

SABLE CITY BLUES

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This is dedicated to my family and friends
for all of their support.
Thanks.

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ABSTRACT

SABLE CITY BLUES

by Thomas C. Wheatley

Sable City Blues is a collection of poetry that reflects the author's personality and experiences. The poems in this collection are mostly free-verse in form and narrative in style, designed to engage the reader and lead them through an exploration of themes such as the rustbelt city of Saginaw (Sable City), love and relationships, philosophy and religion, and the author's relationship with his grandfather.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

When I began work on my thesis I considered creating a cohesive group of poems, a group that would either tell a story or provide multiple perspectives on some subject. Firstly, though, I had no idea what story or subject I could produce forty poems about. Secondly, I thought about what makes me who I am. I have a very analytical mind, and am fascinated by physics (in which I minored in as an undergrad), biology, cosmology, and mathematics, as well as history, philosophy (in which I also minored), psychology, religion, economics, and politics. At times I am humorous, brooding, polite, adventurous, vulgar, serious, introverted, timid, and friendly. I have known a lot of diverse people, and have had plenty of experiences to reflect upon. My education, personality, and experiences have all contributed to the poetry I write, and so I decided to include all of my best poetry in any style, on any subject, so that my thesis would be a reflection of my interests, my background, my personality, my mind, myself. Therefore, rather than a tightly themed series of poems, *Sable City Blues* is a collection of my best work so far.

I chose the title *Sable City Blues* for two reasons. Firstly, I spent the first 23 years of my life in Saginaw, Michigan. My friends, family, and most of the people with whom I interacted prior to attending CMU lived or worked in Saginaw and the surrounding areas. Saginaw was the geographical center of my life, and I think it also was for me a cultural/emotional center. Saginaw is afflicted with crime and poverty, but also a pervasive kind of hopelessness, a lack of ambition. Even those who aren't poor, who aren't the victims of crimes, among them some of the most intelligent people I know, seem to be drained of this ambition. In a poem I tried to capture some of Saginaw and its

culture, but I felt that, in writing about Saginaw explicitly, I would have an obligation to the truth of Saginaw and all its details. So, I conceived of a city to represent Saginaw, a city which could be as much like Saginaw as I needed it to be, while also being as different from Saginaw as I needed it to be. I chose the name “Sable” because of its connotations of something sleek or luxurious (as in sable fur coat) but also something black, gloomy, mournful, reflecting Saginaw’s decline. “Sable” by itself didn’t sound right, and so I called it “Sable City.” This poem was a kind of lamentation, and so I titled it “Sable City Blues.” This title was a good fit for the poem, but also for my thesis as a whole, fixing Sable City at the emotional center of myself, my work. Also, I chose *Sable City Blues* because of its sound -- a trochaic repetition followed by a final, emphatic stop that also has a lingering quality from the final ‘s.’

There are many themes present throughout *Sable City Blues*. One of them is relationships, and while many are about romance, others are about family, specifically my paternal grandfather. For the most part he has been altered, fictionalized in “The Knife” and “My Grandfather’s Hands,” but I also explore him as he actually is in “Prosehoney, Farewell” and “To My Grandfather (1).” I spent a lot of time with my paternal grandparents, and my grandfather always encouraged me, gave me advice, and in many ways he was a role model, and so he is an important part of who I am. Another theme is philosophy/religion, and in my poems I explore and reflect upon the nature of human spirituality. One important theme is growth or change, and the ideas of newness and rising show up again and again in many poems. A lot of this is related to another theme -- my experiences in Saginaw (Sable City), which I explore in “Sable City Blues,” as well as “Night Cabby,” written as an aubade to the city as a woman, inspired by my

coming to terms with Saginaw and my relationship to it that occurred while actually working (very briefly) as a cab driver in Saginaw. Each of my poems contains several of these themes, and so organizing them into sections was difficult. Ultimately, though, I divided *Sable City Blues* into four parts. The first three are roughly based on topic, such that the poems in the first section are about Sable City (directly or indirectly), those in the second section are about relationships, while those in the third section are about religious and philosophical thoughts. The poems in the fourth section, unlike the more fictional poems which reflect and explore the ideas, events, people, and places which influenced the formation of who I am today, are more personal and more autobiographical (some poems partly, others completely), reflecting my current emotionality.

Genre

I came to poetry in a sort of round-about way, and my work and my philosophy on the craft reflect this. I attended a magnet school for “the gifted and talented” for my elementary, middle, and high school education. For middle school and high school I attended Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy, which had “concentration classes,” such as Theater, Math and Science, Dance, 2D Art, Global Studies, and Language Arts. These concentrations had advanced classes in which students would spend three hours every day. The concentration I had throughout middle and high school was Language Arts, and so, in addition to a lot of reading, I wrote a lot of poetry and fiction. However, fiction was my genre of choice, and I rarely wrote poetry when I wasn’t assigned to write it. I attended Saginaw Valley State University, majored in English (and also, for a time, physics), and wrote both fiction and poetry. I had always considered myself a fiction writer who happened to write a few poems, but near the end of my undergraduate

education I looked over my portfolio and realized that I had written many more poems than stories, and that many of my stories were problematic, underdeveloped, or simply unfit to ever see the light of day. Though I currently have a few fiction projects, I now write mainly poetry, and have come to consider myself primarily a poet.

Most of the fiction I've read lacks the kind of concise and powerful use of language found in most poetry, and much of the poetry I've read lacks the kind of narrative elements found in most fiction. Because of this I had difficulty finding poetry which synthesizes these elements satisfactorily, and so I strove not to emulate the poetry (or fiction) that I read, but to differ from it and create the kind of poetry I would like to read. It isn't the case that I have never read narrative poetry (Frost, Soto, and Shakespeare come immediately to mind). Rather, I am the kind of person who has to figure things out for himself, such that I cannot follow someone else's poetic tradition, but must make my own. This has made it hard for me to situate my work in the world of literature, but has given me a much clearer understanding of why I write my poems the way I do.

