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Gesamtkunstwerk and Other Trifles

Derk Arie Olthof

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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April 2011

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ABSTRACT

Gesamtkunstwerk and Other Trifles

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Master of Fine Arts

In all their various categories, the arts serve as the dominant subject matter of *Gesamtkunstwerk and Other Trifles*. The title itself begins with a German word-meld—*gesamt* total + *kunstwerk* work of art. Thus a primary aim of these poems is to bring as many elements of art together as possible and to use their various forms (self-portraits, nocturnes, odes, etc.) as metaphorical frameworks that inform abstractions such as regret (“How to Draw Regret”), psychological disorders (“Insomnia Nocturnes”) and confusion in how one should feel about living realities as opposed to inanimate objects (“Dead Starling”).

Most of the poems that are not related in some way to the arts (other than their inseparable relation to the art of poetry itself) deal with death or some other form of loss. Some of them humorous (“Commencement Speech”), others poignant (“In Places Where We Store Our Deaths”), these poems ironically find their place as the “other trifles” of the work. The purpose of this somewhat irreverent categorization of death and tragedy is to create ironic commentaries on the triviality of humankind’s grand designs and accomplishments and to show the many similarities shared by comedy and tragedy alike, a project Tony Hoagland took up in his first book of poems, *Sweet Ruin*.

My aim in writing these poems is to better understand how various art forms relate to each other and how aligning those arts in poetry allows the various genres to be “in conversation” one with another. I hope that readers will come away with a better understanding of how art forms are interconnected, but at the same time, I always aim to construct my poems in such a way that multiple readings can occur.

Keywords: music, art, *gesamtkunstwerk*, self-portraits, odes, poetry, comedy, tragedy, loss, irony, metaphor, Tony Hoagland, *Sweet Ruin*, conversation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to those who made these poems and my admission into the MFA program possible. I owe my poetic beginnings to Susan Howe—without whose formative instruction and encouragement I likely wouldn't have applied (or been accepted) to BYU's MFA program. Due thanks to Kimberly Johnson for murdering the belief I once had in the Muse and for helping me realize how far one must go in order to arrive at an effective linguistic representation of emotion. Much appreciation to Michael Hicks for taking on a project outside of the music department. Your feedback on my poetry as a whole—and specifically in relation to the music related poems—was invaluable. Inclusive thanks to Trent Hickman, Stephen Tuttle, and Lou Anne Crisler for keeping me on the straight and narrow path to graduation. And special thanks to Lance Larsen for being my thesis chair and taking so much time to help me reach a new level of quality in my writing. Ultimately I want to thank everyone on the committee as a whole. All of your feedback on my poems has fundamentally changed my approach to writing.

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Critical Introduction: Basics and Binaries Learned Along the Way

In the opening lines of “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James claims that a novel’s “only obligation...is that it be interesting” (13). When I first began writing poetry, I wanted to do exactly that—catch the reader’s attention. The best way to do this, I thought, was to write humorous poems containing concrete imagery. For guidance in my pursuit of humor, I looked to well-known contemporary poets such as Bob Hicok, Tony Hoagland, and Billy Collins because they all write in a fairly straightforward and, at times, hilarious style. “We are still / drinking at 40 for the same reasons as 21” reflects Hicok, “only our shirts are better, our hands / are less inclined to destroy the elegant / shrubbery” (37). Although I wouldn’t place the poetry I wrote then or now in the same category—in quality or style—as that of Hicok’s or the other poets mentioned, I often wrote to be humorous and tried to throw in an ironic twist at the end. “Return of the Turtleneck” was one of the first poems I wrote that approached my goals to be humorous and ironic:

Sitting across from my wife this disenchanted
 evening at our enormous white oak dinner
 table...I realize I can’t remember the last time
 she gave me a come-hither eye-lashing....So I try
 to spice things up a bit, “What’s the new black?”
 I ask. And with an exquisite cube of albino Jello—
 she calls it tofu—poised on her fork
 like an abstract modern sculpture, she says,
 “Right now black is the new black.”
 So I laugh...and say, “Yeah, and I heard turtleneck
 sweaters are coming back in style.” With that,
 her face goes ashen....And I can tell

by the impossible-dream look in her lost-at-sea eyes
 that she's still planning the divorce.

Not a masterpiece by any means, but measured by the rubric of my early poetic expectations, “Return of the Turtleneck” was a successful poem. I used concrete, somewhat humorous imagery (the description of tofu and the husband’s failed attempts to make his wife laugh), and it ends somewhat surprisingly. Another strength of “Return of the Turtleneck” and my other early poems was the clear sense of setting the characters involved—a dining room and awkward dinner conversation between a husband and wife. There is absolutely no “furniture moving” which helps keep the situation clear. I mention these simple aspects of the poem because my sense of setting and character was sometimes lost in my more recent poems, which I’ll touch on later in the essay.

“Return of the Turtleneck” is also an example of my ongoing fascination with combining humor and tragedy or in using irony to offset and make light of the more serious subjects such as divorce or death. Tony Hoagland frequently plays with comedy and tragedy, and the inversion thereof; my favorite example is “Phone Call” from his book *What Narcissism Means to Me*:

Maybe I overdid it
 when I called my father an enemy of humanity.
 That might have been a little strongly put,
 a slight overexaggeration,
 an immoderate description of the person
 who at that moment, two thousand miles away,
 holding the telephone receiver six inches from his ear,
 must have regretted paying for my therapy. (40)

Although this situation has the potential of being too sentimental, too sad without actually evoking feelings of sadness in the reader, Hoagland's humorous way of pointing out the exaggerated

hyperbole of his accusations lightens the seriousness of the subject. But then, after describing his desire to let go of his anger directed at his father, Hoagland transitions from humor to heartbreaking imagery and metaphor:

