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Chameleon: A Collection of Poems

Daniel Albert Daw

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

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Chameleon: A Collection of Poems

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Chameleon is a collection of poetry that largely springs from John Keats' notion of the chameleon poet, which posits that poets can and should be able to speak with any voice or perspective in their work. A critical essay introduces the collection by putting Keats in conversation with other poets and scholars, such as Paisley Rekdal, Philip Sidney, and Fernando Pessoa, who also have much to say regarding the nature of voice in poetry. The essay further explores some of my most recurring strategies in poetry as well as what I consider to be some of the touchstones of great poetry. The poems that follow are crafted in agreement with Keats' assumption and constitute my attempt to write as a chameleon poet who aims to write good poems in myriad voices while avoiding harmful appropriation.

Keywords: creative writing, lyric poetry, voice, persona, devotional poetry, perspective, theory

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
Works Cited	16
Idaho Goes to Sleep	18
Rattlesnake.....	19
Ode to a Mailman.....	21
Crucifix	22
Household Bread.....	24
Father’s Day.....	26
The Apple isn’t Thrown Far from the Tree	27
Gharraí an Iascaire	28
Shamrock	29
Boys With Tin Pails.....	30
Great Lake Prayer	31
I Search the Internet for Help with my Depression	32
An Evening in Provo, Utah.....	34
A Supermarket in California Revisited.....	35
A Survivor at Fukushima Remembers His Mother.....	36
Haiku & Senryu	37
Can’t Say I’m Surprised.....	38
New Year’s Resolutions	39
A Man with Alzheimer’s Muses on Olives.....	40
The Trucker.....	41
Visiting Grandma’s Garden in Osgood, Idaho	42
I Take the Kid to the Movies	43
Revisiting YouTube’s First Video	44
An Obituary for My Concentration.....	45

INTRODUCTION

A year ago, I had the privilege of receiving the *Inscape* Poetry Prize for best poem in the magazine's Fall 2020 issue. "Great Lake Prayer" is a largely imagistic piece detailing a quiet moment on the shores of Lake Erie. Shortly after my poem was published, another poet and good friend mentioned to me her experience of living for a year with her husband on a sailboat on the Great Lakes and how accurate and rich my descriptions were, certainly indicative of someone intimately familiar with Lake Erie.

I was grateful for her feedback, but I have never been to the Great Lakes. Instead, I spent hours browsing Google Images and articles about Lake Erie's ecological history before sitting down to write the poem. It took about four years from the time of writing the first draft to getting it published, four years of rearranging lines, toying with structure and pattern, altering images, and crafting a persona that wasn't necessarily the same as me. This experience helped me start examining the ethical responsibilities of writing poetry and the inherent differences between writing poems with personae that essentially mirror a poet's lived experience versus those that are far removed from said experiences.

Some months ago, I was introduced to the poetry of Fernando Pessoa, whose work highlights such concerns. Pessoa went as far as having over seventy heteronyms with unique personalities, identities, and even poetic styles. Like Whitman, who famously decreed "I contain multitudes" (Whitman 53), Pessoa too asserted that "each of us...is a profusion of selves," and that "in the vast colony of our being, there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways" (Pessoa 327-28). Some of the poets I most admire, including Pessoa, Louise Glück, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Tracy K. Smith, and Robert Browning all have at least some poems not easily associated with their own lived experiences.

With concerns of harmful appropriation so much a part of today's poetic discourse, writing such poems successfully is not only difficult, but can often be controversial. One of my mentors, Lance Larsen, says, "whenever you write something down, you start to tell a lie." But what are the lines between a productive lie, a lie for art's sake, and a harmful one? And what do we say to poets like Philip Sidney, who in his *Defence of Poesy* goes so far as to argue "the poet...nothing affirms, and therefore never lies...never makes any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes...cites not authorities of other histories, but...calls the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention?" (Sidney). Using key texts like Sidney's *Defence* and Paisley Rekdal's *Appropriate*, I aim to understand what constitutes "good invention" in terms of both craft and ethics, to reinvestigate how the relationship between invention and empathy has changed over time, and to consider the roles of both truth and accuracy in good invention.

John Keats is the poet who made me most interested in pursuing these ideas in the first place, and it was his characterization of poets in his letter to Richard Woodhouse that inspired the name of my collection. "As to the poetical character itself...it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – it has no character...It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet...A Poet has no identity – he is continually...filling some other Body..." (Keats 262-63). This is right in line with Sidney's *Defence*, and I believe Keats is right in his assessment despite what I interpret to be some obvious hyperbole on his part; as with the chameleon, poets too must have some base from which to work, some characteristics and experience with which to begin camouflaging themselves, something I suspect Keats understood but would have made for a less exciting declaration in his letter to Woodhouse. I've believed for some time in poetry's capacity for both

empathy and truth, and I would argue that this work of inhabiting the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of other speakers, of being empathetic and pursuing understanding, is part of good invention.

The chameleon poet is able to write convincingly from any perspective, both their own and those far removed from themselves. While I believe the poet's imagination and dedication to the craft to be the most critical tools for writing great poetry, the best chameleon poets should research the stories they wish to draw from or the voices they seek to imitate before writing or publishing poems that imitate real people or draw upon real experience. I give most poets, and indeed most people, the benefit of the doubt in saying I believe they understand the importance of being kind and compassionate to their fellow humans. To return to Rekdal, with this desire to be kind and understanding as a starting point, the poet will naturally gravitate to keeping Rekdal's two major rules for avoiding harmful appropriation when writing from marginalized or oppressed perspectives: not perpetuating harmful stereotypes and not repurposing or making light of a culture's sacred symbols or objects (25-26). From there, the poet should research cultures, events, and people he or she wishes to write about, and then combine this knowledge with the boundlessness of their imagination to aim for great art. The discomfort and difficulty found in pursuing the "chameleon poet" ideal has been illuminating and productive in my growth as a writer and in how I treat such trademark workshop activities like imitation or homage writing.