My fiction background has greatly influenced the way in which I write and regard poetry, and thus, while some poets consider themselves to be artists, I consider myself to be a storyteller and philosopher who uses poetry as a medium. Most of my poems are short, short stories with characters, setting, and a plot arc, and I even use the prose convention of using quotation marks to indicate spoken dialogue and italics to indicate inner dialogue, as opposed to the poetic convention of using italics for spoken dialogue. Sometimes the story of the poem is in the forefront, as in a magician romancing a barista in "The Old Town Street-Beat," and other times it is more subtle, as in the story of how verbal language has shaped human development, described directly and by contrast in

“Language.” Some of my poems are mostly philosophical, such that a story doesn’t take place within the poem. Still, a kind of story takes place outside of the poem. By this I mean that the reader is (hopefully) taken on a journey of understanding -- the reader begins in ignorance, proceeds by learning, and ends with understanding some idea, such as the smallness of the human scale in “Winter Wood,” or the existence of Buddhist qualities in American culture in “Zen.”

Craft

During high school and in the first two years of my undergraduate education I was captivated by the form of the sonnet. I had written free-verse poems, and written poems in other fixed forms, but I preferred the sonnet to all of these. I liked the flowing quality of the iambic meter, as well as the constraint of having to end-stop each line. Working with this constraint forced me to express ideas or describe actions in discreet units of ten syllables, requiring me to maximize conciseness and clarity. The quatrain of the Petrarchan sonnet has a rounded, cyclical, completed quality -- moving from A to B, and then reiterating B before moving back to A -- and so I used the Petrarchan quatrain in most of my sonnets. However, I preferred the short, punctuating end couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet over the long, messier sestet of the Petrarchan sonnet. So, in my sonnets I strived to create a sense of wholeness or completion in the quatrains, and an abrupt (yet foreordained) conclusion at the end.

In pursuit of maximizing my poems’ ability to convey information and provide an experience for the reader, I have almost entirely abandoned the rigidity of prescribed forms in favor of the versatility of free-verse. However, despite not having written a sonnet in a long time, my earlier preoccupation with them has greatly influenced the way

I write today. Though I don't write line strictly in iambic meter, I've learned to pay close attention to the meter and how it affects the flow of the poem and whether it rises or falls, flows smoothly or choppily, or creates a punctuating effect or a lingering one. Also, from having end-stopped so many lines, I either end-stop them or enjamb them at the conclusion of some action or concept. For example, in "Prosehoney, Farewell" I write "I keep it safe, folded neatly, tucked away / in a shoe box with old coins." The first line stands alone as a concept, conveying the way in which "it" (a poem) is kept by the speaker. The content of the second line elaborates that initial concept, and, by being on a separate line, paces the intake of information for the reader while also emphasizing the unique content of both lines. From using the cyclical/completed qualities of the Petrarchan quatrain I learned to separate out larger concepts or actions, and my stanzas reflect this, at times being short and at other times long, each containing a set of actions and ideas related to one another much like the ideas and actions within a paragraph of prose, such that my stanzas, much like my lines, are ended not for the sake of form, but for the sake of function -- the organization of the content into distinct lines of thought. In some of my poems the stanza breaks present the content in a series of discreet units, while in other poems, such as "Depression Like a Locomotive," the absence of stanza breaks presents the content as a cohesive yet multi-faceted line of thought. Lastly, my use of the Shakespearean couplet with the punctuated ending had influenced the way I tend to end my poems. I no longer try to end them with couplets, but with some sort of profound, unexpected, yet foreordained conclusion, something impressive that also sounds nice, like "and the train that for so long held south / begins to curve west, following the sun" in "Amtrak 353 to Chicago."

New Directions

In finishing my thesis and preparing to graduate, I've come to a crossroads, about to leave many people and places behind. *Sable City Blues* has been an exploration of myself, and while I will continue to write on some of the same subjects, I am leaving some things behind. Yet, in writing these poems I have grown in some unexpected ways, the first of which has been my use of indentation. In "Lord Lazarus" I use indentation to separate one speaker (Lord Lazarus) from another (the doctor). For example, the poem begins:

There is a growing movement among physicians
to define medical death as brain-death,
 I am Lord Lazarus
 and dying is not an art
the cessation of the heart
a criterion now inadequate.

In "Zen" I use again use indentations, but this time to set aside a list from the main body of the poem. Also, I have historically been a "page poet," regarding performance poetry as primarily theater and presentation with little substance. I was never drawn to performance poetry because the rap/hip-hop element was unappealing. However, I recently experimented with performance poetry in "Three Short Poems" and "I Once Worried That I Was Gay," drawing not from rap/hip-hop but from something more suited to my personality -- stand-up comedy. I don't think I'll be using indentations in every future poem, nor will I make every one of them a performance piece. I will, however, experiment with them with the aim of growing comfortable with them and adding a couple of new tools to my poet's toolbox.

Finally, I have recently begun writing poetry that is honest and personal. Many of my early poems are very intellectual, perhaps even sterile, and this, I believe derives from being afflicted for many, many years with clinical depression. Depression for me was never a sadness, but more of an apathy, and after being depressed for so long I became emotionally desensitized. It wasn't the case that I could feel nothing, but it was like being numb -- numb flesh can feel some things, like pressure, but it can't feel those things as fully and as accurately as it can when it is not numb. In looking at many of my poems, poems which pertain to myself, I seem to have lost or neglected myself, bringing to my mind the Zen image of an empty circle. However, I recently began taking medication to treat my depression, and have started to come out of this numbness. For the first time in a long time I was able to honestly and emotionally explore some deeply personal and complicated feelings, such as those I have for my grandfather. In "To My Grandfather (1)" I begin with the line "Fuck you for what you did to my father," and go on to explore my feelings about my grandfather – so abusive before I was even born, but kind, gentle, and nurturing for as long as I had known him. While exploring those feelings has been challenging, it has also been rewarding, and I have no doubt that I'll continue similar exploration in the years ahead.