...I have to remember the second father,
 the one whose TV dinner is getting cold
 while he holds the phone in his left hand
 and stares blankly out the window
 where just now the sun is going down
 and the last fingertips of sunlight
 are withdrawing from the hills
 they once touched like a child. (40-41)

Although Hoagland's "Phone Call" plumbs the depths of human feeling, my own efforts to write sad yet humorous poetry were one-dimensional —playful but rarely meaningful, full of puns but devoid of a payoff. I wondered, after receiving feedback from readers, what the takeaway was. Realizing my poems lacked depth and meaningful dimension, I focused on reimagining my use of language. I searched for surprising phrases and tried to match words in ways that created unique resonances. Many of these exercises failed, but towards the end of that first graduate poetry workshop, I started experimenting with language by writing simple words like "bottle" and then in free association exercises I meditated on the words to create artistic definitions for them, an exercise similar to Gertrude Stein's meditations in *Tender Buttons*, but without the avant-garde use of repetition, sound, or syntactical experiments. As those short exercises turned into a simple list of words, I tied them together with compelling definitions to create "The Golden Dictionary, 5th Ed. with Forward by Jean-Paul Sartre" (47):

me where these poems were taking place, I couldn't have said because I didn't know. I began to realize that memorable poetry is more than a mere constellation of twinkling words placed arbitrarily on the page; it's also locating the language in a concrete setting—a night-black sky perhaps. A specific example of an early draft of a poem without a place was “Memento Mori”:

Skin stretched taut,
 stretched taut over
 a work wrought of
 skull and razor bones.

Wrapped right,
 wound tight to catch
 the light and play of
 skinscape shadows.

Just so. When it's ah!
 just so with the skin
 and bone. When it's ah
 just so, we call it

Call it beautiful.

In “Memento Mori” I was able to couple fascinating words like “skinscape shadows” and “razor bones,” but I still couldn't determine where the poem took place. Professor Larsen suggested that I give the poem a setting. “Perhaps the speaker is looking in the mirror or observing someone and thinks about death,” he said. Once I decided to create a setting where the speaker of the poem was observing someone else, the rest of the poem seemed to fall into place because I had setting and characters to anchor the descriptions. Here are a few stanzas from the final version of the same poem:

On a park bench
 conspiring, two girls
 whisper over scuffed
 rollerblades and skinned
 knees.

The same skin
 that stretches taut over
 those frail works wrought
 of skull and razor boned
 faces. (56)

By giving the poem a setting and characters, the cutting diction and slicing effect of the truncated line breaks ties back to the object of the description (the two girls on a park bench). This connects all the elements of the poem together into a theme related to the title, which suggests the idea of having the skin fall off one's face after death.

So far, I have traced the evolution of my poetry in language, setting, and character. The next half of this critical analysis will focus on how I hope to evolve as a poet.

Something I already touched on, in mentioning humor and tragedy, is the idea of binaries. Much of my growth as a writer has come by analyzing the divided approaches to writing poetry: e.g. poems framed with formal meters and rhyme versus unrhymed free verse. While it is possible to pursue both, most poets lean towards one method over the other. One poet might have a formal tone, with elevated diction and themes. Another might tend towards informal language and the quotidian. I'm drawn to poems that work both registers because the contrast in tone and diction can create fascinating harmonic overtones. Analyzing "Today We Have Naming of Parts" by Henry Reed, Shira Wolosky says, "the art and strength of this poem, through which the contrast between the worlds of the army and the garden is dramatically felt, is centered in its diction" (9). The following two stanzas from the poem serve as an excellent illustration:

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
 Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
 And today we have naming of parts.
 This is the lower sling swivel. And this
 Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,

When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
 Which in your case you have not got. The branches
 Hold in the gardens, their silent, eloquent gestures,
 Which in our case we have not got. (qtd. in Wolosky 9-10)

I want to use the tensions of opposing diction and tone registers to do similar work in my poetry. The contrasts in diction create their own commentary; they do the work of explaining something that would seem trivial in a straightforward statement: military training is bleak and monotonous when compared with the beauty of nature. It reminds me of a scene when the main character of the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a German soldier, is in class learning about war and why he should enlist while he looks out the window and sees a bird perched elegantly on a thin tree branch—transcendent beauty versus an efficient, mechanical activity that is ultimately intended to kill the enemy.

In addition to matching diction to the idea, as Reed does in using repetitious technical language to describe the taking apart of a gun and beautiful lush language to describe nature, I also want to improve my ability to match sound with sense by using assonance and soft consonants to describe something calm or beautiful and harder consonants to match a violent or jarring image. Gerard Manley Hopkins mastered the use of aural coupling to contrast the wear and tear of man's work on nature and the regenerative vitality of God's creation:

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears mans' smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Notice the prevalence of hard consonants such as the hard c's and t's, and the sharp sounding internal rhymes of "seared," "bleared," and "smeared." The next stanza marks a change in sound:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (1166)

Compared with its preceding stanza, these lines are full of cottony w's and h's. And the softer b and d consonants. Not only does Hopkins use specific letters to match the idea of the poem, he also uses sprung rhythm to speed up the lines of the second stanza so that they move with the lush swoosh of soft wind, as opposed to the lumbering clop stomp of destructive treading found in the first stanza. This matching of ideas to the meters, sounds, and tones of a poem is its own form of rhyming—matching sounds with sense. Ideally, I would like to achieve this in my own poetry.

Not only do I want to match sound with meaning, I also want to use sounds and meters that oppose the idea they describe—mismatching sound to sense—to create an entirely different kind of commentary that would be applicable to contemporary readers. For instance, writing a poem that describes something violent and destructive with mellifluous language, or, on the other hand, using harsh, fragmented language to describe something people generally consider beautiful—nature, romantic love, children, or friendship. “Memento Mori” serves as my best current example of a poem that attempts this. Two young girls talking “on a park bench” but described with cutting language and imagery that creates dissonance because it does not match what is being described—youth and friendship. My aim in describing beautiful things with violent sounds and horrible things beautifully is to expose that aspect of human nature (as is evidenced specifically in modern movie-making) which glorifies violence and portrays the grotesque as something beautiful.

