

The Possibility of Actual Happiness

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Boredom and the Long Poem about the Writing Self
*'Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no*

Inner Resources.'

—John Berryman from *Dream Songs*

Not much troubles or depresses or disorients a poet's consciousness more than the prospect of boredom; boredom in general, and especially boredom with the one thing the poet is not supposed to be bored by: poetry. And since the feeling of boredom is (often) not a failure of poetry but a failure to engage or to be excited by poetry (at the moment one encounters a particular poem, at least), the act of being bored might be considered a reflection of the poet's lack of inner resources. This is a problem. If the poet becomes bored with poetry—her own poems, and/or the poetry of others—then the poet's understanding of herself is called into question in a sort of emotionally violent way: if the poet is not a poet, or doesn't feel like one, then who is she in the world of poetry? The poet's recognition of being bored with poetry shocks her into a kind of existential crisis, the "cure" for which is...what? Action? But what kind of action? Poetic? Poetic exercise? Actual exercise? Inter/intra-art-poetic exercises?

The kind of existential crises initiated by boredom that I have just described is a complex one with a rich history in poetry. It goes by various names, mostly French in origin—ennui, melancholy, malaise—but the emotional state has deep Anglo roots, too. Patricia Meyer Spacks lays out the cultural history of boredom in her book *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of*

Mind. In *Boredom*, Spacks traces the word's etymology from its introduction to the dictionary in the early Eighteenth-century and up to the postmodern era, using fiction and pop culture artifacts as her sources for analysis. Basically, the meaning of "boredom" begins in the Eighteenth-century, with a definition that "associate[s] boredom unambiguously with moral failure," which can only be remedied via "mental, moral, or spiritual discipline." In the Nineteenth-century, the word becomes linked with, "class arrogance...inadequate responsiveness to others, [and] sometimes with capitalistic false value," which can only be remedied by "self-discipline." She goes on to argue that the rise of Eighteenth-century individualism (brought about by "new forms of Protestantism, the increase in affectively motivated marriage, the intensifying stress on personal accomplishment and achievement, and the interest in individual psychology") culminated in a sort of collective existential crisis by the early 20th century (23). The era's general focus on the consequentiality of the individual self's personal experiences both greatly magnifies the ordinariness of those experiences and distorts the nature of personal achievement. Add to the mix an increasing division between work and leisure, the idea that you, "work hard and then play hard," and that if one is not "playing or working hard" one is not "living," then we're talking about mass feelings of inadequacy, for which boredom is the go-to descriptor. Spacks explains that Anglo-Modernist fiction writers saw boredom as the "basic condition of our time," and that their works, "convey no glimmer of hope." The bored are perceived as boring and they "lack the capacity to alter their condition" (268). Spacks then goes on to describe a few other characters who see writing as a "response to but not an alleviation of an inevitable state of being." The characters embody the phrase: "Those who can, do; those who can't, write" (269). In postmodern literary works, Spacks argues that boredom, is "no longer a locus for ethical interrogation, no longer does it mark individual corruption," rather, it, "declares itself as an

aesthetic or intellectual or emotional category" (252). Spacks's work reveals how useful boredom is as an interpretive category of literature, in that such a lens shows us prevailing cultural attitudes and perspectives about a person's *feeling* of daily—even minute to minute—life in a given time, but she limits her analysis to English fiction. I want to combine her estimation of boredom with other like-estimations from thinkers like Martin Heidegger and psychologists like Peter Toohey, and apply them to Jim Harrison's *Letters to Yesenin*¹ and James Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem*² in order to reveal what those writers / writings tell us about boredom and what the poet can do about it.

The poetic operations that these writers use over the course of their long poems might be similar enough to suggest a long form poetic structure for the chronically bored writer. Harrison's and Schuyler's poems both take the form of an epistle addressed to an artist (in Harrison's case: Yesenin, a Russian poet; in Schuyler's case: Darragh, a friend and painter), wherein the speaker acknowledges that he is, to whatever degree, in a bit of an existential crisis. Throughout this "correspondence," the poet often directly acknowledges his³ general state of malaise, and then he tries different ways to escape the feeling. Some of these ways include playing with subjectivities, deploying mini travel vignettes, indulging in the pleasures of rhetorical tonal shifts, and messing around with time. The speaker ends up coming out of the experience of writing the piece feeling somewhat resolved, having established a personal relationship to his art (rather than a necessarily formal one), and having a deeper understanding of what it means to ask the question, "Who am I?" This resolution comes as a result of completing the poem (or, if Valéry is to be believed, as a result of finding the strength to abandon the poem). In their tenuous-but-ultimately-feel-good

¹ Hereafter referred to as "*Letters*."

² Hereafter referred to as "*TMOTP*."

³ I'll use "him" as the gender neutral pronoun since the poets that I'll be talking about from here on out are men, though a case could be made that Bernadette Meyer's *Midwinter Day* also engages with the major elements of this structure.

resolutions, the boredoms that each poet "suffers" and "works through" ultimately supports Heidegger's notion of boredom as a "fundamental attunement"⁴, wherein the poets can "assume [their] Dasein⁵ once again" or, more accurately for these two poets, take control of the, "mystery of [their] Dasein" (172). Thus, these poets, over the course of their long poems are, "given back to [them]selves, so that [they] are *given over* to [themselves], given over to the task of becoming what [they] are" (77). That is, these poets want to be Poets, and the act of writing a poem about themselves—about writing themselves into *being*—produces a context in which they are allowed to give themselves over to the task of becoming what they are. In plainer terms, this particular long poem structure allows these poets to write in an autobiographical way without being confessional in too boo-hoo-hoo of a manner. Because they are writing to another (an Other), the poems become not just a way for the writers therapeutically to work through their existential troubles, but also a means of artfully communicating to a person who is close to them and to the reader. The kind of resolution that each poet reaches—not complete, a sort of "out of the fire for now" kind of feeling—chimes with Spacks's notion of postmodern boredom as an emotional or intellectual or aesthetic category that writers experience on those levels and that they approach and deal with in those ways.

Though much shorter than Schuyler's *TMOTP* and Harrison's *Letters*, Frank O'Hara's poem, "Mayakovsky" stands as a good example of the grand (if loose) structure of these poems. In "Mayakovsky," the speaker announces his existential crisis and implicates the titular poet as possible cause of and cure for it: "My heart's aflutter! / I am standing in the bathtub / crying. Mother, mother / who am I? If he will just come back once / and kiss me on the face / his coarse hairbrush / my temple, it's throbbing! // then I can put on my clothes I guess, and walk the

⁴ "Way of understanding the world," basically.

⁵ "Being"

streets" (201). Here, the poet-speaker locates as the source of his anxiety (represented by the fluttering heart) the "he," who has abandoned the poet in some way, and this feeling induces an existential crisis. In the following stanzas, the speaker attempts to solve his crisis with language, the medium of his art, but the art fails to solve the problem: "I love you. I love you, but I'm turning to my verses / and my heart is closing / like a fist. // Words! be / sick as I am sick, swoon, and I'll stare down / at my wounded beauty / which at best is only a talent / for poetry. // Cannot please, cannot charm or win / what a poet!" (201). The "verses" here might refer to the act of writing poetry and also to the poetry of others in general. Thus, the speaker suggests that a numbness to poetry—both his own and to the poems of others—fuels his crisis. The poem closes with the speaker having resolved this existential crisis—albeit in a very qualified manner—with the idea that the act of using Mayakovsky as a lens through which to view the world constitutes a sort of "visitation," which gives the speaker the strength to get through the days to come: "It may be the coldest day of / the year, what does he think of / that? I mean, what do I? And if I do, / perhaps I am myself again" (202). Especially important here is the line, "...what do I? And if I do." The line break emphasizes the importance of the act of *doing*, which explicitly refers to the act of thinking about someone else, but which implicitly refers to the act of writing a poem. Here, the speaker seems to recognize that the act of writing to a specific Other about the feeling of being unable to write or to be inspired by writing has produced a poem. The production of that poem metaphorically resurrects the addressee and confirms the poet's status as "poet," which solves the speaker's crisis re: poetry being dead and the speaker feeling dead, and so the problem resolves along with the poem. However, in the last line O'Hara troubles this resolution. Now that the poem is finished, based on the structural logic of the poem, the speaker returns to a state of non-writing, and thus to a state of existential uncertainty. The speaker seems to be aware of this

possibility, and so hedges and qualifies his resolution: he is "perhaps" himself again.

Harrison's and Schuyler's longer poems employ this general structure, but each also share particular gestures that seem to derive from the symptoms of chronic boredom and simple boredom as Peter Toohey lays them out in *Boredom: A Lively History*. Essentially, Toohey sees simple boredom (e.g. Your job is to turn big rocks into small rocks for 8 hours a day.) as a secondary emotion of its parent Disgust, and he sees chronic boredom (e.g. Woe is me!) as a feeling. He describes a feeling as, "...the capacity to recognize and to describe the presence within oneself of an emotion" (34). Simple boredom is not an emotion, Toohey explains, because "it has no need of self-reflexivity for its existence" (34). His assertion here means something like: you don't have to reflect on being bored to be bored any more than you have to reflect on being disgusted to be disgusted—you just are. Toohey goes on to describe chronic boredom as the most "self-reflective of conditions" (34). In this light, Harrison's and Schuyler's autobiographical long poems in and of themselves amount to evidence of a prolonged condition of self-reflection, which, in Toohey's estimation, would be evidence that the poets suffer from chronic boredom. That's no big surprise, as both poets admit as much in certain places throughout the poems (more on that later). Interestingly enough, the common poetic gestures in these poems match up with many of the symptoms for simple boredom, namely, Dromomania (a constant urge to travel all the time) and the sensation of dragging on. In effect, Harrison's and Schuyler's poems can be seen as formalizations of the symptoms of simple boredom that they use in order to address their chronic boredom. From a writer's perspective, formalizing the symptoms of boredom sounds inherently dangerous, as this technique risks instilling boredom within the reader. I want to argue that the opposite effect occurs: by formalizing their boredom, these writers make boredom interesting.

Though Schuyler always felt a little left out of the so-called New York School, and though the back of Copper Canyon's reissue of *Letters* reports that Harrison's poem was written, "In the early 1970s, [when] Harrison was living in poverty on a hard-scrabble farm, suffering from depression and suicidal urges," I don't mean to diagnose these poets as sufferers of boredom and existential woe any more than the speakers of these poems would diagnose themselves. Schuyler describes the nature of his existential crisis using a few coded images and a comparison to the primary "you" of the poem, and Harrison does basically the same thing. Both set-ups, though, transform images that would traditionally represent death or inactivity into images that represent productivity. Allow me to begin my analysis here, as these opening moves establish the project and problems that these poets face, which they will then try to solve throughout the course of the poem.

In the beginning of *TMOTP*, Schuyler claims that when he woke up to greet the day Baudelaire's skull popped into his head, and after a bit of ruminating he decides that the skull represents not an image of memento mori but an image of, "Force, fate, will, and, you being you:" or "strength and fierceness, the dedication / of the artist" (57). This stirring interpretation of the skull of the man who wrote *To the Reader* suggests that the prospect of death impels the speaker to exercise his will, to demonstrate his innate ability to press on and to *work*. Though the sentence goes on to describe the "you" doing something, Schuyler's line break puts an emphasis on "you being you" as a phrase, which reveals his general stance toward skull-inflected self-reflection: the condition presents an occasion for the speaker to look at his self and describe it as it is. (This is an especially exciting prospect for Schuyler, because in this poem and in other writings he constantly advocates poetry and art that describes things "as they are.") As he goes on, though, Schuyler introduces tension to his seemingly buoyant take on a depressing image:

Force, fate, will, and, you being you:
 a painter, you drink
 Your Ovaltine and climb to the city roof, 'to
 find a view,' and
 I being whoever I am get out of bed holding
 my cock and go to piss
 Then to the kitchen to make coffee and toast
 with jam and see out
 The window two blue jays...like me, too
 chubby, and Baudelaire's skull,
 That sees in the tattered morning the passing of
 The lost and indigent, the lost, the way
 the day when I arose
 Seemed lost and trash-picking for a meatless morsel,
 a stinking
 Bone...(58)

For Schuyler, the painter (the addressee of the epistle) represents the truly dedicated artist who wakes up in the morning and climbs to the top of a building and generally *does* things. Schuyler contrasts this Portrait of the Artist with a portrait of himself, someone who gets up to piss, who does not purport to know what or who he is, who stares out of a window and through the eyes of Baudelaire's skull sees himself not as a determined artist but as a pair of chubby blue jays, that, earlier in the poem, he saw "ripping something white" (57). Whether the "something white" is a flower (for Schuyler, flowers in poems are words) or paper, both images suggest that the speaker does not feel so confident as an artist, and is even prone to self-destruction or capable only of destroying and not creating art. Moreover, Schuyler's description of the day conflates the images of blue jays and lost people "trash-picking for a meatless morsel," which associates the speaker with the ideas of half-desperate lostness (I say half-desperate because the speaker is, after all, in relative safety, sitting in a window eating toast and jam (*his* meatless morsels)). Schuyler further reinforces the contrast between his view of himself and his view of the artist's a few pages later, when, after he forgets a word (Schuyler's equivalent to paint, and in this case the name of flower) he turns to the artist again:

you, Baudelaire's mask your sign,
Legs apart, addressed to your easel, squeezing
out the tubes of oils
Whose names you know: what is that green you
use so much of, that seems to
Devour itself? (60)

This image of the painter's body mirroring his easel (his *work*) connects the painter's painting with Schuyler's writing, the major difference being that the painter "knows" the tools of his trade, while the speaker, who forgets his words, seemingly does not. The speaker's interest in the, "green that seems to / Devour itself" is suggestive of the speaker's desire for his life to become his art, but the choice of the word "devoured" casts a menacing light on that project.