SABLE CITY BLUES

ONE

Into The Morning Air It Rises

Into the morning air it rises
over the tired brick
and weathered concrete
of post-industrial blight,
some stallion of smoke
halfway into a leap,
an ancient spirit stretching
toward a cloudless sky,
a horse-god,
disjointed in a foreign element,
or a signal
with an illusionary shape,
delayed,
warning of some approaching thing
hundreds of years too late.

O God give me night

O God give me night,
give me stark street-lamp night,
give me dried sweat and blood night,
give me quick night like vodka,
give me full night like rum,
give me tired pot-smoke night
and give me sleep,
give me dark-blue-like-black sleep,
strong sleep like wine,
slow sleep like cold coffee,
give me warm summer water sleep,
give me thunderclap-echo sleep
and give me dreams,
give me pomegranate-erotic dreams,
vertigo free-fall dreams,
tingly nitrous oxide dreams,
millennial dreams like darkness,
infants' dreams like blindness.

Sable City Blues

I am Black Velvet, Newports, ganja,
barefoot backseat fucking.

I am the seed sown onto stony ground,
the poet-kids and slammers,
the Jackson Pollock wannabes.

I am the streetlight weary in the night,
the rust stains on the concrete,
a pothole,
dioxin in the river,
fists beaten upon the countertop,
the pale tunnel of an empty street,
a new soup kitchen,
asbestos in the bedroom walls.

Apropos of gunfire I am arson,
the jalopy with no muffler puffing blue smoke,
the window-shuddering thundering beat,
the steady tread of bright sneakers
meandering along the water's edge,
turning, at last, before dawn,
plodding their way home.

Clown Luggage

A horn,
Make-up,
A rubber chicken,
Together in a mailbag.
Discarded by postmen and bought at auction.
Two dollars.
Infused with pyrotechnic smoke
And the rank smell of elephant shit,
Elementary particles of graphite, ink, perfume,
And the jungle-stink of Vietnam.
The reverberating thunder
Of a million million voices,
Stale mucus from as many tongues,
A cumulative whisper
Of infinite fibers tearing,
In the clown-car trunk it rests for now,
Stained with traveler's dust.

Preemptive Revenge in a Department Store

You stand in new black slacks,
fresh name tag dangling strange around your neck,
a nervous smile on your lips.

You will never enjoy this job,
and the sandwich you brought for lunch
won't taste near as good as you hoped.

It'll get to be too much work to give a damn,
so don't. In the first few weeks
you can get away with almost anything.

You don't have to steal.
Instead, leave on faucets, lights,
flush blouses down the toilet.

Drop lamps and slash pillows,
give too much change to customers,
and take two extra minutes on every break.

Also, wait until you clock in to shit,
don't bother with the suggestion box,
and skip the Christmas parties,

and when you get the chance
with the new girl in housewares,
for God's sakes fuck her.

After that start calling in sick,
insist that a whole score of relatives,
one after the other, really have died,

and on the next Black Friday
pull the stockroom fire alarm,
walk out wincing, clutching your back,
then smiling, at ease,
already calling a lawyer.

Man on TV, Leaping from a Moving Car

On the news once I saw
that Santa Monica
suddenly got snow -- soon slush,
which turned to ice in the night
and froze so slick that come morning
commuters fish-tailed, spun out, collided,
clogging lanes like free-floating lipids
stacked into plaque, choking the city.

On the news was an aerial shot
of a car sliding toward a pile-up,
and well before it hit
the driver bailed,
rolled over a few times,
then scrambled to the curb.

*What a dumb shit, I thought,
he could've been killed.*

Yet, maybe he had checked his blind-spot,
checked his mirrors,
had worked a third,
just wanted to get home.
Maybe he was starting his day,
headed for the office, the plant,
the stockroom, the kitchen of a diner,
and when the way was no longer clear
he ditched his ride,
taking his chances in the cold,
walking uncertain but steady,
turning away from the road,
finding a new way to work.

Winter Wood

Wind comes dry from the east
and grows to a gale,
rolling over hills,
above distant houses.
As it swells bare trees sway
like grass in a midsummer breeze,
and their limbs crack
like so many twigs underfoot.

Out Across The Lake

He sits in a tattered wicker chair
on a creaky patio, dusty with sand,
his feet propped on a coffee table
as he watches out over the lake.

Whiskey in a glass grows warm in his hand
as light from the early sun
washes across the grass to the shore –
the fingers of a nearby willow
swaying slightly in the breeze.

In the water a distant boy struggles
against small, slow waves,
the subtle and unseen current,
the heaviness of the cold water
dragging his arms and legs.

On the other side of the lake
runs a man, his flesh bronzed,
sprinting the length of a dock
before jumping into the water,
swimming out to where the boy had been.

Minutes pass as the fading moon
descends into the morning blue,
and raising his glass he drinks, at last,
to the man and the boy,
to the willow and the moon,
to the water, and to the calm.

Amtrak 353 to Chicago

Letters on street signs, billboards,
slip across the window in quick streaks
in the bleak midday of early March.
Winter-battered roads, empty parking lots
flash by, recede, disappear --
looking back, I go forward
past chipped-paint houses,
small, squat brick buildings,
factories from the fifties, some vacant,
others black, steaming, post-apocalyptic,
then the stockyards, sprawling, still,
a few miles of flat yellowed grassland,
and at last sparse trees
that thicken into snow-mottled wood,
all bare branches and bracken.

A brook swings in
to run beside us for a while,
widening to almost a river
before gently turning away,
and the forest thins to farmland,
bare fields of saffron, gold,
jeweled with irrigation machines
that stretch to the north and east
with spindly arms, standing vigilant,
waiting for warmth,
and in time we come to other towns,
and they, too, yield to woods,
muddy little waters, the farms,
and the train that for so long held south
begins to curve west, following the sun.