I've done my utmost to keep these things in mind while writing poems like "A Survivor at Fukushima Remembers his Mother." The only time I've ever spent in Japan was during a three-hour layover in the Narita airport. But ten years after the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, I stumbled upon a documentary commemorating the associated events and victims. I

wanted to write a poem in response, but I felt ill-equipped to tell “a beautiful lie” without looking more into people’s experiences. So I found articles, interviews, photographs and videos discussing Fukushima until I eventually felt that I could create something meaningful. And even then, I had to be sure I was being respectful of the experiences I integrated; my aim was to use Fukushima, which I have limited knowledge about, to communicate universal feelings of grief and the experience of loss, which I know considerably more about. For example, I know from experience the tendency to ask “what if” questions in the aftermath of some loss or disaster, to consider if any different choice could have altered such an outcome, and the speaker of the poem shares this tendency when he asks: “What if I hadn’t left my children / at your house that day?” (lines 18-19). So long as I am pointing towards this sort of common human experience rather than trying to come across as an expert on a given subject, I believe any subject or voice to be available to the poet.

I take comfort in knowing that not only past masters like Keats and Sidney believe this idea, but also living poets like Rick Barot. In a post for the *Lantern Review Blog*, Barot recalls an experience with a student that closely mirrors my own while writing “A Survivor at Fukushima.” The student became absorbed in survivor accounts from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and wanted to attempt poems in survivors’ voices. Barot admits he wanted in part to dissuade his student from what he considered such a fraught undertaking, but he ultimately encouraged her to move forward with her idea. He says further: “In poetry, there is no such thing as hands-off material. A poem never fails because of its subject matter—it fails because the poet has inadequately given depth and shape to that subject matter... You have to be ingenious to avoid failure—or, at the least, ingenuity will allow you to fail well” (Barot). The chameleon poet

must be intimately familiar with failure, as it is through repeated failure he or she becomes more competent as a writer and more likely to write successful, lasting work.

Having only some past experience in exploring my own poetics, I still hesitate to assign a label to my approach, partly because I feel that identifying with schools like New Formalism or saying that I'm an absurdist or imagist or confessional poet would restrict a fuller embrace of the one label I really care about, that of the chameleon poet. Even so, I've been able to identify structural elements I often use to make meaning out of both form and content in my work, elements I've most frequently played with in changing my poetic hues, if you will. These include the use of questions as an avenue for exploration, white space and the invitations it suggests, and careful consideration of things like line breaks and sonic features and how they can best surprise and delight a reader.

Let me begin with questions and exploration, which most often manifest through speakers asking direct questions in my work. While such questions range from mundane to cosmic in nature, I believe that the interrogative mode's primary purpose is to contribute to a poetics of forward momentum. I use questions in my poems as a sort of connective tissue between words and ideas, a springboard or transition to the next group of words. For example, after casting off for a fishing trip with his grandfather in "Gharrai an Iascaire," the grandson wonders to himself "who will land 'the big one'" (24), and it is after this more innocent mode of questioning that the poem can move into a heavier, weightier sort, one which deliberates on the eventual absence of the grandfather. In a similar way, the impetuous inquiry of the speaker's sister Adrianna in "Household Bread" allows for the entry of new emotions into the poem – anger, frustration, and weariness for the father, and fear and the yearning for comfort on the part of the child speaker.

Questions serve as a junction for the poem's progression, then; each question mark in a draft offers an opportunity for me to consider the content that should logically follow, and question marks in completed poems offer the same opportunity to readers. After the aforementioned question, my poem, "Gharrai," could easily have detailed the experience of catching a fish, and "Household Bread" could have similarly displayed the mother politely declining the request for bread, or even showed her putting some bread on the table. I think the reason I opted to stay away from such avenues is that these sorts of progressions are perhaps too expected, the "answers" provided in response to the questions "too easy." Questions offer a great opportunity to signal a turn in the poem, and when I use them for this reason, I want the turn to mark a shift in the poem's tone or momentum, or to present some new difficulty based on everything previously written – I want for there to be no bread, for someone to get pissed, for the fishing line to stay still and give way to thought. As a poet, I appreciate these difficulties; the questions that appear within the text of the poem allow further, behind-the-scenes rhetorical questions to fuel my writing. With each question written down, I find myself immediately asking how the poem should respond or carry on.

However, I do not believe that questions need solely to signal a transition to new ideas in a poem, and I often find myself ending poems with a question in an effort to engage the reader more directly, inviting them to sit with the question and contemplating a poem even after it ends. "Crucifix" asks a few questions contemplating Christ as object, but the final question of "Who says stuff like that?" (35) invites readers to consider the character of both Christ and the speaker. The ending question of "Ode to a Mailman," on the other hand, weaves together a number of specific images to encourage readers to place themselves in the speaker's shoes and consider the experience of a postal worker and the almost divine qualities they display in delivering mail. In

both of these poems—though “Mailman” especially—the last line of the closing question is roughly one third the length of the other lines in the poem, an invitation for the reader to “fill in the blank” with their own answers or responses. White space and questions go hand-in-hand: both invite pause and interpretation.

The pauses inherent in white space don’t only invite questions, however, but also inform meaning through the breaks they signal. A few of my poems use white space to this effect, including “Ode to a Mailman” between the third and fourth stanzas: “and they meet / for the first time their darkling // cousins?” (14-16). The white space between “darkling” and “cousins” forces the eye to move down and to the left, and helps the reader trace the distance and the drifting, falling motion of a leaf gently growing closer to its shadow on the concrete. In “Household Bread,” however, the white space between stanzas two and three is meant to enhance the tension associated with the silence at the dinner table, but it also serves as a way to characterize the speaker’s sister as the member of the family most likely to interrupt an awkward silence: “Nobody speaks, // but of course, it is Adrianna / who breaks the silence” (18-20). Although white space is blank space, I never want to think of it as wasted space. While poems rely primarily on language, or the “words on the page,” I like to construct poems with an eye for how both the presence and absence of language intermingle to create meaning.

