t
remember picking up, but now in the haze
they’re clear as the nurse’s assurance nothing connects
her wisdom teeth to her voice, a latex glove
stroking her arm. But surely she must be infected,
face scarred from all the hands in her mouth,
the claw of scrapeful tools, the gulp of cutting.
She knows it’s there, even though she’s under,
like when she opens her eyes and finds she’s kissing,
hungrily close, the scored lips of the trumpeter.
It’s just a metaphor for making music, she knows,
and yet her voice, so small she must have swallowed.

Florida

Her daddy loves these Jimmy Buffet dives
with their double-fried fish, coconut-crusting
snapper and shellfish, the way the menu describes
its drinks like steel drums, but they come rusty.
There is no Florida in her blood, no puerile whisper
in the violet, nothing East of New Orleans pomp.
Texas trails off into the plains, the white
sands along her shoulders, ends in swamp.
“You and me, there’s hurricanes between us,
sometimes, and I’m sorry,” he sips his margarita.
She knows when he says this not to discuss
the burly swell of oranges in California.
She loves him still. Though she’s acquired taste,
he’s the golden drawl that silhouettes her face.

Opener

“Opening for B. B. King is like getting felt up by Pavarotti: sort of a brush with the elect, but not that good for your self-esteem, a flop in a little city.” Her anger’s only in check because the bad connection makes her focus to hear what the promoter says at all. Grounded for half an hour to wait for big gusts of wind or some shit, she figures she’ll can this project well before the plane takes off. She drops the phone a moment, lets the guy talk to the tray while she collects a coke from an attendant with sympathetic eyebrows. The promoter’s jokes are too true to be funny, and she thinks he’s fresher with her than he ought to be.

Ice Cream

Because she comes out singing, the ice cream man
loves her and sells her chocolate-covered cones
half price for any neighborhood kids that scam
along next to her. Here she's been on radio,
so all their mothers think she's good and rich.
What do these women tell their pudgy-eyed dolls
with Texan drawls stuffed in their mouths like whipped
cream in a donut? "Keep close to that girl, y'all,
go tug on her dress and see if she'll get you a treat.
Maybe someday she'll bring you into the fold."
She doesn't bother to count their heads, just keeps
buying until their hands are full. The bolder
girls are placing orders, but the little boys stare,
open-mouthed, at her body, her smile, her hair.

Sweet Tea

Strange to sit on the porch in the afternoon
watching the drizzles of condensation relax
and fall when she knows the post won't come
with anything for her. Maybe she'll get a fax
from her agent if something important comes in the bags
of daily fan mail the interns filter through.
Her agent always says there are bags, but maybe
there's only letters from kids, or a few blue
poems from perverts. She tears a leaf of mint
and stirs it into her glass to diffuse its flavor.
The phone's been quiet all day, so no new gigs.
This isn't how the "A" list works, she's sure,
watching the neighbors' cars tool the suburbs
and any moment her mother home for supper.

Water

Around eleven o'clock she stops loving
the way the cattail down catches in the grass,
thick as hair around the edge of the pond.
She'll have to call her agent, take a pass
on songs by composers still alive, their slacks
and shirts rumpled with lack of sleep and not
from making love. She'd better stick with classics,
the margins of scores smudged with oily spots
from fingers well-traveled along their narrow roads.
They know familiarity wears better than fame
when pressed into the cleft of a grand piano,
the lights trailing off to some corner of the stage.
No suckers for reeds in the waters she used to wade,
thinking when they dried up she'd remain.

Storm

The thunder hulks, then rushes up beneath
the steady bass line, locking its own groove
into the stage's foundations. She bares her teeth
in an uninhibited smile, unshaken, though moved.
No disrespect meant to all the fine concert halls
across the United States, Europe, and Australia,
their carefully crafted ceilings reflecting all
her melody's perfect hips and sighs, the regalia
of quick breaths caught up in the moments she makes,
but she likes it better, singing with the weather outside
where the small audience gets up when the ground shakes
and pushes forward under the lip of the shell to hide,
so close she sees their faces, and they feel her warmth.
Any moment now it's going to pour.

Cry

“Baby,” she sings as if her mouth were full
of bubbles, smooth and round, reflecting light
gently as planets do. It’s late at night.
The cymbals rattle and rise, the final push
into the note she pulls from somewhere below
her chest, like a bottle before the stopper’s out.
Maybe during the applause a man in the crowd
will whisper, “Baby.” Sometimes someone shouts
before she’s even in full voice, a cry
that makes her body quiver. A lover makes
a sound like that. So many lovers, the heart
mistakes her music for its own. “Don’t you cry,”
she sings, and in the “I” for a moment her voice breaks,
the space between notes where her body pulls apart.

IV. Death on a Small Screen

Cradle

When I call and have the misfortune of you
picking up, you never fail to make me think
of what else I should be doing. For God's sake,
the luxury of improvement is all yours,
so close to retirement for so many years.
The rabbits stare blankly at the chicken wire
you've placed around each of their favorite bushes.
The garage door opens and closes. The porch
slides from afternoon shade to evening shade.
When did owning a truck to tow a boat
replace the dream of the boat itself, and the house
improved for sale replace the crawl of coast?
You haven't been in love with anything in years.
Your wife worries herself to sand and your kids
stop making love to their spouses and you
have no prayers. The dirty bomb of your heart
leaves us gazing at the neighborhood amazed,
the bedroom windows candlelit, the insects
beating the glass, and you in front of your TV.
Father, instead of dying, you watch us die
from the cradle where we keep you like a thought.

Traverse City, July 1984

My father nurses the red crescent cut,
wipes my foot clean of sand, the slick,
organic lake silt a lubricant and balm.
Today I am displeased with sunken things:
ships, submarines, any iron vessel,
rusted-out shafts and sheets of metal
that carelessly litter my uncle's beach.
The other kids push gray sand into mounds,
with gentle palms and fingers smooth shapes
of dolphins and starfish. My cousin marks furrows
for eyes as the waning tide slims
his mermaid's flank, waves licking nearer
her wide nipples. Aunt Ethel sips a tall iced tea
and worries about her children.
At night we go out to fish from the boat
where my father insists I hold a fish by its gills,
the length of my arm, because it came in on my pole.
My mother juggles the camera and I swear
I can feel through the sticky feathers
the tentative outcropping of teeth.

Gray's Anatomy

Like Gray's fingers stripped of skin,
red around the book's white spine,
between me and the basement TV,
I'm enervated, surface gone and insides
displayed like the rows of old pipes
carved into faces, like the eagle
hung on the front of the wet bar,
or the black one hung on the paneled wall
above the couch, one on a mailbox
next to the fireplace mantel
where an antique clock winds down.
Whose address is down here
with discarded needle-point,
the wicker rocker and stool?
The pulse in my head when I cover my ears
is footsteps. Someone is coming.
I know about the crawl space
that runs beneath the house,
and though I imagine it's full
of old toys worth money, I know
it isn't. There's nothing there.
There's Scooby-Doo, who always looks
in trouble, but is always safe.
On TV the spines of trees scroll by,
the spines of books scroll by,
the painted background moves
while his scrambling legs stand still.
Gray sits next to me trying to laugh,
but the dozens of muscles twitch
like he's being strangled or punched
in the gut. The air burns him.
His fluids mingle into the couch.

Before You Dovetail into Sense

The Lidocane numbs your forehead,
my sister, in your pinhole crown,
a systematic unwinding of you,
as you make light from borrowed words,
lines recalled from plays you read
before you left my care, a husk
of horse's hoof to cauterize the whole
body of words as they unbend you.

Let's not talk of each other this way.
You're sick, and the things you say
are sickness, too, although they seem
sometimes to make me happy again.
The tambourine that jitters and scrapes
against your bedroom's concrete walls,
the one that calls you to lift your arms
then draws you wide-eyed into bed,

I hear its garish jangle when you stare
into my eyes, your pupils wide and black
as though there were no light at all.
They're tunnels, lead each to a red wall
and stop, and then you look up at me
as if you'd been a mischievous smile
the whole time, as if there were no song,
your white shirt split like a curtain,

the opera spluttering up my throat,
through my teeth and over my clothes,
the puddle of music around our feet,
all a myth I made to wrap around you.
There's no hurrying the alphabet,
you said. There's enough cherry ice
for all of the mothers to wipe themselves
before the MICR dovetails into sense.

You hide your face in my chest but know
it means that both of us can be seen,
that even in the drapes of night your eyes
see past the platinum light of stars.
There's always someone looking for you,
but who else could there be to need me?
I'll check your breathing, check your heart.
Whatever you say, I'll believe you.

Dormant

The path of broken stems through the garden
where I picked you up and carried you to the car,
your sock hat lost in the squash, purple buds
spotting the lilacs, and tomatoes ripe in their cages—

how I imagine it happening, my perfect intervention,
from last attack through your long recovery
to you pulling weeds again in your white overalls,
your body out the window framed in a single pane—

how neither of us would have wanted it,
a year lost to sitting by your bedside,
neither of us certain enough to smile
when your hand pinched my wrist—

how I imagine it is not how it happens,
a mess of vines, in my absence a sudden shout.