TWO

Osmosis

I watch you clean the dishes.
There is water in your fingers –
joints arthritic,
tips crumpled,
nails short, plain, and frayed.
That water's in your skin,
in your lungs,
in your eyes,
murky brown with grease,
and the permeating miasma
that fills the house – Old Spice,
and a thousand dreams like light
refracted off bubbles of soap
that slosh among the bits of food
before flushing away into darkness.

Prosehoney
(a love poem)

You wrote me a poem called *Loneliness Is...*
Loneliness is a muted panic,
a dry throat and a full-body ache –
flu-like symptoms.
Lost in a soft, quiet forest,
the smell of earth, pollen, leaves?
This is solitude –
loneliness is realizing you can't get out.
You said loneliness is a cold, dead puppy,
and I see it lying, still, in your hands –
I want you.
Prosehoney.
It's a pet name, a moniker.
It's endearing, and I think.
Honey. Sweet. Milk and Honey. Warm.
Breast.
You mash your breasts against me
with your arms around my neck,
and in loneliness we fuck
with desperation so fierce
it almost feels like love.

America is like Bavarian Chocolate

"America is like Bavarian chocolate,"
she says,
"it's bittersweet,
and too much of it makes you fat,"
and I say nothing as we sit
together on a bench in the park,
sipping hot spiced cider
from Styrofoam cups that have no lids.
Two schoolgirls walk past
in the distance wearing
cheap pink pillowy jackets,
and I hold my cup
up close to my chin,
steam rolling up over my face.
"You're not fat," I say at last,
"do you want to get some rum?"
She says "*sehr gut*,"
and we move toward Old Town,
taking three-block-long side streets
lined with tired two-story houses
in need of new siding.
We cut through a few alleys
of gravel and deep tire-ruts
that collect water during heavy rain,
and we stop down where
the poet boys smoke,
some small old commercial space turned flop.
Here the windows are too thin
and some young fool is going on
about the beauty of a tarpan,
but I just collect a debts
and get the hell out,
and she and I
head to Crowski's Liquor,
and that night we fall asleep
together, naked and drunk,
and I dream of dead horses
and a buxom German girl
and cold rain of spiced cider turned sour.
I see her standing
in some primeval forest
that withers suddenly
into unending winter,

and she amid the desolation
only laughs and says "*sehr gut.*"

Summerbrain

“Fuck you, Kant,” then the flutter of pages
and a slapping thud against the wall.
I’m standing in the doorway,
my hand still on the knob,
Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals
split open on the floor.
She rubs her forehead and takes a drag,
pushing the smoke out slowly.
Our eyes meet and she smiles abashed.
She’s sitting on the bed, textbooks frozen in orbit.
She shakes her head.
“People, when you really get down to it, are animals, right?”
and I go to answer her and look her over,
her legs hairless only because she shaves them,
her fleshy tits like bags of meat,
the scent of a budding sweat rash
rising from my armpit, sickly in my nose,
all the muscles and tendons of my groin now dead.
“After Mill I tuned out, baby,”
and I push all of her shit to her side of the bed and lie down,
already falling asleep, still wearing my shoes.

Her

Her eyes, her nose, her teeth, her lips, her voice, her hair, her chin, her shoulders and arms, her small and cold hands, her flanks, her hips, her blouse, her sweater, her winter coat, her hair and the way she walks, her shoes, the sound of her voice on the phone, a beer after work, her eyes, the morning news, grocery shopping, Tuesday, a trinket suspended a moment above the trash, a diner, her sincerest smile, her hand pulling away, her voice on the phone, Saturday, chain smoking, the movie theater, her laugh, her hair and the smell of her shampoo, the cold night air, her voice on the phone, a tupperware bowl of her chili, her kindest smile, work, Wednesday, her apartment, a walk in the cold afternoon air, her small, gloved hands, her nose, her teeth, her lips, her eyes, her hair and the way she walks, her shoes.

Prayin'

She laughs like sugar
and speaks like a priest,
A metered melody in her voice --
Father Son Holy Spirit
Amen.

Sex with her is like water --
cold, rough,
regularly rhythmic,
dull.

Her litany of emphatic affirmatives
stack like waves
and crash on my ears.
Her voice fills the room --
operatic,
and all at once she cries out to God
and fakes it.
She could have been a priest.

Gamer

Three jabs low kick uppercut,
blue plasma, the butt of his rifle,
the sudden fish-tail of a muscle car,
a three-round burst to the head --
lately all I do is die.
My twelve-year-old roams the map
with rockets and a shotgun,
or perches unseen with a sniper rifle
and puts prox mines where the weapons spawn,
or in one game deftly turns his car,
rounding each corner like a teenager --
his grille suddenly swelling in my view
before tires smear my body into the pavement.

For a time he was my guide,
and side by side we fought at Normandy,
bopped our way back to Coney Island,
won the Stanley Cup, the Super Bowl.
“But to really get good,” he said at last,
“we have to play one on one.”
Over and over we dueled and I lost,
but he took time to teach me,
showing me moves I could not master.
Soon, though, he gave me no lessons,
beat me for fun,
and when I convinced my wife to join
he always took her side.

I’ve read that goddamn play.

Heartburn at 3 A.M. --
I’m sipping water in the shadows.
I can see it, pale white in the dark,
and all on its own my hand reaches out,
fingers caressing the curves of the console,
probing for the ventilation holes.
There’s a red glow from behind the t.v. --
everything’s plugged into a surge strip,
and so the cup moves in close,
slowly tipping,
until the light of the strip winks out,
and I yawn, put the cup in the sink, go back to bed.

It'll evaporate by morning, I'm sure.

Tomorrow I'll buy him a football.

The Knife

It lay in his grandfather's humidior,
a small polished box kept locked
in an old cedar chest in the basement.
It was cold like the concrete floor,
the edge of the blade nicked and jagged,
its handle the shape of a pillar
from some tiny Athenian temple.
He turned it over in his hands.
On the bottom of the handle
a small steel eagle stared back at him,
perched upon its small steel swastika,
and then it was a well-polished key,
some unseen lockwork turning with it,
and then suddenly it was a knife again.
Only a knife.