When it comes to language itself, I try to pay particular attention to the words that end a line, and I strive for concreteness and sensory richness (usually nouns, verbs, or adjectives), so that I can justify ending other lines with weaker pronouns, prepositions, etc. Even these “weaker” words have value at the end of a line, because if every line ended on a strong, concrete word, then to a certain degree, the reader would grow to expect this, and the element of surprise would be lost. That said, in focusing mainly on concrete words to end lines, I am keeping in

mind Robert Frost's adage: "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader" (Frost 235). I believe that surprise is more easily found in concreteness rather than in an overabundance of abstraction, which risks the type of surprise that is grounded more in confusion than anything else, and so I gravitate to line-ending images like "stubble-grass"; "parched tumbleweeds"; and "tin clusterbox." Beginning and ending lines with concrete language also allows me to play with enjambment in ways that result in more linguistic surprises as well, surprises which not only push the poem forward, but which encourage the reader to follow the poem's momentum in anticipation of surprises yet to be read.

A tangible line ending immediately followed by an equally tangible line ending allows me to subvert expectations in readers and accomplish a number of miniature turns throughout a piece. Consider my poem "Great Lake Prayer": "They drill deeper and cut / The moon in half, explosion of silver / Slime gleaming across the water" (22-24). Ending a line with "explosion of silver" conjures up images of shimmering on the water's surface, something markedly beautiful, but to make "silver" the descriptor for "slime" immediately turns the image into something more repulsive. Through such maneuvers, I can better engage with the complications of nostalgia and avoid coating it with too much sentimental sheen – I can look back on experiences that are marked with disgusting circumstances but still find fondness and value in reliving them. This is very true when I consider "An Evening in Provo, Utah," a largely autobiographical piece that is filled with fairly gross imagery, but that I think still manages to evoke at least some level of tenderness. Amid all the mayhem outlined in the poem, the speaker and his spouse are still united in their efforts to restore order, and there is a level of comfort and love inherent in the playful questioning of the ending. To find love and unity surrounding a clogged toilet is to suggest that

such wonderful qualities can exist alongside frustration and within fetid spaces, which was surprising to me, and therefore keeps in line with Frost's advice.

If I were to narrow down the elements of my poetics further, I would need to jump from considerations of line, phrase, and word down to sound and syllable. While I enjoy putting similar sounds together for the sonic pleasures they evoke, I find myself more often experimenting with ways I can put dissimilar sounds together, especially when it comes to vowel sounds. Not only does this make a line enjoyable to read aloud, but I would argue that it enhances the potency of images by encouraging a momentum shift with slower, more deliberate readings of the language. This is especially true in a phrase with multiple long vowels strung together, as in "streetlamps shine through leaves" in "Ode to a Mailman" (6). While this line is the same length as many others in the poem, the longer vowels make it read like a longer line, forcing readers to spend more time with the image of lamplight casting shadows through the trees' remaining leaves. I find I can achieve a similar effect when I, much like Keats, construct a line full of sounds which alternate between long and short vowel sounds, as in "black, kaleidoscope shades of evening," also in "Ode to a Mailman" (10).

Another device I often employ to give poems distinct rhythms and textures is repetition, either of lines, words, phrases, or sounds. I'd say some of the most prevalent themes in my work include nostalgia, father-child relationships, and loss, so the idea of repetition intrigues me in the way it signals a return to something of great importance to a speaker, a demonstration of what is most on a speaker's mind. For example, the repeated image of the father focusing "only on his food" in "Household Bread" suggests more than mere annoyance at petulant comments, but neglect. And the repetition of "my Jesus" in "Crucifix" highlights the differences between a Christian icon and the actual Christ. I don't want to use repetition only to emphasize or thematize

words and images, but to characterize speakers and adjacent figures, and to highlight the importance of memory in my work. When something is repeated, the more the memory of it is solidified, and the more it announces recollection as a primary concern. The relationship between repetition and nostalgia also attracts me to certain fixed forms like the pantoum; in *The Making of Poetry* Mark Strand and Eavan Boland explain that “the reader takes four steps forward, then two back” in a pantoum, making it a “perfect form for the evocation of a past time” (44). In a pantoum of my own, “New Year’s Resolutions,” the speaker looks back frustrated on prior years in which he pledged to change, making a similar commitment to himself in the poem but the repetition of the first and last lines communicating that he is unsure whether the change will finally come this year or not: “This year, things will be different for me.”

Though I do tend to gravitate towards these devices, I still try to arrive at what reads, sounds, and fits together best more than anything else. This “best fit” is and should be different for every poem, and what constitutes the best fit is often beyond description or prediction during drafting and revision. Auden said, “a poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language” (Auden 171), and so I try to keep this in mind above all. Rather than meeting some sort of quota with each poem, I hope to focus more on writing the best poems I possibly can. Intuition is difficult to explain, but Mary Ruefle says, “[a] poem is done when it stops bothering me” (Ruefle). When the lines that “aren’t right” stop coming into my mind after constant revision, rejections from magazines, or approval from outside readers, I take that as a decent indicator that I can put the poem away and move on to something else.

In the same way I am not hyperfocused on poetic devices when writing, I rarely drift to theory in the process of writing poems; this is even true of Keats and the chameleon poet, even though it’s so key to my project. While I admire the astute theoretical writing of scholars like

Allen Grossman, I have yet to find myself setting out to write a poem by first situating myself within some apparatus of theory or reviewing the theory I've read. I've certainly benefited from reading poetic theory and think it's made me a more careful reader of poetry. I've even been moved by some theory writing, as when Grossman writes in *Summa Lyrica* that "the poem, by a fiction, reduces the...inconceivability of personal...experience" (35). I think this notion of fiction speaking about human experience not only calls us back to the chameleon poet ideal but also highlights art's relationship to life, that one of the reasons any of us write poetry in the first place is to make sense of the world we all live in, a task which has become all the more important and frustrating during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when it comes to actually writing poems, it's not theory that guides my craft, but my desire to work through a narrative and commit beautiful language to the page. When crafting an image, I concern myself with how to distill or make more precise the description of a certain smell, taste, sight, sound, or texture over ensuring the poem is operating under the guidelines of great thinkers like Derrida or Saussure.