Another dichotomous approach to poetry is the differences between Beat and New York School poets who were “content to let the poem just happen” and the Language poets who “wanted to know why and how it happened, and what the social and political implications would be” (Swensen xxiii). The New York School poet in me does not want to create a poem that is tangled in such implication because it might lose the appearance of spontaneity and fail to meet Frost’s standard of surprising oneself in order to surprise the reader. To this point, I haven’t thoroughly studied the process which Language poets follow, but what little I do know makes me want to more fully explore the “social and political implications” of language without writing a preconceived poem with a preconceived outcome. Perhaps I’ll just have to wait until my subconscious brings the two poetic impulses together. Either that or I will need to use poetic rhetoric to create the illusion that my preconceived poem idea came to me as a surprise.

One of the most surprising aspects of language occurs in the use of metaphor. My fascination with metaphor began once I realized all language is metaphoric. The word “blue” is a metaphor for the wavelength of light most eyes see when viewing an unpolluted day-sky or body of water, but there are metaphors that go beyond the pure metaphorical nature of language by using language to further depart from itself in an attempt to come closer to the actual object, idea, or sensation the language attempts to describe.

A chapter from Tony Hoagland’s *Real Sofistikashun* analyzes the opposing approaches to metaphor of William Matthews and Larry Levis. According to Hoagland, Matthews’ metaphors evolved from surrealistic images to metaphors subordinated by narrative and the subtle nuances of diction. His later poems suggest that he wanted to make more social commentary, which meant he could not use wild outlandish metaphors because they would dominate the poems. In poems like “Cancer Talk,” Matthews uses a functional metaphor to comment on the widespread epidemic, “thanks to the MRI / we see its vile flag luffing from your spine” (253). Levis, on the other hand,

had a poetic purpose and inclination that greatly differed from Williams's. Hoagland claims that a Levis metaphor is often compelling enough to stand on its own, as with the metaphors Levis strings together in "In Captivity":

The lovers undress, they are
 The white of calendars without days,
 The white of trout multiplying,
 And blank dice, thrown once,
 And then never again. (qtd. in Hoagland 76)

As this example shows, unlike a functional Matthews metaphor, a Levis metaphor is intoxicating, disorienting, fantastical, romantic. Matthews uses what Hoagland calls "metaphors of equivalency" common to most classical poets, whereas Levis's metaphors create "images of inquiry." They poke a metaphorical finger into the mystery box of life—perhaps coming out (the finger) stung by some strange creeping thing (Hoagland 69-80).

Considering my own poetic inclinations, I see myself gravitating towards the metaphors of Levis, but deciding whether to settle strictly on Levisesque or Matthews-like metaphors for my own writing is unsettling. Although I prefer the surreal imagistic metaphors of Levis, I also appreciate the clarity and unassuming style of Matthews. Fortunately, the current conditions of poetry writing allow writers more flexibility in using opposing forms without having to conform to one school of thought over another. On one hand, there is a certain register of the imaginative, the transcendent, that Matthews's poetry (in my opinion) does not attain, and the metaphors of Levis, on the other hand, have an otherworldly mystical quality that is sometimes difficult to comprehend. Being able to choose either approach opens a wider range of possibilities.

With a Levis approach, I can explore my interest in metaphor almost purely for the sake of metaphor. For instance, I have tried to personify metaphors in a number of my poems, such as

“Studio 64,” (42) where I describe the characters in the poem as “dancing metaphors,” as well as in “Self Portrait w/ White Space & Broken Teeth” (37-38) where metaphors become orphans in the poem. I am also interested in deconstructing metaphor by reversing the conventional form of giving one signifier and then modifying it with another signifier that shows a relation. Instead, I would like to describe things and ask outright or imply that the thing or event described is or could be a metaphor for something else. “Self Portrait with Barbed Wire and Melting Snow” (32) is an attempt at this reversal with its description of “water reflecting mountains in its mirror [with a barbwire fence cutting] into his reflection” being the metaphor for something but the character in the poem wonders what “these things are a symbol of.” The referent isn’t given in the poem which requires the reader to make his or her own connections. And while I am not typically fond of the postmodernist dictum that readers should share an equal portion of meaning making with the author of a text, in some cases (such as the example just mentioned) I think it can be a rewarding tool.

To conclude, I return to James’s quote about the novel because although being *interesting* is important, it isn’t sufficient for what I want to accomplish in poetry. Perhaps it works for novels, but I think poems need something more. As I learned from my graduate experience, if a poem has interesting language or ideas but fails to bring those things together in a meaningful way, then it leaves the reader without a context, a setting, and it’s unlikely he or she will ever think of it again. Ideally, the fusing of meaning and beautiful language should evoke some sort of feeling, not one of frustration at being lured into the esoteric pink balloon of the poet’s mind, empty of purpose. Though bouncing off the rubber walls of such a mind might make for an interesting—perhaps even meaningful—future poem.