Your Movie Life

We all agreed for your birthday
to dress up as our favorite characters
like we used to do in college,
and even you liked the idea
of playing the big damn hero,
though you stopped shaving too late
to grow stubble enough to craft
a moustache and goatee.

You knew you'd look nothing like
the man you pretended to be
inside, the same twisted meat
you'd put your knife through
if you meant to get it dirty.

You said you'd wear the costume
if you could carry a gun
or find a knitted orange hat
with ties dangling beneath the chin
and a ball of fuzz on top,
so your wife learned to knit,
though too late to get the job done
in time for the movie premiere.

Why go out just to parade
our crazy notions?
You bought a "Blue Sun" tee
and called it close enough.

Now our coats catch
the headlights' shifting stars,
wrapping them around us.
We wait by the highway as if you'll speak.
It's your birthday again, and though you're not here
we feel you can't have gone far.

Behind us the cinema's neon sign
goes out, last show like last year.
They didn't kill off your favorite,
the one whose clothes you'd worn,
but the character most like you.

And who makes sequels about the dead?
A splinter of wood through the chest

as the chase wore down,
at the moment we felt most safe.

We put our hands to our mouths.

You thought we should all die
like heroes for changing tires,
for building a new mantelpiece
over the fireplace, for lifting up
as much as we have taken down,

and who can say we won't?
In your movie life your favorites died
the way that you directed them.

Elegy for an Exhibitionist

You called your brothers “victimless crimes,”
the cars they drove, suits like slivers of light.
When they stoop to defend you, my language boils,
your memory, a sleeve ripped and dangling.

When you stare at the world you always see friends,
the faceless re-faced, the ghosts of courage,
who write themselves in new places, internet posts,
lament you in blogs and tombs of cybernight.

Each day you taught the lesson you learned
the night before, uncovered the next cigarette,
the next potential shift in stars, the cards
you didn’t read because you admired mystery.

You wouldn’t admit you desired chaos,
your fine clothes unimpressive until discarded
in piles, sharing the scent of your sweat.
I bury my face in them in lieu of you.

These, the stitches you left, miscellaneous thread
on which I post my hopes, are less than scarves,
less than undergarments, the clothes I wear
when no one else will witness the crimes I commit.

You left me your apartment key, and I touched
everything you left for me to find.
I leafed through all your computer files,
roughed out prose you never got to upload.

Your words, slight and angular as ribs,
were lop-sided, lists of temptations
you glibly courted. The letters dribbled through,
and I draped their serifs over my stomach.

I lay naked on the couch where you slept to keep
always near the door. I played every film,
and sipped from every jar left in the fridge.
But how should I say what I found there

to all your other witnesses of grief?

Tuscaloosa, July 2002

Every Spring we walked out to the pond
with pickaxes and shovels, our boots
water-proofed for all the good it did
against the cold water,

to break down the dam the beavers had rebuilt,
drain it along the highway. Not for the dog
alone, tormented by mosquitoes bred
down by the water,

but for the Fourth of July when Matt
refused to sit on our blanket, leaned alone
against the truck and watched our rockets spark
over the water.

We lost the dog that evening by the highway
beneath the green snaps of roman candles,
knew the creek would lead her
away from the water,

from the shadow of the fence against the red
mud of the bush-hogged field, through damp cuttings,
through stands of weeds and purple wildflowers
steeped in water.

You took my hand, pressed your thumb to my palm,
a question I had answered earlier that night.
Put a ham on the porch and she'll bring herself
back from the water,

put a hatchet in the mud, pick out the sticks.
Like the marks of the waterline white on the bark,
we became our own effigies,
rooted in water.

Getting the Big “K”

When the farmer, who has brought his pair of dachshunds in from Kalamazoo because he believes them to be infected with West Nile, mentions putting down a heifer with the Big “K,” for a moment you misunderstand, riffling through the sediment of terminologies from years of veterinary school in search of a drug that both euthanizes and begins with the letter “K.” Of course he means *cancer*, now so unspeakable that he falls silent, the word he has divorced from its letters, a party to all of his interactions. A neatly kept brown moustache, khakis and a plaid shirt, he defies you to repeat his error as if it were a joke, as if he could possibly misunderstand an animal to the degree that he might mistake the disease that took it from him. You have to remind yourself how ordinary the farmer is in his grief, one ignorant little dog tucked under each arm. The conversation recurs often. The cancer they took out of your mother. The one you tried to take from the golden retriever, whose insides blossomed with tissue. As a child you refused to let your hamster go in spite of blindness. You think of it now as a self love, so exuberant that it can’t help but spread. Even when it broke through the surface of her body, you had to keep telling her how beautiful she was.

Coincidence in Knockemstiff

The windows shudder in the rain
like the creak beneath the chair's thick claw
or crickets lost in the quack grass:
everything an echo, same and same again.

A voice from TV shimmies down the stairwell
as we ferret under the carpet,
sweep out corners, run the water,
cock our ears against the furnace.

Same and same again.
We start at the shift of night sounds,
flashlights over the door of sex.
Listen, it's the owl in the poplar.

The streetlight blackens the branches
crossed beneath it like our mingled etymologies.
We've relinquished all our mortal names,
as if we could re-love in treason all we think we love.

Other night. Other lover. Same and same again.
I'll remember not to bury you, but by your wish
inter you where you sleep, ripe for resurrection,
a parody of my crooked throat.

Plainchant rises from the blades. Another choir
shifts like damask, overtaking human noises.
This is the culmination of all our efforts:
like a woman, like a cricket, like a storm.

A Little Wine

Its bitter scent a mist along the dash
as Mother drives the two of us back from church

to meet our secular halves, take them on
like ridicule, argue over steaks at brunch.

It seems simpler to take the side you're taught,
pretend you all woke up together.

Half a pot of coffee no one wants,
a box of doughnuts stuffed with white cream.

Dad picked them up even though there's bread
and eggs and bagels, sugar cereal, juice.

He wants to celebrate just being here
while we're here, worried he's getting old.

The TV is bigger every time we visit,
its pixels always wider, less real.

One of us will have to leave the room.

Like all fathers he used to church with us,
then skipped to watch tennis, sprawled on the couch,

which is now upstairs with the sewing machine,
and the catechism photo I won't take home,

but visit every time to see the girl
I've never gotten over. She smiles

in her stupid robes, just to please her folks,
her breath red with wine.

Being Good

Too hot to sandblast and yet
they're at it, dust masks and T-shirts,
protective goggles, sun thick as paint.
What I've said today isn't so bad
as what I didn't get the chance
to defend myself against,
what conviction feels like,
skin scraped clean,
the granite fleck
caught in my eye.
Cuss at the birds
for not helping.
Who do I say that I am?
Would it hurt so much
to have been honest, to say,
no fucking clue, man?
Still waiting to find out
who *any* of us are.
I wake up some mornings
and know I'll leave home
for some fantasy who says
Christ when she fucks.
But do I have to say it?
I keep her buried with all
the things that never happened,
the box of yellow crayons
meant to get us where we are
in time to get the laundry done,
figure out tomorrow will be good.
Tomorrow they'll finish the bricks,
and power wash the new façade.
I won't feel the need to call
and correct the impression I made.
I'll turn on the TV and watch
the heat lightning over the houses.
There's a bottle of raspberry schnapps
tucked on top of the fridge,
and I've been waiting
for just such an occasion.

The Upswing

After confession, observation and grief,
what then? The students pass outside,
the grip and coast of shoes
and smoke-like chatter.

I think we started backwards,
skipping the litmus tests and lists
of long-term, age-appropriate goals.
Could I be honest in the third person?

He held her hand and wished
he'd shared her drunken years,
the ones that swept her back,
the tower clock that caught her eye.

He ordered drinks but wanted to leave,
hated her belly's purple lines,
but loved her more than himself.
That's what makes people happy,

isn't it? You hand me your card
for the last time, the message clear:
I'm a slow-pitch guy and not that crazy.
You've grown too bored to explain.

I draw a circle, write the rules,
tack them up all over the house.
In therapy, play passes to the left.
Take this book. Read it. Pass it on.

In the Dream Where I Stand Up for Myself

You are there,
mowing the blades of your body.

I follow behind and bail
the skin quick as I can.

It mingles and falls among stalks,
just as the cuts on your hands

feed the roots with old blood.
Surely this poisons us.

Your black swirl of blouse
swings down the rows.

Perhaps if I keep closer
I can catch more of you,

widen my bail until I've saved
enough for another you,

a homunculus, a shade
birthed from discarded parts

I love as much as you
with your constant growth.

Or perhaps, stepping close I might
get caught in the swing,

and add my body to yours,
polluting the red field around us.

“A Huge and Birdless Silence”

For us no black-sailed ship, whose tattered hull
our final lighthouse passes, dull as hope.
We are too proud perhaps to deny the myth
of our children warmly wrapped like husks around us,
our small and satisfactory legacies.
They cry with well-educated grief,
sweetly spoiling themselves on our remains,
the beneficiaries of daffodils,
the honest wage, the savings held in stocks.
Perhaps we were confused by the abrupt
foundering that left us heirless, mattress cold,
short on cash, short on instinct. We know
there must have been some soft turning point
that would have lifted the burden from our dear beliefs.
We were not failed, no chance deserted us.
No black-sailed ship when we expected white,
but this raft, our arms against the current,
the slick logs separating beneath.