The Dinner

He peels back the plastic wrap
covering the chicken from the fridge,
two breasts in tandoori marinade
that he puts on the top rack to broil.
After they cook he leaves them to cool,
pinches the meat, pulls it apart,
drops the pieces into a casserole dish
and fills it with tandoori juice --
spices, olive oil, water, salt --
then covers it with aluminum foil,
slides it back into the oven to stew.

He washes some dishes, sets the table for two,
grills banana peppers and an onion.
Sweating, he pauses at the kitchen sink
and runs the water full cold,
cupping it up to his forehead, his cheeks,
letting it run down his face.
Sighing, he checks the clock, sets the yogurt out,
hurries upstairs to change his shirt
and comes back down wearing cologne.
He warms up the naan, waits 'til it cools,
sitting unmoved from the kitchenette chair,
and he waits until the yogurt sours,
until the chicken dries up and burns.

The Apartment

She scrubs in little circles
as the powdered bleach cleaner turns blue.
Sweat drips from her forehead,
and from the kitchen sink bits of food loosen,
drops of old milk melt, rust marks fade away.
Her fingers, grown pruney, begin to burn,
and from bathroom tile soap-scum rises,
his wayward piss, dried to the lip
of the of the bowl, dissolves,
and every stain is negated, undone,
every filthy thing made clean,
by toil and leave-taking made new.

The Old Town Street-Beat

Coffee house, pub, gourmet sandwich shoppe;
the people on the sidewalk scene
now bare trees, patches of wet leaves –
he still walks the Old Town street-beat
in baggy black jeans, a fedora,
a gray-striped shirt unbuttoned, untucked,
the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms.

He moves with a swingin' zoot-suit swagger
toward the smoke mingling with breath-steam
and the vapors of a venti mocha,
the barista out for a cigarette.
He flashes her a smile and slides out his deck –
the deuce of clubs now king of spades,
the front of a joker wiped blank, restored,
the back first red, then blue, then red.
“Trick for a treat?” He pauses, gags,
barfs a dozen cards into his hands.

One last hit, she flicks her cig into the street.
“You’re a few days late.” She takes a sip.
“Aren’t you cold without a jacket?”

He chuckles. “Can I bum a smoke?”
a black Bic already in his fingers.
She hands him one and he lights it,
takes a slow drag and blows a ring.
“You didn’t tell me it’s a menthol” –
in a twitter of digits it’s gone.

She slips the length of her slim hand
into the pocket of her coat,
plucking a blueberry muffin
wrapped in plastic that glistens in the light.
He lifts it from her hand with just his fingers,
her nails rolling up to brush his palm.
“A coat’s just too constricting,” he says,
a wave and then that cigarette, still lit,
rests suddenly on his knuckles.
She takes it and he walks on down the street,
moving stiffly as he rounds the corner,
rubbing his arms, holding onto October.

THREE

Zen

is a thing strange to the American mind,
grasped in quick wisps
come fluttering into conscious thought --
 the calligrapher's brush,
 his slow-flowing figures,
 teacups with no handles,
 an empty circle,
 a lotus gently lifted overhead and
 twirled in the mid-morning sun,
 one lone, slow-spreading smile.
All these things are caught in glimpses,
gleaned from magazines and t.v.,
desktop rock gardens,
calendars with sayings of the Buddha --
meaning flashing into the brain
like pollen from a foreign flower,
the scent blooming briefly,
something in it familiar,
slowly fading, forgotten.
We have our own buddhism,
taken to the bitter-vinegar end --
we are, at once, filled with absence
and the absence of absence,
and we know too well
that one hand clapping --
 a thing in contradiction,
 existentially disjointed, an illusion,
 or something singular, alone,
 moving forward into nothing,
 hitting itself again and again,
 growing wrinkled, arthritic,
 straining its tendons, waving goodbye.

Helix

Together we move --
grand cycles upon cycles.
Returning, we rise.

City River

It's still, ever still –
a slate
of slick obsidian in the dusk
and the smell
of some many dead things comes
like rank female corruption,
and then, of a sudden,
six-gun firecrackers snap,
the sound rising out of the Tao
to make love with music,
some groovin' fuckin' ghetto jive
from a nightclub nearby.

The summer sun
that brings young blood to boil
is gone,
now fallen into the Tao,
and pith out of pore shall cool
save where sober night is made hot
by slippery wayward spirits
or miasma
with fire cleft
from mystic fruit of the earth.

Weary, though, the watcher grows,
restless,
sublimity and all sense of shape subdued
and undone
like his pants,
and as Jupiter in wrath
from him lightning leaps
in a hot arching bolt –
down to the dark
to discharge and diffuse,
and he and the river are one.

Poets Would Call Them Emeralds

I have never seen that gem,
but when I met that gaze
all I could see were her eyes,
preternatural –
buttons of lush and dewy moss, caught
in the glimmer of a summer morning's light.
She winked and all at once it came
like some Freudian infantile trauma
of irrevocable separation,
the recognition of artifice
that extinguishes naiveté,
that severs men from God.
She walked away
and I closed my eyes
and something welled within me –
Zen Mastery, like sleep,
Nirvana, like dreams.
Poets would call them emeralds.

Lord Lazarus

There is a growing movement among physicians
to define medical death as brain-death,

I am Lord Lazarus
and dying is not an art
the cessation of the heart
a criterion now inadequate.

Black tires slip-slick in the rain –
hydroplane, a tree
Not breathing, in earlier times, defined death,
but medicine, physiology, evolve.

Down to deltas and dropping fast
Understand, please, that brain-dead is dead.
Three times defined, then three times I've died,
Fräulein tochter, Fräulein kind

Don't waste money prolonging it.
Best begin to make arrangements,
consider donating the organs.

