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NONPLUSSED

Calvin Pierce

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**Abstract**

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This thesis is the forerunner to a book of poetry. Most of the poems were composed from 2011-2013 at the University of Washington, the exceptions being *It's the Same Here as Anywhere*, *Without Will*, *Remember When Memory Became Irrelevant*, *To You Still Talking*, and *The Ocean*, which were composed earlier. The ordering of the poems is unimportant except for some brief stretches here and there where a theme catches on. For this reason the thesis, although a complete thesis, is an incomplete work of art.

Much of the poetry questions the existence of identity and the self, usually by way of sensory experience. This line of thought dictates the themes encountered in the work.



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## IT'S THE SAME HERE AS ANYWHERE

I don't know what I mean when I say this anymore.  
It used to mean: *life cannot fail to be beautiful.*  
Now I think it's a reflex, becoming:  
*you can't escape your mind.*

If things keep going this way  
I'll descend into religion for consolation.

I once had a dilemma, that pitted myself against the world;  
I couldn't decide who belonged to who.

When I lost, there was only time,  
that involved me like water in a fountain.  
When I won, there was nothing;  
a sense of mad determination.

Now, when I stand on the shore and watch  
the depleted waters roll back to reveal long fields,  
leaving completely except for a vast well somewhere out of sight,

I just go to my cottage  
and sit  
where there may or may not be a table,  
may or may not be a chair to sit in,  
and watch  
the windows leave the room.

## DEFEAT

Defeated wooden chair, there in the corner:  
I have nothing to say to you,

although I've never felt this connected  
to an object before.

You're driftwood; worn;  
dead by many definitions.

I never think of you.

I won't describe you anymore,  
that would waste you.

You would cease to be  
this bit of nothingness

in the corner  
that I need so desperately right now.

## WALL

I walked into a wall today.  
I don't mean this to be a metaphor.

As I turned it sailed into my path  
like the back of a very tall stranger

who was holding a drink  
and talking coolly to a crowd

about how some idiots just don't  
pay attention to what they're doing.

## RED EYED MOON

We'll take for granted  
that everything is meaningless.  
You know the argument,  
whether you agree or not  
it only needs to be made once  
to form a permanent crack  
in the psyche  
(I call this crack the soul).  
If you understand despair  
I think you agree.

*Now that I've seen tonight's moon  
I think that rabbits are beautiful.*

They are the same  
with the rest of it;  
I see them everywhere.  
Except beautiful  
is a strong word.  
Rabbits and the moon  
are both muck colored.

*Round body in the moon.  
Its red eyes  
indispensable suddenly, and suddenly  
the moon has changed forever.*

Despair can undo this  
and this can undo despair.

## ON A BOUQUET AT A CEMETARY

I look at a bouquet of flowers laid  
before a tombstone; all are different kinds—

I never know their names, except for roses.

I see they speak to me, but I've forgotten  
how it is— to be so serious.

The cellophane's breadth is squared, I think,  
with what would be the shoulders of the coffin.  
White ones fill the edges. Lots of frilly,  
ruffled petals, specked with traces  
of fresh dirt. Some violet-colored bells,  
some tongue-pink disks.

Red ones are stuck in here and there as well—  
all bunched together in tight spheres  
half-sunk within the rest— each single  
flower's no bigger than a clover,  
but their globes are large enough to handle—  
had they any weight.

Because of some desire  
to know— to have an understanding  
secret to myself— I call the soft red-petaled  
one *placeamy*, then make myself  
believe it.

It's like an apple floating  
on the surface of a river— for a moment—  
wet and spinning— hard and cold— kinetic.  
Soundless, back it goes below,

and remains. I'll never understand why life  
can't feel that fragile in the first place— why  
I'm forced to manufacture something that's  
essentially love.

An undercurrent  
sweeps away the things we leave alone too long;  
the traffic we forget about— down there.

I guess I shouldn't speak for you but I know,  
sometimes, I treat people as if they weren't afraid  
to die, as if they were oblivious,  
like me, of what it's like  
to have a life that's tender in itself.