The nature of Harrison's existential troubles are quite similar, and he also begins his poem with a poet's head, only, in *Letters*, the head is a glossy photo of Yesenin, who, "doesn't stare at me / he stares at nothing" (3). This line, part of the poem's opener, already conflates the speaker with the idea of "nothing;" with the idea that once there was a "me," but now that "me" is a sort of void. Harrison goes on with the poem, describing distractions—which later he will describe as the spice of life— and other objects and people as "nothing," using nothing as a sort of shorthand that means arbitrary-and-meaningless: "In the vodka was nothing / and Isadora was nothing, the pistol waved / in New York was nothing, and that plank bridge / near your village home in Ryazan covered seven feet / of nothing" (3). Finally, he dooms the poem before it begins as just one more "nothing:" "So this is a song of Yesenin's noose that came / to nothing, but did a good job as we say back home / where there's nothing but snow" (3). Already we see the glimmer of the notion that the feeling of doing the *work* of the poem (or, as Harrison more romantically has it, the "song") is its own reward, not necessarily the poem or product it creates, whether that product is self-enlightenment or a bridge of communication to the reader or to poor

dead Yesenin. Harrison then turns here to reveal the hope in the nothing, the something that the poet can pull from the nothing and form into words:

But I stood under
your balcony in St. Petersburg, yes St. Petersburg!
a crazed tourist with so much nothing in my heart
it wanted to implode. And I walked down to the Neva
embankment with a fine sleet falling and there was
finally something, a great river vastly flowing, flat
as your eyes; something to marry to my nothing heart
other than the poems you hurled into nothing those
years before the articulate noose. (4)

Like Schuyler, Harrison sees his existential crisis as a potential wellspring of poetic activity. He has found a *semblable* in Yesenin, someone who was capable of hurling his poems into "the nothing" even under trying personal circumstances (substance abuse, tricky love affairs, guns). This connection with Yesenin is problematic, though, in that the thing that reinvigorates the speaker, the thing that saves him from the tedium of nothing (and the tedium of trying *not* to feel nothing via vodka, women, and acting crazy in public) is a conversation with Yesenin, who committed suicide, who is dead and can never "really" be resurrected. Indeed, the phrase "articulate noose" introduces the notion that these words and this conversation might end up strangling the speaker as the noose strangled Yesenin. That is, this poem might be a record of Harrison talking himself into suicide. This conflation of the noose (death) and language is an construction that Harrison returns to over and over (often at the ends of the sections), and a few times he just states the idea as if it were common knowledge, as he does rather bleakly here: "We know the price of / the poems, one body and soul net, one brain already tethered to the / dark, one ingenious leash never to hold a dog, two midwinter eyes / that lost their Technicolor" (55).

Both poets seem to be experiencing a similar kind of crisis, which they plan to interrogate by way of an epistolary long poem to a "you" figure, but which interrogation seems fraught

because a big part of their existential crisis is a deep struggle with boredom. Part of Schuyler's boredom stems from his living conditions. At the time of composition he's in-between apartments, living with his mother in East Aurora, Mass. So his boredom arises in the way boredom would arise if you had to spend a few months of your adult life living in your hometown with mom: this is the boredom of incarceration. If it's not already coded in Schuyler's images of staring out a window and feeling mopey, he plainly states the reality of his boredom in way that suggests that he's suffering from both simple and chronic boredom:

I subside into the quiet of my
Room, announced by the rapid ticking of my cheap alarm clock.
(The phone bill came: last month I spent
A hundred dollars on long-distance calls: I must be bored here...(113)

Schuyler's reflection on his emotional condition recalls Toohey's definition of chronic boredom, and his (i.e. Schuyler's) depiction of the "quiet" room with a "rapid ticking" of a "cheap alarm clock" suggests that the speaker suffers from simple boredom, too, in that the image is one that draws attention to the sensation of time passing. Harrison, too, seems to experience both kinds of boredom. If you can't tell from his long-ish, unexcited sentences and his "midwinter eyes," here's Harrison's summation of life early on in the poem: "how almost never is / there any fire and how often there is only boredom and a craving / for cigarettes, a sandwich, or a drink. Particularly a drink" (11). One senses his chronic boredom in his general estimation of life's excitement potential, and one senses his feeling simple boredom in his summary of his daily activities, which seem to be little more than a few tricks he uses to escape boredom. (I want to stress here that Harrison and Schuyler present two very different intensity levels on the boredom + existential crisis spectrum. Harrison's speaker's maybe-suicidal relationship with existential malaise and the arts seems much more psychically troubling as compared with Schuyler's relatively light-footed-but-sneakily-deeply-troubled version of the same phenomenon.)

What is particularly troublesome for Harrison and Schuyler is that their boredom is tied up with poetry. Harrison is much more direct than Schuyler about the relationship between his (i.e. Harrison's) existential crisis and his boredom, but both express a kind of dissatisfaction with poetry. Harrison's problem feels deeply personal and more closely related to his existential crisis: "All those poems that made me soar along a foot / from the ground are not so much forgotten as never / read in the first place. They rolled like moons / of light into a puddle and were drowned. Not even / the puddle can be located now" (5). In these lines, Harrison suggests that the poetry that used to wow him has left him, and not only has it left, but the place or its exact place of departure cannot be located, so he can not return to it now even if he wanted to. Moreover, his description of poetry's effect on him—that it made him "soar along a foot from the ground"—so eerily recalls a hanging man that it seems as if his relationship with the physical effects of poetry will henceforth be tinged with death and loss, or perhaps it always was, and the fact that he has no mental access to poetry now is suggestive of how deep and dark a hole he's in. Schuyler seems not to be bored with poetry per se, but rather disgusted with the "state" of poetry:

So many lousy poets
So few good ones
What's the problem?
No innate love of
Words, no sense of
How the thing said
Is in the words, how
The words are themselves
the thing said. (70)

Schuyler goes on to fix this problem by using words the way he'd like to see them used:

A word, that's the poem.
A blackish-red nasturtium.
Roses shed on
A kitchen floor, a
Cool and scented bed
To loll and roll on. (70)

Despite MLA regulations regarding block quoting, I reproduce the shape here for the purposes of formal comparison. These lines are much shorter and controlled than the rest of the poem's galloping, indented monostrophe that works so well with its general chatty tone. This move has the effect of turning down the volume of the poem to a kind of whisper, and thus establishing a more serious and intimate mood. Also, these lines are indented almost all the way over to the right margin, which literally sets them off from the rest of the poem. This formal adjustment suggests that Schuyler wants the reader to pay close attention to this section, and one gets the sense that the reader here is not the primary addressee (the painter, Darragh) but the more general reader of the poem. Trying to avoid allegations of hypocrisy, Schuyler seems to pay extra-special attention to language, here, making sure that the words and form enact the concern of the poem. The clacking of the short As in "blackish" and "Nasturtium," the echoes of the short e's in "shed," "scented," and "bed," and the sonic mirroring of "A word, that's the poem" and "A blackish-red nasturtium," call attention to themselves as sonic elements *qua* sonic elements; lovely for their own sake, like a particular flower. The repetition of the ls in "loll" and "roll" sound as lazy as the action of rolling around on a bed of roses, a bed of words. Like Harrison, Schuyler seems to be in a phase wherein he's dissatisfied with or feels like he does not have emotional access to most of the poetry that surrounds him, and so he has to write the stuff himself.

Besides employing the time-tested tools of poetry (the striking image, musical phrasing, etc.) these writers try to escape their boredom by formalizing the symptoms of that boredom, using them as major structural elements and minor propulsive elements in their long poems. According to Toohey, one the most apparent and obvious signs of boredom is the sensation of time dragging out. And, indeed, one of the main recurrent gestures in these poems is the

reassertion of the season and even the month of the supposed composition of the poem. For Schuyler it's always July, a fact which he's sure to mention about every 4 or 5 pages: "July 8 or July 9 the eighth surely, certainly / 1976 that I know;" "why is / each day dawning so alike? Overcast, / Or gray: choose one:" "(It isn't always July, you know);" "I watch the street and kids skim on skateboards: it's / summer, it's July, / Or else it's winter, December, January, February.../ These flaming Christmas plants bring to mind / Joel Poinsett: must read up on / Him: and in September (it isn't winter, it's / Summer, it's July)" (57, 64, 67, 71). Finally, Schuyler just comes right out and explains the way he feels about time's passage: "today / is a year, a morning, this / Morning was a year (60). To me, that penultimate line seems like a wink at the title, as if Schuyler is poking fun at the length of his poem and at the sense of boredom that he knows he's projecting by constantly announcing the month. Indeed, Schuyler's poem seems to have a lifetime's worth of Julys, and while that reminder serves to express Schuyler's feeling of time passing slowly, it also serves as an anchor for the reader. In the poem, Schuyler liberally uses associative jumps to connect words and ideas, he digresses constantly, he connects long disjunctive sentences with nothing more than an "and" or a colon, and he writes primarily in a discursive mode; all of which moves are suited to his epistolary form. Though this frenetic motion increases the velocity of the poem and is common for the genre, over the course of several pages the reader begins to feel bombarded: the poem seems suddenly unimportant and self-indulgent, as if she really was just reading someone else's journal. Most pressingly and confusingly, Schuyler's associative leaping also causes him to jump around *in time*. He is constantly telling stories about "that one time when," and about, "what we'll do if we ever go here," etc., which leaves the reader feeling a little unsettled. Once the reader is unsettled in this manner, one begins to get the feeling that one is not reading art, but some crazy-and-interesting

uncle's journal that fell out of his pocket. The restatement of the month, though, puts both writer and reader on common ground; a little bit like hitting a reset button that allows the reader to stop thinking about the relative importance of Joel Poinsett and to start thinking about where—or to what place in time—Schuyler plans to take her next.