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Gesamtkunstwerk and other Trifles

POEMS

DERK OLTJOF

Commencement Speech

After Kenneth Koch

On this momentous occasion, you stand at the threshold of excellence or failure, which depends mostly (according to recent studies) on your height. This is why for some people, *look up to* will always be a damning

social idiom. No matter. Throw out the statistics. You control your destiny or as Freud would say, bowels, and therefore must honor the past without forgetting to remember the future. In French they call this *déjà vu*, which Samuel Beckett translated as: *Hmmm...*

That's odd. And it was. When abroad, take copious mental notes of any anomalous dietary reactions you may encounter. In most cases, vomiting blood is considered anomalous (unless you are a vulture). Once beyond the walls of the university's

care, you become a student majoring in life; I therefore suggest adding a minor in death and/or Spanish, depending on the region. Avoid double-majoring as this will add unnecessary ink-weight to your diploma, perhaps causing the nail holding it up

to bend, cracking the expensive frame of your credibility. Another well-kept secret: It seldom hurts to care about people unless, of course, they do stupid things (which they will), but caring in and of itself is like an unloaded gun,

relatively benign. So remember, the fashion of the day is raw meat slung casually over shoulder. See how it sways in the brisk walk from the butchery? A trail of red—the carpets we leave behind; it weaves a dry brown scab on the sunbaked sidewalk. Now,

as you go out into this world (or merely for a night on the town) eschew safari clothing, unless you live in Tanzania, as this will be a source of unnecessary weight and your friends will likely find your khakis and mosquito nets

unfashionable, however practical they may be in preventing malaria. Low mileage is a good principle to live by when buying cars (or replacement hips). Avoid, however, saving money on lower grade fuels. *The New York Times* Best Sellers list falls

somewhere between low and medium octanes. If and when you decide to seek a soul mate, employment, a place of residence, or (as the French say) your *raison d'être*, never forget that the *American Dream* (unlike sasquatch) most likely exists and can be found

in applications, interviews, a mortgage with low APR, playful banter, and a certain level of introspection (not to mention the destruction of someone else's American Dream because the economy can only support so many Americans, so many dreams,

and so many compound versions of the two). When you find this out (and in every walk of life) relish the use of the passive voice and euphemisms. Say, for instance, that "Actions were taken" regarding cutbacks. In choosing the cause for divorce, check *Irreconcilable*

Differences since ours is the Age of Binaries and Specialization. Never call someone *special*, however, as this is synonymous with Down's syndrome. Today ends the student loan grace period. Tomorrow is the first day of a long line of bad credit. But as you step

into the fray, consider that others have considered what you are now considering. But more than likely didn't have the courage or apathy necessary to actually jump or pull the trigger; remain a coward in that regard. Way out there in the jungle

you will learn that amber memories conceal the gray tassels you are about to throw and later suspend from your rearview mirrors and that the pink-gray lobes of your brain bury secrets in childhood sandboxes. Wondering which direction to take in life? Just remember

that moving self-wards can only get you to that spot where a person can see his own nose. Try a different path. Moving other-wards is moving joy-wards. But wherever you go, watch out for tripping hazards in the sidewalk, especially when moving backwards.

Tripping is unfavorable for the elderly, which you will be sooner than you hope. Which leads to my final remarks. On behalf of our fathers before us, please tip your caps. Bid them adieu. Be kind, moreover, and practice proper hygiene and virtue because one day—and soon—

we all shall shake the severed hand of Death.

ONE

Odes on Music Intervals

Perfect Unison

The circle in a circle
of pitch—full zero orbiting
moon complete with eclipse.
Meanwhile, in the ballroom
with glittering backdrop,
Orion stands in his tux—pearl pool
cufflinks glisten—and assumes a dance position
without a partner.

Ascending Minor Second

Call it a half
tone, semitone
or minor second—same
poison.

Nerve-hair
on twitching octet legs:
the dark anticipation of a trapdoor
spider waiting
in its lair.

Harmonic Major Second

A certain closeness that nests
inside itself.

The way a sky presses its paint-stained
palm to the palm
of a lake to stain color it the color same.

Descending Minor Third

Why do children fill their pockets
with posies?

When ashes burn what do ashes
leave behind?

Is there ever anyone left standing
after this game?

Descending Major Third

Taught as the falling sound of a doorbell
that no one answers because (as Beethoven
knows) no one is there.

Ascending Perfect Fourth

Ever tainted bridal bed.

Augmented Fourth

A nightbound train.
The cargo—bleeding guns of laughter
Shipped to shoot out the eyes
Of the last living nightingale.

Ascending Perfect Fifth

When the light went out
did I disappear?
I wonder, I wonder, I wonder
am I even close enough
for you to see me?

Descending Minor Sixth

There was a time in my life
when I was so sad
that after I passed a hitchhiker in Montréal
who looked dangerous
I thought, *Maybe he'll kill me,*
and turned the car around.

Ascending Major Sixth

Green hills beyond green
ocean cliffs falling
whitely down to the foam.

I have measured my life
with worms
that will measure my corpse.

Ascending Minor Seventh

That we
may
someday
dwell
with thee
somewhere
in
peace.

Ascending Major Seventh

Sealed alive in a stone tomb.

Perfect Octave

Reaching the fairest
sphere by
climbing the nearest hill.
Impossible.
We all have a dream
haloing us.

When Gi-Gi Met Billy Corgan

He set down his Fender Strat—
umbilicalled to stacked amps charged
with doom and distortion—and stretched
out his right hand, and Gi-Gi saw
the strawberry birth-bruises dappling
the other with long armor-tipped fingers
and climbing his thin wrist webbed with well-toned
tendons (the hydraulics of guitar mechanics)
but pretended not to notice. Though
she interrupted his riffs, Billy
just rubbed his bald head (perhaps remembering
when he still had hair) with his bruised hand
and smiled to reveal acute incisors
that had stripped so many words
of their skin. When at last he spoke, Gi-Gi
(knowing nothing of his music
or the Infinite Sadness that comes to those
who still believe people can imitate those birds
who share air currents until one topples
into an Impressionistic ocean) thought that his nasal voice
sounded like a dying crow in agony over its bullet-crushed wings
frail as a butterfly's, and that his words limped
and left a trail of blood-tinged feathers in so many
shades of black. Even though she had never met him, she felt
as though they had shared in something unspoken
the way Siamese twins share dreams.

Insomnia Nocturnes

I

And now Apollo's cruel torch has welded the iron
sky shut on itself
so that only a glowing red remains hot as the metal
shores of Troy
where starlit surf cools from scarlet to the gray of ash
waves pulling
the pierced armor back to be swallowed in the widening
throat of the sea.