I was born yesterday,
a dark miracle
He won't make it.

One in a million
He'll be comatose.
I have wakened from the dead
He's blind.

The spit in my eyes was blood
He won't walk.

Which is easier to say:
'I am forgiven of my sins,'
or 'I'll get up and walk'?
My ablution water was the rain,
and by blunt-force trauma
and a penitent punctured lung,
by tears and parting prayers I am purged
until, thrice dead, I rise.

Fragrance of Samsara

It rises from the city streets,
from taxicab smog
and pedestrian breath-steam
curling in the morning air.
It is carried on the backs of flies,
rising with cigarette smoke,
from men smeared with sweat and filth,
from drain pipes, filled with shit,
that swell in the rain.
It smells like new plastic,
like spoiled meat,
like ammonia,
like methane and sulfur,
and it fills the narrow alleyways
and the high-rise apartments
and every air-duct of every building,
and it binds to hair
and the cotton fibers of clothing,
and it diffuses from the wind
into water,
into blood.

That night she arrives like being born,
and abruptly she's standing,
swarthy, naked and wet
at the intersection of two avenues,
squinting in the sudden light
from electric streetlamps like full moons,
their bulbs housed in opaque glass orbs
that become pale pearls in the distance.
The city is still now except for the wind
and the dead leaves that ride it,
quiet except for their rustling.
Her hair, long and black,
drips water onto the pavement,
and she says nothing
as she kneels, sits, then lies
on the cold concrete to sleep.

In the morning she is gone,
only nothing where she had been,
and very slowly *it* rises.
That evening the traffic lights burn out

and the taxis sputter to a stop.
The wind, at last, is still,
and the people, dazed, begin to walk home,
saying nothing.
For dinner they eat nothing,
gorging themselves
until they are filled with it,
and at night they sleep without waking,
they sleep without dreams.

Language

Had script been invented before the spoken word
we'd see text in our heads when we thought --
a ghost-lettered banner scrolling left to right,
a news ticker at the bottom of the screen.

If man first used his hands to sign
we'd be fleet-fingered and hawk-eyed,
evolved to catch such slight, swift movements.
And war would be a rarity --
what army, then, could take commands
without turning from its foes,
or report holding shields, spears?

Instead we learned to speak,
can talk while we work, while we war,
in the dark while someone tries to sleep,
or to people in another room
without bothering to go ourselves.
Yet, in listening for others
we hear voices in the wind,
wrath in thunder claps,
the whole world's ten thousand sounds
commingled in the atmosphere,
and when we add our own to them,
push our life into the air,
we speak to everything --
surrendering the spirit and then drawing it back,
holding it a moment,
waiting for reply.

Annihilation

The limit of the function as X goes to infinity --
she says it's love and I see
chaos-kaleidoscope patterns
slosh and spill out of order
like cigar-smoke stretch marks bleeding,
running upward on her body,
or a Rubik's cube melting
into a vomit-colored sphere,
or someone suddenly drowning
as air and life recedes,
or somewhere a schizophrenic
off his anti-psychotic pills,
shitting to paint a halfway-house wall,
and some time far from now
it lingers yet
like a premonition,
like *déjà vu*,
and as strings resound
in a single cord
while 'branes combine
and stars explode,
the universe and anti-universe collide –
the whole world is dawn,
and there is no thing but
light, light.

Words

I have been to places with no words,
back in time before language
to fear tightening in the groin,
to nauseating hunger, semen, sweat,
to fever, the smell of soil, the stars,
and from them dragged meaning, tethered to sounds,
hot out of the body, out of seawater, out of silt.

I have lived with words,
but I stray into places where they will not follow --
a book replaced by cigarettes,
traffic lights and empty sidewalks at night,
waiting for water to boil for a handful of rice,
or a friend telling me, tearfully,
that he can't stop looking at pictures of naked little girls,
and waking, after dreaming of my father, and realizing he's dead.

Voices at last have turned to noise,
and letters on pages will not join together, but sleep,
and when I reach for them words stay behind,
catch in my throat, turn to mumbles on my lips.
In the morning I return to a time of language,
gather up words and carry them forward, one by one,
but gradually they slip my grip, sink into a riverbed,
or follow the rice and then dissolve, turn to vapor, and rise,
or rumble along a crumbling street like wheels
of a Grand Am with worn-out shocks,
slowly at first but gaining speed, receding,
vanishing in the distance.

FOUR

Depression Like A Locomotive

It's plowing on down the tracks
at 150 miles an hour --
I knew a poet/playwright/conductor, once;
nice guy, always late for class;
maybe he's in there, hellbent, disheveled,
full-throttled suicidal,
his frustrated art turned madness --
strange thing is, though, it's a steamer,
black-iron and heavy, antique or replica --
it could be an old one;
rails the same, tracks same width,
same as a car, same as a wagon,
same way back to Roman chariots,
but it, the steamer,
steams steady, steadfast, stable,
no vibrations threatening derail
like they ought to, usually do,
only smooth, slick, sleek, certain,
something gyroscopic,
conservation of angular momentum,
full-steaming-top-speeding ahead,
almost at the end of the line.

An Ode to Joe

He reads each line like cunnilingus,
grinning, mesmeric, as he tongues each word,
pivoting each 't' on the tip of his tongue
as soft syllables brush across his lips --
he has a kiss for every rhyme,
teases as he relents for each end-stop,

and the poem's soon spent and we applaud
with beatnik snaps for claps, and pass
that bottle of port wine around.
I take a swig and he's up next,
holds out his hand as I hold back --
his teeth recede,
his smile fades,
and at last, abashed, I relent,
and we read, we drink, 'til dawn.

Prosehoney, Farewell

You wrote me a poem called *Strictly Platonic*,
and you said that I said "let's be friends for now,"
but I didn't.

I still have it.

I keep it safe, folded neatly, tucked away
in a shoe box with old coins,
a dream catcher from a casino gift shop,
the name tag from my first job,
the ignition key to my first car,
its engine block now cracked, useless.