Manmade:
Masculinity in the Poetry of Tony Hoagland, Mark Halliday, and Rodney Jones

Too often, poetry, like literary theory, has followed the path prescribed by Ian Gregson in *The Male Image*. Gregson insists that “what poetry does, through its habit of wrenching language into defamiliarizing shapes, is to make masculinity aesthetically open to discussion” (10). One wonders to whom precisely Gregson believes the defamiliarization of language opens anything at all? Nevertheless, he is at least correct inasmuch as this seems to be the practice of some contemporary poets. Indeed, even creative writers in the academy, who already separate themselves from literary theorists and most Literature professors by studying current poets, cast a wary eye toward poets like Billy Collins, whose accessibility of language garners them a readership outside the ivory tower in spite of the fact that they generally make their livings in the academy. These are precisely the poets that I believe are able to continue to do the work that Men’s Studies theorists have been struggling to do, to analyze, dismantle, and mark masculinity, precisely because of their highly accessible language. In this essay, I will be examining work by Tony Hoagland, Mark Halliday, and Rodney Jones as writers whose particular language choices and strategies address contemporary masculinity issues without succumbing to the alienating language of high theory or the “defamiliarizing shapes” of some of their contemporaries.

Ken Plummer nods at Judith Butler when he writes that current theories of sexuality must acknowledge “vast areas of overlap” because they are “social interactions” that are necessarily “messy and ambiguous” (186a, 187b). Hoagland, Halliday, and Jones, by acknowledging the messiness and uncertainty of masculine identity, transcend the masculine narrative of the previous generations of poets. Gregson points to Robert Lowell and John Berryman as the key male voices in the first generation of poets to allow for the interrogation of the masculine through gender dialogue invited by the confessional mode (10-11). At the same

time, he recognizes that feminism more strongly influences the generation that followed them. In the case of the confessional poets, each becomes bound up by a form of personal narrative, a form now thoroughly critiqued by post-modern and narrative theory, which suggests a clear and certain relationship between the poet and the speaker, the speaker and the poem, and the self and the word. The strategies that Hoagland, Halliday, and Jones employ ensure that, while narrative may be employed in their poems, the narratives never become entirely complete or coherent. Instead, the stories they tell, if they may even properly be called that, always remain troubled by the ambiguities of contemporary life, and their surprisingly candid accessibility.

Perhaps the primary connection among these three poets is the way in which they use accessible language to confront out-dated notions of masculinity. If the hegemonic masculine ideal is the strong, silent type, these three men are determined to speak out, especially when it comes to their struggles with speaking out and with weakness. Calvin Thomas, whom Ian Gregson fairly attacks for his own alienating stances, encourages men to produce “writing that does something other than simply take up space,” acknowledging the possibility of a permeable masculinity through accessibility (77). The challenge is not merely to speak out instead of remaining silent, but to discover different ways of speaking. Throughout the course of their poems, Hoagland, Halliday, and Jones argue with themselves, haggle, dither, doubt, backtrack, and evade in their pursuit of a new, complex masculinity. Where Thomas and Gregson as theorists appear to be limited by the inaccessible and therefore seemingly impervious language of theory, Hoagland, Halliday, and Jones are able to explore accessible language that allows for more complex and challenging definitions of masculinity.

To this end, all three poets employ several of the same strategies to create and explore their own complicated masculinities. Each of them is keenly aware of the double-edge

of humor, and uses humor as a way to appear simultaneously inviting and defensive. They also favor evasiveness as a method of indicating the complexity of masculinity and their own precarious positions in relationship to it. Hoagland, whom I refer to as “The Embodied Man,” draws his evasiveness primarily from ambiguous imagery. He looks at and lives in the male body, but his gaze is anything but unflinching. Halliday, “The Hyper-Vigilant Man,” employs overt verbal dithering and second-guessing, his speakers always paranoid and hyperaware, and the words of his poems constantly backtracking like a verbal tic. Jones, “The Humble Man,” concerns himself with alternative pasts and presents, the lives he might have lived, in an effort to understand the life he has. When faced with new definitions of masculinity, each of these men struggles with uncertainty, fear, failure, and hope. They attempt to establish a connection between the self and the word, and by doing so to create fluidity among their selves and their masculinities, a fluidity as slippery and elusive as any identity.

Tony Hoagland: The Embodied Man

In “Adam and Eve,” Tony Hoagland poses perhaps the central question in the debate over masculinity that underlies much of his body of work. After admitting to wanting to hit a woman who refused him sex, the speaker begins a long, abstract wondering over what he is allowed to feel and say, and to what degree what he feels comes from his own biology. If the biological explanation for man’s sexual aggression is a fossil, the speaker asks, “Can the fossil be surgically removed/or dissolved, or redesigned/so the man can be a human being, like a woman?” (*Donkey Gospel* 64). For Hoagland, the fossil is straight masculinity, a masculinity derived from biological assumptions about the differences between the sexes and heterosexual mores. Hoagland’s speakers are threatened both by the physically aggressive male bully and by

the potential each of them recognizes in himself to embody a limited, destructive form of masculinity. They are also, as the question suggests, faced with the theoretical possibility of being “like a woman,” which alternately feels both wrong and necessary to the speaker of “Adam and Eve,” but points to a kind of gender ambiguity on which many of Hoagland’s poems seem to settle, though not resolve. This ambiguity takes a number of forms in Hoagland’s work, and can be seen in the ongoing debates in his poems over how to approach the male body in terms of its physical presence, the language we use to describe it, and the way men choose to live in their bodies.

Hoagland opens *Donkey Gospel* with “Jet,” in which he proclaims, “On Earth, men celebrate their hairiness,/and it is good” (3). This seems a peculiarly strong, contradictory opening statement for a book that will go on to criticize how men treat their own bodies and view the bodies of other men. At the same time that he acknowledges that the male body needs to be celebrated, he admits the conflict between celebrating that body as an ideal associated with primitive masculinity and celebrating it while acknowledging its flaws and weaknesses. Without celebration, the male body too easily slips into invulnerability by absence. As a hegemonic principle, masculinity absolves the male body of markers, but singing epic praises of the male body as hairy and virile, “uncapping the bottle/to let the effervescence gush/through the narrow, usually constricted neck,” only perpetuates the myth. Where such phallic hyperbole might be seen as defensive in regular conversation, the speaker’s awareness of his subject allows the humor to undercut the supposed impenetrability of the phallus. Instead of accepting epic praise of the masculine we must, as the speaker from “Jet” finally does in conclusion, be “amazed how hurt we are.” The language of wonder that he applies to the phallic description of the men celebrating must also apply to an admission of pain and vulnerability. If it is, as Hoagland

suggests a few pages later in “Reading *Moby-Dick* at 30,000 Feet,” “Better to be on board the *Pequod*,/with a mad one-legged captain/living for revenge” than “rushing through the world [...] at unimaginable speeds,” the nostalgia is not for a primitive version of masculinity, but for one that is intensely connected to the body and the feeling of “the salt wind/spitting in your face” (7). The celebration of the male body must be one of feeling, all feelings, and not of the hard and impenetrable.

Hoagland also points out a significant connection between words and the body, and how men’s use of language can limit their view of masculinity and perpetuate the myth of male invulnerability. In “Hearings,” the speaker watches a congressman on television bungle the word “homosexual” and considers the possibility that “to say it might mean, just a little,/to *become* it—/which might be right,/since language uses us/the way that birds use sky” (*Donkey Gospel* 29). Hoagland emphasizes the dangerous intimacy of such a wondering with the short phrase “just a little” set against the broadening that occurs with the italicized “*become*” and the image of the open sky, a danger Hoagland encounters with each of his poems. In questioning masculinity, is he somehow becoming less masculine, or differently masculine? “When you say a word,” “Hearings” continues, “you enter *its* vocabulary,/it’s got your home address, your phone number/and weight—it won’t forget” (30). Word and identity are one, but the speaker considers the possibility that the word is not his identity, rather he is the word’s. He becomes part of the word’s vocabulary, which gives him the power to be part of its definition as much as the word has the power to define him. The relationship is symbiotic, and anything but clear. Not only does the congressman become more like the word, the word becomes more like him, and what might that mean?

For men, Hoagland suggests, the only thing more dangerous than entering into this relationship through speaking is remaining silent. In “The Delay,” the speaker wonders what happens when men’s experiences have “eaten up/the part of them made out of words,/and left the bony, silent men themselves” (*Sweet Ruin* 13). Although men might feel that silence will provide a stoic invulnerability in the face of the threat of language, Hoagland suggests that it, too, emphasizes vulnerability by leaving just “men themselves.” Silence does not protect men from the world, but implies the lack of anything inside and, therefore, leaves men completely vulnerable to language and experience, not necessarily a bad thing, but very risky.