Another well-established element of poetic discourse that I don't pay much heed to is the notion of categorizing poems into genres like lyric and narrative. The lines between these genres have always seemed blurred to me. Can narrative poetry not be filled with language that is augmented by musicality? (Von Hallberg 10). Or have a "lyric 'I,'" a single speaker who, as M.H. Abrams argues, "expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling for its speaker?" (Hunter 78). And can lyric poetry not contain narrative elements like other characters or movement that feels less meditative and more plot-like? Assuming these crossovers are allowed, I find it not only difficult but also not very useful to engage in such classification.

This is not to say that I discredit the extensive work that has been written about poetry that does make such classifications. In fact, some such work lines up remarkably with the notion

of the chameleon poet; Grossman calls lyric “the genre of the ‘other mind’” (420) and Stephen Burt notes lyric offers a “way that we come to imagine other people’s inward lives...To read a lyric poem is...to have an experience, almost like meeting a person” (428-29). I simply find it most useful to strive to write “good poetry,” without the necessity of additional qualifiers like “lyric” or “narrative.” I hold to what G.K. Chesterton says on the matter:

What the world wants, what the world is waiting for, is not Modern Poetry or Classical Poetry or Neo-Classical Poetry — but Good Poetry. And the dreadful disreputable doubt, which stirs in my own sceptical mind, is doubt about whether it would really matter much what style a poet chose to write in, in any period, as long as he wrote Good poetry.

(Chesterton 77)

I suppose I’d be remiss to not attempt to specify what constitutes good poetry in these last few paragraphs. Beyond those principles I’ve mentioned already, I’ll return to Frost in saying all good poetry must have some element of surprise. This can come in many forms, whether through a sonnet’s volta or other poetic turn, the subversion of cliches, or the packing of rich imagery and language at the line level. With this last method, Sandra McPherson offers wise counsel to aim for two surprises or pleasures per line (Larsen). More broadly, I think good poetry tries to follow Pound’s injunction to “make it new,” or to surprise readers by presenting old information in some new or interesting way that forces reexamination of held perspectives. Good poems might also demonstrate surprise through Richard Hugo’s model in “The Triggering Town,” that of having some triggering subject to begin a poem, but then letting the poem, “like a piece of ice on a hot stove...ride on its own melting” (Frost 236) toward a discovered subject. Both Hugo and Frost advocate a view that writers themselves must be surprised by their poems if they have any hope of surprising their readership, a view which I hold to strongly.

Second, and building off McPherson's counsel, is Keats' injunction to Percy Shelley to "load every rift of your subject with ore" (Keats 548). In other words, good poems not pack multiple surprises into each line, but are efficient in their language, avoiding as much fluff or filler as possible. Long poems especially run the risk of dragging on or going slack merely for the sake of reaching a certain length.

Another way for poems to feel hollow is when they rely too heavily on abstractions, which Pound says to "go in fear of" (85). Many good poems today tend to favor concrete details and language; if any abstraction is used, it is often minimal and always feels earned. While my math skills are quite poor and I feel unqualified to provide a precise ratio of the concrete and abstract in good poetry, I can at least say with confidence that for almost all good poetry, the scales are tipped quite noticeably in favor of concreteness. "Poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous" (Lowell). This is not to say that poets have never had success writing great but heavily abstract poems—just ask Emily Dickinson or John Donne—but concrete language and imagery tends to lend more power to abstract language and concepts and heightens the chance for overall success in a poem.

Finally, I'll appeal to Anne Sexton's famous injunction: "Whatever you do, don't be boring." With this, I confess that my criteria for good poetry lies comfortably outside of what can be measured or easily defined because their success is entirely context-dependent. A good poem does not guarantee a certain amount of alliteration or assonance, does not need to break lines after a certain length on the page. Instead a good poem is ambitious in its attempts, and does its utmost to repel boredom, but how one good poem achieves this will be completely different from how another might do so. I admire Elizabeth Bishop's litmus test: "if after I read a poem the world looks like that poem for twenty-four hours or so I'm sure it's a good one" (Bishop 409).

The best poems then are not only not boring, but they linger, they haunt, and even if they don't reshape the world, they grant fresh eyes through which to see the world anew. What matters most to me in defining "good poetry" are those things I can least define, and perhaps this is what I find so alluring about poems; how many ways can I find to repel boredom through language? As a chameleon, how many shades can I show to the world?

Despite the many questions I have about poetry and how to be a successful chameleon poet, I still strongly believe what Adrienne Rich believed: that "we...go to poetry to receive the experience of the not-me, enter a field of vision we could not otherwise apprehend" (Rich). I want to believe that attempts to empathize, even with fictional or lyrical speakers, are not wasted exercises; that poems truly can offer "rapture and solace and help" (9) to quote Rilke; that writing and reading poetry can catalyze change for good in individuals and force reexamination of long held beliefs, especially those that are harmful. The greatest poems I've read, those which have lodged themselves in my memory and refuse to vacate, have given me these opportunities. They have given me the goal to write poems of similar quality, even if I never will, a goal reinforced in me after reading texts like Donald Hall's "Poetry and Ambition" as well as Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Dedication," which asks the haunting question: "What is poetry that does not save / Nations or people?" (Milosz 42).

Frankly, trying to write such poems, works which consistently "instruct and delight," that repeatedly startle and surprise with each line, and that force readers, as Bishop says, to live in a "world that looks like that poem for twenty-four hours or so" (409) after reading is mentally exhausting work. I no longer see writing poetry as the therapeutic release I once did, but as a necessary and complicated grappling with my own humanity and that of those around me through language. I hope to keep taking such steps forward as a poet, to further solidify my

opinions of poetry and to have them continually challenged and refined. That said, maybe Pessoa was right in saying “to have every opinion is to be a poet” (186). I can take comfort in this, at least: so long as there are opinions in the world to have, I’ll always have poems to write.