Harrison uses a different time frame, but he works toward the similar poetic goal of expressing and combating boredom while also grounding the reader. As in *TMOTP*, Poem-time and the supposed composition time are synchronized, and the speaker feels time dragging on. The poem begins on a "cold autumn evening," and then after a while progresses into deep winter, which then gives way to a snake-intensive spring, which, of course, yields to early summer. Harrison's general disposition tends to match (perhaps too neatly) the seasons, and it's no surprise that a long poem about boredom, death, and a Russian poet who committed suicide spends much of its time in the winter. But for all the snow and ice, Harrison, like Schuyler, does a lot of travel, both geographically and through time. Harrison's poem, too, moves primarily via associative leaps, digressions, lists of grievances, and sometimes just pure rhetorical force (almost half of the sections turn on a phrase like, "But stop this whining" (9)). These moves have the reader season-jumping in potentially disorienting ways. So Harrison's seasonal markers not only connect his emotional state with the passage of time, but also ground the reader in a particular place. Having just visited Oregon, and then England, and after some talk of August, Harrison gives us this:

I have no explanations for myself but if someone
Told me that my sister wasn't with Jesus they would get an
Ass-kicking. There's a fascinating tumor called a melanoma
That apparently draws pigment from surrounding tissue until
It's black as coal. That fatal lump of coal tucked against the
Spine. And of all things on earth a bullet can hit human
Flesh is one of the least resistant. It's late autumn and this
Is an official autumnal mood...(13)

All of Harrison's associative jumping around is a little difficult to track—his sister's death connects to the cancer, which leads to the image of a small black mass, which leads to the image of a small bullet?—but his declaration of autumn binds the images together and emotionally colors them with the familiar gloomy light of late autumn. Harrison uses autumn here as a kind of shorthand for "the end is near," but his use of the word "official" seems like a knowing move, which recalls Schuyler's playful "(It isn't always July, you know)" in that Harrison senses that he's using the seasons in a clichéd way (or that they're effecting *him* in a clichéd way) and so tries to undermine that with a joke. Regardless, Harrison uses the seasons to organize and contain his wily imagery much in the same way that Schuyler uses time to reel the reader back in. Both of these moves, then serve as footholds for the reader.

Though time for these poets might seem interminable⁶, eventually, happily, it does budge, and both poets mark near the end of their poems this change-of-feeling toward time.

Harrison's mood brightens with the arrival of summer: "so odd / in a single green month to go from the closest to so far from death" (57). Schuyler comes to a similar conclusion regarding time. Finally, we leave July: "July is gone, / A hunk of August a few blank days got lost...Late in the afternoon and suddenly a cool / Breeze springs up and streams in the window: the leaves shudder: / how sweet, when something you really enjoy / Unexpectedly arrives, like the postcard I got this morning from / Ned Rorem, with flattering words about some of my / Poems" (115). In these lines, both poets marry time's speeding up with the sensation of potential happiness.

Schuyler is not just sending but *receiving* communiqués from the outside world. The breeze is picking up! Harrison's speaker's long winter ended with the arrival of a single green month!

These poets' emotional synchronicity with the external world buttress the happy-ish resolutions of these poems, even as they suggest another descent, perhaps around the same time next year.

⁶ Schuyler's eternal July; Harrison's long year.

I have mentioned each poet's proclivity toward logical and geographical "jumping around." According to Toohey, this constant urge to "jump around" is called "dromomania," and is actually another sign of boredom, and, for these poets, another mode of escape from that boredom. Indeed, another title for *The Morning of the Poem* could have been *A Poem In Which James Schuyler Tells A Series of Short Vignettes and Expresses a Strong Urge to Travel*. As it is the one of Schuyler's go-to moves in the poem, there are too many examples of Schuyler flat out saying that he wants to get out of town, but here's a representative case:

What's for dinner? Shrimp croquettes?
Barbara Guest sent me a card, "Architectural Perspective, Italian,
late 15th Century," that gave me a pang, that makes
Me long to take you to that loveliest land and we could visit
Vicenza, walk up the drive to the Villa
Rotunda...can I tempt you
With Cleveland and Boston and Baltimore? California, frankly,
is just too far. Suppertime shadows, my gastric
Juices are beginning to flow. Barbara writes, "I can see you working
& poking your head outdoors in the evening—or
Taking a late walk—" she may be right. She was right, I poked
my head out of doors after supper (beef in
Tomato sauce—ick). (106-107)

In this passage, Schuyler sets his enthusiasm for travel against the humdrum of everyday life—the pang vs. the ick; Vincenza vs. gastric juices. The dreamy tone he adopts when he speaks of travel reflects his emotional longing to travel, and he starts to luxuriate in the sounds of language, too, as the repetition of the *ls* suggest in, "long to take you to that loveliest land." Moreover, the paratactic structure of "Cleveland and Boston and Baltimore" adds urgency to Schuyler's desire. He wants to go far away, and now. His imaginary companion here is Darragh, and while these mental vacations to Italy (and NYC, France, Guatemala, etc.) psychologically save him from the physical conditions that limit his travel, they also allow the reader to get swept up with the poet in his reverie. This gesture runs the danger of annoyance, though, as when

someone shows you the photos of his trip to Paris, stopping every few seconds to go on about how *wonderful* the little sandwiches were at Café Such and Such, and how you *must go* the next time you're in France. But Schuyler carefully offsets the fried shrimp balls with the croque madames, and that tension textures Schuyler's dreams of travel, making them seem earnest and not boastful.

By the end of the *TMOTP*, Schuyler comes to terms with his dromomania, and in a very quick move resolves the poem: "Still, Nantucket has its / points, but I prefer to go north and further north: / Main, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia. Oh, what's to make such a fuss / about? I like all sorts of places. I can't / Believe it, I have to go piss again" (116) Not only does Schuyler scold himself for "making a fuss" of wanting to travel all the time—thus rejecting wishful-thinking as an empty enterprise—but the image of the event of having to take a piss returns us to the poem's beginning, when the speaker rises from bed to take a piss. This urge sets off a final vignette, which mentally takes Schuyler to Paris, but only briefly, before he signs off from East Aurora with a simple "goodbye" and the promise of a return to New York City, where he will reunite with Darragh. Schuyler's circumnavigation, the gentle self-rebuke, and the fact that the last word in the poem is "goodbye," suggests a final settling down, an end to his wandering (117). Though New York City and Paris are rife with the problems of alcohol (from which he would like to abstain) and with more successful doubles (Darragh), Schuyler seems to have chosen his New York lifestyle over East Aurora's. In NYC, he can be more himself, which, after writing this poem, he is now a little happier with.

Harrison, too, takes frequent trips around the globe in an attempt to escape boredom, and, like Schuyler, he ends up acknowledging his dromomania as such, self-consciously dismissing

travel as a sort of empty evasion. In *Letters*, Harrison seems to have two reasons for travel that relate to his boredom. The first reason is pretty typical: to find love and to have adventures:

I wanted to fall in love on the coast of Ecuador but the girls
Were itsy-bitsy and showers are not prominent in that area.
Unlike Killarney where I also didn't fall in love the girls
Had good teeth. As in the movies the Latin girls proved to be
Spitfires with an endemic shanker problem. I didn't fall in love
In Palm Beach or Paris. Or London. Or Leningrad. (7)

These are sad-but-funny postcards. Harrison's list of the all the places where he did not fall in love suggests that travel is no catalyst for love, no means of solving emotional issues. He has searched all over the world, and the women of this world have found him wanting. However, the speaker's lovelorn experience is the reader's delight. The (okay, slightly chauvinist heterosexual male) reader is allowed vicariously to live these moments out for the first time but not actually *feel* the pain of them, and so these incidences of rejection read like a humorous bar story and not like a sad dirge of lost opportunity. Phrases like "endemic shanker problem" and "showers are not prominent in that area" suggest that Harrison knows he's being funny, and so one can sense the speaker's spirit lightening. Later on in the poem, though, Harrison sees travel almost as a potential means of resurrecting Yesenin, and, in turn, Harrison's spirit:

These last few notes to you have been a bit somber...
So here are some of those off-the-wall extravagancies.
Dawn in Ecuador with mariachi music, dawn at Ngorongoro with elephants
Far below in the crater swaggering through the marsh grass, dawn in
Moscow and snowing with gold minarets shouting that you have at last
Reached Asia, dawn in Addis Ababa with a Muslim waver in the cool
Air smelling of ginger and a lion roaring on the lawn, dawn in
Bleary Paris with a roll tasting like zinc and a girl in a cellophane
Blouse staring at you with four miraculous eyes, dawn in Normandy...(43)

In these lines from the late-middle of the poem, Harrison uses very particular images that seem derived straight from his travelogue. They seem to operate as evidence that he has not always felt so dull, and that he does not *want* to feel dull now. The anaphora of "dawn" and the

accompanying images work almost like defibrillator paddles, as if Harrison were trying to restart Yesenin's (and, by proxy, his own) heart with the constant assertion of the day's "starting up." In contrast to the lovelorn travel diary, this list seems a little more desperate, the tone a little closer to that of an old man telling you stories as he polishes his medals. Not travel, but a renewed interest in his current geographical position (thanks, in his case, due to the beginning of summer in Montana) reinvigorates his happiness:

But now there is rain
On the tin roof, the world outside is green and leafy with bluebirds
This morning dive-bombing drowning worms from a telephone wire,
The baby laughing as the dog eats the thirty-third snake of the
Summer. And the bodies on the streets and beaches. Girl bottoms!
Holy. Tummies in the sun! Very probably holy. (57)

In actual sunlight, Harrison falls back in love with his backyard, his town, ordinary life, and also seems to be comfortable with the casual violence of the brutal but natural cycles of life and death (worm, meet bird) that come along with feelings of hope and happiness. These lines suggest that he does not need to travel in order to escape boredom, rather, he needs to see his own backyard (a sort of metaphor for his own life) in a new light.

Harrison's and Schuyler's flirtation with and eventual dismissal of dromomania is a pretty useful device. This move, along with the treatment of time, allows each poet temporarily to escape his boredom, and to entertain the reader with the finery and bright imagery of travel. And as major structural organizers, the resolutions of these moves contribute to the swell of resolving issues that closes these poems. However, the primary structural element, and the one most crucial to the resolutions of both poems, is the epistle. As I mentioned earlier, both *TMOTP* and *Letters* are constructed using a slightly altered epistolary structure. The general set-up for the classic epistle is that the poet takes on a persona and then writes a didactic letter or series of letters to a clearly defined "you." Both Harrison and Schuyler adopt the pretty typical speaker-as-

author model, but they make fuzzy the "you." Harrison conflates the speaker's self with Yesenin's, which allows him (i.e. Harrison) to explore suicide as a way quite literally to end his existential crisis, and through this rather safer exploration ultimately escape the urge. Schuyler makes the you "fuzzy" by not always referring to the same "you." The poem is addressed to several "yous" at different times, which allows him to extend the intimacy of the epistolary form not just to Darragh but also to the reader, and his other friends. This extension of the you to people other than the primary addressee gives Schuyler the ability to speak to as many people as he wants to, permitting him to draw on as many friends as possible to help him escape his boredom. Each poet's particular alteration of the epistle allows him to see his life through the lives of others, which gives each poet the perspective he needs to see himself as a mysterious and interesting being, and not necessarily a dull dolt. And if a dull dolt, a fine dull dolt.

The twelfth section of Harrison's poem serves as a microcosm of the poem's concern and a good example of the conflation-of-the-speaker-and-the-addressee move. To give you the full effect of the arc of this "you" move, I will trace it throughout the book. In the twelfth section, Harrison tells the story of his boyhood before ultimately finishing it in a way that conflates the life of the boy with the life of Yesenin. The poem begins with a few self-deprecating lines that quickly slip into the language of existential crisis:

I was proud at four that my father called me Little Turd of Misery.
A special name somehow connected to all the cows and horses in
the perpetual mire of the barnyard. It has a resonance to it un-
known to president senator poet septic-tank cleaner critic butcher
hack or baker liberal or snot, rightist and faker and faggot and
cunt hound. (23)

At first, one suspects a kind of Level 1 irony and not much more from this first line: who could be proud of being called "Little Turd of Misery?" However, Harrison deepens the irony in the next line by (half-heartedly) romanticizing his unromantic nickname before turning to a starkly

unromantic list of identities that drop us into the reality of the speaker's emotional state. Being called "Little Turd of Misery" offers the speaker at least a single identity and thus a simple role, one that is meaningfully connected to other things and animals and systems surrounding him—to life, basically, even if that life is a "perpetual mire." This Romanticized self stands in contrast to the speaker's suggested list of the identities that are currently available to him and that he embodies at various stages over the course of the long poem (esp. as hack, poet, faker, and cunt hound). Harrison does not separate these identities with commas, which suggests that they are unstable and that they might bleed into one another, unlike the stout and stable Little Turd of Misery. Furthermore, this list of characters seems sadder and more corrupted compared to the adorable LToM. So what begins as a joke in the first line ends up being an earnest Romantic reflection by the third. This tone and focus on identities sets up the conflation of the speaker and Yesenin that ends the poem:

But the wary boy catches fish
there, steals a chicken for his dog's monthly birthday, learns
to smoke, sees his first dirty picture and sings his first dirty
song, goes away, becomes deaf with song, becomes blinded by love,
gets letters from home but never returns. And his nights become
less black
and holy, less moon-blown and sweet. His brain burns away like
gray paraffin. He's tired. His parents are dead or he is dead
to his parents. He smells the smell of a horse. The room is
cold. He dims the light and builds a noose. It works too well. (23-24)

Somewhere along the quickly-narrated course our boy's life, his identity becomes unstable. Judging from the biographies of both writers, the exact moment when the conflation occurs is unclear, but Harrison's and Yesenin's lives seem to overlap right after "goes away." Here the boy becomes simultaneously a figure for Harrison's possible future (or, within the drama of the poem, the speaker's immediate present) and for Yesenin's past. The images of the horse and the noose embody this simultaneity; the horse recalls LToM's of barnyard, while the noose is

Yesenin's. As the long poem continues, Harrison gets even closer to death and thus to Yesenin. Elsewhere in the poem, he experimentally wonders about what it would be like to hang himself: "I worry some that the rope didn't break your neck, but that / you dangled there strangling from your body's weight. Such / physics can mean a rather important matter of three of four / minutes. Then I would guess there was a moment of black peacefulness / then you were hurtling in space like a mortar." (13) Harrison indulges his death fantasy here, seeing the moment before death as peaceful, and then conceiving of the moment after death like the path of a mortar—firework or bomb—which sounds a little like he's excited about the prospect of death. But then later on in the poem Harrison calls himself out for fantasizing in such morbid ways, suggesting that as poets,

...we would prefer to have a star fall on us (that meteor got me in the gizzard!), or lightening strike us and not while we're playing golf but perhaps in a wheat field while we're making love in a thunderstorm, or a tornado take us away outside of Mingo Kansas, like Judy Garland unfortunately. Or a rainbow suffocate us. Or skewered dueling the mighty forces of anti-art. Maybe in sleep as a Gray Eminence. A painless sleep of course. Or saving a girl from drowning who turns out to be a mermaid. (14)

With this last line, Harrison details what to him is the most tragic of deaths, a Romeo-and-Juliet-type death based on misperception. To die while rescuing from drowning an entity who can presumably breath underwater is to hold fantasy too closely, to fuse the art-as-life/life-as-art dichotomy in a disastrous way. Also, his ironic tone and the self-conscious, hyperbolic one-upsmanship of possible deaths register as a self-criticism. In this section's final stroke, Harrison recognizes that Yesenin's suicide can't "mean" something in the way that a symbol or image in a poem could "mean," and thus that the powerful connection Harrison feels between life and art is severed the moment the life ends, the moment the life stops writing.

These jokes don't last long, though, and in 13 Harrison again blurs the line between the speaker and Yesenin: "Just one pull on the bottle starts the morning faster. If you / don't rouse

your soul you will surely die while others are having / lunch. Noon...The food got better anyhow and the / bottles. This is all called romantic by some without nostrils / tintured by cocaine...No time to marry back in Ryazan, / buy a goat, three dogs, and fish for perch" (25-26). The images here—dogs, vodka, "bottles," lunch, drinking in the morning, and especially cocaine—have all been used up until this point to describe the *speaker's* setting, though Harrison seems to be speaking through the lens of Yesenin's imagined last days. Harrison's use of the generalized "you," here, ropes the speaker and Yesenin together. Right in the middle of the poem, having exorcized his demons a little, having flirted with the subject of death, Harrison changes course completely with no more than a "but:"

But I've no right to bring you back to life. We must
respect your affection for the rope. You knew the exact juncture
in your life when the act of dangling could be made a dance. (32)

These lines constitute a sort of big, Heideggerian breakthrough for the speaker. Harrison claims that the major difference between Yesenin and himself as he sees it is that Yesenin *knew* when his death would actually be perceived as a work of lasting art (Yesenin did, allegedly, write his last poem in blood). The speaker *does not* know, does not have the sensation of knowing this, and this not-knowing is what saves him. In this moment, the speaker might be said to regain the mystery of his "Dasein." And just a little later, Harrison convinces himself that writing this poem is what allows him to entertain the mysteries of life: "These letters might have kept me / alive—something to do you know as opposed to the nothing you chose" (35). If writing a song to Yesenin is, "nothing," then with these two lines, Harrison suggests that he's picked the better "nothing," having become comfortable with the idea that, "we like our poems are flowers for the void" (59). The next few pages involve the speaker generally accepting the idea that all life has to offer is women and daughters and marriage and dogs that lay their heads on our chests and the

occasional half gallon of burgundy, and all the while Yesenin's and Harrison's identities become more distinct until finally Harrison decides to see suicide as a decisively undesirable option:

You didn't die with the
dignity of an animal. Today you make me want to tie myself to
a tree, stake my feet to the earth herself so I can't get away. It didn't
come as a burning bush or pillar of light but I've decided to stay. (61)

These lines humorously, baldly, and definitively declare that Harrison has resolved his existential crisis. A big part of this resolution is the fact that he recasts the image of the rope as a thing that ties one to earth and not a thing that flings one off of it, thus subverting its association with death and releasing the tension that Harrison, like Yesenin, might have written this last poem with his own blood. With this gesture, Harrison ends his flirtation with possessing another, and so returns fully and refreshed to himself.

Schuyler also conflates his self with the self of the "you" along the bumpy road of his existential crisis and his escape from boredom, but, unlike Harrison, Schuyler does his possessing without fear that it will end in suicide. As I mentioned earlier, Schuyler sets up *TMOTP* with a comparison between two people: the writer, who doesn't know "who he is" and the addressee, Darragh, a figure of certainty and artistic action. Throughout the poem, typically after recounting a long-ish vignette, Schuyler will directly address Darragh, wonder about what he's doing, and then stay in his world for a while:

...though I have never wanted to. Brush in hand,
You've slipped out of my poem: I have such confidence in your
future, in what you'll create, with paint and
Canvas, Conté crayon and heavy paper, views, faces, a pier glass
in a long room, a fence hung with roses out a
Garden window: is the stereo playing, and if so, what? *The Ring*
Scriabin, moth-wing strokes of Sviatoslav Richter's
Steady fingers? Here, I have no phonograph: television. My mother
watches (i.e. dozes off) while I sit and read. (101-102)

Here, by imagining what Darragh is doing, Schuyler collaborates with the painter, briefly inhabiting the determined artist's mind, painting with words what Darragh would paint with...well...paint. However, in a move that recalls Schuyler's earlier bodily interruption at the beginning of the poem (Darragh gets up and paints; Schuyler gets up to pee), the external world with its television that is so boring it puts his mother to sleep breaks in and disrupts his fantasy mind-meld with Darragh, which forces the poet to return to his own world. The reader, too, feels the effects of this mind-meld technique as a means of drawing her attention back to the poem, especially in this passage. Before this passage, Schuyler is talking about something completely different—his personal feelings about Jesuits—and then he slips the direct address right in. The "you," as in "Darragh," hasn't been addressed in a while, and so initially the "you" could read as the "you" that means "You, the reader." Schuyler's acknowledgement that the reader might have "slipped out of [his] poem," seems like a slightly cordial and apologetic move: he feels like he's been veering around too much, missing the point and purpose of his writing the poem, and so he needs to reel himself and the reader back in. The introduction of the "you," makes the reader feel suddenly implicated in the poem, and the stress-intensive list slows down the syntax, nearly forcing the reader to pay more attention, to "see" the fence hung with roses out a garden window, etc.. And then, after he's got us back, he can run off again. Aside from adding a kind of jumpy dynamism to the poem, Schuyler's use of the "you" here and throughout allows him to control the level of intimacy in this inherently intimate form. Psychologically, Schuyler uses the "you" to escape his hyper-frazzled mind and to become, for a moment, the quiet and determined artist that he strives to but cannot really be.

Since Schuyler's boredom has its roots in a form of incarceration, his crisis, his struggle with boredom, and his poem, seems to end when he gets to leave East Aurora for New York,

where he will be reunited with Darragh and will therefore no longer require the psychological services of the long poem (he won't need those again he writes the book *A Few Days*, a long elegy for his mother). The poem ends briskly, as if a taxi was waiting outside: "Tomorrow: New York: in blue, in green, in white, East Aurora / goodbye" (117). But Schuyler's sudden "release" only ends *this* particular crisis, and though his "goodbye" seems final, there's no telling how many East-Aurora-like situations await him.

From a cultural perspective, I find *Letters* and *TMOTP* interesting works because both seem to reflect the postmodern era's version of boredom as Spacks sees it. Both Harrison and Schuyler ultimately approach and defeat boredom in an emotional, intellectual, and especially an aesthetic way, rather than in a spiritual way, or through some rigorous regimen of self-discipline. Though each poet represents a different intensity of feeling with regard to boredom and existential crisis, both independently developed very similar and I would say interesting and good poetic models for dealing with those problems, and for injecting the "mystery of being" back into the writing self. These models are welcome gifts to those poets who have been in, are in, or soon will be going through a similar situation (me).

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STILL-LIFE IN A FIELD

The pod cracked. It was time.
But the seeds clung
to the ribs of the thing
while the spine
held the halves in place.

And it stayed like that!
All winter long.

ALL TALK

1.

"You are my hope for rocks," says the one rock to the other.
"My island up there in the sun."

"And you are mine, glittering in the cold gut of the ocean,"
says the other to the one.

2.

"Do you know the physicists

say we never quite touch, and never quite will?
And so the water could never quite sate me,

nor could the sun ever quite dry you.
Not, at least, atomically," says the one.

"Then where's pleasure poised, if it exists—which it must—
in a world without touch?" asks the other.

"Not in me." says the one.

"Not in me." says the other.

"Between us then," they agree.

3.

And then the democratic rain poured down,
which was another kind of solution.

PORTRAIT IN THE MIRROR BEHIND THE BAR

Anyone who loves Tim loves him for the same reason.
He hit one home run. "Did you ever hit one?"
He'll ask, as the day begins to wash over his face
and he leans back to stare at the baseball soaring just past
the carved mermaid someone's hung from the bar's ceiling.
He'll say something cracked. He'll say it was the ball and his bat.
And then he'll laugh until he coughs. He'll say it cracked—
whatever it was—in him, once. He just happened to be playing
a ballgame at the time. He thought he felt it about to crack again
when he took an ugly wife like Jimmy Soul told him to,
but then ugliness took her right back. Seven long winters ago—

it's here where anyone who does not love Tim stops listening
and stops looking at the mermaid's wooden breasts
and nods at the barkeep for the check, and smiles through
Tim's apologies for going on so long the other night about his early onset arthritis
and his minor stroke, and his father's minor stroke,

and runs out onto the street made quiet with snow
where someone's wrapped Christmas lights around the trees.

PORTRAIT OF A SCENE

Extraction hooks, nets,
the long-handled ice pick,
the aluminum canoe.

The men in the boat row,

Jab the pick into the lake,
row, repeat. Collage of
mouthed *Dear Lords*.

It will not be theatre

When they lug him up,
check his pulse, blow two breaths,
pump his chest once, twice...
but for whom?

The men in the boat row,
jab the pick into the lake,
row, repeat. The pick
snags a parka (his).

The net snares a body (him).
The crowd, like a single ripple-pulse,
closes in. Who is it?
A pulped smile. We liked the kid.

Called him the Brazilian Kid.
(Wasn't Brazilian.) Charming. Played soccer.
Kissed girls twice his size.
Never seen snow. Now doesn't see

the sky reflected in his skate blade,
the men lifting, tugging, working
their hearts into sickles.

CAT MISSING

All black. Yellow eyes like viper. Likes people.
Tripped over him two weeks ago.
Now am suddenly struck with colitis, plus Dad's in hospital.
\$500 REWARD if captured alive.

WARNING: Man on floor. Will be stalking alleyways
With onion bag, can of albacore, crossbow.
May ransack forget-me-nots, azaleas.
Will replace anything broken.

If errant bolts found in sill or bush,
PLEASE RETURN TO: Bob Smith
C/O Rich Smith, Swedish Medical Center
Seattle, WA 98122.

OPEN INVITATION to public execution,
If found. Plan is to strap cat to haystack in common space.
PLEASE BRING own pitchfork, flashlight,
X-ray of brain tumor, mangled Labrador,

Last 15 years of life, whatever else
For subsequent bonfire. Weather permitting.