## DEATH

“Fragile purple spear-shape  
on this petal,  
what makes you fragile  
when at any moment  
you could rise up and take your place as king?”

The purple spear doesn't say anything.

“Who are you talking to?”  
the petal asks.  
“The purple spear is just part of me.”

“Yes, but then you are just part of the flower,” I say.

The petal doesn't say anything.

“Who are you talking to?”  
the flower asks.

NOT A STONECHAT

Speck  
on the flat white sky.

Bird, with breast  
the color of dark rust,

I don't believe in you; I release  
the singularity of your color.

TO TAKAHASHI

In the last step  
above the last stair, eternity—  
where supposedly a cymbal hangs.

Tell me Master  
do you hear lightning  
or the din of a rattled can?

EVERYTHING I HAVE TO OFFER

it doesn't mean anything but it accumulates

## WITHOUT WILL

Once work was done and he settled without will  
into the stream of his thoughts, he exhaled  
and let everything settle before him.

He was stopped at a light  
behind a car and stared at the rear lights until  
they were disembodied and the car  
became part of the darkness, a shade of maroon  
beneath the existence of the lights and imprinted on the dark  
which obscured everything into one thing,

but just as in the car ride until now, where he had thought of work  
and how as he worked he knew his mind was not in the middle of it,  
how his muscles moved without his will but only with his consent, operating as a car,  
off fire that has nothing to do with the metal it's made of,  
his eyes focused back on the shadowy imprint of the car.

The lights then became a presence inside him like a balloon, lifting him  
further and further away in his mind, so that the darkness became solid  
and the lights became like pathways for moving diamonds—  
transfixing in such a way that it didn't make sense  
for them to be anything he understood.  
Behind the light where everything subdued  
set before him like a lake went all his thought and he felt  
like water beneath water.

## NOTHING IMPORTANT

My thoughts? Nothing important.  
But for fear of insignificance  
I think hard, looking for something.—

My whiskey, imbued with amber,  
reminds me of autumn.—  
A black fly gets darker  
under a neon sign.

My looking: the black fly, almost  
out of sight.

Nervous to be chased away.

## REMEMBER WHEN MEMORY BECAME IRRELEVANT

What good is it to go back  
and re-remember life in new terms?  
To see, now, after so much time, our first loves  
as misunderstandings?  
Or even to see them as we remember them—  
the way we're sure is wrong?

I don't know what's happened to me.

What are the things I needed to tend to?  
Tendons, I think, still wet: responsive  
to exposure and notions of the self;  
if memory's gone the present should go too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Images exist alone—  
birds aren't birds,  
lakes aren't real  
and every second  
stop existing  
along with birds, and fish  
that might as well be birds, and  
lakes,  
lakes  
and their reflections,  
lakes and their birds—

Is it victory  
to teach yourself there is no such thing?  
I have learned not to believe, yet it feels as if something were saved.

LOVE POEM

*... a wildflower,  
a bolt of lightning,  
and the gasp  
that brought me to you...*

I wrote it for a beautiful waitress  
but I think it applies to you too.

ME

Numinous swamp, supporting the sky,  
where our legs disappear  
and frogs evaporate.

I turned to her and said we were flying.  
She asked me not to speak to her  
from behind my death mask of a philosophy.

## ONE PICTURE OF LOVE

two birds  
in flight  
for a moment  
beak to beak

## A DEFENSE OF THE WORD *CUNT*

Vagina's ridiculous, pussy is whimsical,  
Crotch isn't bad but it doesn't have oomf.  
Slit's unacceptable, vulva's too clinical—  
Cunt's the most sensible word we can use.

Punani's too playful and gash is too sinister,  
Twat is to swat is to fly is to pest.  
Beaver is childish and lap is too innocent,  
Cunts are not rodents and cunts are not blessed.

Muff misses the mark and soft wedge is too wordy  
And vag is distasteful, vajay is the same.  
Cooch is all cutesy like cooter and kitty,  
Cunts are not kittens and need a real name.