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Idaho Goes to Sleep

In Stanley, stars blanket sky,
make campers skeptical

of night's advent. A late flight
blinks over Boise, still awake,

a defiant child. Yellowstone
kisses Targhee's cheek goodnight.

Craters of the Moon stares
at its namesake, jealous

it gets so few visitors.
Cutthroats in Henry's

Lake drift in a trance through
soft water. Westward, Basques

dream of home, of teaching
the grammar of Euskara,

setting tables with paella
and wine. To the east,

the Snake River hums softly
while red-tailed hawks,

moved by Pound's ghost, hunt
brookies, crave sturgeon.

Rattlesnake

There is something sublime in the curve
of my spine, in the way my rattle announces
my resolve. I never tire of spitting

through sage at panicked rabbits, of silently
mocking the circling osprey who sneers
at my scales, beak twitching

at the prospect of a second course.
I know his kind. He will flap off to the river,
take pride in hunting trout, flaunt his dominance

over something fat and lazy. I prefer the scurriers
whose hearts rattle their bones once they realize
I've won. Today, I crave gopher. I will slither

towards dimmer shades, search every cave,
reject my decreed diet of dust by tearing tendons,
ripping sinews apart. Or perhaps I'll climb

that ironwood, savor the warm branches brushing
beneath my belly, flick my tongue at all
that is left for me to consume in this world.

Whether it belongs to a golden eagle
or red-tailed hawk, that tree is mine
to conquer. I will scoff from up high

at my desert siblings, shot or severed
in two by bored young men – deride cousins
across oceans whose hearts are cut out

and dropped still beating into cheap rice wine.
But that tree is quite far off, and here is a hole
with sufficient shadow to curl and sleep in.

It is a vole's work. When she returns, I'll
make her mine. Venom will spill
from my fangs at dusk as I lay claim

to this hollow. Tomorrow, my cold-blooded kiss
will drain the warm soul of a buck, a horse, a man.
Today, a vole will do.

Ode to a Mailman

He's late. I spy him through the window,
throw on my jacket, and descend into
a wind that corrodes numb fingertips. Tonight,
the maples are naked, their auburn
and soft gold foliage sheeting stubble-grass.

streetlamps shine through leaves
still clinging to branches, painting
dark mosaics on concrete.
The wind rustles these shadows—
black, kaleidoscope shades of evening.

How can neighbors talk of holidays,
hometowns, themselves, when before
our eyes the breeze cradles leaves
down to cool pavement, and they meet
for the first time their darkling

cousins? Does some god sneeze
and the gusts come? Whose art rivals
lamplight on patchy bark? I step over
the whirling shadow-tree, let the wind carry me
to the small door marked '88' on the tin clusterbox.

The door creaks on its hinges, and I see
leaflets filled with coupons addressed
to names I rarely go by: "dear neighbor,"
and "resident." How strange is it to see
divine magic in a moment, and the next

hold the mailman's alms in frosty hands?
To know that wherever I go, at least one
person in a sputtering truck full of boxes and
bubble wrap will drive through chalky hills
and alongside parched tumbleweeds
just to find me?

Crucifix

I left my Jesus in the glovebox
of the old Buick when we got
this wide new SUV. I remember
him best hanging

From the mirror, shaking
 violently
with every bump
 in the road.

My Jesus may yet be nestled
in that glovebox between
used tissues, old Angels
cap, forgotten toothpicks still sharp.

He's being driven somewhere
else now, leaving me
no bead, no cross to give,
not a single Jesus to live

Inside this newer, cleaner
glovebox. But who knows?
Maybe I'll find my Jesus
on the counter of the Jewish deli

on 12th, where the weary people split
reubens after 5:00. Maybe he'll hang
from a red paper lantern in Chinatown,
swaying through cries

of 'gong xi fa cai.'
But what if he comes back
to me—what if I find him
peering up at me

from among the straggler
fries at the bottom of a paper bag
surrounded by salt and ketchup stains?
Perhaps he'll whisper after I scoop him out:

“It is easier for a camel to go through
the eye of a needle than for a rich man
to enter into the kingdom of God.”

Who says stuff like that?

Household Bread

After *The Frugal Meal* by Rose Hartwell

Papa rests his scythe
gently against the wall.
His brow trickles sweat,
the gift left to those
in the wheat fields
by the blazing sun of Tuscany.
We scurry to the table,
eager to look at him
before he leaves once more.

Spaghetti unravels
onto my plate from Mamma's
wide bowl. Her arms
quiver as noodles
spill in front of me,
but she finds strength
again when filling
Papa's plate.
Nobody speaks,

but of course, it is Adrianna
who breaks the silence
with questions she pretends
to not have answers to.
"C'e il pane, Mamma?
Abbiamo il pane?" Jaw clenched,
Papa slams his fist
on the table, eyes
never leaving his food.

"Basta, Adrianna. Basta!"
The frost in his voice
turns the noodles limp
and cold against
my brittle teeth.
My eyes drift behind
Mamma's thin shoulders

to our small, chipped
painting—a saint,

I can't remember who,
carries Bambino Gesu
in sturdy arms.

My prayer to the babe
is tendered silently
over a rickety table
set with plainness.

Papa's eyes don't leave his food.
Mine move to him, waiting
for prayers to be answered.

Father's Day

Oh, just trudging along, galoshes full of downpour,
off to visit our father again down in the Seventh Circle.

How do you remember him?

Gossamer slobber webbed across sandpaper chin

as he spat your name through

Marlboro teeth?

Teeth that still grind at your bones each night —
the way he'd loose Orion's belt from his jagged hips

whenever sudden lightning shot
from some dark Emyrean into his frothing eyes.

Would you rather be cruising on your old, red Schwinn
down some shimmering Andromedan driveway? It's too late.

Now the cosmos are curtained

with a dolorous, priestly black. How could a man

of God

wear robes that fit so well each Sunday,

but only we could see there was nothing

Holy about the spirit in his face?

