

**A New Village:  
Mark's Bad-Ass Poetry Project**

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## Introduction: Talking ‘Round a Poetry

### 1.

“Imagine . . . that you should be condemned to doing only those activities deemed possible of achievement, possible in themselves. What profound anguish!”

-José Ortega y Gasset (Schulte 99)

Imagine a jazz combo, a quintet perhaps, digging into a blues. They’ve just finished the head, and the trumpet is warming up his solo, with short bursts of sound. The bass drops down low and quiet, walking on his toes, the ride is just barely audible dinging on the beat, and the kick drum is all but out. The audience sweats through a measure near silence before the trumpet speaks again, this time whining, the next time emphatically declaring something. “But what?” the snare speaks up, wanting to understand. “What did you say?”

Curious himself, the trumpet lurches into some search for an answer, some exploration, and the snare goes with him, filling in the holes, the high-hat insistently clapping in time. “I’ve got it!” the trumpet yells, and the audience turns with the snare and with the bass to see what it is he’s got. The trumpet goes on explaining in long breaths, gaining momentum, growing louder and more insistent, as the bass and cymbal snicker and chatter objections before heckling him outright. But the snare is excited. And the kick drum is reared by the commotion, thundering obscenities. Out of breath, the trumpet is still not sure what he has come to. The path of chords has led him up and down hills and into a few clearings, but never out of the woods. His cries become more desperate, his speech is rushed, babbling. The bass has stopped chuckling and calls to him, trying to ground him in a safe place. The snare is annoyed at his own gullibility, and the cymbal shouts angrily for the tenor to take the reins. But the tenor has inherited a bit of chaos at this point.

The failure is a good show, is it not? We love to watch such a struggle, the trumpeter reddening, desperately searching through the changes for *something*, not knowing exactly what, scattering and splatting notes around like papers and paint, shouting in frustration. If nothing else, he finds emotion. He finds a very peculiar fact about his own humanness, though not necessarily what he wanted to hear out of his own horn. His horn betrays him, tells him (and all the ears he just blasted into) the despair of failing every time he puts the horn to his lips. Perhaps his failure included some of the most difficult and complex lines a trumpeter has ever played (much less improvised), doubtless the result of years and years of training. Perhaps his lines were some of the richest ever heard. This only matters to the listener. The trumpeter knows that what he played is not only incomplete, but can never be completed because his limitations are too great. Because he is always forced to decide, and every decision for one thing is an exclusion of all else—a trait that gives him the power to say *something*, but the harsh fate that he will never be able to say it all, that he will inevitably fail. The louder he blows, the further he boasts his inadequacy. But also the further he spreads that *something*. He is saying *something*. Indeed, he is a courageous loser.

2.

“Let us say, then, that Man, when he begins to speak, does so because he thinks that he is going to be able to say what he thinks. Well, this is illusory. Language doesn’t offer that much. It says, a little more or less, a portion of what we think, while it sets an insurmountable obstacle in place, blocking a transmission of the rest.”

-José Ortega y Gasset (Schulte 101)

Our poet is no different than the trumpet player. A “D flat” is no better than an “A sharp” just as no word is better than any other word. The poet can put the words in a nice order with a nice rhythm, but just as we saw with the trumpeter, he cannot say anything that will mean what he intends to say. He might not even know what it is he intends to say—language likely failed him in thought as well as in writing. Thus he is forced into the dismal world of metaphor and objective correlative, a world in which he will never be successful, but an exciting world nevertheless. My brother recently called me to complain that he could not understand why his teacher thought William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheel Barrow” is a good poem. “It sucks, right?!” he said. I tried to explain to him why I like the poem, and tried to explain the kinds of things writers have to go through to say *something*.

“It’s about how you define things, Eric,” I said. “Look, I wouldn’t say: ‘Yeah, my brother goes to a really great, important high-school. It’s right over there beside those pigeons.’ What does that tell you? I mean, look, I wrote a poem about a chicken the other day myself. Just think, why would I do that? Do Williams and I care that much about chickens or are we trying to insult you? Doesn’t it mean something that we’re writing about chickens and wheel barrows and shit like that? There’s nothing profound in the literal statements, Eric, but there’s *something* there.”

Of course, I knew all along my brother was right. The fact that he, a very bright and artistic kid I should say, is offended that someone would call this short bit about a wheel barrow a good poem should tell us something. The poem fails. I still like it and think it is an excellent poem, but it fails. Sure, it’s incredibly well put together and is very complex for such a short poem, but it fails because it’s a just a poem, because writers have to jump through these hoops to say anything at all—we have to write about chickens and all kinds of nonsense. We can only speak to certain people, only certain people will understand. Only English speakers, perhaps, or only people who know about chickens. Or only people who read poetry. And even then, the reader has to not listen to what we say if he intends to understand; he has to listen to his imagination, otherwise he sees a piece of paper with ink splotches rather than poetry. And the translators are terrible: from world to brain, brain to mind, mind to hand, hand to page, page to page, page to eye, eye to brain, brain to mind, mind to mouth, and there are many more. And each has its own biases and opinions. But again, through these strange translators, through all the metamorphosing that happens between them, as well as through our dismal failures, our maze of botched attempts, we discover so much we had never thought of finding. We find what we didn’t even know existed, or may not have existed, before we stumbled upon it.