Chalulu and cha cha are skirting the issue  
But ball-stop and fuck-box are certainly out.  
Box by itself's not so bad but we miss it;  
Cunts are the things that we're talking about.

A snatch is a latch that will trap us and trick us  
It seems sort of hip, but you sound like a douche.  
Bag is degrading like hole or like clit-haus—  
Cunt is the only word that we can use!

## IT'S SAFE TO SAY

That violence isn't the answer  
is clear.

It is not clear  
when you are a child and then as a child  
you are taught.

You must believe it's right.

Imagine the lectures, and the conversations that would be only lectures if you didn't.  
But we're lucky for this.

Now when someone slaps you, pushes you down, and your glasses fall off, and he picks  
them up, and breaks them, and you're twenty-five years old,

you'll feel pity; not castrated or as though you've been castrated for a long time.

You'll think of his parents and of how their parents must have been bad parents.

You won't want to hit him.

You'll feel good, the way that people do feel good when their convictions are tested and  
proved.

People won't respect you?

People will respect you more!

They will wonder at how you were able to exercise such restraint.

You will be reassured in the strength of your will and thus more confident and easier to  
love.

They will seek your advice on taking a punch and you will say you were slapped and they  
will be even more impressed because to anybody else that would have been even more  
humiliating.

People will consider you a man whose sight is set higher than the hand that struck him.

Someone who knows that the best position in a fight is the moral high-ground.

You will have high self-esteem.

Everyone will see your resolve.

And women will use the word 'mature' to describe you.



## LOVE AND IMPOTENCE IN A COFFEE SHOP

See that man?  
Eyebrows vaulted  
like two tectonic plates crushed slowly together?  
That girl he's with needs him to relax.  
She came in with a whole day ahead of her,  
and now he's forcing the crisis of an evening question—  
*What shall we do? Where shall we go?*

She will leave him almost immediately, I'd guess, and he—  
thinking on his little mountain—  
will remain.

For him, this silence will be the same as it would be  
after sex: like a cat burning in a hollow tree.  
This fire, the same as the center of the universe  
that says: I will take back everything I lost.  
Its voice, his own, echoes.

First—  
*I lashed myself to the mast.*  
*The sea filled with the floating heads of men and I strained to see and heard the cries but*  
*I never knew why or what kind of cries and when the men came back they were the men*  
*of another country who found my resolve—*

Adorable.

Then—  
*I will take back everything I lost.*

Someone once told him, as we're all told,  
to take a stand at the center of the universe.  
Then he saw the universe expand outward and take with it all its women  
to dark corners where different men have waited,  
standing next to their pyramids  
chalking their hands.

But there is time for him,  
don't feel sorry.

He can change towns and names and become Christian to meet girls;  
he can ask himself an evening question—  
(though, he never will.)

He has always grieved for this moment.  
His grief is ancient and looks forward.

## POEM

the hero killed the girl  
and remained the hero  
then killed himself

UNTITLED

Sometimes I remember I'm an animal  
and think, "Why am I sitting in this chair?  
What are these lights made of?  
If I finish with these papers is that really going to help?"

Then from the wreckage  
a sound rises.

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

## IN A CROWDED POOL

Ahead of me a lady-swimmer  
splashes the water, shaking it up  
and shedding it off  
in clear glides over blue spandex, white buttock and thigh.

—a squirrel transfers a nut  
from cheek to cheek—

—two turtles hold hands  
downstream,  
mid-day,  
the sun—

A lifeguard catches me staring  
and I look at the bottoms  
of the swimmers feet,  
then slowly, naturally, away.

I see other men  
stare, still— most all of them  
look there, away,  
back there—  
staying longer like for a place to rest.  
Then I stare  
with them again: tired  
and not outnumbered.