It's hard to remember

what wonders once waltzed with our eyes before we blinked:

the chalk lines that drew themselves

in the heavens for fleeting moments, the fiery autumn leaves

that flickered down to the surface

of the sopping green, or raindrops that conjoined on glass,

then promptly

disappeared

The Apple isn't Thrown Far from the Tree

While you wait for your bus, get this.
I call my son the day after
my sixtieth birthday. Miraculously,
he answers the phone,
huffs “hello.” His wife shouts
something about their toddler
catapulting applesauce;
I just laugh at the flashbacks
of my own kid wreaking havoc:
the slurp of crushed Froot Loops
and milk seeping between couch
cushions; crayons smashed
into kitchen walls; marching
toy elephants over my shorn scalp—
Hannibal reborn.

Now here he is reprimanding his daughter
over spilt applesauce, and I can't resist.
“Does she take after Pollock?” Swear
I *heard* his eyes roll at that.
He's always been spacey, scattered
as the toys and clothes that once littered
my carpets. That reminder only helps
a little. Forgetting your old man's big
6-Oh is pretty shitty, no? Anyway,
I wished him “Happy Father's Day,”
took a long, slow drink, hopped into bed
unsurprised.

Is that your bus coming around? Before
you go, look at that oak. When I was young
it reached only to my waist. And now look,
look how it's grown, how crooked it's become.

Gharraí an Iascaire

My grandfather glimpses sunrise,
and I follow him out the door to
hear the finches' song, our prize
for walking down to shore; the dew
on Connemara's flattened clovers
coats the coltsfoots' roots all over.

"My own grandfather would say it best,"
the old man booms from his chest.
"Today, the fisherman's garden
is under white blossom again;
but we'll still cast off there, where
the wind seems most fair."

He points to the small pier and
beckons me to run ahead. My
footprints strew across the sand,
and soon my fingers untie
the dinghy from its splintered post;
Grandfather arrives and begins to boast

that today again he'll catch the most,
that my haul won't compare.
We laugh and joke as we watch the coast
get smaller, the green hills of Éire
bobbing up and down with the ocean.
Then we cast; who will land 'the big one?'

But beyond competition and taking the piss,
this large, tattered man—weather-beaten statue
of a scarce Irish breed, the men I'll miss—
the gardener of the sea pulls back, casts, follows through.

Shamrock

Three is perfect. So many
of you already agree,
with your three-personed

god, the fairytales I hear
you read to children
through open windows.

My three leaves
were your healers
once. It was I

who calmed your bones,
I who thinned the blood
to ease your heavy hearts.

I was Belfast's medicine,
Dublin's remedy, panacea
for Antrim and Cork.

Even now, no snakes
prey on this isle
I have given you all.

So why do you stamp me
into the earth searching
for a cheap imitation?

Let us love and live
together once more,
as in times gone.

I am here. Four leaves
bring no luck,
only wasted time.

Boys With Tin Pails

As a child, I would scurry along the Moyola's boggy riverside with Gallagher and Duff close behind. We'd dip tin pails into the muck to see what treasures might slide into their cold metal mouths. We hoped for gold but grew accustomed to shale.

Eight kilometres between us and the banks of Lough Neagh, eight kilometres of boyish hands dragging river slime like veteran potato drills. Through sludge and silt, we sifted away with the vigor of storybook pirates until we reached Neagh's shores again. The lough swelled with vile life: serpentine eels staring with stagnant eyes, viscous moss wrapping our ankles when scuttling into the water, the peppering of midges on our necks. We squelched through the mire with little care, splashing around with our pails, never giving up on flecks of gold.

But the skies always grew darker and our eyelids would droop toward home. The Moyola would guide us til we came again to the elderly alder standing among the lady fern, our place of congregation. We laughed at our new coats of dried mud, sopping hair, dirt wedged beneath every fingernail and then bid farewell, each walking different directions home. Beneath the tree, our buckets begin to rust.

Great Lake Prayer

Our pickup whinnies to a halt
On the anemic shore. My boots
Sink into cold sand, coal-black,
Flecked with sterile clumps of grey.
Surging the curling brush,
A muddy fog of mosquitoes
Swells in tandem
With the stained-glass
Surface of Lake Erie.
The briny air is tinged with the stink
Of dead trout and dying magpies
Lining the coast, drifting
In the water, shaping themselves
Into strange and familiar forms.
Bluegills erratically array
Like stone paths, luring us
Closer to the murky graveyard.
The smelt resemble a crescent moon
Orbiting a distant black island,
And boring through them, a barrage of carp,
Like a nail in the hammering waves.
They drill deeper and cut
The moon in half, explosion of silver
Slime gleaming across the water.
An acute wind slaps
The lake's surface, contorting
The waves into eyes, ears, mouth.
The fish burst from this new face,
Multiplying and oozing out
From every slimy pore.
Gazing up into ashy skies,
A spiritless rain begins
To pepper the waves, the taste
Of dirt and moonlight
Seasoning our tongues.

I Search the Internet for Help with my Depression

Ancient Egyptians used ice
to treat inflammation. Hippocrates
revered the cold's potential to ease pain,
lessen swelling, stop blood. Who am I

to doubt? If it was good enough
for medicine's dad, then a cold
shower might be worth a shot.
Glacial pinpricks assault my skin

as I breathe in
then out again, Whitman's yawp
reborn in me, heart near bursting.
Those first moments, I curse all the sons

of bitches who say this shit works.
Improved Circulation! Greater Willpower!
Lower stress, my ass! One cold shower,
I think, should be enough until my death.

Next time I can't get out of bed, I will
stay in the bed, cherishing what sleep
I can get. Or I'll walk in the spring sun,
stopping to smell the dianthus flowers

as the Greeks did. Maybe I'll go fishing,
letting Heraclitus' river carry my dross
away as I reel in tilapia and perch
as the Egyptians did.

But to hell with the cold, with bodies
plunged into disarray. An inescapable
chill is no cure for a mind on fire (breathe in
breathe out). Always, always I am

gasping for air. But when I turn the handle
and the water reverts to a trickle, I step
out, breathing deep through a small smile.
I glide back lighter into the bedroom

And lie beside my wife, content
To watch the gentle rise and fall of her,
Thrilled to hear her breathing too.
How long can such happiness last?