II

Meanwhile—millennia away—the workman dreams
of conducting, but night thoughts make short time
for sleep and the score we set to our lives is rarely
award winning, often accompanied by the trailing vacuum
harmonies perceived through starless ceilings (another man's
floor) with strange glissandos that whirl forth and buzz back
devouring carpet as the workman's moments of waiting minutes
stand in his moonlit yard with smooth rake in hand,
lush leaves curl around his feet, a swirling
wedding gown lushness with the swelling hollow chests of dead
trees fashioned like female bodies with high tension strings
attached to the mornings, attached to the occasional
sunsets in their silence and the light-wakened
glass muted birds yawning out trills caught
in rice paper nets as leaves get tangled in the workman's metal rake
teeth as he watches people pass to take their morning walks, he records
sounds so unlike the early joggers metering their progress towards
nowhere by the sound of rubber shoe molecules being eaten
by concrete sidewalk molecules as his ear canals, those lonely concert
halls no one can get tickets to except the full house of a wax
figure museum, remain empty like his night lying
awake moments with clocks that say *here*
is another second and *there is another reason*
to leave the windows open and let in
perhaps

III

God of verse. God of music—

Through a closed bedroom window I heard
the tide of highways,

passing cars with the same rush and swell
of life cycles, of cliff-faced longing,

of war dirges and free-falling paeans. I doubt anyone
with this curse could possibly believe you

are also a god of love.

IV

though *perhaps* has its own uncertainties
and its own bay windows that let in the ocean
of freeway waves like soft mallets
crashing the feathered cymbal shores of a bed or pillow
while deep blue air spreads its night wide wings
to carry the augmented fourths of an occasional passing
train's ebb of breathing out the breathing of one
who can't breathe in sleep in spite of all the rare triumphs
of French horns that repeat the dial tone fermata
signaling yet another waiting, like the minutes lost
in the green undergrowth of quilts and the ringing shrill
tones of arthritic box springs while he waits
sitting at a sinking soft edge for the drowsing cue
not freely given by the clocks who we can assume suffered
from polio, like he did, because one arm is smaller than the other
making labor true labor and the dream of conducting
a perpetual imaginary, so the workman thinks, as the cacophony
of getting it right ends and he stands bedside and reaches with his
good hand under the lampshade pinching the small beaded chain and pulling
down with his fingers like a conductor closing the final movement
of the nocturne before pausing to announce the fanfare
and brassy flourishing forth of another sleepless dawn.

V

Morning returns. Misplaced limbs roll in and out of rhythm
with the sea,
some continue clutching a shield or a short brass sword,
cold bones sink
to ocean floors—some of us won't be coming home to sleep
tonight—or ever,
the score is never settled until night collects her due.

Chopin on Waiting to Die in Majorca

This is what I tried to say
 (without saying) that repetition
 thrums like raindrops on hollow
 church ceilings or empty concert

 halls where my pale fingers
 walked soft as cathedral sages
 across program pages stuck
 together like wet autumn leaves.

I tried to say that my inevitable
 was sad the way unresolved
 chords are sad.

 Not the way
 left-hand arpeggios
 without right-hand
 melodies are sad.

Not the way
 saying without saying
 that repeating the same note
 over again is the only way
 to say *incurable*.

Not the way playing
 one-two-three and more
 in D-flat major, fingers
 stumbling over fingers
 while writing my own
 requiem is sad.

Saying that mine
 was sad the way
 a sound wave
 pretending to be
 a raindrop
 is sad.

T W O

How to Draw Regret

Space the eyes an eye
width apart and pale
as a nebulous dream. Say, "These cannot blue"
as you conjure a cloud.
Say, "This cannot slight"
as you dip fingers in paint.
Say, "These cannot—" and leave
it at that.
Then start over
but backwards this time,
as if in a studio where sadness has nowhere
left to expand except in mirrors.
Then again,
if it's true regret you wish to depict,
avoid all symbols and circles
as these imply the eternal
void. Learn to row without oars, which
make circles in the air
and ripples in the water. Ignore the possibility
that these things
may have little to do
with regret. Then
let the paint or pencil breathe for a while, but not so long
that it dries out or becomes comfortable
with what it is, because then it's too late
to find out
what it really wanted to be.
If it answers *Landscape*
If it says *Soft brushstrokes*
If it pleads *Rainbow*
of colorless *always*
reply with a portrait.
crush it with charcoal
answer with an assortment
and with lashes penciled with ashes
from charred paper
sticks to smudge the clarity of eyes until they bleed
gray as the blur of convalescent tears. And rub the canvas with your thumb
until the soft-boned cheeks curve into an absence
of taut. Now
only one lesson remains. Look here
at its crisp and chiseled separation
from gravity: the eyelash
on my fingertip—
(open parenthesis
to the never coming of what could.

Self Portrait with Barbed Wire and Melting Snow

Rusty prongs dig deep to the heartwood
of Osage orange fence posts. Strangled
with long strands of Rose Kinked wire—like loss
they line up following the curve of a distant hill,
disappearing beyond the horizon. I don't know why
I got out of the car in these shoes, knowing the snow
runoff has pocked the potholed mud road
with patches of dirty tea puddles, knowing I don't
have another pair of dry socks, also knowing the road—
in spite of scientific proof—is far from shortened
by our measuring of it. The fence quietly insists
I remain parallel to its three-foot straight
shot understanding of destiny. Tall brown grass in tufts,
white crystallized snow in scabs on the mud skin
of soggy plains. I comply, following the trail of wires—three
strands evenly spaced from post to post until
the runoff accumulates in a pond
that wasn't there when the ranchers went a-fencing who knows
how many summers ago to prove their own theories,
to learn the painful onomatopoeia of overtaxed wires
that begin with a hard C snap and end
slipping through bare hands and whipping the air while hissing
crucifixion. But they aren't here anymore, the ranchers or their bloody
hands. Only post and wire—half submerged, the top line exposed
at the deepest point and the other two strands slice straight into the glass
water reflecting mountains in its mirror while the man standing
over the sky-plain water notices they also cut into his reflection, deeper
than any clear pool, and wonders why he didn't bring a better pair
of shoes, and what these things are a symbol of.