I keep in there a slice of pine
from Lumberman's Memorial Park, where,
for five bucks, you can cut a piece of a log
and take it home to remember.

I went with my grandpa when I was thirteen,
my strength growing daily, his slowly fading.
That afternoon we met in the middle,
each pulling one handle close, the saw pausing
like a body reaching its apex
mid-bounce above the bed,
each pushing away, the blade stopping,
as if to confess its love
before turning back, dragging its feet.

From time to time I take out your poem,
the paper still stark white,
smelling of pine,
and I trace well-worn creases with my fingers.
You said that maybe you could say something
that would make me fall in love with you --
but you can't.

There are no more words between us
but these last few -- so take this
and keep it folded, tucked in a drawer,
and some time long from now read it,
then tear it up, burn it, flush it away,
lose it like old guilt, old shame,
like a dream the morning after
when you stretch and then rise, bleary-eyed,
fumbling your way to the shower.

I Once Worried That I Was Gay

I remember being 7 or 8
and seeing on Dateline or 60 Minutes or whatever
a story about a man who turned out gay.
For 40 years he thought he was straight,
had gotten married, had a couple of kids,
and after all that discovered he was gay.

I was young enough to not really know why I liked girls,
but was old enough to know, for certain, that I did.

But did I?

After all, this guy thought he was straight too.
He was gay and didn't even know it.

But I was a kid,
and I didn't really think about it for too long.

By the time I was 13 I'd started having wet dreams,
usually about a teacher at my school
with good-sized breasts, widish hips, and a firm, athletic ass.
I was horny for women all hours of the day,
and I absolutely knew that I was straight.

But then I had a dream.
It wasn't wet, but in my dream I was naked,
and my friend was naked, and he laid down on top of me.
In my dream I had a boner,
and my friend had a boner, and our boners were touching,
and I woke up and realized I really did have a boner,
and then

I thought of that guy on 60 Minutes.

I panicked, and that evening
I did absolutely the worst thing I possibly could have done.

I told my parents.

They asked me what had been bothering me and so I told them.

They looked at me askance,
my dad suddenly uncomfortable, scrutinizing in his mind
where exactly my hands had been the last time we hugged.

My mom just looked down and sighed,
the prospect of ever having grandchildren suddenly gone.

I managed to talk them down,
and I assured them that I was pretty sure that I was straight.

But they were still suspicious, and things only got worse.

When my dad handed me a condom
after meeting Denise, my 10th grade girlfriend,
I exclaimed "Oh dear!"
And my mom suddenly stopped liking Denise
after watching an episode of Oprah
and discovering that there were such things in the world as beards.
And when two of my best friends,
friends I'd had since grade school, came out,
everyone thought I was next.

For a few years things were rough,
and for a while I was single,
and when they asked what was new
and I told them about the occasional date
they'd just nod and say "uh huh."

But then, last summer, my parents stopped by unannounced
early on a Saturday morning,
and while we were talking in the living room of my tiny apartment
my new girlfriend Candice finished her shower,
blushed as she greeted them with nothing but a towel on,
and darted to my bedroom to find her clothes.
Never mind we hadn't quite gone all the way yet.
My parents were smiling, they were beaming,
and they were so happy that my usually cheap-ass dad
took us all out for breakfast.

Sometimes, though, I still think about that guy on the news.
Now that I'm older I think he had to have known. How could he not?
It must have been awful to live in denial, and I hope
that wherever he is now he's happy.
But maybe he really didn't know.
Maybe that's better --
better if everyone who thinks they're straight
could look at him and wonder, could look at themselves,
and never really know for sure,
and just not treat people as being so damn different.

And I've got a ways to go until I'm 40.

For A Poet I Know

On Fridays we meet at the Beanery,
a café, real neo-hippy chic,
nestled in an old office building
from the thirties, six stories high,
home now to just a few businesses,
a microcosm of Downtown.

We spend those afternoons on old poems,
he with his new thin, slick laptop,
me with my grandpa's old briefcase
stuffed with scrappy composition tablets,
loose sheets of frayed paper – typewritten,
topped off with a few pens and cigars.

He says I'm quite the Spartan,
working each piece over weeks, months,
taming every undisciplined one,
sometimes adding, sometimes cutting,
improving, a little, each in turn,
rearing poems a platoon at a time.

The unworthy, he says, the unfit
that cannot work I brutally discard –
choice meats to feed my imagination-wolves,
or buried alive, forgotten in a file,
or lifted in my hands and then crumpled,
pitched headlong off a cliff into the trash.

Of course, then, he's the Athenian,
stroking his chin in the glow of the screen,
drafting every poem a dozen times,
sparing, democratizing them all,
improving each to its ideal form,
the gilded and the bronzed alike.

I thought him clement, at times soft,
wasting titles like 'Amaretto Sky'
on poems he should have thrown away,
brought instead to last month's slam,
which he won and I missed – our Marathon,
and I can't but think him a tiny god,
casting none aside but finding beauty
in his maimed and crippled children

that even the worst may be redeemed,
yawning, letting his latte grow cold,
typing until it hurts to make them whole.

To My Grandfather (1)

Fuck you for what you did to my father.
You don't really see him now,
the way his limp has grown worse,
the way walking wrong for 38 years
has destroyed his knee.
You don't drive him every two months
to get his leg brace fixed,
a brace that wears out so fast because he limps
in remembrance of seven months spent lying in a bed,
a brace that was never meant to take that kind of abuse.

Your son always hugged his son
with one arm firm, the other clumsy,
barely pressing against my shoulder.
He had to use his right side for everything,
and my dad grew strong enough to beat me
with one arm hanging almost dead at his side,
but even in the sudden swells of anger
common to people with a head injury
he'd sometimes punch a wall, but never me.