UPDATE

Still shopping bags fly from hands of bystanders
Ricocheted machine gun fire has ripped through,
Still videos of bloody Madonnas and Child by roadside,
Still Dad breathes via tube.
I tell him: try not be embarrassed; we all do.

APPOLOGIES DUE TO OWNER OF COLLARLESS CALICO:
Was mostly black at first glance.
Little sad at time. Not thinking.
Buried in flowers in common space.
Tombstone in cardboard and ink reads:
TRAGICALLY MISTAKEN
FOR BLACK HALF OF LUCK.

In short: CAT STILL ON LAM. Ha ha.
\$1000 REWARD FOR SUSTAINED JOYFUL LAUGH.
For instance: saw woman eating noodles with fork
While driving. Ha ha. She is own black cat.

More like that.

WANTED: LIGHTER DEATH IMPLEMENT:

Crossbow has become burden, bolt costs prohibitive.

Have tried horseshoe and poison tuna trap.

No luck yet.

CAT FOUND

PAWING CARAPACE ON SIDEWALK IN COLD LIGHT OF DAY.

Presumed locust, possible cricket. Confirmed evil.

Nearly escaped capture despite necklace of rabbit foot and clover.

Good suggestions all.

Bonfire on for tomorrow. Common Space. 7:00PM—??

REMINDER: Potluck: BYO SADNESS

Dad will be there in spirit.

MISSING CAT

Event poorly attended.

Rain turned to snow turned to salt.

Struck by lightning trying to shovel over left shoulder.

In chaos cat slipped straps.

Did not give chase.

Worse luck to follow.

CONDITIONS

Can't think straight with flu,
much less with maybe leukoplakia,
which means you have a hairy-white-tongue
like an almost-dead person.

Can be symptomatic of cancer or HIV.

Translates to: reduce
alcohol and tobacco and sex
to zero. Impossible.

I go homeopathic:
honey and whiskey, drinking
a lot of water,
all kinds of roughage,
not thinking about it,
Motown, oversleeping,
Echinacea goldenseal,
brushing tongue, tea,
lying very still.

I try everything too much
until I remember mother,
who infects me with all the diseases
she thought she had.

I call Dr. Wagner.

Spend month looking too closely
at my tongue in the mirror.

Where's the clinic? There's the clinic.

Waiting for Dr. Wagner,
filling this out, please,
checking boxes for family history of:
heart disease, anxiety, diabetes,
preemptively checking boxes for:
cirrhosis, lung cancer,
surrounded by: periodicals,
little bald girls, oblivious
toddlers, demonic
sneezing, an old man
peeling, quiet parents,
Richard Smith?

185 lbs. 6' 1" (and ½)

No drug allergies.

Waiting for Dr. Wagner.

Knock, knock. Paralysis.

Hello, Richard.

Hello Dr. Wagner.

Dr. Wagner peering:

"Could be Geographic Tongue."

What?

"No biggie, anything else?"

Geographic Tongue?

"Yes, some people have it."

I think that's all.

Co-pay. Pocket Saf-T sucker.

Light up right after
revolving doors.

A BREAK

"I know the beauty of that course," says the waitress of the smoke break I excused myself to take between Pommes Frites and Rabbit Confit.

On a boring but not bad date, did she once excuse herself to—she loves to say it—run off to the little girl's room, but instead slink out the side door with the dishwasher and his dripping bags of garbage?

Did she duck under an awning and spark a square without fear of lung-rot and reprimand?

From her vantage could she see—in the reflection of a car window reflecting the restaurant's window—between the backwards *le* and the *petit*—him! stiff, arranging and rearranging his knife and fork, taking small sips of ice water?

Did she French inhale, stink-eye the dishwasher, and think, "Pity I'm too busy for espionage. I'd make a fine spy."

Did she think she'd catch the 10:37 to the airport and haul off to Lyon, where she would fold in with Special Forces and spend four months on the fish mob beat stuffed in an air duct with sneezy Jean-Claude before the night they dropped through the ceiling tiles?

Smoke, scuffle, furniture. Jean-Claude, winking at his comrades: "Behold this American scum, trapped like a fish in some dust."

Our lady spits, "Traitor, coward, Jean-Claude. No loss—you fucked like a broken toy."

But how did she escape the mobster's slapdash gulag with nothing but a rabbit pelt hat and a can of beets?

And after her thousand-mile trek through the pines, after all that snow, after her third team of tundra wolves froze mid-slog, did she collapse trying to ford the waters of a petrified torrent?

Did her entire family, one by one, come to her in the face of the moon and say, "Your sister is graduating from High School this May, and she really wants you to be there."

Did she think, "How can I even live through next week, what with Jennifer gone on vacation, and John, that jerk, covering her shifts," as she allowed the swishing clank-bam throng of taxis and breath to sound around her?

Did she find the city unsettling when surrounded by it?

Did she flick her butt into the can and with her foot catch the door the dishwasher swung open, thinking, "Really, a pity."

Did she slip back into her seat, place her napkin on her lap just so, and when he said, "How'd it go in there?" did she think, "Check, please," but say, "Rabbit Confit, and step on it!"

Did he not laugh?

Did she wake up in a helicopter bound for the States?

Looking down at the patches of deciduous trees, did she think, "It really is a beautiful country. I'll fight, in my way, for it."

In the reflection of a car window reflecting the restaurant's window I can see her topping off my date's ice water.

Her face lets nothing on.

THE VIEWER

I just looked for a ring
on the ring finger
of a drowning woman
in a black and white
fine art photograph.

Her eyes were closed.
A few bubbles had collected
at the corners of her mouth,
which was rouged,
I could tell,

from the crinkles
in her lips.
Has she drowned?
Or will she never
because the photo

has captured her
the moment before
the water could interrupt
her absorption
of oxygen

from the air,
which would actually be
a kind of suffocation.
Of course
she was married.

FORCING IT

Her beauty was an imitation of Venus de Milo casually ordering a cheeseburger and then asking what I wanted, and my love for her was an imitation of Rilke, so of course I had whatever she was having and we became one through the burgers.

It was quiet there in the booth. We separately imagined taking a roll in the hay, but then collectively we imagined the needles and the horse teeth sneaking in on our peripheries. My phantom phantom limb tried to draw

a curtain around the whole scene, but by then the meal was over. There was nothing left to do with the afternoon so we did nothing and told each other we liked it. Bought gum. Found some place to pee. Forgot to go to the bank. At times no doubt we separately

remembered the Booth Era of Our Courtship. How we sat and loved. How we loved and thought of sitting. And was it raining? It was. And since it was we kissed and then more or less separated.

MY LOVE

I would wait on line for a can of biscuits
if you were a can of biscuits. I would steal you
from a grocery store. If you sentenced me
to 6 months in a minimum security prison,
I would rise and embrace the bailiff
as long as you gave me a wink when you brought down the gavel.

But the thought of introducing you to a small group of friends...
of me kissing you while thinking *I am so tired of kissing you*
of waiting for even one of your 27 angles to devastate again
of not having the whole bed to stretch out on
of you saying "space" instead of room
of listening to you poorly summarizing an article from the *Times*
of the food you can't eat
of your pathetic brownies
of your ratty pajamas
of your nonstop photography
of your stupid faces in photos
of your return to bangs
your stupid face in these photos
your return to bangs
the food you couldn't eat
that sad article from the *Times*
I just want to enjoy this bagel in silence
but all your angles
your sick body loafing
your adorable pajamas
the entire bed:

Lover, I would love you with my whole Walt Whitman,
and I would roar that love from the moontop,
as long as there were no follow-up questions.

THE CHANGELING MEETS HIS MATCH

As a tenant, I stared into the windows of other tenants as they lunged in sweatshirts.

As a sweatshirt, I wicked away sweat for a decade before I was tossed on a sudden bat and defenestrated. As a sudden bat, I awoke in a damp cave alone, and then a wind whipped through and revealed the batty winghands of my brethren. As a wind whipping through, I preferred the alleyways of Philadelphia, preferred to help a candy wrapper tumbleweed along. As an alleyway, I was no good as an alleyway. My nooks were exposed so that any kissing or shooting up had to be done in full view of a tenement lunger. As a full view, I failed to compensate for the trudging of the trail-weary eagle scouts. As an eagle scout, I was a night owl.

As a night, I felt much like a day, but darker. As a sun, I rained. As a raindrop, I took an erratic drip path down a windshield that framed two lovers shivering and waiting for the car to warm up. As two lovers, like two lovers, I bounced endlessly back and forth between my selves, unable to become anything else.

THE POET LOOKS UP AT THE CROWD FROM HIS LINE

for Summer Robinson

A priest walks into a book of poems, looks at the poet, says,
"Whatever your confusion regarding the Lord,
I have observed in your verse a clear penchant
for sympathy and the selfless act, which is a quality
you share with our archest of bishops and saintliest saints.
Why not don the Cloth, and use our arms
to extend your sympathy's reach?"

Then a scientist walks into a book of poems, looks at the poet, says,
"I find myself delighted by these poems. They're full
of complex theories! Great descriptions of flowers.
I even came across a pretty solid explanation for *déjà vu*,
which, since you can't, I plan to prove.
Like us, it seems you aim to uncover systems of Beauty and Truth.
Why not join the sciences, and put your creative faculties to real use?"

Then an undergrad walks in, looks at the poet, says,
"I'm on track to become a mechanical engineer,
but my girlfriend just cracked my heart open with a shovel she calls Randy,
and last night I heard that the unobserved universe does not exist, and the sentence,
"They plan to scrap a derelict barge christened the Davy Crockett,"
makes me feel giddy on the inside of my body.
I'd like to write poetry, but I worry a life of close inspection
may lead only to a steady series of minor disappointments
which will amount to one major disappointment,
which for the moment I'll call Randy.
If there really is a community of you people, should I join?"

The poet looks up at the crowd from his line:
"and loneliness shook off to the tempo of songs sung low,"
and thinks, *sung low sung low sung low what next* and says,

Don't ask me,
I just work here.

BROODING

Because no one answers the original question to anyone else's satisfaction,
but a rooster gets in the henhouse anyway.

Because my egg tumbled down an already heaping mound of eggs.

Because the hatching is tumultuous when the egg tooth is dull,
and the egg tooth is always dull.

Because I couldn't see anything but yellow for weeks, and then all of life
became a pecking-fight for mere fragments of yellow—

and to support my bulky chassis I am given toothpicks?
Lizard feet? Inadequate pants? A squawk?
And then there are falcons, wolves, weasels,
every stump's stuck with an axe,
every mouth's a foe—

but then, there it was!
The road. I crossed it.

Why is anybody laughing?

With all the major moral quandaries now resolved with a shrug and a, "Well, that depends..." and action restored to its original place before the subject—"desires he you" being the more honest formulation—he felt he had plenty of time to watch the sun dip out each evening like a beautiful woman he hadn't noticed at a party until the moment she slipped on her overcoat and spun on her heel, and to remark on such an injustice and to cry about it. Pet pastimes basically included reposing old questions so that they could become pink and orange and gold again. Would he rather risk seeing her once and then never again except in the shoulders of strangers, or would he rather conjure a wispy incubus from a compilation of passersby? What was the real difference? How long could he care? Did he want an extra squirt of grumpy sauce in his latte? More to the point, would he rather battle 100 duck-sized horses or 1 horse-sized duck? The right answers were pretty much all on the table, where his goals nestled, too, like holographic fruit in a fruit bowl.

But then there was the question of will. Of course he is going to begin the project of becoming relevant, loved, and plump with grape, right after this bathroom break and then that lunch and then the dentist reminds him of the infant mortality rate about which something must be done this afternoon, and then how *do* you spell bourgeois, bourgieous, bourgeois (spell checked). How does he say, "I think the sheer number of goofy hats in our closets absolves us of our atrocities," with his mouth wedged open in a noiseless perma-scream? After the crown's capped the Vicodin haloes every dying day, demon, and troublesome projector screen, until its power runs out and he finds himself back in his kitchen, a Saturday, whipping up deviled eggs for the dinner party, the fruit in the fruit bowl flickering.