Sabbatical

To Rome for better air. To breathe revised
images and walk collar-up into ghost gusts.

I long for the day when I can say something
I actually long to say. And then there's the fear

of never equaling the masterpiece I spat out
early on. So I'm off to Italy, to see paint peeling

from frescos. To hear them say, *Isn't it lovely to watch
your face fall like flakes of paint to the floor? Now listen*

*to entropy's sigh, they say, our flesh swept up by the bronze city
breeze—your failed attempts at something greater than this.*

Self Portrait with Pre-recorded Train Announcements

so goes it with ceaseless advertisements
of pink and green color schemes

next station murray north forty-four hundred south

and my hair is falling out

a woman almost smiles at me—a man
two seats away has a fanny pack so near a word to *funny*

next station murray central fifty-two hundred south

—with a sucker in her mouth

green and pink were created for the daisy
maids poster on the wall with asterisks to list their services

bicyclists must follow rules posted above entrances in the train

in an almost empty train she twists white paper stick of sucker
with lip pink bubblegum on the in

next station fashion place west sixty-four hundred south

sour green apple on the out

on the second day daisy maids set their asterisks
in the plastic firmament of creation

*deep
*move-in/move-out
*and more!

somewhere the list mentioned cleaning

*proof of payment is required before boarding please
buy your ticket before getting on the train*

daisy maids say their services include free phone quotes
a sultry cartoon figure, she has a feather duster

next station midvale center seventy-seven hundred south

and my hair is falling out

the beeping sounds like timers that go off in fast-food kitchens
the beeping warns us of closing doors

*next station nine thousand south please check
for personal belongings before exiting the train*

and an apron full of rain

lithe limbs and black ponytail flipped to the right, I check for my
poppy seed muffins and two eight-pound weights

next station sandy expo ninety-four hundred south

an undrawn tongue in her mouth

her arms exposed sensual akimbo head tilting to the side
as if about to smile

next station sandy civic center ten thousand south

through beeping doors the woman walks out

by adjusting the part no one can tell about my hair,
but the double reflection of the Plexiglass window makes it hard

ten thousand south as far as we go the end of the line

to know which hand is mine

Van Gogh's Starry Night

Not long after what with my ear
(you know the story)
I sat alone in a pool of lunacy—
moonlight on an asylum floor
breathing, and everything else
was also breathing in rhythm
as I looked through a crescent
window as the stars smeared in the sky
like paint drops stamped into a stone floor.
I saw the scythe moon swiftly curving
and the cypress ascending its jagged spire
pointing to some strange heaven
beyond the darkness. Below
a church foreshadowed by the silhouette of a tortuous
cathedral. I wanted to please God. And my brother
who believed in me. He said
I had the artist's hand. But who can satisfy anyone
with paint? How can I describe light's looming
any larger than it is? I can only paint
what I see—these spheres that drip and magnify
their swirls in unscabbing
golden blotches that ripple like a lake with stones
dropped into its darkness. I walk
through the nightwashed field to enter
the cathedral. There I kneel, asking God
what will happen to my ear. Asking him
to take back the one thing he gave
that took everything else away.

Self Portraits w/ White Space & Broken Teeth

I

And still we stand
in the art gallery & wonder if tipping back
on our heels, bending slightly at the waist (at the waste)
makes us
(parenthetical) to the tangentials () between () our ()
wanderings.

II

Lost— we wonder where
did the dental specter find them? And how much
did those
bric-à-brac
tic tacs cost to texture the tabula
rasa with
glued -on
garbage & broken glass?

III

Reflecting no meaning, the gray granite tiles return blurred faces to our eyes
as we haunt the halls like verbs passing through polished sentences. Pausing
to colon-eye various colors of punctuation (!,;,?) Admiring
the adjectives, secretly wishing
they were adverbs.

IV

For you of course—
says the o u t s t r e t c h e d b o u q u e t .

But they aren't. Never were. Never will.

V

And still

the studio lights shine down
on our question

marks:

And we wonder where the artist found

our baby

teeth

to clump together with the broken
broken bottle constellations of
our re-mem-bering.

There is no answer.

And still

we look at waxed floors
to see ourselves
seeing ourselves moving on
as verbs do

gleaming

through well-lit nouns where the
suggests a promise of finding

a space for meaning,

the same promise we made

to our-[broken]-selves & our in-[]-completes,

our all for-[nothing]-gotten

gottens & our scattered

orphan

metaphors.

Hallelujah Bird

Metalwork, "Phoenix Catches Fire," by Morri Rasmussen

Tin feathers
 razor praises
 unspoken phrases
 from dented tongues
in dead intervals
 that rise unsung
 like the smoke-
 metal grief
of your song
 Hallelujah bird
 ten long feathers
 five on each wing
bent triumphant
 intervals
 of a soul
 bursting joyful
 as flames
 Hallelujah bird
 nail the sun
 to the dented roof
of my mouth
 corrugated like
 the ridges of your beak
Hallelujah bird
 fanning out feathers—
 what is God
 but an interval
 of air
 between
 our fingers
 outstretched in hopes
of redirecting gravity
 though it nails us
 to this pedestal
 fronting the museum
 in New Mexico.

THREE

Lillian Gish

A blank gray sidewalk that silently unreels:

So this, so this is how forgotten feels.

Studio 64

Abandoned like things worn not in wear
but frayed by time's fickle sense

of fashion.

Before the dance, I moved over spit-colored
sidewalks, looking down, pushing through neon sighs in search
of the luscious.