An Evening in Provo, Utah

The newlyweds' toilet is flooding. They'd held hands, plucked grass near rivers, read anthologies aloud, were wed, and now they are here. The floors need washing, but not like this. Red spandex tied to the broom handle doesn't do shit, nor the fork, the sewing scissors, old chopsticks fished from the garbage, the husband's gloved hand. Through soaked glasses and clenched teeth, he swears to buy a plunger. The bathroom swirls with apple cider vinegar and baking soda, the sounds of warm water cascading from bucket to bowl, the occasional spittle soaring from porcelain mouth onto bare skin. Silent prayers are tendered to the Lord with great profanity.

Outside the window, the woman from 107 begs her dog to piss. Thirty minutes pass; still she implores. A car roars down the side street, honking, and the dog wonders if *this* is encouragement. The shops and flowers begin to close up for the night. Soft jazz wafts through the light of an open window. Listening trees jostle their branches in rhythm; leaves twirl with the breeze, loop down to the cold concrete, find rest in the piss-dry grass.

The whistling of the bowl ceases, the wife balls up on the sofa, and the husband collapses into his folding chair, fingers idle on a keyboard. He scratches his head, thinks *what's that plant that looks like a corn dog, again?* then calls out to her, "Sweetie, poetry must be born from cup noodles and stillness. Don't you think?"

No answer. She is already dreaming of mice scurrying through drain pipes, of cattails bowing towards starlit water, and of salmon battling upstream to see home one last time.

A Supermarket in California Revisited

I follow the bread-crumbs trail of beard hair you leave behind, and see you stopping each grocer: “Has Grandfather Whitman been through here today? Where has he gone? Look at my beard—do I resemble him yet?” Would it satisfy you to be reminded that his beard pointed him into the ground? That he became the grass he loved so much? He is still pointing the way, and your leaden sighs blow you toward the register, ready to leave and follow him there. The doors close in an hour. Wouldn’t you care to stay? There is so much here you haven’t seen, so many things to look at without purchasing. Where are you going, Allen Ginsberg? Will you walk all night through graffitied alleys and nicotine fog looking for a man you will not find? Will you drunkenly stumble into the megachurch on 5th, the one with enough space to seat your whole pantheon? Will you finally be content? I wonder, when you find him, when you finally go to him, Allen Ginsberg, which one of us will end up lonelier?

A Survivor at Fukushima Remembers His Mother

The waves in Iwaki are strong today.
Your grandchildren are well. They speak little
of you but remember your warmth,
the lychee sweets placed in their palms
when I wasn't looking. Aquamarine Fukushima
towers on its pier in the distance; some school
children are walking there now, perhaps to learn
of whales, algae, the power of waves.
Be glad, Mother. Your city is alive again.
There are some of your old friends now, talking
on park benches through their scarves.
Ten years on, they wait patiently for the return
of beloved bodies, and so they carry your name
in their breath when they go searching: *Mitsuko*.
Mitsuko. Your name like a prayer to the waves,
A plea to return what was taken from them
as your body was returned to me.
What if I hadn't left my children
at your house that day? Invited you to visit
us instead? They have tried forgetting
the waves that carried you away,
the uprooted homes, roofs bowing down
to water that never bested them before.
What was so important in that house
that you went back for it? Food? Blankets?
Your hanko, or letters from Father kept under
the bed? I like to imagine everything found
its way to you, that in the month we could not find
your body, sakura petals fell early around you, laid
a trail towards the things you could not live
without. But I know the trees were still in bloom then.
I know any petals that fell were sucked under white current.

Haiku & Senryu

I.

Scottish highlanders
In a crumbling cathedral,
Crawling to their friends.

II.

Snowflakes flutter
From eyelashes down
Through fingertips.

III.

Just once a year,
The orchids bloom,
Calling bees to work.

IV.

Autumn twilight
Tricks my eye. Flames
Dancing in streams.

V.

In Pompeii, the wind
Blew ashes out to sea;
Now the wind is still.

VI.

In the corner of
My eye, a collie rolling
In the summer grass.

VII.

In dreams, Milton
Asks me to describe
London's streets.

VIII.

Eddies
In the summer sea, pulling
Algae under.

IX.

A possum's ribcage
In dry soil. Bony
Fingers curled low.

X.

My son asks, "what is
Joy?" Emerald hummingbirds draw
Nectar from bee balms.

XI.

Two boys skipping rocks
Across Easdale Tarn.
Sunset through yew leaves.

XII.

When the sickle cuts
The wheat, only then
Will I thank God.

XIII.

Tonight, the stars look
Down at their reflections in
Golfo Aranci.

XIV.

Fireworks or gunshots?
My dog's life flashes
Before his blind eyes.

Can't Say I'm Surprised

I can't say I'm surprised it ends this way.
Mother was right in saying I would grow.
The skies are pouring down October rain.

And Father told me there'd be hell to pay
if I, a child, moved sprinkler pipes too slow.
I can't say I'm surprised it ends this way.

My mother used to hold my hands and pray,
but now my arms seem always hanging low.
The skies are pouring down October rain.

My father used to clutch my arms and say,
"Make me proud, or you're finished, boy," and so
I can't say I'm surprised it ends this way.

My hair and eyes have faded now to gray.
Dear Mother, do you still sing soprano?
Are the skies pouring down October rain?

I'm hearing Father's voice: "Today's the day."
I wonder when this rain will turn to snow?
I can't say I'm surprised it ends this way.
The skies are pouring down October rain.

New Year's Resolutions

This year, things will be different for me.
To prove it, I have written all these
goals in a hazel, leather bound journal. First,
I will make a living from my writing.

To prove it, I have written all these
poems about love, birds in big cities.
I will make a living from my writing
if I spend less money on cigarettes and wine.