Ultimately, Hoagland insists men are vulnerable regardless of how much they try to hide it, and that vulnerability is a necessary component of masculinity, a thing to be embraced as much as it is feared. Even more frightening for traditional views of straight masculinity, Hoagland says masculinity and the male body must be penetrable. Masculinity must be vulnerable and ambiguous as a concept, and the male body can and must be physically penetrated. A knife penetrating the father’s heart in “America” allows him to be free of the money clogging his heart; the speaker in “A Color of Sky” admits, “Years ago she penetrated me” and “now I’m glad” because it showed him “an end turned out to be a middle”; and in “Patience” the speaker “felt a certain satisfaction in taking it” like “a little bird/opening my mouth and swallowing” (*What Narcissism* 7, 27, 32). The instances of penetration of the male body in Hoagland’s work vary in kind and degree, but all suggest necessity and value, although that value is often complicated, difficult to understand, or unrecognizable for a certain amount of time. Often the penetration is an intellectual or emotional self-penetration paired with the image of the vulnerable body, as it is in “Lie Down with a Man.” In a poem where one might expect a literal penetration of a male body by another male body, Hoagland gives us a far more nuanced

view of a speaker who recognizes his struggle to understand masculinity as a struggle “with the old adversary, myself/—in the form, this time, of a body” (*Donkey Gospel* 40). The actual lying down with another man is “humorless” and unmemorable, but the vulnerability of the speaker in that moment is potent for him because he finds himself recognizing his own body and himself as the impediment to knowing that body. Penetration, for Hoagland, is always a moment of self-recognition. To suggest that the male body must penetrate, instead of being penetrated, is to misunderstand the relationship between a man’s body and himself. Being penetrated is not feminizing for Hoagland’s speakers, although they sometimes struggle with the possibility of what that might mean, but humanizing, suggesting a necessarily ambiguous understanding of gender.

Only a few pages into *Sweet Ruin*, Hoagland introduces the problem of humanizing men by discussing what happens to men when they get old. In “Poem for Men Only” he hypothesizes that fathers “had so little to say” because “It wasn’t easy, inventing the wheel,/dragging the first stones into place” (5). Men involved in hard, physical work seem to deserve this silence as a kind of defense against the inquiries of the poet or intellectual. An image of a father watching the game on a divan is quickly followed by a dream “of flying naked//through a storm of bills,” the idea of money as a replacement for or defense against feeling being one Hoagland often associates with the father. By the time the father in “Poem for Men Only” falls “like a weighty oak,” Hoagland has built up the father as strong, silent, and impenetrable as a tree, thus the father’s falling and placement in “an adjustable bed,/below a chart of pulse and respiration lines” draws attention to the disconnect between the perceived image of the father and the actuality of his humanness. This contradiction between what the speaker of the poem perceives the father’s role to be and what he witnesses in the father’s failing

health causes him to question how one can be a man. He claims, “then I understood what it meant to be a man,/and land on your back in the shadow//of all your solitary strength,” but in actuality, he only understands that this can happen. He has witnessed the rupturing of an ideology, but in truth does not understand how to deal with the repercussions. The switch to a short sentence when he says, “Weakness is so frightening,” emphasizes the sudden acknowledgement of both the father’s vulnerability and his own. “You speak/from the side of a sagging mouth,” he says, “hear a voice you never wanted to produce/ask for some small, despicable, important/thing,” but the “you” indicating the father represents all men because age is a shared fate.

The speaker’s reaction to the troubling revelation is to look out the window, “seeking what to feel” (6). The meditation on feeling by looking outward to the image, Hoagland’s own strategy in many of his poems, contrasts the type of men’s work established at the beginning of the poem, further complicating the question of what a man should be. In this instance, the speaker watches a group of sparrows in simple, evocative language as “Light purred into the grass,” and then draws conclusions based on his attempt “to see all men as brief/as birds.” They may have “their afternoon/as sort of millionaires,” recalling the father’s dream of flying through money, but in the end they “shrink, remembering their size.” Ultimately, all men are tied to the limitations of their own bodies as material, decaying things, but it is the recognition of this, the remembering of size, that is particularly crippling. Because of the humiliation that comes from the fallen ideal of the impenetrable man, the speaker finds he cannot connect with his father at the time when he feels it most necessary. Instead he says, “We kept/our dignity,” a sentiment made even more suspect by the questions that follow it. “When did I get/as strong as my old man?” he wonders, recognizing that “Out of your strength,/you

make a distance.” Although the speaker claims not to know when he went wrong, he knows how, and although he anticipates we might “start to cross” that distance, in the end he can only insist that we “Think about it” all day if necessary. Hoagland poses the problem and in writing about it appears to speak about it, but in the context of the poem, the speaker has only recognized the problem and his continuing failure to speak.

Hoagland widens his interrogation of the scope of this silence to the male body in “Carnal Knowledge,” in which Hoagland invokes an uncharacteristic second person to relate an enlightening sexual experience. When the speaker’s girlfriend gives him a blow job with “surprising expertise” and then kisses him, “you had to worry whether you could taste//the faint flavor of your own/penis on her soft peach lips,/and what that possibly could mean” (*Sweet Ruin* 26). Hoagland describes the sexually explicit act with extremely tender language, dwelling on the sibilance of “amethystine sweetness” and “surprising expertise,” and the soft consonance of “came up for a kiss,” making the moment particularly vulnerable. The only truly explicit word, “penis,” expresses further vulnerability because it is so frequently blanketed in euphemisms. The vulnerability of the language, combined with the speaker’s instant worry at coming into oral contact with his own penis, emphasizes the uncomfortable relationship he has with his own sexuality, an implication he shares through the second person with all men. That this gentle moment becomes “an idea so charged//it scorched the fragile circuits/of your eighteen-year-old/imagination” makes this relationship, and this moment of recognizing it, of paramount importance. Not only is it hot, it is also electric, having to do with the circuits of the brain, the hardware that controls how the human male thinks and acts. The speaker recognizes that he has taken his own body for granted.

The conclusion the eighteen-year-old speaker draws connects with the problem of masculine identity Hoagland writes about in "Poem for Men Only." The eighteen-year-old in "Carnal Knowledge" sees this experience as confirming the idea "that everyone/lived a secret life of acts/they never advertised." In this case, the secret is not merely the life of acts the body commits, but the male body as a physically real entity with its own softness and its own taste. The speaker posits that this could be "the evening/you began to learn/how to swallow/what you couldn't understand," the word "swallow" reiterating the earlier experience of self-invasion and casting it in language that connotes a kind of forced acceptance in the form of consumption. The speaker consumes his own body, and has to recognize it as capable of being consumed. More importantly, he discovers "what it felt like to be entered/by something strange/for pleasure's sake" and the sake of love (27). Vulnerability, specifically in the form of penetration, being "entered," becomes a natural and necessary part of inhabiting a physical body. The tone of the poem's closing questions is almost mocking, asking if you "smoke a cigarette/and feel a little foreign to yourself?//as someone does who has been changed/by a single unexpected drop of life?" The revelation the experience provides is so obvious in retrospect that it brings out a slightly mocking, certainly jocular tone, which simultaneously acknowledges the discomfort essential to the experience. The experience seemed exotic, but was about being familiar with one's own body, which ironically turns out to be less comfortable than the exotic. The ambrosia in the "drop of life" was the taste of the self. This is an experience, the poem suggests, that everyone desperately needs to live in a body.

The question of how men grow so distanced from their own bodies and the exploration of a self-defined sexuality independent of a socially prescribed masculinity serves as the subject of many of Hoagland's poems, and one answer to that question features prominently

in *Donkey Gospel*. “Dickhead” explores the way that learned behavior, and learned language in particular, contributes to a man’s distancing himself from his own body and sexuality by providing him with the kind of defensive structure that becomes so problematic for the speaker of “Poem for Men Only.” The poem opens with the salutation, “To whomever taught me the word *dickhead*,/I owe a debt of thanks,” setting a humorous tone that allows the reader to ease into the poem without worrying about whether or not this will turn out to be one of those uncomfortable poems about male sexuality (10). Also, the reader can initially safely assume that he or she is not responsible for having taught the speaker the word. Hoagland builds up empathy for the speaker, providing support for his argument before the reader even knows what it is, through his description of the speaker’s body as a kid. Put on exhibition, he’s

[...] pale and scrawny,
naked, goosefleshed
as a plucked chicken
in a supermarket cooler, a poor

forked thing stranded in the savage
universe of puberty, where wild
jockstraps flew across the steamy

skies of locker rooms,
and everybody fell down laughing
at jokes I didn’t understand.

The unflattering body imagery and the chicken simile make the speaker seem a ripe target for adolescent teasing and humiliation, and Hoagland has written it down here for all to see. By the end of the sentence, Hoagland has moved from the concrete into a highly romanticized abstract world, where the “universe of puberty” bears witness to a jockstrap that takes on epic importance. “Everybody” gets to laugh except the humiliated speaker. The reader, drawn to sympathize with the speaker through the first description, must also laugh at the language’s

elevation of the incident to epic proportions, if not at the likelihood that the speaker must have seen this at the time as the worst moment of his life.