“They’re Italian,”

she said. The leather, I thought, was coffee colored not black
but creamy, mixed with crystal sweeteners from pink
or blue paper satchets.

“How lovely—”

meaning her shoes—and a smile, meaning an exchange of numbers, of saliva,
and later, perhaps, of giftwrapped remorse later returned for better fits

and new colors.

The voices were distorted by the bass droning in our ears—fading
out like pulses overstimulated by snowdrifts on glass table tops.

Night diffused

with the scent. The vapor. The dance floor lit with the artificial colors
of foldout fashion magazines—their sickly blossoms—their free samples

of fake fragrances.

What is *now* but a loss of *then*? And there we stood—petal-pressed—between
the pages of a dance floor and ceiling filled with yesterday's

throwaway faces (such lovely dancing metaphors)

our eyes to the floor.

FOUR

Biblios Dei

In the glass libraries of God
The covers can't snap shut
On light, and shadows never sleep
Between the pages.

In the glass libraries of God
Letters curl like frosted vines
In forgotten patterns between
Lines of crystal veined calligraphy.

In the glass libraries of God
Lamplight pools from stars,
Cascades over shelves,
And pours through the shining corridors

Of the glass libraries of God.
Where we read no metaphors
Nor iambic doubts that separate
I am from *I Am*

In the glass libraries of God
There are no introductions or conclusions—
A rock drops down the mineshaft
Without an echo—

Our eyes fall through the pages

To Elizabeth Bishop

Did you really let the fish go
just like that— no questions
asked, expecting us to accept it
on anthological merit alone? But why
no snapshots other than the ones
you developed on Kodak stanzas
in the portable darkroom
of your mind? Did you think
no one would see any correlation
between fish stories and fish
poems? *It's my God-given right*
of creative license!—perhaps
you thought—(looking at the fishing license
in your open tackle box) or maybe major poets
just live in nondescript worlds
of their own making—odd watercolor
places where words swim
like fish and water creatures serve
as the consummate symbols of great
art. And what about the four or five hooks
you claimed dangled from his serrated jaw
like medals with frayed translucent
ribbons? With such a prize beckoning, what kept you
from slitting lengthwise down his stomach
with a slick fish knife before wrenching
out the entrails from his body, that paper
birthday bag full of colorful surprises, revealing
ribs like whitewashed rafters in an empty
cathedral? Did you see something in those foil

packed eyes of the tacky wallpaper
brown fish? The lake shattering sunlight
as the rusted boat clanked an oar-lapped cadence
filling up the world with Technicolor victory, and still,
you let it go? Let it submerge the way one does
when regrets surface their unblinking
faces with their mouths scarred over, opening
and closing their gills like a machine
trying to breathe in nothing, revealed in the upper
layer of the lake, looking up at us, leaving us nowhere to hide,
not even behind our most beautiful descriptions?

The Golden Dictionary, 5th Ed. with Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre:

All that I know about my life, it seems, I have learned in books.

Bottle

Not a question of empty or full but rather the way it holds or pours the contents

Black

- (1) Goes well with everything, minus everything else
- (2) Seeing unseen

Clock

The bottle tipping round the wall until empty

Fossils

A product with no target audience filling no immediate need that creates jobs for hosts of academics nonetheless

Hand

- (1) The extremity from which bodies are hung on crosses
- (2) *(See Bottle)*

Joy

When at last I find time

Neck

- (1) The medium of song
- (2) The elegance of bottles
- (3) The extremity from which bodies are suspended from scaffolds

Pen

A reviving IV for blanched pages

Piercing

- (1) Not enough of a process to justify suspending it with a gerund
- (2) *(See Hand def. 1)*
- (3) *These trees the way—the way they are to mine eyes*

Quiet

- (1) Hearing unheard
- (2) An alternative to fluorescent light

Resurrection

- (1) The reward for pain caused by holes
- (2) *(See Piercing, def. 2)*

Success

- (1) For many, when others lose theirs
- (2) Placing oneself under the clock as its bottle tips to six
- (3) *(See Joy)*

Tautological

The adjective form of *tautology*; a tautology is a tautological statement (*See Tautology*)

Tautology

The noun form of *tautological*; a tautological statement is a tautology (*See Tautological*)

Time

The space in which one longs for what one no longer has

White

- (1) The space in which space is space no longer
- (2) Unseen seeing

Words

- (1) When guns lose their appeal

(2) More than less than

Yes

So soon...Leaving so soon?

Yesterday

(1) Less than *day* more than *yes*

(2) (*See Hand, def. 2*)

Zero

(0)

(1) Where points the invisible hand of clocks

(2) The sum of sums unsung

(3) (*See Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre*)

FIVE

2.

under the stairs

you said
they were calling
from the roots
they said
through the basement windows
the city lights
looked stagnant

as stars

you said
their soft voices
from the dirt floors
were inviting you said
like a streetlight's
upward reaching

for stars

in the closet

you said
they whispered
from the coatracks
speaking
through the losses in glass languages
that shined
the beginnings

of black holes

you said
the scout uniforms
on their hangers
reminded you that even
small flames
would be noticed

when gone

on the suitcase

where you stood
they had called
from the attic
saying
Come up here
from the basement
to the grasping
of dusty ropes then

the twisting star

cut down
from the rafters
like you were

3.

The empty fifth never
of every cracked you
thing and glass you are
the cylinder lining
the bottles fixed in
your windowsill truck
cylinder you are in your
you the cracked fifth
empty never and bottles
cracked empty you are
the lining in every fifth
of your and the fixed you
of never in every cracked
empty thing you are
the glass bottles cylinder
of the fixed windowsill
lining truck you never
in every thing you
are empty bottles the glass
you are in every thing the empty
glass bottles lining your windowsill
and the cracked fifth cylinder
of the truck you never fixed.