TIRED OLD THEME I STILL LOVE

hard stems tick  
like broken clock arms  
in the shallow river

flowerless  
    shaken

blossoms continue  
to topple  
to the floor  
of Hell

\* \* \*

microscopic  
electricities  
rise like crowns  
of a thousand  
fused blue ladders  
into  
    disappearances

LOVE

with much thought I  
    unable  
to fall

hesitate

    and rush

like a drop of water  
on the high window

of a skyscraper

## BOREDOM

I'm bored and boring; what more can I say?  
The bored don't have much else to talk about,  
and Berryman stole that.  
Talk about boredom is now boring again.  
We didn't know it could be not-boring until it wasn't for a moment,  
now for sure it is more boring than it was before.  
What am I going to tell my nephew?  
After I share with him my one revelation  
about all this being a sham  
and read him the Berryman?

If you and I, reader, sat under a tree and raked our fingers through the grass  
I think we would both agree that it was nice  
but boring.

People forget because of nostalgia  
that contentment, like the kind under a tree,  
only lasts a few moments before it's tired and needs to be replaced  
by a picnic or a head on a lap, which both also get tired  
and turn to wine or sex.  
Or, if you're too bored to be bothered,  
junk food and masturbation have worked well in the past.  
But I will not need to teach my nephew those things;  
he is still young and has no urge to vanquish himself.  
When he thrashes on top of his covers  
it is not for the same reason I thrash on mine.  
I wonder what transformation will take place when he learns  
his energy will not always be resolved?  
What transformation occurred in me?  
That one I guess  
that makes me look to children.

## FORAGING

She asks how my day's been  
and, as I answer, I see a crow  
taking something so tiny  
in the tip of its beak, I hardly notice;  
what it flies away to do,  
I hardly know.

## HAND

Deep inside everything,  
in a sense that doesn't mean the heart,  
there is a hand.

It isn't cold or dead, it's meaningless,  
in fact it isn't even a hand,  
and it is perpetually in the act  
of taking.

## TO YOU STILL TALKING

I can't talk to you the way I want,  
with words that would hurt  
you. Not your heart or ego  
but what they've taught you  
to be unaware of.

What they were destined to distract you from.

Do you remember what made you this way?

I want to go back—  
sometimes I think this—  
before the emptiness started trembling,  
before I began to have faith.

It's seldom anyone has the nerve I want.  
Certainly no one's dared to stop me;  
I've been cradling this dead body,  
talking to it,  
and no one even asks  
who I'm consoling.

They must ignore it  
because they think that's what matters,  
to go on themselves in the same, old way,  
talking.

This is why I can't speak to you. Like them,  
you don't understand  
that hope was at first a tool,  
used before you used yourself,  
to believe you weren't alone.

## I WORK ON MY POEMS

As I work, Hesiod shakes his head  
and knocks on my window.

EVERYTHING I HAVE TO OFFER

The spring  
spouts  
bits of line  
to someone.

## SADS

### DOG

your face is so so big  
and so so wet

### BROOM

now I must sweep  
the floor of bristles

### COAT

where are your shoulders?  
  
why do you face the wall?

### BUILDING

gravel lawn  
all planned out

### LOVE-LETTER

brown lipstick  
unreadable

### FISH

you look better in the sun  
your gills like silver handles

MAN

hesitates to play  
with baby

FAUCET

crycrycry  
everything downward

LEG

your leg

one leg

just one

again

again

again

through the long coat

flashing

across the lawn

pale

pale

pale

## POEM

the sun spoke  
split the water  
and turned its depths  
green

## MANY SUNS

Don't be afraid. All of it's yours,  
dating back to the petal-white heart of the sun.

A hot needle against the eye?  
Friend,  
that's just the sun  
going to your head—  
the needle splits  
like a wand into a bouquet  
of blue-violet thistles.  
Those flowers are yours.

## SUN-BIRD

Marvel with me  
at this sun-colored bird.

Its needle-white beak  
shrinks in shallows  
and picks pink locusts  
from the shadows.

Its fit yellow wings stretch  
like the glare of the sun  
in the passing eye.

The blackness of its legs  
support a flicker.

All the size of a golf-ball—  
Oh God!  
There it goes,  
if it ever existed.