Fortunately, the word “dickhead” saves the speaker, not like a caped superhero, but “as dumb/and democratic as a hammer, an object/you could pick up in your hand,/and swing.” The word is like a tool one would use to perform hard, physical work, work that requires large muscles and an imposing physique. You can grab the word like the penis it denotes, but it has none of the vulnerability of genitalia, and has been divorced from its own meaning through its usage as slang. The “beautiful ugliness” of the word annihilates the body in all of its beautiful ugliness, at least long enough that it “protected me and calmed me like a psalm.” Indeed, it becomes a mantra for the speaker, indoctrinating him into a cult of masculinity that absolves him from acknowledging his body. Hoagland describes this in a later poem as a brain replacement and a “kind of cooking/the male child undergoes,” getting “dipped repeatedly/in insult” (41).

Looking back on the distance from feeling the speaker achieved as a youth, he reflects on the lack of distance he feels now from that past. Although he admits that now “my weakness is a fact/so well established that/it makes me calm,” he remembers “the bad old days/back in the world of men,/when everything was serious, mysterious, scary,/hairier and bigger than I was” (11). It seems that for reasons not elucidated in the poem the speaker has come to terms with his own body and vulnerability as he describes the “serious” and “hairier” world as a thing of the past, but he curiously describes that as “the world of men” instead of the world of boys. Certainly now that he is an adult, he inhabits the world of men more so than as an adolescent. One implication is that the notion of a “world of men” is inextricable for him from the time when “flesh/was what I hated, feared/and was excluded from,” so that he cannot help

but describe his current state of self-acceptance as unmanly. Having used language to divorce himself from his body, he is now using it to admit his connection to his body, which goes against masculine culture as he was raised to understand it. By acknowledging his vulnerability and weakness in the present, he is questioning the nature of masculinity in such a way that it seems easier to refer to all things masculine in the past tense. The final stanza of the poem complies with this rejection of masculinity by forgiving it. “Hardly knowing what I did, or what would come of it,” he says, “I made a word my friend.” Here the speaker loses any strength he gained in admitting his own weakness by writing off his behavior as a youth as just one of those things adolescents must go through on their path to adulthood. The problem with this kind of copout is not only that it suggests there might be a place for the kind of masculinity for which he previously reserved the primitive symbols of the hammer and the garbage can lid, but also that it precludes the possibility that masculinity might be re-imagined in terms that allow for the kind of exploration the speaker experienced later in life or rejected altogether in favor of that exploration.

Of course, the language of adolescence, as it turns out, is not always so easily divorced from the adult self as the speaker of “Dickhead” would have us believe. Immediately preceding the poems “Lie Down with a Man” and “The Replacement,” which together interrogate the perceived impenetrability of the male body compared to the actual experience of living in a body, “Muy Macho” explores how adult language is as guilty of perpetuating a view of masculine as defensively alienating the body. “I can’t believe I’m sitting here/in this dark tavern,/listening to my old friend boast//about the size of his cock/and its long history,” the speaker wittily laments in the poem’s opening lines (37). The speaker, as an individual enlightened about his sexuality much in the same way that the speaker of “Dickhead” has

admitted his own weakness and its gender ambiguity, describes with embarrassment his friend's overblown recounting of sexual exploits "as a warrior might recite the deeds/accomplished by the family spear,//or like an old Homeric mariner might/go on about the nightspots/between Ithaca and Troy." In spite of the speaker's discomfort, his descriptions admit the precedent for the friend's sexist, hyper-masculine monologue through the comparison with the epic tradition. The two men sit in a bar that feels like "a hideout deep inside the woods, a stronghold/full of beer and smoke," an enclosed, private space that lends itself to the kind of defensive posturing of a masculinity centered on impenetrability. Perhaps even more importantly, the speaker feels his "chest grow hairier/with every drink, and soon," he says, "I'm drunk enough to think/I'm qualified to handle/any woman in the world." That he admits he only "thinks" this is true, shows that he does not subscribe to the masculine myth into which he is being drawn, but at the same time his inebriation is not enough even for him to excuse himself from being drawn into his friend's stories. The camaraderie leads him to think "we're no different from any pair/of good old boy Neanderthals/crouching by their fire//a million years ago,/showing off their scars and belching/as they scratch their heavy, king-size balls" (38). Enraptured by the rhetoric of the evening, the speaker sinks to perhaps the lowest point Hoagland allows in any of his poems, implying that for all his efforts to dismantle masculine impenetrability, there might still be some overriding biological imperative. Hoagland offers his description of the two men drinking in terms that are anything but realistic, humorously, if tritely, referring to them as Neanderthals and inflating their testicles to gigantic proportions, but the speaker, caught up in the moment, feels some truth to it, sucked into the phony defensive posture the humor allows.

On the brink of giving into the myth, Hoagland's speaker backpedals just enough to reconsider slightly. He cannot deny the urge he feels to participate in the moment, but he can

interrogate his own rationale for it, or lack thereof. They might feel like they are the hairiest men ever to walk the earth, but he admits there is one beast hairier still: “that great hairy beast, The Truth.” Try as they might to grow to epic proportions, they are still “just an itchy spot/in the middle of the back,” and must ultimately shrink, just as the father in “Poem for Men Only” must. “I know,” he admits, “that every word we say is probably a stone/someone else will someday have to/kick aside,” including, perhaps most of all, himself; however, Hoagland breaks the stanza here and starts the next line with an imposing dash as the speaker turns back on himself again, “—still, part of me feels privileged,/belonging to this tribe of predators,/this club of deep-voiced woman-fuckers//to which I never thought/I ever would belong.” He cannot sugar coat the observation, referring to himself as a “predator” and crassly as a “woman-fucker,” but he is overwhelmed by the sense of privilege at being admitted into the impenetrable circle. He says, “Even if the whole world splintered and caught fire,/I would continue sitting here” even though it means being “implicated, cursed, //historically entwined,” and even though he has indicated repeatedly that he knows better (39).

As in “Dickhead,” the sense of disappointment in the speaker makes the conclusion of “Muy Macho” extremely frustrating. This speaker, like all of Hoagland’s speakers, can do better. In the very next poem, the speaker is going to “Lie Down with a Man” to get closer to his own body, and Hoagland will write the poem about accepting male vulnerability over and over again. Why does the speaker in “Muy Macho” give up, and in doing so implicate all of Hoagland’s other speakers in his inability to commit to a rejection of the myth of impenetrability? The answer the last three lines of the poem provides is tragically simple: “We can’t pull ourselves apart from it.//We don’t really believe/there is another one.” The speaker sees no alternative masculinity and no alternative to the community of men described in

the poem, for all of its distance, for all of its lies, and for all of its hopeless sexism. The caveat, the glimmer of hope, is of course that these poems have been written at all. Hoagland's speakers may not know it, but even the poems where they backslide and the poems where they give in are explorations of what a new masculinity might be because they advocate interrogation.

Hoagland's speakers may not always find, but they seek, even in their worst moments of despair.

Mark Halliday: The Hyper-Vigilant Man

Referring to the need to "find the product" to keep mud out of his apartment in "Shopping with Bob Berwick," Mark Halliday writes, "Life was a series of practical problems and nothing else" (*Tasker Street* 10). Although he means for this statement to differentiate this recollection from other times in his life, many of Halliday's poems are wrapped up in the quest to understand life experiences as practical problems, regardless of how insoluble they might be. Halliday boils down almost all issues of masculinity in his writing to finding the right product to solve a problem, whether he's musing over his own lust, worrying about his career, or attempting to communicate with his son. The speaker of "Removal Service Request" begs the "pragmatic seraphim from a god of gentle oblivion" to "Take away the heartbreaking photographs" in exchange for "standing alone under one naked burning bulb/a freed man" and orgasms every hour "with a new steak-fed cheerleader" (*Selfwolf* 23-25). After cataloguing possessions that lead to emotionally intense memories, he begs the service he has imagined to simply remove everything like sanitation workers in exchange for a bland, macho fantasy. Although the imagined solution cannot be real, it's representative of the kind of approach Halliday's speakers take to emotion at even their most rational. Where Hoagland's speakers in conclusion look outward to the ambiguity of an image or unresolved remark, Halliday's speakers cannot get their

minds off of the possibility of resolution. They try to explain what they feel, try to explain why they might feel that way, and even try to explain why it might be wrong, but almost always in the context of seeking some kind of solution. In “64 Elmgrove,” he muses, “what I can’t lose is the feeling that things are/taken away because I haven’t understood/the right way to hold them close” (*Tasker Street* 27). Even though the speaker here isn’t suggesting a fanciful solution as he does in “Removal Service Request,” only thinking here that the solution is trying harder to understand, he still suffers the same kind of myopia that lead him in “Removal Service Request” to insist on removing everything. Why does holding things close have to be part of the solution? Why shouldn’t things be taken away?

Halliday’s practical problem framework results in a high degree of instability in his poetry because his interrogations must always second guess themselves. Although he continually fails to acknowledge the male body as a source of his problems, he can’t help but recognize the accountability he must have to his own explanations. After establishing the cheerleader fantasy as a suitable replacement for all of the memories taken away in “Removal Service Request,” Halliday breaks the stanza on a moment of sexual climax and enjambes the line, “Or not” (*Selfwolf* 25). The next line continues with the repetition of “Or not,” and then, “I’m tired.” The reversal of the entire three pages of the poem’s fantasy world occurs for exactly the same reason given for the fantasy’s occurrence: the speaker is tired, too tired now not to sleep in spite of his earlier insomnia. By the time the poem concludes, it becomes clear that Halliday’s dithering, in allowing him to relentlessly seek conclusions, also allows him to evade them entirely.