Poems about lovebirds in big cities
always concern themselves with the wounded.
If I spend less money on cigarettes and wine,
I'll write about those who do the wounding, who

concern themselves with the wounded
only to make themselves look better.
I'll write about those who do the wounding, whose
children try to forget their names and fly away.

Only, to make themselves look better,
they smile in midnight snapshots, champagne in hand while
children try to forget their names and fly away.
This year, things will be different for me.

A Man with Alzheimer's Muses on Olives

I could never sample an olive and not
see the cobbled streets of that Sirmione
old Catullus loved, or that piercing sapphire:
Lago di Garda.

Biting through viridian skin, the briny
juices flood my tongue as their currents carry
memories overpowering Lethe's flow with
sweet anamnesis.

Spit the bitter pit in your hand and slide it
through your teeth, but mind that you practice caution.
Pits are slippery devils for palms to cradle,
Likely to plummet.

When I finish grinding the fleshy pulps, I'll
Turn instead toward this bruschetta platter:
Basil, garlic, olive oil, diced tomatoes.
What could be better?

Damn! Of course I've bitten my tongue. Now blood and
oil are mingling all through the mouth, reminding
me of pores that bled in abundance, drained and
pressed like an olive.

"All live. All love." I mumble these words like a
prayer. There is something on the tip of my tongue.
Something I have lost. I remember a lake.
A peninsula.

What I don't recall are their names. But my God,
they are beautiful. And what was the name of
that king who bled among olive trees? Lord,
help me remember.

The Trucker

'When it's all over,' said the truck driver,
'I hope to hurry on home, where my name
is known though quite unnoticed,

and sink my head into a cool
pillow meant for two. Yes, I imagine
two heads resting closely together.

I envision baking the perfect peach cobbler to surprise
my granddaughter, who flies back in a month on break.
I'll slouch in my recliner, leaning back with a cold one

in my good hand, my eyes bobbing between
the sputtering fire and the staticky glow
of the 7-day forecast. I'll inhale

the comforting ash,
the squeaking ceiling-fan air,
wondering at what hour my wife might return.

When it's all over, I want to see the mountains
that reach upwards in the morning as I do, that grind
like nubby molars against cotton swab

clouds on the sky's numb blue roof.
Where the evenings bleed runny sunset
until the dry valleys fill with warm,

orange rivers. I'd like to see
it all from the outside, to hand
over the keys, hang up my greasy cap

with its faded lettering, and emerge
from the freeway smog to release pent-up sighs,
remembering how good it can be to breathe.'

Visiting Grandma's Garden in Osgood, Idaho

Bright green tomatoes, dusty snap peas, prickly
fuzz on zucchini leaves could not sway me
from sunflowers that swayed in June's breeze.

Nine feet tall, towering over my father,
who towered over me, they watched
the sun, unfazed by my leaping to touch

their petals. Would I ever get that tall? I wanted
to ask, but Dad's eyes were fixed on budding
green beans, swelling pumpkins, all that dirt.

Grandma hobbled from the garage:
"Come on Chicken Little, getcha
a candy and some soda."

I left Dad and the sunflowers behind
for fistfuls of chocolate, the chance
to guzzle root beer.

"She's getting old," Dad told me
on the drive over. "I know she loves
talking with you."

With every visit, the sunflowers grow
heavier with seed, waiting for their necks
to snap.

I Take the Kid to the Movies

I slip through the theater doors,
spy his bouncing seat
in the middle of the fifth row
and begin to close the gap.

The people in the edge seats
hear most clearly the crinkling
of my sneakers across a floor
coated with cooled butter

and spilt cola. Their faces
twinge at my progress, at each
syrupey stride. But soon,
the slaps of stickiness

are drowned in surround
sound gunfire and explosions,
in the good soldiers' gargling
blood and salt and yearning.

Chubby little ginger-haired boy,
god to plastic troops
clutched in stubby fists.
He envisions the grimy floor

as the same sands on the screen,
casting himself as the most rugged
infantryman – the hero who saves us
all from the bad guys.

My eyes pull away, fixed back on the screen;
another young soldier bleeds out and dies.

Revisiting YouTube's First Video

Two elephants live trunk to mouth
behind Jawed Karim's disheveled head,
which bobs in and out of center-screen.
Gray skies, a black and red windbreaker
portend a rain that never comes, at least
not within the eighteen-second window
into Jawed's fascination with the masses
beyond the wired fence. One elephant,
draped in hay from head to rear,
wears his food like a royal robe.
The sluggish king of San Diego
Is joined by a friend as they feast
On the straw strewn about their concrete
domain. But Jawed cares little
For shoveling straw between elephant
jaws; he is drawn instead to the trunks
themselves, how "really, really" long
they are. He tells everyone who'll listen
what's on his mind: "That's...
That's cool." For two and a half seconds,
he turns away from the camera to get
one last look at the grey giants, but grows
distracted by skinny trees far off.
Or maybe by cracks in the concrete
where grass pokes through, the metal
wires in front of his face. Jawed
turns back around, blinks twice,
gives a slight shoulder shrug, disappears.
"And that's pretty much all there is
To say."

An Obituary for My Concentration

My concentration dies each time I try writing poems.
Don't get me started on revision. My concentration
dies even now at this funeral for an uncle I hardly knew.
Thankfully, in the aisle beside my pew, two children take
turns flipping pairs of cards, twenty face down on the floor.
A failure to match draws out squeaky groans, one after the other.
They are too young to be chastised with voices, too old to escape
furrowed brows. A familiar scene, children distracting themselves
when they can't understand loss. Now that I'm older, I'm still
unsure how to pay respects to departed relatives who never knew
me. How does one feign focus, fake love when death yields
only boredom? I try asking God about it silently, and invite
His spirit to work its magic in me, to say, "Come forth
out of your apathy, won't you?" For a moment, I swear
I see the casket tremble, and I smile with my teeth at God,
a smile that says I will focus, that I can do it, me. This resolve
fills me like a sloshing sacramental cup. But God, it turned out,
was staring intently over two children flipping cards on a rough
carpet floor. "Bottom right," the spirit whispered. A match.
Some progress at last.