IN A MOOD

My eye catches and follows a falling *thing*—
not a petal part, not a helicopter seed, not fluff,
but a weedy—like a little baby tumbleweed—
bit of something. In my mind the thing grows
spiky, sort of oblong, I wonder if it would tumble at all.
What a lovely Armageddon that would be,
spiky, sort-of-tumbleweeds slicing through the clouds
being attacked by lions—but I'm trying to have a good day,
a better day than its been. I am trying to see
that bit of non-petal non-fluff as fluff or part-petal,
as a weird eyelash blown off a god's cheek—
not only are the gods not dead, they're being adorable—
and yet in this mood my feelings are against it,
this little piece of thing I don't know what it is,
and seeing its harsh prettiness after being late for the bus
and so late for a date and so rain checking
and so now alone with coffee to-go (but where?
I'm walking fast, but why?): everything's spilling
all over the place: the sky, the sad pop ballad on loop
in my head (was I singing aloud just then, am I still?)
the time (it's already April, already Thursday)
my eyes: I want to say that I'm about to cry,
and that the man next to me will not be the only man on this street corner
who will not know exactly why—
but this thing, I don't know what it is,
is falling like it's doing my crying for me,
so now my crying would be overkill
and thus disappointing—
even one tear, like everything else,
would be just another god damn thing.
You may be asking when I am going to stop blaming the weather
and start taking responsibility for the rain
tapping on my shoulders like an old friend,
when to see doors as windows, to see death as a chance
to live life as a daisy and life as a chance to die beautifully.
I'll tell you when. Never.
That thing that I don't know what it is,
it's none of my business. I don't even care
if it melts into the sidewalk, and if, from now on,
all that it does is get stepped on.
I have to go home and do something else
besides try to refresh the whole universe
one particle at a time for nobody but myself.

AMEN

I have come to know the world without You,
 Lord, with all her consequences and wolves;
her tooth, her claw, her ruin, and her renewal.

Still I want to capitulate to the self-help-like
 aphorism—*seize the day*—but Lord, I equivocate.
I am lazy of brain and tired of leg. I stand stagnant

before your wavy brilliances:
 Your Shakespeare, Your Bach,
Your honeydew, Your hollyhock.

I am gluttoned with Your nuance
 and beauty, stuffed with knowing
I'll never—will not have time to—

suffer them fully. At this point, Lord,
 You might be detecting a contradiction.
This I have come to accept as a given.

So when I call out my little weaknesses
 at night or midday, my little thanks or praise—
Lord, when I pray—I am grateful You, too,
keep the moment quietly.

NOT QUITE HEAVEN

If you are planning to come here for answers, then take your time coming.
The people go on and on about how they know one thing, and it is that they know
they know nothing. And yet they bicker with the bartender about the tab.

Once, outside, I watched one of them staring at a telephone pole.
He was doing nothing but seeing that pole.
The next day, he brought me a bad drawing

of some weird object affixed to a telephone pole. He asked,
"What have I drawn?" It broke my heart to know
it was a crow. But if you take your time coming, when you get here

perhaps you will have more to say on the matter.

CONSUMER REPORT

In school, your dandruff garnered sneers. I sneered back.
When I suggested a vacation, everybody took a vacation,
a brief lut-lut at ClubMed or on a Carnival Cruise.
Upon your return I made your home
Carpet Fresh, OxyClean, Arm & Hammered.

I was the novel frying pan that made everything
more possible. I was Lotramin and Pepsi,
the red and green and bright white lights
that made you giddy in the bitter season.
When your dachshund died, my dachshund died.
I offered dispensation. I offered you a synonym
for empathy though there isn't any synonym for empathy.
I offered you a chance to be enough for yourself.

In your adult afternoons, I softened the distinction
between you and the glass of scotch and the woman
in the bed beside you, thin and silvery
as a declarative sentence on a storefront window:
A diamond will when a kiss won't do.
But you didn't need a diamond. You had a bottle
of Pantene in your shower rack. You had market research
and coy copy scrolling through your contact lenses.
You were becoming a god then, such was the power
of your accessories.

Lately you read your Marcuse and Chomsky. Your notion
is to purchase what? A second-hand wolf sweater?
To tell everyone I make you feel fat? That I reduce you
and your congresses and your congregation to carp
on blacktop? To go off market, kickstart, and non-profit?
To blog and to poem? To prove what? That you can live
without cruelty? Without hydrogenated corn syrup
and transfat? Without the image of your body distended
in an animal light?

But your deodorant smells and your toothpaste sucks
and your sponges are 50% Agave fiber but they don't
suck enough. You have a choice, broke commuter.
Your options are open, chubby hero, but you don't know
where to end your story, nor which expression to take
when you're being heroic.

You don't know what song to play in affection

or affliction, or the right tenor of condolence
after a catastrophe. You hardly know,
dear leader, anything without me. How would you even
bury the dead without a brochure?

FRACKING FRACTALS

A twig is a branch of a branch of a branch of a tree,
and a tree and a tree and a tree make a forest that we raze
to build a home on a home that houses homes,
where bodies out of bodies out of bodies stare at cloud puffs,
which are puffs of puffs of puffs of, all too often,
mosquitoes and mosquitoes and mosquitoes.

But here, a mosquito does not have to bite, and bite, and bite.
A mosquito can be a tiny Mexican dish, or a small house of Islam,
or a pet name for a stinky lover,
all of which can be forgotten or remembered here,

where we tease the pattern,
and in so doing,
out the raw material.

BEE SONG

The flowered bush
kneels
 heavy with rain
Which is good
and why the bees
they suck
 come night,
 come day
Come here:
near the window,
 where they gather
they make
little hovels
 in the cracks
 out of pollen.
Some hang
from a web
 —happy spider
 out of silk
 makes hay—
Some dance
 with friends
to remember
 the way
 to the bush
and back again
Such grace
 how strange

ORANGE

What I have to speak with are oranges.
Perhaps now it is clear to you why,
when you ask me what I have to say,
I respond only by slicing a Valencia in half,
or by ripping it apart, or by peeling a segment away from its skin—
let me count the ways...

This, of course, leads to all kinds of problems,
not the least of which is my inability to answer your question
without having first to drive clear out to the supermarket
to select a few specimens from the bulging piles there.

And they look weird beneath the halogen lights.
And the people who woke up early beat me to the best ones.
And I don't even know what the best ones smell like anymore,
what they feel or look like.

But anything beyond the purview of this fruit
is a mystery to me. For my part, I will say that
I've come to consider it a gift.

A LITTLE INEFFABLE

I love it. And because I have called it I can put it
in this box, or that box, or my blue box,
my favorite blue box. I've never seen anything like it!
It's like Alka-Seltzer, or bi-sexuality, or tape,
and yet it is none of those things. In fact, it is nothing—
but it is so confidently nothing that I have already given it my blessings
and then breakfast. Look at it, eating. A being without being.
I understand that I don't understand it,
see what it allows me to say? It is so
generative. I can only hope that it doesn't begin to swell,
doesn't begin to outgrow its box,

slowly, surely, silently, sadly, like a star with no sense of stellar history.
Even with all the worries, it has been given to me,
and the gifting has bestowed upon it its quality,
which is the quality of being for me, though it is no thing at all,
and yet there it is, on the table. And, as it is mine,
now that it has been made for me, I will do what I like with it,
which is to put it in a box, my blue box, my favorite.

ON THIS AND OTHER AIRINGS

I did not intend to ruin the lily pads
by marking their likeness to Pac Man.
It was the only way I could love them
on our pass through
an already orchid-dotted lagoon.

THE SINGER SINGING OUTDOORS IN A CITY

Her high, clear C hung just at the edge of sharp.
The note was meant to invoke a man,

but this time, a car horn honked in,
which was more like the man in the song

than the word man sung in C,
and it invoked him perfectly without her knowing,

until she did,
which is why she smiled,

which is how I came to love her,
though I am, of course,

that man—no—that honk—
no—that chance
harmony among jackhammers,

and as such I am doomed to pass
at her next exhalation.

Though I am here
by accident,

do not mistake me
as a mistake, rather,

as a chance taking,
so that I may have

at least that beauty,

which is not hers,
but which exists because of her.

FAN LETTER

To the woman who sang me awake and out of the doldrums
of our common winter, who sang me to work and to sleep,
who hummed me from lover's bed to lover's bed,

to the bar and from the bar to the bachelor bed alone,
who waltzed me into the funeral home, who crooned me
along the yellow and white stitching of the interstate,

who sang me into myself on underground trains:
thanks. Some comfort worked through me then.
May the world ever pain and surprise you.

NOT REALLY A DEATH WISH

I want to die with my shirt on
after a night of no lust,
under the lone, incandescent light bulb
in a wood-paneled apartment
before the Jets lose a regular season game,
next to an un-dog-eared novel,
in the loyal company of snacks,
(these Doritos, this Mexican Cola)
on a futon mattress above my downstairs
neighbors who are watching a rerun of Roseanne
wherein Roseanne forecloses a conversation
about contraceptive pills,
as the first pre-dreams outline the dark
ghost of a woman's face compiled
from real-life passersby, those imagined,
and you, in a moment where I recognize
my power over breathing,
having left behind a few hundred thousand
cigarette butts flicked into the medians
of a dozen countries, some papers
(this bag, this bottle) you can toss
with the body, so long as I'm assured
a restrained, public smile surprising
your afternoon walk into laughter,
and when asked what's so funny—
if you could say nothing—
yes, I would vanish right then—

The Great Poem of Desire? I heard it existed
as a transcribed rumor about its existence.
Scholars kept the rumor in the ether,
but their want for fame and chocolate
garnered wide-spread distrust in the public sector.

Luckily, those facts did not stop Jack,
who leaned into Paulina's ear and whispered,
I hear there's a tree in the poem.

By noon that day, Thomas had written
the definitive contemporary lyric response to "Desire,"
wherein, he said, the speaker is a fawn warming upon wind-flattened etcetera,
and the speaker is also the hunter, hungry and so on, and with son;
their muskets poised, as it were.
The reader is invited by the poem
(he began to trace his finger around the rim of his day-beer)
to embody this contradictory state, which,
(he discovered while writing)
is the essential nature of desire.

At which point Paulina slammed her rusty nail on the counter.
She claimed to have written the contemporary lyric response to "Desire,"
and in it, she said, a woman simply walks
to the approximate center of a wheat field. In the field,
the woman holds out her cupped hand and wishes into it a planet.
She says she would like to have one clear desire here,
Christmas-morning-clear, actionable.
The poem ends with the wheat waving, and with her body
waving or still / waving...
(Here, Paulina leaned in and tried to cock her eyebrow, though she could not.)
So, whereas Thomas's poem asks you to hold a snowball in your throat forever,
hers enacts the poet's charge to invest in firewater,
and that, she added, is the very stuff—the very cytoplasm—of desire.

At which point Jack broke in and recounted his day.
He made sure one number matched another. Ate tuna.
Caught himself mouth breathing. Then he read
the contemporary lyric responses to "Desire."

He liked how there was a field in both of them.

*

THE GREAT POEM OF DESIRE

We have laws in this town that dictate
when you can and cannot steal a boat.

Custom demands corduroy at funerals.
You must invent at least one dance move;

the Tyrannosaurus Shimmy is taken.
This place was founded by Zeus Johnson,

and if you sleep with any of the Johnson girls,
(esp. Sarah) your future in public service

will be limited to park maintenance.
(Though Sarah may proffer a lemonade

if you seek repose from your mowing
on the shady benches dedicated to her progenitors.)

You are required to spend two entire evenings listening
to Murry recount his diminishment in the plastic factory:

"Then the saw caught my arm. Then I couldn't work.
Now I'm sitting here talking to you."

Don't swear in front of birds. It's considered rude
to buy mustard greens from Joanna only to let them wilt in the fridge.

If you inhabit the windmill apartment recently vacated
by Petri, who burned down Sarah's carrot fields in a fit of love-rage,

and then even politely decline your invitation to the Cherry Festival,
don't expect Sarah to hum Love Me Tender to you in the stolen gondola

as you lay the oars to rest on the gunwale.
Don't expect her to look over her shoulder

as evening pinks the hills and roses the rising dust,
as the reflection of glimmering row houses begins to waver

in the barely troubled water beneath the Japanese bridge.
Don't expect her to look at you and whisper, "Welcome."

///

Sarah's seen my focus fall on the blue mums
whose stems she slips into olive oil bottles

to brighten the café tables.

For her, I am what I do when I'm sleepy.

I am a double tall Americano,
a dollar in the tip jar.