It was 1972 and your 13-year-old son
squared a pistol against his forehead and pulled the trigger.
I wish you would've been standing there,
looking into his teary eyes when he did it,
except the gun would've jammed,
would've exploded apart,
all your wrath blasted back at you to strike you dead.
Instead your son shot himself
way back when a wound like that was always fatal,
but by dumb, brutish luck
one of the best neurosurgeons in the country
lived in our humble, rusting city --
Dr. Wait,
 as in eleven months in the hospital,
 as in two limp limbs for an albatross so heavy
 you should be hunched and stooped over, hanging your head.

I only ever knew you as an old man,
dignified and warm, all silver hair and smiles,
only drinking a couple of high balls when company came over,
or a glass of beer when you'd take us out to dinner,
and for such a long time I could only fault you

for chiding me about crumbs on the countertop,
about wiping my feet at the door,
or for swearing, half out of habit, about your sister-in-law.

When I found out why my dad limps I said nothing.
Did you ever know that I knew?
When he told me I wouldn't have believed him
but for the tears he held back,
but for how he refused to tell me until I was 13,
until I told him I felt so sad I wanted to die.

From time to time he'd wreck
a car and you'd buy him another,
or grandma would slip him 20 bucks
when he was low on cash,
and when he told me I finally understood why.

Do I confront you now?
Now that Alzheimer's has bloomed in your brain?
You're mostly deaf,
and your joints are stiff and full of pain,
and your wife is dead,
and when I saw you just before Christmas
I watched you look down
and marvel at a card already in your hands
and you read it again as if for the first time,
looked at me and smiled.

My dad told me you came to see him
every day in he was in the hospital.
Once, you asked him why,
and he told you,
and you wept,
then looked at him with your teary eyes
and said you'd take his place if you could,
and I have to believe you were true.

I think of when you showed me where you grew up --
on a small side street in the middle of the city,
nothing there but an empty lot,
and no matter what happened in that house
it's gone, burned away before I was even born.
Even now that land is vacant,
but I have to believe it will sell,
the old foundation dug up and replaced,

crab-grass and weeds overtaken by lawn,
and I have to believe
that atop that lonely plot
a new house will rise,
better than the one before it.

Three Short Poems

1. "Yup"

My mom once called me a son of a bitch.

2. "Shit or get off the pot"

A friend once got munchies
and ate a whole pound of cheese.

3. "I'm a perfect match for a lesbian"

I'm fat, so,
I have tits,
I'm kinduva pussy,
and I like to eat.

My Grandfather's Hands

They're big – farmer's hands,
broad with thick fingers
too long to be stout.
They worked a grubby sewing needle
through most of the war,
darning socks for K-ration cigarettes,
stale smokes he'd trade for French soaps
and perfume to send home to his wife.

Winter always dried his knuckles,
staining them with ash,
and the creases would grow tender,
deepen and begin to bleed.
A gray day in December
in the farmland north of Strasbourg,
the whole sky a pale cloud,
the color of all things tired, subdued --
he strangled some young Nazi in the snow,
and that night he drank for the first time,
gulping bitter hooch with his men.

His hands came back gnarled and beaten,
rough to the touch,
flesh given way to thick sinew
stretched over swollen knuckles,
the fingertips of his right hand numb,
their nerves damaged in the cold,
his left hand marred
by a fat pink scar across its breadth.

He hardened them fixing cars
at Reinbold Automotive,
chipped his nails and cut his thumbs,
darkened them with grease and grit
ground into the leather of his skin.
They grew strong and calloused,
heavy and quick,
his knuckle hairs singed,
and he'd scrub them every night
in the basement sink with Lava soap,
scalding them clean but for a few black stains,
soot pushed into the folds of his skin
in little lines that ran up every finger.

Arthritis had taken hold
by the time he bought the garage,
the hair on the backs of his hands
already turning gray.
I remember him then, sitting at his desk,
his pen scratching fast whispers
across invoice slips, checks, memoranda,
before suddenly he paused,
his fingers speckled with ink,
and he thrust his left hand out,
a divining rod,
turning to me as he grinned:
“there'll be rain tonight.”

In summer he'd read the paper
and have a beer in the shade,
his fingers holding a spitty stogie,
his palm pressed against the sweaty glass.
A bright day in July
on the patio at my grandpa's house,
the whole sky marbled white and blue --
I held out a football and he took it,
looked it over, gripped its laces,
chomped his cigar and threw me the ball,
the quarterback hero of 1939
wincing as he held his wrist;
smiling, though, as he took a long, slow drag;
the pigskin rifling neatly through the air.

One spring, when I was fifteen,
he had an old birch in the backyard cut down,
the limbs chainsawed to short pieces.
He helped me stack the logs,
taking only the small ones --
slowly, with both hands,
dropping them into the wheelbarrow.
He kept firewood stacked behind the garage,
and by late October he'd begin to burn it
on cold winter nights,
filling the house with the scent of woodsmoke.
He followed me as I took the load to the pile,
and after moving a few logs I found a nest,
small in my hands.
In it were three forms, pink and fetal.
Their bulged eyes seemed to squint

as I moved them into the light.
My grandfather had been looking toward the house,
and when he turned to me he said nothing,
then he took the nest, small in his hands,
and carefully he folded it,
the twigs rustling and snapping,
his fingers firm,
squeezing so tight that they trembled
before he tossed it away into the bushes.

Night Cabby

My city is a woman and I love her
in the late, late summer light,
in an old cop car painted yellow,
my elbow resting in the window,
my sunburned forearm tingling in the wind.
She's slowed down a little, grown a few wrinkles,
but I've never seen her more beautiful.
When I roll north over her heart
she shudders electric,
her face lights up and I trace the edges,
brush east across the ghetto
where she keeps her sorrows,
double back and come to the river
and follow her water south.
From downtown to uptown and back
we spend the night, and it slips away
with the rising sun -- an old, old song,
but there's nothing to do but watch it anyway,
and so I sigh, have one last smoke,
take a long way back to the station,
and I hold her close,
and it feels like new.