Ode to a Space Monkey

From gravity's talons
you tore
free,
marring the sky
with hydrogen bursts
that traced
your pillared path
towards space.
All the while
from below they watched
the rocket ascending
imperforated by its trail
of softly
expanding feathers.

Perhaps in darkness

the clusters
of pinhole stars
created an astral
refraction
off the microsphere
of your steaming
helmet. Did fear
fill up that glass orb
with the echoes
of your engine-
muted screams?

Mission complete.

The shuttle returned
to earth in a burning
rebirth. Did you yearn
for release
from the reeling
coffin capsule?

And then

in the instant
before the parachute
jammed
or burned
causing the shuttle's

tip to strike
the planet
full force,
did you imagine
the hour
of deliverance?

Did you see yourself
clinging to bespectacled men
in white
lab coats, feeling
safe at last
in the arms of
your lesser gods:

the ones

who let you die?

Memento Mori

On a park bench
 conspiring, two girls
 whisper over scuffed
 rollerblades and skinned

 knees,

the same skin
 that stretches taut over
 those frail works wrought
 of skull and razor boned

 faces.

Their flesh wraps
 tight around small frames
 reflecting the light's play
 on skinscape shadows

 and hair

cropped just so.
 When it's just so with skin, hair
 and bone. When it's just
 so, we whisper a secret

 beautiful

like little girls,
 unaware that skinned knees
 foreshadow that which
 awaits frail works, our delicate

 faces.

Dead Starling

Did you drop
your will to survive
or was it unwillingly
you fell
into this gutter
where the snow
has melted clean
down to the dirty shinbone
of concrete?
Now, you accumulate
every polluted molecule.
Crystals form on your feathers
gray as black without
resolve. I can't tell
the difference
between your feet
and the twigs
tangled in the nest
of your matted
breast.
One wing visible,
the other under you.
I thought I saw
your beak—dirty
orange, but it was only
an orphaned winter
leaf. Hollow-boned
you lie twisting
this way
and that.
I confess,
at first I mistook
you for a plastic grocery
bag pretending to be
a dead bird.
Somehow,
it seemed more tragic
than what you really are.

Questions to Man Who Listed His Soul on EBay

Item condition:-- Price: US \$2,000.00. Item number: 220673249408. Item location: Anchorage, Alaska; Ships to: United States, Item History: 0 offers

Is it cold out?

Are the thumbtacks coming loose that pin your brain against the corkboard of your skull?

Does your spit freeze—

Are you trapped and down to your last match in a hotdog factory outhouse?

—before it hits the ground?

Does your shadow fail to stick—even with soap?

Has she grown up—

Does your beloved refuse to thimble you though you proffered your shiniest kiss?

—without you?

Have the final rhinestones fallen from your matching doeskin gloves?

Do you wear them—

Are callouses shedding from your fingers like snakeskin?

—while hefting the weightless wait of tools?

Do elk seal their eyelids as the snowflakes touch down on wet pupils?

Can you blink—

Has the Trumpeter Swan sung her last song but refuses to die?

—with frozen eyelashes?

Did your italics draw the wrong inflection?

Was it the first time—

I'm sorry—was it merely tongue-touch-teeth and hiss?

—you asked her not to leave?

Did *too late* come too soon?

Or was nothing said at all—

The way a broken red sun slips

—before you watched the taillights trail away

into the winter solstice mountains?

...

I will ship anywhere for free.

Thanks for looking, and please don't judge me.

Ballistics 101 and Other Laws We All Must Obey

Welcome to the mortuary. This brief tutorial is designed to answer any questions you may have (assuming it's your first time here) concerning the current state of your corpse. A quiz will follow, so please take notes of key concepts. Lesson one: even more so than with solids, gases must obey when metal point-A-to-B's through their hidden spaces. The oxygen and carbon dioxide, the nitrogen and the argon part ways for greater forces, which leads to lesson two: once the air has divided, the bullet then moves through the more densely woven carbon molecules—the complicated matrix of a cotton exoskeleton of t-shirt, sweater or whatever, and from there, into the skin, which also makes room—politely—parting the crowd of outer skin cells, already dead, and the deeper tissues—not yet so—and divides so quickly the nerves won't even complain that metal has decided to tunnel its way to a point C. This brings us to lesson three: much can be learned about recent affairs abroad from your experience. For instance, the million members of the hemoglobin nations spread, waving flags on the sidewalk—the place where they found you lying before laying you out on this stainless steel slat—those red cells behaving like refugees trying to get their homeland's attention, screaming less loudly than the steel, “Take us back!” as the pressure (this is an informal

lesson four) that pumped blood up to the optic nerves
dropped to the cheeks, everything went black once
then (lesson five) a second time in a darker
permanence because bullets (perhaps the most
important thing to be learned) and their entourages
are rarely spared the red carpet treatment
we normally reserve for rock stars
and illustrious politicians.

A Cynical Search Engine Asks

Did You Mean...

Abstinence makes the heart *go fawn her*?

Cut your *throat* to suit your *coffin*?

Everyone wants *to die* but no one wants *to go to heaven*?

Carpe Tweedle Dee / Dum?

He who lives by the *s-word* shall die by the *s-word*?

Axes speak louder than words?

The laborer is worthy of his *oppression*?

Behind every great man there is a great *woe*?

The way to a man's heart is through his *sternum*?

Forgiveness is *for getting*?

Another day, another *meaningless fabricated symbol that signifies empty gold reserves*?

People who live in glass houses shouldn't *loaf about in the buff*?

There's no *taste* in *accounting*?

In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man *has no depth perception*?

A nod's as good as a wink to blind *whores*?

A *woman's* work is never *Donne*?

The road to hell is paved with *a well-packed base of rock-stuff and tar by a crew of seventeen orange-clad construction workers (sixteen of which are leaning on their shovels) while you do the digging*?

Our *fodder* which art in heaven?

What doesn't kill you makes you *straw*?