The most overt example of Halliday’s hyper-vigilant approach to masculinity occurs in “Venus Pandemos,” a somewhat lengthy monologue on the speaker’s own lust. “What

am I going to do with my desire/for women?" the speaker asks in the first lines of the poem (*Little Star* 26). The analysis ranges from a somewhat sincere consideration of language to humorously glib evasions. He insists that "'Lust' seems such a fierce hairy word, I don't think/it quite applies," but later confesses that "'visual rape' is not a meaningless phrase," alternating between a view of lust as an appropriate response to beauty and an inappropriately aggressive masculine response to women's bodies (26, 30). In a kind of mock blazon, the speaker talks about estimating a woman's breasts, ass, face, and so on, but spends considerably more time debating the appropriateness of the words. This is partly an admitted evasion because he doesn't want to "belong with/Hugh Hefner's legions of Total Assholes," but he's sincerely concerned by the fact that the word "breast" unsettles him, looking like it should rhyme with "yeast," and that "'Ass' seems such a nasty word,/perhaps antagonistic, certainly crass" (26, 27). He doesn't like using them in conversation, but always has them in mind, suggesting discomfort with his own objectifying behaviors. The humor in the comparisons and considerations is highly reminiscent of Hoagland's casual humor, and thus contributes to the sense of evasiveness. Halliday's speaker seems to be aware that his humorous tone makes him charming, but also that the defense it provides will not ultimately be effective enough. When the speaker asks himself why he demands that breasts be "definite," he responds, "To help make her manifestly Other./Why? Hey, I don't know! Do I have to explain/everything?" (27) The speaker is intelligent enough to be aware of the theoretical implications of his behavior, but also is a little nervous about where his self-analysis leads him. Does he have to explain everything? He at least feels an obligation to try because he knows that his desire must be critiqued because it can be so easily perceived as sexist.

But the interrogation of language and the application of theory aren't enough.

The speaker second guesses the sufficiency of his discussion when he wonders "if any intelligent feminists/will ever read this poem," saying, "I hope so; though the prospect makes me tense" (27). More than simply trying to explain himself to himself and to whoever might read him, he feels he must also bring his masculinity before an imagined court of feminist readers. Because he imagines that after a mere two pages they are still condemning him as "Shallow, horny, and exhibitionistic," he must go on (27). The speaker's need to interrogate his masculinity seems to be forced on him by an external world that finds it suspect. After considering the "sick nexus of sexism and capitalism" that brings concepts of possession, control, and conquest into the vocabulary of male sexuality, and then dismissing all of them as too "grandiose and arrogant," he asks, "Is it a defining quality of beauty/that it won't leave us alone?" putting the onus for his desire on beauty as an abstract idea (28-9). To ignore a beautiful woman without some form of ogling, he says, would be "death-in-life," although he later second guesses this line of thought as well, finding that it just leads him back to the "penis shoving home" as a "war machine blitzing all the way/to the citadel" to plant a flag so that it can "normalize" an objectified body and move on (29-30).

There seems to be no conclusion the speaker can come to that doesn't require him to fold back on himself and reconsider, but he seems most comfortable with the idea that "this is a problem *imposed* on [him] by beauty" (30). Perhaps the sense of comfort comes from acknowledging that no amount of interrogation can give him control over his own masculinity if the circumstances that create it, whether they are imagined feminist readers or social conventions of beauty, are beyond his control. He can admit responsibility for the problem of his own masculinity, but he cannot ultimately be responsible for providing a satisfactory explanation of it

or keeping any other kind of control over it. By the time he says at the poem's conclusion that "an ATTRACTIVE WOMAN is a PROBLEM," he's made it clear that he does not mean to blame women nor beauty for his desire, but that he does mean to implicate them as inextricable factors in the problem of masculinity because it is socially constructed. The speaker's monologue brings him to the conclusion that, although masculine desire cannot merely be accepted uncritically, it also cannot simply be blamed on men. Understanding masculinity, as is the case with any gender construct, requires participation by everyone, because everyone is involved in constructing masculine desire. The speaker says "all this" so he can bring his "problems out into the open" because "it's supposed to be healthy," but it only makes him feel "a little better; but not relaxed" (32). To be relaxed, he must be joined now by all those he has implicated in his discussion, we whose responses he has only been able to guess and second guess, because all of us are part of the "problem."

One weakness of "Venus Pandemos" as a poem proclaiming honesty about masculine desire is its curious impersonality. In spite of the glib, confessional tone of the speaker's voice, his comments are abstract and ungrounded. Although this helps Halliday contribute to the notion of masculinity as universal, rather than merely belonging to men, it sacrifices the opportunity to convince the reader that a real, particular individual might experience masculinity this way. At the other extreme in Halliday's work would be a poem like "Seven Baskets" in *Jab*, which consists entirely of personal details built into a narrative of hyper-masculinity. Making seven baskets in a row serves as a central point of stereotypical masculine success that emphasizes a successful career, sexual exploits that "set a new standard for self-assurance/in the history of athletic Dell-Viking poets," and the convenient separation of different lives, all of which are meant to make up for an earlier humiliation (80). Although the patent

ridiculousness of the egotistical speaker reveals the poem to be a critique of this kind of masculinity, the fantasy world of the poem ultimately limits its ability to illuminate something as complex as masculinity. For that reason, it is more worthwhile to consider a poem that bridges “Venus Pandemos” and “Seven Baskets” in style and content to contrast a more nuanced approach to masculinity with “Venus Pandemos.”

In “New Wife,” the speaker helps his wife unload groceries, all the while wondering how she sees him and what the repercussions would be if she could get into his head. He wonders,

What if my new wife sees through me in 1993
on a long August day of the greenhouse effect
and realizes that in the end I choose
five times out of six
to do what might protect my ego from its wormy fears
instead of what might help her live
or help someone else live?
In the rippling wet heat of that long day
she comes to see that my real priority
emerging beyond accidents and gestures of this week
is to publish poems and stories and thus win praise
not so much because of a great Belief in the Art
but because I was unbrave on the soccer field in tenth grade (*Tasker Street* 36)

Immediately, the speaker contextualizes his experience with a date, a time of year, and figurative language. Although he asks questions that are as serious as those asked in “Venus Pandemos,” the setting suggests a different level of intimacy. Admitting the details of one’s lust for women might be intimate in terms of subject matter, but the speaker of “New Wife” expresses an intimacy that is far more present. It has a place, and it involves specific, contextualized people. The problem of masculinity described in “Venus Pandemos” affects everyone, but the problem in “New Wife” affects real people, whose fears are “wormy” and whose thoughts are influenced by “the rippling wet heat” of a specific moment and place. The speaker fears that his new wife will

see his willingness to put himself first most of the time, admitting that his reasons for doing so are personal to the point of being petty. Beauty is not responsible for this speaker's actions, nor "Belief in Art," just his own inability to forgive himself for being "unbrave," and for not moving two women, both mentioned by name in the poem, to kiss him. The speaker fears his wife will see that he sees himself as "a forgettable fleck of nothing," which means to him that his "Belief in Love is therefore frail/and could bend and even break if pressed against/my myth of Great Achievement" (36). This speaker is far less concerned with implicating all people in the problem of masculinity than he is in understanding his own place in the problem. He has subscribed to the myth that men must achieve, and believes that he has placed it before his new wife.

As Halliday does so often, the speaker second guesses himself, asking parenthetically and repeatedly, "Is this true?" Is it true that he has lifted up the "myth of Great Achievement" above the lives of others? "Can writing this poem," he wonders, also in parentheses, "make it less true?" (36) Halliday does not give us a literal answer, so his speaker must assume "All this/grows apparent to her/as we unload groceries from the car and I dish out some sour remark/about the sameness of our dinners while merciless heat reflects/down from my scalp, scalp of balding writer in his forties" (36). As privileged to the speaker's thoughts as the reader, the new wife bears witness to the speaker's petty grouching and aging body. The myth is no longer simply the speaker's achievement, but his virility. In three short lines, the speaker fears the worst: "She sees./What then?/She leaves me" (36). When his masculinity is stripped as bare as his head, he fears his wife must see him as "some forgettable self-licking small-headed egotist who can't grow up," his language bringing to mind a flaccid penis consumed by ineffectual masturbation (37). He has built himself up at the expense of all else so many times to try to compensate for early failures, and now he must take account.

Of course, in any of Halliday's self-interrogations there is always room for at least one more capitalized, enjambed "Or." Maybe, the speaker thinks, his new wife merely imagines she understands why the old wife "allowed herself to lose" him, suggesting the speaker's partial acknowledgement of his responsibility for that failure, too. As in "Venus Pandemos," it seems to be the speaker's recognition that responsibility must be shared that allows for a kind of temporary closure. He finds relief not in a masculinity that requires him to put his achievements before all else to compensate for moments of weakness, but in one that allows the responsibility for life's challenges to be shared. He calls it "a testing of love, the shoulders and arms of love tested/by a weight more than bags of groceries/that we haul up the dim stairs" (36). Not only must the speaker acknowledge the limits of his own body, he also gives love a body with "shoulders and arms" so that it, or more appropriately the speaker and his wife through it, can share the weight of their pasts. The problem has not disappeared as the stairs are still "dim" and the bags are heavy, but the speaker has recognized a framework for understanding that relies on more than his inflated trust in himself.