I twist my invisible mustache,
and say, *As I go so goes Washington.*

I am an average flirt.
If I take my tea at home and lie very still

I might become solvent and not move back in with mother,
who misses me.

I am what I do for mother,
but I hope not forever.

Sarah asks why I keep repeating myself.
I say I want the poem to establish its own logic

because I am what I do when I remove myself.
She says this poem doesn't know anything,

and neither do I,
and for that matter I've done nothing

with the mums, with blue, and I have yet to
immortalize her sweet ass, honey.

I am what I do, for her, when I'm forgetting mums.
She is what she does when she's laughing.

///

She is easy unlike each trauma of my workaday waking.
She is *go back to sleep* and *taking the day off*

to be with me, though we do not love each other, do we?
She is *drive to the store for more milk for me,*

but she is *steer with her knee*, and we have not
made love yet or will we? She does not return from the store

all afternoon and I worry and take a walk and skip lunch.

I want something from her as the silence now seems to want
something from me, but spend the afternoon idly
and alone in the heat. She is *arrived with no explanation*
bearing a surprise of Grenache which we drink immediately
and walk off down 10th street where she makes the architecture blush
and I laugh a lot. We spend the night sitting and drinking
and talking interminably about ourselves at the lazy little center
of this July Tuesday, yet another interim that comes, of course,
to nothing, until we get our fourth or fifth wind
and I practically dance her home where she is
lie in bed wearing nothing presumably. I try imagining
a better day off spent less in the light of her company.
I am still trying.

///

Even in her blue jumpsuit Sarah hates love poems.
If you leave a poem in her drip pan
she will wheel out from beneath the Ford and say,

I came to this town without so much as a virginity.
If she finds a poem in the pockets of her blue jumpsuit
she will tell you, *I cannot sustain another thin body*

displeased with the way his chest hair is coming in,
and if you read a poem to her while she wears her blue jumpsuit
she will say, *What I need is a Jack*

to barrel through my cabin in his trolling flannels
with a generation of squirrels dangling from his trap,
or she will say, *Spare me your love poems; hand me that wrench.*

You can see why I want to write a love poem for Sarah
in her blue jumpsuit. In it,
I would like to include the oil smear on her cheek,

and her pronunciation of *croissant*, as when she said,
"To a Jiffy Lube you bring a *croissant*?"
Because she says it in the way of our people,

whom only friction moves.

\\

You know I smile proud
when I pair the duck and wine like a pro,
and when the Pinot really does work

against the grease, like I thought it would.
You know I feel conflicted about that,
because the pairing is a vanity,

my worry is a vanity,
and my admission of vanity is a seduction,
which seduces you,

and I just want to give everyone a rose and die
after a long life of very public philanthropy.
I'll be burned on a pyre whose fire warms the hands

of the dispossessed. They will warm enough to become
community organizers in the Swat Valley, or intrepid social workers
so unafraid to dance beneath the whirl of a hovering reaper drone,

beneath the billy club of a hovering officer,
beneath the buzz of a malarial cloud,
they'll remove their shoes and tank tops and tunics

and shoot off flares to make a disco strobe
blink over the emerald mines
and the Daras and the hospital roof at Saidu Sharif.

Or maybe they'll become nothing but just warm
for the four minutes it takes me to smolder and mulch.
And you know all that, too,

or say you do, and I hate that;
how sweet you look when you say,
"My love, I know that thing your father said.

I know you're embarrassed about the brown hair on your arms,
about leaving so vulnerable the plums."

///

I have long been the student of a Woman's Academy.

As a middling pupil, an eternal sophomore,
often I've been humbled, rendered an electrified stone,
over something as foundational as a wonder bra,

stunned by how the lingerie silk to lace ratio determines
the course of a life, an everlasting soul, a whole evening!
Its swirls and deep cuts, for instance, clearly do the devil's work,

while its clasps and straps and static seem to serve the Lord:
trembling in a dark room I find myself torn between my love
for the underdog and my healthy fear of God. And if I conceive

of the garment functioning as a stay against function,
a last line of defense, and an open invitation, then I am torn
between tearing or lifting, letting lover lift,

or bypassing the thing altogether and barreling in.

Days of careful study, nights of trial and error, the better to
understand a slip! Scholars of the boat neck, the black dress,
those burning the midnight oil over empire waists,

let us announce our work worthy and deserving of funding
equal to that of other arts and sciences; integral, in fact,
to the understanding of our destiny on the planet. To wit,

my recent findings reveal most nightdresses long
outlive a man.

\\

Better to be a bit of a lepidopterist, here.

Is the page some Garden of Women Eating Breakfast Forever?
No, it's fiberboard,

the words pinned to it still and scrutable
as moths. And form? Nothing more than a killing jar
for a piece of fluttered time, caught.

You write about a you, or a her, or a him—
but you cannot contain a person
in a poem, in a pronoun, in a you—look at it—

the word erases all but
the v part of hips
with one leg crossed over, maybe,

and the bellybutton, and the stomach,

all in a weird cubist arrangement.

Or else the you contains too many yous—

who do you mean? Surely all are *you*—

"I" am just you trying on your little sister's dress;
the "reader you" just you winking at yourself

in the mirror; the "you you..."
who knows? One gets the sense
that one wants

to put one in his gallery, wants to
examine one from safe angles, inspect,
exhibit, to point and say here

one idled in a garden with hot holly leaf tea,
with a southern honey fruit cup. Say here
one saw that, this, felt whole, held dominion,

and so here one will always be.

And then have
one mean *me*, and *you*, and *you all*?

But this is no gallery, and so no place
for one's one. Here, for any word
one has its master,

for this jar

a hammer.

And one quickly

grows tired of idling in gardens.

///

You are not her, though she, like you,

observed my tall profile in a pea coat pointing at this and that landmass,
the wind popping my collar; though she, like you, heard me naming

this one Ham Sandwich Hill, and that one

Ham Sandwich Hill, after what we packed in our picnic basket,
in, yes, the same park that she, like you, thought shabby.

And you are not her, though I call you you,

like I called her you. And perhaps I shouldn't,
but I do: as with hill and hill, so with her and you:

I name delightfully to confuse and so fuse, and like to,
like putting the lie to the idea that all's not one: those hills not food?
How so? Some flower feeds some bee there, some squirrel some hawk,
and maybe there is even a row of kale someone secret-planted for the village.

And don't the hills themselves seem to have baked up from the earth?
A necessary concentration obtains here:

as with machine gun fire and poetry,
as with lists (Best ofs, Worst ofs,
the unaccounted for, the missed)
as with data and floating plastic in the Pacific,

so with love: there is too much.
So I lump all into one and call you Sarah,

though she, like you, is called Laura, Yolanda,
Tomoko, Dark Lady, Helen, Victoria, Sally, etc.

Though she, like you is otherwise named,
she, like you, is you, and likewise loved.

\\

My thighs are like what? Milk bottles? And my wrists,
like thinner milk bottles? And my mind—forever second,
or falsely first...And my heart is like, "like like."

Count your ribs. Are you missing any?
So why liken me at all, when it's not me you like,
nor milk, nor its bottles. You like liking;

like looking to like; like seeing yourself in what you see.
I think my arm is like my other arm, as my leg's like my leg.
And my heart's like itself, and my mind likes minds that mind

their own business, unlike yours.

\\

And another thing.

You keep me penned thoroughly,
keep my trough topped off,
my hide massaged with milk,

only later to hang me from my nostrils
and spin me above the pencils
and maws of appraisers—

*See how white and wide her teeth?
See what excellent spot placement?
Please, do note her*

grace even in the act of dangling—
only later to cut loose my rope
and toss me out of the pasture

into the pale gold patchwork of suburbia
where I find myself in a blue dress,
sunpowder freshly settled on my shoulders.

Before I can even enrich the evening
with the breath you've had me purloin from the sea,
I'm hitched to the back of a Windstar,

I'm careening down the interstate, signaling wildly,
passing on the left, the right,
breaking through the tolls and down the off-ramp

to the city come alive with buskers and birthday balloons.
Now giggle between bike bells, you say.
Now wear this poncho the way a rock wears rain.

Now stand right here and outglow the rush hour headlights.
And the next day I blow in wearing a white dress.
And the next day in puce. And the next day, and the next—

no history, no habit, not even the comfort
of a recurrent color! Whose eyes could bear to be
one thousand windows opening onto Omaha,

onto Rome, onto Jakarta, onto Jackson, Mississippi?
I am not pieces; please stop making me pieces.

\\

My hair is brown, just brown.
Fuck James Dean.
I don't like going into town.

///

What I have kissed I want you to kiss
as you kiss when you uncinch your pajamas and allow the idea
of toast and juice to freshen in the room again.

But perhaps you find kissing too limited an engagement with the world,
restricted, as it often is, to the cheeks.

Or maybe you bet my kissing has a history of failing.
I'd be the umpteenth handsy troubadour to tumble
into your breakfast nook with grapefruit and grapefruit spoons,

singing the praises of your body in pert pecks too delicate
to stir the god you want stirred in you.

You prefer a nice morning romp for breakfast.
You take tooth to your fruit,
and your water you draw from the bathroom sink.

Or maybe you are plumb tired of kissing, having kissed so much
and having seen so much particularly kissed
that you cannot even look at a wristwatch on a nightstand without the idea

of loss freshening in the room again.
Or is proximity at issue, and not the kiss per se?

You know too well when you get too close
you sense the too much to miss. In that case,
take this as is—
a blown kiss.

Those always hit.

\\

You strike me with a novel kind of nothing.
Not the nothing that is
(some airy something)

nor the nothing that could have been
(I think of brushing baby Ada's one new tooth)
nor the nothing of impossibility

(me and you...) and nor
is it the nothing of confusion
(...plus him).

It's the nothing of the extra stroke. The addition
that addles the Picasso. The kiss
that tanks the spurned lover's ship.

The radio tacked on to silence—

\\

A doctor takes a bite from her sandwich.

Three blind mice are swallowed by one man's wet vac.

The dental hygienist with a tragic back-story says she hasn't been to church

for as long as I haven't been to the dentist.

A pipe fitter finally chooses the Côtes du Rhône over the Malbac.

The trapeze artist claims to believe in herself. Who's confused?

The customs agent inspects a heavyweight champion.

A beautiful woman takes a bite from her sandwich.

Three beautiful women are swallowed by one beautiful woman's wet vac.

The beautiful woman with a tragic back-story says she hasn't been to church

For as long as I haven't been a beautiful woman.

A beautiful woman finally chooses the beautiful woman over the beautiful woman.

The beautiful woman claims to believe in herself. Who's confused?

The beautiful woman inspects a beautiful woman.

///

She likes to think that her white dress is a kitten she saved
in the war-fog of other white dresses,
that her body was the formula that nursed the white dress
back from a combination shrapnel-and-love-lack-induced coma,
that she takes on a regal demeanor facilitated by the play
of light and shadow that catch on her dress and texture her confidence
with a look that says: I have won at the front, but flaunt surrender—
that it would be a faux pas to mention the faux pas
of her wearing a white dress well into autumn.
She hates to think that she will not be loved purely in her white dress,
the way the white dress means. Carefully, she eats
a strawberry in front of the bachelors. She sips
from the martini glass. She likes to think she will leave
with one of three young men scarfing hors d'oeuvres.
They are foxy and youthful in their khakis and blue shirts.
She would like to change her mind about her white dress.
She wants her red dress to also be her white dress.
One morning, she hopes a man will tell one perfect joke,
which will bloom into one perfect twilit ice cream,
four years, one ring, one serviceable hovel in Santiago
where she would eat lightly in the summer, and in the winter...
roasts, roasts, roasts! heavily rosemaried and thymed topped
with melting eggs! Then—midlife—niggling desire,
glorious divorce! Uproarious custody battle! Voilà! New start
selling honey with baby Ada in Vermont! Or she will
wake up and stride down the cobbled streets of the German Village
where she will have kisses with her companion over tiny cups of steam.
Every other Sunday she may wake wanting to cloister herself
with priestly men too intimidated to touch her body
for fear of befouling her clear and apparent seraphic beauty.
Her Ada will be the unmothered and fly-pocked infants

of an unloving world. Surrounded by a hell of petit fours,
an empire of chandeliers, a forest of fake wood,
she folds her shoulders into a laugh—a bright one—
and she could be anyone—until her bobby pin falls,
until her strap slumps off her shoulder, until she feels
in the birdbath hollow of her chest her heart beat alone.
Everyone thinks the white dress was a smart buy.