## TO A TUMBLER OF WHISKEY

You tiny chandelier!  
You demon-mouth!  
I pull you close  
and watch a comet glide  
around your lip.  
And what's this?  
in your throat?  
gold vomit?  
or the perfect light  
of the magic hour  
made to make  
me drunk?—  
it burns.

EVERYTHING I HAVE TO OFFER

hand gesture

## 18 SECONDS

Clouds of gnats rise into the air and ruin my view of the horizon  
like huge plumes of insignificance.

Behind them in the east, blue coal marks the end of one hemisphere  
and the lid of night begins to shut over the sky.

Behind them in the west, red brick buildings grow gold  
and grainy sunlight separates the grass blades by degrees.

I feel the weight of standing  
in my knees.

A duck flies low, from the east, overhead.

I let go when it settles  
on a turned-off fountain,  
far from the exposed nozzles,  
at the dirty edge,  
where loose gnats collide with the water  
like light rain.

## BIRD IN SPACE

(after the sculptures by Constantin Brancusi)

Flight exists as a soul  
in all things. Its essence  
is the smooth belly,  
the silent upward  
thrust,  
and the bent back,  
which indicates the fall.

## NEVER OR ALWAYS

I am dying;  
I must choose  
to have never  
or always loved.

## THE OCEAN

1.

I've learned,  
staring at the surface of a lake,  
that I can make the edges disappear,  
so that the waves, reflections, and washing light  
seem to go on  
forever outside my field of vision.

On the ocean I can reverse this and feel  
the shore surround me.

At first I thought this meant that none of it was true:  
not the feeling of myself in the lake  
nor the feeling of myself in the ocean,  
nor the feeling of these things in me.

I found myself staring into the water and seeing the sky.

I tried to go into the sky, at that point, not caring,  
not thinking it mattered what reflected it.

2.

I can't recall it now, but  
once I felt panic.

I refuse to believe I was overcome;

I was sensitive  
to life, perceptive,  
not fearful,  
as one would believe.

It was as natural as its absence; somehow

it must have grown from its space,  
as little sense  
as that makes.

Before there is intent—  
in the morning, before you understand  
you're awake—  
is something  
not there?

3.

I want to challenge the assumption  
that some things are known  
without ever being felt.

Consider a blue table,  
in the sun-room of a cottage  
by the lake.

Do you see the surface of the table  
barely gleaming  
like the surface of the lake?

—it is obvious standing there,  
that table,  
hardly worth mentioning—

Before the table was there  
there was an empty space;

the sun and the lake entered the room  
and nothing more happened.

4.

When I was a child pictures were shown to me:  
everything was arranged just so  
yet something was missing.

A plate with eggs, toast, bacon,  
a fork and knife.

“What’s missing, Calvin?”

The orange juice was missing.

I was capable of that, seeing  
what wasn’t there:  
what they might say  
wasn’t shown.

Those exercises don’t make sense to me anymore.  
How can there be more than what is shown?  
What good did it do me  
to look at these things and believe something was missing?

5.

Below the rocks  
that form the mountain

there are trees  
that have dry bark and tufts of needles.

Above that, from gravel, the mountain  
is reared, its barrenness lifted  
out of the earth.

In the presence of a mountain  
I don't believe there can be pride.  
It is desolate straight through  
and straight down.

6.

Once the world is relinquished  
the mind creates a working space for death.

At this point  
it is hard even to revive fear.

Where air was once capable of compassion— over the ocean,  
where it hovered like the heat from another body;  
above fields where it was golden because the field was gold—  
the sky is uninhabited.

It's humiliating later but, at first, there is guilt  
that neglect has driven out sympathy and left landscapes  
without any real conviction.  
A pale road no different from the sky,  
disappearing into just a thin strip of desert.

No one owns these things;  
there are no names for them.  
As the road, guilt and pride  
are just extensions of a dead body.

Going back is impossible.  
This is learned. Eventually  
you can be thankful you no longer plead  
with something you believed to mock you  
from behind images,  
where the shadow only may have been,  
and wasn't,  
a black fish, descending  
into an already black lake.