Rodney Jones: The Humble Man

At the conclusion of an early poem Rodney Jones describes "a way of thinking of saints: how a man/On a mountain comes to resemble that mountain,/Then is the mountain, his speech/Meant for silence, silence for his words" (*Going Ahead* 31). The devout man bleeds into his surroundings, becoming sainthood, an abstract concept, and an impenetrable one. He becomes that with which he is associated. Silence and speech are also identified with each other, which seems somewhat fitting for a poem that describes a character's actions without ever giving him a voice. The implication throughout the poem that the man's actions, "staying home," speak

for him builds him into the mountain (30). In his impenetrability, the man becomes representative of a narrow view of masculinity, which prizes the marmoreal façade to the exclusion of all else, and which defines itself by associations with the phallus. It is cold, alienating, and, superficially, a perfect defense against weakness and humiliation. Although the tone of the poem's conclusion suggests Jones holds an admiration for the man he describes, in spite of the implied criticism of the man's reclusion, he develops in his later writing a much broader view of masculinity.

Jones's exploration of masculinity ranges freely from boyhood to manhood, focusing on the notion of lives as stories. He views present sexuality as a function of past sexuality, placing a high degree of significance on an examination of adolescent sexual experiences, but instead of defining manhood against boyhood, he views masculinity as encompassing both. Instead of defining adult sexuality against adolescent sexuality, he defines sexuality as a whole by contrasting stories of sexual experience with stories that could have happened, but did not, that is, actual experience against potential experience. In "The Life I Did Not Live," the speaker sees the potential experience "trailing a woman I knew," and contemplates very briefly a few alternative choices he could have made in his life (*Apocalyptic Narrative* 55). Rather than trailing off completely into the fantasy world, he reigns himself back in the middle of the poem with the short, solid declaration of an actual self, "But I am forty," emphasizing his "One life to hold, one night that weeps/From the block of all the time there is." Definition of an individual self or any aspect of that self, happens for Jones in relation to "all the time there is," and all of the potential that time holds, rather than in relation to another fixity. A story defines itself by not being one of an infinite number of other possible stories. Where

Hoagland uses humor and the final image, and Halliday relentlessly second-guesses, Jones allows for ambiguity by considering infinite possibility.

When he reflects on his college experience driving in a car ahead of an esteemed professor, Jones writes, “When a young man drives alone,/It is as if a faithful animal holds the wheel/While he draws from the bounty of his ego/The wishful story of his life to come, a saga of martyrdom and nudity [. . .] I thought my life would pass in erotic gentleness” (*Things That Happen Once* 35). Jones embeds the impenetrable notion of masculinity in the speaker’s assumptions about his life. The speaker drives alone, sees his ego as infinitely bountiful, and feels his physical self to be a faithful animal. He imagines that he stands above his life as it spreads out luxuriously beneath and ahead of him, one of noble sacrifices and gratifying sexual experiences. What he discovers in the car wreck that follows, and the uncomfortable sexual overtones of the way the male professor simultaneously pleads for his company and offers him comfort, addressing the speaker as “honey,” is that actual experience limits and defines our lives’ abstractions. Instead of gentle and erotic, he finds he feels “like a woman/Struck down in a field and ravished by a god” (37). Instead of the lone man feeling confident on the highway, he feels kinship with a classical myth, with a victimized woman, and with a greater and more confusing complex of ideas than he had ever suspected would comprise his own identity. Masculinity for Jones is not defined against boyhood, femininity, or any potential opposite, but in the context of all other possible definitions of the concept.

Because Jones refuses to define masculinity against femininity, they often seem partners in a kind of co-conspiracy in his poems. What emerges from this, perhaps the most interesting aspect of masculinity in Jones’s work, is a view of sexuality in which masculinity and femininity are fluid, merging together into a form in which distinctions between the two become

meaningless. Men and women are not masculine and feminine, they are just sexual. In “A Prayer to the Goddess,” the speaker laments the time he spent in adolescence with various religions seeking “What kind of thing [he] was” (*Things That Happen Once* 65). He remembers a time when he was worried he had gotten a girl pregnant, recalling his prayers to the stars, to the stones, and to the clouds that she would not be pregnant or that he might die to avoid having to deal with the repercussions. Now, as an adult, he tells the goddess, “Confused as I was, I did not even know you existed/Except that the pith of everything worshiped and forbidden/Inspired some vague and unkeepable promise of the world.” In spite of the sense of humor the speaker now seems to have about his “adolescent systole-diastole, sex and suicide,” as well as his appeals to all the different religions to understand himself, and in spite of the comparative seriousness with which he now addresses the goddess, the poem does not suggest literal paganism on the part of the speaker. What he does embrace, through recognizing the goddess as an alternative way to understand sex, is a holistic view of sexuality. The “vague and unkeepable promise of the world” at the “pith of everything” is the unity of sexual experience. His mistake in adolescence was reverting to a stereotypically male isolationism, when what would have helped him understand what was happening was an appeal to the goddess, “the warped cradle of the waxing moon.” Where trying to be masculine in a very limited sense led him to the “systole-diastole” and death, recognizing a broader sense of sexuality would have allowed him to acknowledge abundant life in the sexual relationship that caused him so much panic.

Jones acknowledges the necessity of understanding masculinity as one with femininity more simply, though just as playfully, at the conclusion of *Elegy for the Southern Drawl*. In the last lines of “Doing Laundry,” he writes, “When I tied steel on the bridge, I was not so holy//As now, taking the hot sheets from the dryer,/Thinking of the song I will make in

praise of women,/But also of ordinary men, doing laundry” (*Elegy* 102). Holiness and validity are not defined by a narrow view of work as masculine or feminine, but through the kind of thinking and meditation the work inspires. The speaker considers the meditative quality of “Pouring the detergent just so,” but at the same time that the work “is not always the folded, foursquare, neat” (101). He imagines that his doing the laundry has freed up some women to do other kinds of work, but rather than seeing this as a burden taken on in the name of sexual equality, he sees it as work made valuable by its own merits. The poem does not conclude with him martyring himself by making a song “in praise of women” for doing so much laundry, but rather by offering shared praise for men and women as they share work. Rather than merely reversing archaic gender expectations for certain types of work, Jones insists that there is nothing masculine or feminine about any given work. “Doing Laundry” suggests a world in which ordinary men and women are praised for doing ordinary work, a world in which perceiving work as gendered would be meaningless.

What Jones values most in “Doing Laundry,” and indeed most of his poems, is humility, pride being perhaps the greatest obstacle he describes in bringing masculinity and femininity into union. As he watches a mimosa tree begin to die in “Mimosa,” the speaker considers all of the memories and folk wisdom that surround such trees for him, wondering how and whether to try to save the tree. “It is the time,” he says, “I put my faith in beauty and in weakness,” offering us a strategy for understanding the life that is “dying at each juncture” (*Transparent Gestures* 29). This dying, the pruning off of possible limbs that defines lives against their infinite potential, must be approached with a humble appreciation of beauty and acceptance of weakness, because there can be no other way for a single human being to face that kind of possibility.

Toward the end of Jones's sequence, "Ten Sighs from a Sabbatical," he brings some closure to the notion of embracing weakness as necessary in order to understand the failings of prior conceptions of masculinity:

My father, for all my childhood, would oppose
my sighs as others might object to profanity.
If I had finished splitting a pile of logs
or loading a truck of hay into the barn,
I had only to lean back, inhale a great gulp
of air and expel it with an undiminished *whew*,
and there he was like Marcus Aurelius.
Long I held tight, but now I give out
and go down the cleansing breath
dead-legged and bath-headed with joy. (*Kingdom of the Instant* 77)

The language Jones uses to describe the father makes the father's understanding of masculinity clear. To be masculine means to be in "opposition," to support the profane over the sensitive. The father immediately quashes the exuberance of the "great gulp/of air" the speaker expels "with an undiminished *whew*" by standing over him "like Marcus Aurelius," insisting that a sigh is no appropriate response to physically grueling labor. What the speaker realizes that the father does not, of course, is the necessity of the great sigh. It is only the humble admission that the body is weak and the work is hard that makes the work worthy of doing. Masculinity as the father defines it has nothing to do with the nature of the labor or the response to it. Indeed, it is the father's opposition that diminishes the speaker, because the sigh is "undiminished." Held in, the sigh is "tight," but let out it is "cleansing." The erosion of the old notion of masculinity allows the speaker to feel his own body and to appreciate the experience. It may leave him "dead-legged," but it is not the death the adolescent with a narrow view of masculinity feared in "A Prayer to the Goddess," but a life-affirming weariness. The speaker is now "bath-headed with joy," emphasizing the feeling of cleansing rejuvenation at the same time that the image evokes the heaviness felt after hard labor, like the hypothetical splitting of logs. In this case the

hard labor is the life-long work of humbly accepting weakness in spite of the previous generation's looming prejudices.