Everyone drinks more martinis and leaves.

\\

You know I smile proud
when I do a good job with my nail polish,
and when the color really does work

with everything, like I thought it would.
You know I feel conflicted about that,
and then conflicted about feeling conflicted.

You know that thing my father said.
You know I'm embarrassed
about the brown hair on my arms,

about leaving so vulnerable the plums.
But while you were so busy paying so much attention
you missed the point. I said no. Not no,

but we should still split a bowl of blackberries, blackberries, etc.
Not no, but I'd still love to talk of Michelangelo.
Not no, but please do pay another visit.

My no is not conflicted, complicated, confused—
of course I adored you, a little ten-penny nail sticking out of my threshold,
its cute head bent like a question mark—

and perhaps I dallied at the jamb a long while,
but I closed with no,
not no but.

///

Good, go, go on, out! I've given up on better, more—

whole vocabularies, languages, words...

sidereal? Sidelong? I look the word up
use it once, wrongly maybe, but confidently,
wanting to commit it, to slip it in its quiver, but,
one Tuesday passes, and then another Tuesday, and then another

and like scrap paper slips from a jacket pocket
so from the mind slips *sidereal*, *sidelong*, you, this—so,

well...but, *so* sticks! Oh, if so left! Then what?
Then no so what. Then just *sidereal*, just *sidelong*.

Just *you*, *this*...just *gone*
without referent, bliss.

\\

The young men remove their shirts and encircle the bonfire.
He is not Bob, nor he Bill, nor it a tree, nor it a Ford;

nor is that a can of Natural Light, nor that a moon.
Nothing distinguishes anything until Jack emerges from the fire

like the cracked skull on Jill's shoulder.
She remembers him with his candlestick:

What the hell are you doing, Jack?
I am showing you how uncommon a man must make himself
in a world full of characters.

///

He entered like a sunbeam through a window,
and he plans to leave like one,
but on horseback, and with the girl.

He's a little uncomfortable riding around in a po-eem:
the tracks are strange,
or the animal that leaves them is strange,
or the tracks are normal but the animal has strange feet—

anyway, the beast that leaves them seems assailable. It walks
too much. It wears itself out by itself.

It eats the same grass
for months, and drinks too long at the river. It is probably
of weak stock, on a budget, and fearful.

But him? He is handsome and his hands are fulsome.
He's got a real nice hat.

When you ask his name he answers,
Jack. Then he waits a second. Then he says, *Yeah,*

that Jack. Don Juan. Hans. Giovanni. Mr. Johnson. Her
first football player.

The first man who made her
feel small in the exact way she wanted to feel small

and for exactly as long. The fiction she reaches for
when you touch her.

He has galloped back from the fire pits
with an absolute rock.
He has come prepared with a yes
and a rucksack stuffed with blueprints
for birdhouses, Craftsman bungalows, good schools.
He's as much of a word as she is.

When I tell her that, she latches up to lock him in.
I spend the rest of the evening watching

her eyes like television.

///

Let's say his body would demand crawdads.
He would secure crawdads.

A catfish? Harpooned. He could trot through
the blades of a mid-summer air conditioner

without nicking a whisker.
Presented with a field of dandelions,

and her body in that field, he dismounts.
She approaches him, mud between her toes,

baldly blushing and beaming.
Which part of her wanted him she didn't know,

but the part did. Very much so.
When she said, *Let's do this, stranger.*

You. Me. These leaves. These florets...
with her eyes, he felt old fashioned

in a way he needed to learn how to feel;
older, fashioned, a finally made man—

a man made to what? Have half of? Be
half of? How should he behave

when he reaches to touch her shoulder
and she does as all love does: dissolves

into a fine mist no harpoon can pin,

no net ensnare, no rope pull in;
when through her he can see another woman
in another field just beyond this one?

\\

That's me in the next field. And that's me in the field thereafter.
I'm the greener grass of the other side. I'm the side

of the fence that you're already on. I'm the fence that's left to run.
Both heads on the coin in your pocket are my mine. Flip it:

if heads, then find a still pond. Peer in. Wait there.
And when water bug or frog or rain or skipped rock or ground war

or gas work or flaming automotive or panic or mayfly or hijack
or late leaf tip or cancer or my own footsteps or titanic orgasm

ripple-troubles your reflection, so that you, as I
and all loves do, dissolve,

know that you would only be coming in clearer, closer,
and more completely to me

my love.

\\

When he smiles, a carriage step falls.

She ascends, brushing away packs of crumpled Golds, receipts.
She raises the console, reclines, and grants his kiss its go—

his body warm, wet, paraffin. At her heart's readiness
to retrofit her body for kindling so soon after the last tumbling after,
she loses—she can't believe it—a tear. They, too, tumble

down her cheeks. They smear on his shoulder. So happy, so happy—
until her thighs, and then her belly, and then her hands go cold.
Her eyes open on three boulders of snow and a mouth of coal.

She catches the scent of deadwood and gasoline in her hair
weeks later, when she looks up from her folktale
to watch him flake from the clouds.

///

I could not tell if you were you, or the duffle bag beside you.
So I poked at the bag. Nothing moved.
I slit it open with my army knife. Out spilled Pittsburgh,
rolled-up nighties, an alarm clock, a walkup, a backyard,
a swing set, a scream. The bag's mouth lay wide open.

You stood quite still, as the day now stands.

///

You should have left me after twenty-three seconds of staring
unblinking at a goldfinch twittering and perching

and reperching before coming to rest on a telephone wire.

In that moment we would have turned to each other and nodded.

The goldfinch had so foretold your future in the offing.

I longed for you to rise and say, *Darling, once I finish my stint in retail,*

I shall return to you as the salmon return,

and in the blank and lonely moments after your departure,

gravity and wind would have bested the fresh dead leaf, the sun would have blazed on
despairingly about its distance from its simulacrum moon,

and then I would have known that every image after your leaving was the natural world's
condolence for its indifference to us.

And as you skipped down the porch steps, I would have cut to ten years later
and watched us take the slate stairs of St. Rita's Cathedral.

There, with the stained glass in full bloom behind us,
we would turn to each other and agree

that the last wild oat had been banished, indeed,
and that the first son be born on good English soil.

But you pushed in your chair. You said *take care,*
and on the breakfast table sit two squat mugs of milky coffee,

cold and too sweet.

///

I like Sarah and her awful cooking.

I like it when she shouts from the stair,

To hell with this wedding!

The lily keeps falling off her wrist
when she reaches to unfasten her earring.

We used to manage more intricate vanities.

Two years ago, two gins into the evening,
she was a blessèd and steely twenty-seven.

Two years since, this ceremony fosters fear

that her final act as herself-as-I-know-her
will be to slide the ultimate shiny thing into place

until she's all rocks and flowers and no pain.

And the day is a sentence.

///

Father, you would not be surprised that I lose
at cards. I get very drunk, and I lose at cards.
You are not dead and you would not be surprised.

I also make many modern mistakes. I know that I am
in love with the idea of love and not with someone.

I make mountains into molehills and then regret

the loss of mountains. I deny the sexual potency of ambition.

I remember calling you while we were both boiling
eggs at night in our kitchens to tell you about this.

You said, *Son, we have both been clouds
in the rooms of undressing women.* I found
a photograph in your dresser of an unfamiliar

woman wearing a grey t-shirt standing
beside a newly asphalted road bordering unmown
Midwestern grasses, and I ached for dull,

hometowny spring. You are not dead
or clearly dying, but I am going through your stuff.

I want your leather-bound Superman comics, your Kingston Trio,

your bamboo Buddha. I have been in love
with two women who look like the one in your photograph.
I think I have only seen you three hundred times.

I am twenty-four and you are sixty-five. I need
a box spring and a bed frame if I'm to be at all
comfortable in the coming years. Suddenly, it is embarrassing
not to own a table. Today I replaced the burnt-out light bulb

in the bathroom with the light bulb from the hallway,
which used to be the light bulb from the bedroom,
which used to be the porch light. To what extent,

father, does this sound familiar?

///

I thumb through plastic wrapped T-shirts
looking for L, not finding L, settling for XL, resigning to the fact

that I'll get fatter I guess, now, hopefully. Since I have lost my desire for you,
I fear to lose the whole art of desire—no you to put the you of songs to.

I should notice that I am relaxing on a porch in a big new shirt, mid-summer,
beneath brightening and benign celestials. I should notice

that the breeze is stilled within the air, and that I should take that notion
as an incentive to get a move on, to get goin', to hop to it,

as each step would activate the breeze and so become an invitation to step again,
and then I'd be on my way, and the weather would be with me!

But I'm too busy swatting mosquitoes in the half-comfort of a box fan and a radio.
I'm too busy listening to some torch singer sing through my torn screen.

She says she cries a little whenever you go, that you're a little lark gone astray,
somewhere over the rainbow. There's a weird little tinkly piano riff,

and then she says there's never another you. And then you're spring.
I used to take these moments to superimpose

one of my innumerable, tacky, soft-focus still shots of your face
over some spacecape hurtling with minor comets, over some photo of a bush exploding

with petunias—or, what are they, oleanders?—over some other woman's face
who wears a seersucker sundress and tiptoes along the spine of a Holstein;

a face that stares into my face and not the Oort cloud billowing behind me,
not the pasture or the dilapidated Craftsman. But now I can only see the singer's head
smothered

in a bulk of headphones, her face eclipsed by the spit guard. The engineer smiling in his blue
jeans, saying cut, cut, cut.

\\

I have just confronted the nearest approximation of death and black loneliness,
but the images that came then are happily fading

as the world asserts its reality in the form of you
and the promise of gravity.

If you would like French breakfast radishes
with some toast and butter

I pulled a small bunch from your refrigerator
and put them on the windowsill.

They look pretty there.
Oh, and coffee's made.

///

A week earlier I might have despaired of the world's
grandmother hobbling toward Planned Parenthood,
its reflective man holding what looks like an electronic briefcase
over the manhole cover on Second Ave.,
its belches resounding in late afternoon's sleepy courtyard,
but now it seems as if dying winter
shook them all out to bolster the color of this,
the most recent spring, the first day this year
I've set out to stroll for strolling's sake.
Yes, the first sweat portends a deluge.
And, oh yeah, taxes. And, daunting, the pressure
of enumerating each awakening daffodil.
But for now I am confident in my accidental ability
to calm manic Natalie with a word if I see her all aflutter
in the deli. Or maybe I'll introduce the day-beer to somber Thomas
(just one, Tom, then some coffee).
And if Sarah returns last night's late night desperation phone call,
I'll recharm her when I stress the wrong word in *How are you*,
and I will hear the possibility
that she didn't completely regret our time spent falling
asleep on each other's shoulders in her *I'm doing quite well*.
Natalie might scowl at my audacity. Thomas might balk
at my suggestion to regulate his emotions with liquids.
Sarah—well, who knows how long a heart's truce can hold?
but I am thirsty for a glass of spiked sweet tea, and I am certain
at least, of that, and hopefully this feeling
has only a little bit to do with the sun, the sun, the sun!

POSTSCRIPT

already this letter goes on too long
no endgame

 but to begin and begin and begin
that is the way of letters
 to receive a letter and another and another
in time

 so the daily hum de dums become songlike
as they will please
 when written

the other party
 simply because you were the one humming them!

 but I know I know to begin and begin and begin
as if there were a choice except to begin, to be being
happy anagram
is it? yes

 because it is evidence you can keep beginning
in this way it is most life affirming to begin
 as when someone raises a revolver and BANG

they're off

the sinews of the hurdle jumpers stretch and hold midair
 over their initial hurdle
not a hair on their '50s boy-cuts disturbed

they are not conscious of their contorted faces
they are not conscious of the next hurdle only this hurdle
which is the same as the next hurdle but again

 they are not though perhaps they are in the moment
 thinking about their Coppertone bodies
but probably not

 because they are a photograph of themselves
photographs!

 cruel, cruel, crueller than letters
as they are not evidence you can keep beginning

they are evidence that you are not here,

evidence of the self's need to box up the world in an eye
 not evidence of

but evidence for

 the self

unlike the letter

 (and this is the best part!)

once it's sent it's no longer yours to begin

no negatives

happily willfully
like poems

yours—

it's done, born, gone