3.

“It is prosody and its structures which articulate the movements of feeling in a poem, and render to our understanding meanings which are not paraphrasable”

-Harvey Gross (10)

Accordingly, I have set out on a mission and already stopped to sniff flowers. I imagine smelling flowers is better than carrying out missions, but nevertheless I have quite blatantly fulfilled my fate of failure (and done so alliteratively, it seems). I had intended to get off at the “rhythm” exit, but apparently had too much fun playing with the air hose at the gasoline station on the way out of town. The jazz combo I had originally hoped would explain something about the interplay of rhythm, about the way a jazz musician can stretch and pull and push a rhythm to make it “lay back,” to make it sound slow or unsteady, while actually never losing a very strict beat. And not only is there such a tension in one instrument, but the different instruments play off the rhythms of each other. The freedom is immense, but somehow always held down by that limiting wall of tempo, that steady and inevitable chink of the high-hat on two and four.

Poets have argued from generation to generation about the nature of English prosody. We know language has a rhythm, and poetry tends to highlight this rhythm in one way or another, perhaps only because we expect it to have some sort of rhythm. Even the earliest poetry can be defined as having a very strong sense of rhythmic stability, the strong beats split by a caesura in each line. We have identified certain definite rhythmic patterns appearing in speech: dactyls, trochees, anapests and so on. We argue about whether the number of syllables is as important as the number of beats per line. Different generations come up with different effective answers, but we can almost surely say that English poetry is dominated by the iambic foot. Iambs are very natural in speech and thus work well in poetry. So unless the poem is forcefully turned in another rhythmic direction, we always feel the sort of “back-beat” of the iambic foot. Of course, a poem does not have to be invariably in iambs to be an iambic poem. The problem with a poem written entirely in one static rhythm, is that the rhythm ceases to mean much. Limiting rhythm in such a way is like putting shackles on your star running-back. He just can’t do anything for you that way.

Since rhythm is fairly meaningless (relative to words, that is) on its own (“truck” means something, “tat-tat” does not), having a poem in one and only one rhythm limits it to saying only “I am a poem using this particular rhythm, which means whatever that rhythm means to you.” At best, the rhythm might give the poem a certain feel, perhaps a musical, singing quality for iambs, or the galloping feel of anapest rhythm. But what is really interesting is if the rhythm stops; if the horse stops galloping or changes his stride in some significant way.

So what do we do with rhythm, with this iambic back-beat of the English language? After recognizing it, we use it to our advantage by playing off of it, working against it to create tension. We should not worry that this iambic feel is a limit to what we can do; it is simply a starting line, a field of play. Imagine a 100-meter dash without a definite starting line, or a game of racquetball without any walls to play off of. The important thing is not what kind of rhythm the poem employs, but what that rhythm does, and how that rhythm changes.

Whether poetry would admit it or not, it swings. Iambs are simply swing eighth notes. Shakespeare was a bebopper. Let us look at swing more carefully, so we can fully make this connection. Swing is, first of all, completely undefinable; nor does it define the music. Whereas the eighth notes of “legit” or “straight” music are defined quite precisely and mathematically as an eighth of the beat (however long the beat is defined to be), swing eighths are absolutely undefinable. Computers are incapable of swinging because they require precisely defined lengths

for each note. Studies attempting to mathematically define the length of swing eighth notes have, of course, failed. Much of the “swing” is in fact created less by the actual lengths of the notes (as is commonly believed) than by the style of phrasing, the “feel.” A good jazz musician can make straight eighths “swing” simply by articulating the phrase in a certain way. So writing jazz in traditional musical notation is as impossible as notating the phrasing patterns of speech. One cannot define precisely how long and how stressed a stressed syllable should be in comparison to an unstressed syllable (for one thing, everyone speaks differently, as is the case with jazz). As with the written word, one must know from experience how to properly articulate a phrase. And although there are plenty wrong ways to swing, there is no one right way (and again, we accept failure).

4.

“All expressive rhythms are variations upon a pattern of expectation.”

-Harvey Gross (14)

I slipped in the idea that swing is not only undefined, but that it does not define the music, just as iambs do not define English poetry. People speak of swing eighths as the atom of jazz, the single unit, the place where swing is defined, but this is nonsense. The eighths are simply one swing rhythm of many. True, the eighths vary the most from classical style because they intentionally make one eighth note quite different from the next. But they can still be subdivided into triplets and sixteenths and thirty-seconds. Even the quarter notes swing, because there is a swing feel to them, even though they do not have the obviously distorted lengths of swing eighths. The fact is that one does not play quarter notes in Ellington the same way he plays them in Mozart, though there is no mathematical difference. And like iambs, swing eighths are often only a ghost rhythm to work against. Some tunes turn the swing around for a measure or play a measure completely straight for a certain effect. A soloist might work against the swing by playing only long notes, which would be very uninteresting if it were not in tension against the swing. The rhythmic options for jazz musicians are infinite (since they aren't limited by mathematical divisions of a defined beat), yet the swing is always there like the curtain in the back of the stage. In other words, if I'm not writing sonnets, I'm writing against them. And against Shakespeare. You can see how depressing this could be.