Of course, accepting a masculinity that demands humility and a blurring across gender lines requires more sacrifices than merely that of a father's approval. In "My Manhood," the speaker is mercilessly beaten until he "just sat down in the ditch and gave up,/my oaths softened, all my victories compromised" (*Transparent Gestures* 11). As he is beaten, he remembers his victories as an athlete, realizing that even these "would turn black and rot." Although the reason for the beating is not explicit, religious and political differences are both implicated. The speaker's blood is "un-Christian," the "world shrieked at temple," and "Mussolini dangled from a hook" in the speaker's eye. But regardless of the literal reason for the abuse, the speaker realizes that he is ultimately being punished for embracing the kind of masculinity that demands brutal beatings for dissenters, a masculinity that believes in a distinct line between victory and defeat. "If I could have," the speaker admits, "I would have taken it all back:/the heavy masculine god, the invincible ghost,/but I brought it on, raised it, and provoked it." The speaker despairs because he feels that he has brought the beating on himself by allowing himself to be part of a world that accepts this kind of behavior, but also because he knows that in confessing that he would like to take it all back, he must be held accountable not only for losing the fight, but also for betraying "the heavy masculine god" that demands battle by giving up. After his assailants return to work because he admits defeat, the speaker asks, "What more was there to lose? The secret,/the bitter lie of triumph? The inviolable/face hidden beneath my face?" Losing the fight means little to him in contrast to what losing his faith in the old masculine ideal means.

The second, shorter part of the poem flashes forward to a time when the speaker is touring the cultural wonders of Europe with his wife in “a glad odor of peace,” but he finds he cannot separate this from “the power that blasted the gneiss” and the assailant who whispered, “On your knees, like it, now kiss it” (12). The payment of a sexual fealty implied by the assailant’s words emphasizes the nature of the speaker’s defeat: it was unmanly in terms of the kind of masculinity the “highly masculine god” requires, and its continued resonance with the speaker even as he finds himself leading a successful life shows how permanent the effects of the experience are. When he recalls the beating, “not the artisan of palaces and cathedrals/but the soldier filled me,” a “priapic beast who would claim/all beauty with his fists, not to love art,/but to hold it holy in his rough ideal of/dominion.” The speaker finds that in spite of embracing humility, he cannot entirely separate himself from the “priapic beast,” and these last lines become an *ars poetica* of sorts, suggesting that his art is partly an act of domination. Unlike the more mature speaker of “Ten Sighs from a Sabbatical,” the speaker here cannot find the ultimate joy in humility because he cannot divorce himself from the “masculine god.” He recognizes that masculinity must involve humiliation, but he does not yet understand that this requires a complete negation of his prior understanding of masculinity as domination. As a result of this, he continues to suffer, feeling conflict even at the root of his art. As with Hoagland, the word has Jones’s address.

Humility in the face of experience finally allows Jones to write a poem like “Sacrament for My Penis,” a poem that perhaps necessarily risks sentimentality and an archaic view of masculinity. “How do I approach it,” he asks, “bald as it is [. . .] Blind in one eye, kneeling to his paternosters?” (*Elegy* 93). Far from the rambunctious, honest rigor of the animal pausing to lick its genitalia uninhibitedly seen in an earlier Jones poem, “Shame the Monsters,”

the speaker approaches his penis uncertainly. There are no illusions here of extreme virility, of the penis as a permanently erect phallus. The language he uses to describe it is crippling; it's "blind," "kneeling," "A frumpish soldier slumped in a jeep/Above the caption *Dejected Nazi colonel/Waits to be transported to POW camp.*" His penis is a thing to be pitied, even reviled, "A young terrorist" on the occasions it leaps "of its own volition," "bent on sedition." What seems to trouble the speaker most here is that acknowledging the importance of humiliation has led to a crisis of identity. If the penis is this weak, pitiable organ, instead of a thing mythically impervious, and if the masculinity that myth implied must also be abandoned, then what is one to do with the male genitalia?

The speaker of "Sacrament for My Penis" suggests an ultimately unacceptable solution, but the process he undergoes to discover that solution is highly valuable. At the end of the first stanza he poses the question, "Is it mine? It never seemed to be mine." He at least has the problem right. The phallus as an emblem of masculinity is the property of no man, because it fails to represent anything real, bearing no relation to an actual penis whatsoever. Instead, it serves as an impenetrable mask behind which the actual organ hides in all of its vulnerability and impotence. In the wake of a dismantled masculinity, far from being castrated, men get their penises back. Throughout the poem, the speaker then tries to reconnect with his penis through language, plying it with metaphors, ranging from the ambiguous hopefulness of the "young terrorist" to "A joke/Chaucer might have told but didn't."

Perhaps because he fails to find a satisfactory description, or perhaps because he finds the weakness he discovers too overwhelming to accept, the speaker turns around in the final stanza to say, "No, not that." In what might seem to be a backwards step, he insists, "God/Flowers in this nerve. May it remain/Sovereign, inviolable, and unconfessed./Honor most

delicately this feverish guest.” The speaker who earlier was brave enough to approach his penis with such careful criticism and playful language returns to the language of imperviousness, praying that his penis will remain “Sovereign” and “inviolable.” Although this conclusion at first seems far from satisfactory, there is at least in it the ghost of someone winking at us from behind the speaker. Once again, the impenetrable epic language is undercut by the humor in its hyperbole. Although we know from Hoagland and Halliday that humor typically serves as much as a defense as an admission of weakness, Jones’s own playfulness at the opening of the poem shows he is keenly aware that there can be no real defense for the pitiable, pliant organ. When the speaker negates his earlier observations, he says it is because “here was my religion,” a suspiciously elevated statement in a poem that has moved forward exclusively through casual, humble descriptions. Although the speaker is doubtlessly sincere when he says, “Honor most delicately this feverish guest,” the honor now stems from an intimate knowledge of vulnerability. The speaker might ask that his penis be returned to inviolability, but it cannot after the process of discovery he has gone through, a fact Jones acknowledges through the combination of humor and reverence he employs.

When Jones’s poems praise humility, they offer an understanding of masculinity that surpasses gender boundaries. In “The Privacy of Women,” a poem in which Jones explores his relationships with the women in his family and the ways in which the genders considered together create a familial continuity, he writes, “It does not say in any book that the division will be clean/Between mother and son/or father and daughter” (*Apocalyptic Narrative* 65). Such boundaries are artificial, and preclude actual human experience. Instead, we must have the humility to explore and, if possible, to transcend definitions. In the same poem, Jones writes, “My love, my mother, my one daughter, my song, my salt evocation,/Given completely to their

keeping, /I give up my last shyness.” This, then, is the struggle of men in Jones’s poems and in life as he understands it: to understand, undermine, and overcome masculinity, men must give up the shyness that holds up the illusion of inviolability, embracing instead an open, spoken humility and vulnerability.

Hoagland, Halliday, and Jones all acknowledge that life’s infinite possibilities demand a more complex view of masculinity than that of the impenetrable, dominant male. Whether this takes the form of contemplating those possibilities, as it does in the work of Halliday and Jones, or in the high-degree of ambiguity in Hoagland, such possibilities evoke a distinct emotional reaction for each poet. Hoagland’s speakers become hyper-aware of their bodies and feel troubled by the social and biological battles they see taking place there; Halliday’s speakers become hyper-vigilant and highly paranoid in the face of uncertainty; and Jones’s speakers are humbled by the context of a larger world. Indeed, embracing a multiplicity of feelings is a necessary component of each of these poets’ explorations of masculinity, even in the case of the highly practical Halliday, who admits through the speaker of “New Wife” that his insistently analytical speakers must ultimately survive “a testing of love” (*Tasker Street* 37).

Of course, all three poets continuously struggle with what Jones calls the “priapic beast,” the old masculinity of domination and impenetrability. Halliday’s struggling seems to be the least fruitful of the three, his poems acting as Möbius strips that never quite seem to break free of the grip of machismo for all of their twisting. While his call for a shared, social responsibility for gender identity points toward over-lapping identities, it is perhaps less convincing than Jones’s efforts. Hoagland and Jones, like Halliday, recognize the beast within themselves and are as troubled by it, but they also acknowledge their potential for embracing all

feelings as parts of their own masculinities. Their speakers are more clearly vulnerable, and their physical bodies are more clearly vulnerable.

Most importantly, all three poets insist on speaking out on the subject of masculinity by interrogating it and themselves in accessible language that does not insist on tidy conclusions, necessarily leaving them and their speakers emotionally and physically vulnerable. Hoagland insists repeatedly that the language masculinity has used to divorce the real male body from its phallic ideal must be dismantled in favor of language that puts the male body at risk by connecting it with its own physical reality. It is weak, soft, awkward, and lovely. It must be looked at and tasted. While Halliday continuously fails to find satisfactory resolutions, he insists on speaking as he searches and questions. He is both good cop and bad cop, criminal and attorney, and the often comical, always urgent interrogation is not going to stop. Finally, Jones gives up the shyness that allows masculinity to become a mere defense for male vulnerability. By speaking, exploring, and wondering, he blends the masculine and feminine together, discovering a new masculinity both frightening and wonderful.

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