5.

“Perhaps the real matter of the human soul is poetry itself; perhaps it is in the community that is established between the speaking soul of the poet and the attending soul of the listener that our consciousness, our culture and our selves find their ways of being saved from the awful deaths we imagine and die.”

-C. K. Williams (13)

Reading poetics essays or poetry criticism, or even much poetry, one soon realizes that poets single-handedly maintain universal harmony; apparently, without poets, the earth would fall from orbit and crash into the sun or hurtle into space aimlessly, freezing into a ball of ice. Poets, it seems, answer the world's greatest questions, dig deepest into the human heart, and even correct situations in world politics. Armed with rhythm, metaphor, and a stunning vocabulary, poets fight the important battles, yet remain always slightly subversive toward tyrant upper-education administrations, and rally the commoners against bookstores that don't carry

their latest collections. Poets are the leaders and synthesizers of all important academic and cultural areas: not only in literature, but in science, art, philosophy, drama, psychology, and psychiatry (by means of financial support in this last case).

It seems poets and lead trumpet players have the same kind of ridiculous sense of self-importance. The stereotype of the ass-hole lead trumpet player is, in my experience, startlingly accurate. They rule the bandstand as a loud-mouthed, self-proclaimed dictator, blaring and screeching over the entire band through every tune and bitching anyone out who is suspected of not following his articulations precisely, fumbling a fingering, or botching the dynamics. Even after a rehearsal or concert, he's sure to be cursing at someone—the lighting guy, the sound guy, the monitor, his trumpet perhaps. Of course, this character usually makes more mistakes than anyone else, but does so loudly and without apology; he can only be criticized in private—and he usually *is* criticized, with unanimous laughter and bitterness. Not even the audience likes the lead trumpet player; he looks so red-faced and unhappy, he scowls at his fellow trumpeters, he plays louder and higher than anyone would ever choose to hear. When the director finally brings the tune to a thundering end, the lead trumpet ignores him, holding his final note longer than the rest of the band, a thin, lingering squeal of a double C. He's simply ugly.

Yet every jazz big-band pays someone to do exactly that. Every director tells his band to listen to the trumpet, to take his lead. Anyone who doesn't follow the lead (whether the lead is right or not) is officially wrong. Every note he plays is a verdict. Despite whatever was said in the trombone players' sneering gossip about him backstage, when the first downbeat hits, they follow him like ants marching to a barbecue. He's like a highway construction worker who gets paid little, respected even less, and is angrily honked at by the people who need him most. Meanwhile, he provides the means to keep the country running.

The poet, while I can't say he necessarily keeps the country, or even a sixteen-piece band, running, does find himself in a similar situation. Everyone likes jazz the same way everyone likes poetry, which is that everyone likes the *idea* of jazz and the *idea* of poetry. But most people find the actual study of the two arts, even just for entertainment's sake, a job better suited for someone else. As people generally wince at the lead trumpet player's high-pitched racket (a racket that is incredibly physically demanding and usually painful to produce, I should add, though that concept can hardly be understood by anyone who has never passed out or bloodied a lip while playing trumpet. Examine Louis Armstrong's scarred and disfigured lips in one of his later photographs, or read of the pain Dizzy Gillespie went through as his cheeks separated from his jaw due to air pressure, leaving a chronically infected wound. I know players who have to wear a brace around their neck because the physical intensity of their playing caused internal damage to their throats—they're still playing, neck brace and all.) So do audiences shy away from poetry, however necessary it may be in our culture.

6.

“Who is reading your poems? Other poets. And this is a predicament. I don't have a solution for it, I admit it. At least *somebody's* reading, for God's sake! . . . What am I going to do? Move to Yugoslavia?”

-James Tate (116)

Poetry and jazz both have a strange relationship with the audience in that they fail to get across the message of what it is they are doing up on stage. No one understands their methods. Most writers don't have a clue what poets are doing, just as most classical musicians are jealous

of the jazz musicians' capability of improvisation. There is a lot of skepticism for oddities like poetry and jazz; some people believe mysterious arts like these are incredibly easy because they break all the rules, while others assume these arts are impossible unless you are "born with it." Neither argument is true, but that impression is understandable. After all, shouldn't any writer worth his ink at least know how to put complete sentences together and use correct punctuation and style? Shouldn't he use proper form, make logical arguments, and create seamless narration of events? And shouldn't any musician who calls himself professional have rehearsed his part? Shouldn't he have practiced every note of the composition he plans to perform hundreds of times before it achieves perfection? Are these people so good they don't have to rehearse or use grammar, or are they simply cheating? Perhaps poets and jazz musicians think that because their arts are so mysterious, so far outside the usual boundaries, that they create some sort of fantastic illusion, elevating their status; but that only works for magicians. Poets and jazz musicians just make people angry. It's easy to blow off a musical idea if you don't understand it—especially when your musician buddy from the symphony says he doesn't understand it either. The same thing happens with poetry. But the fact is that poetry does create logical arguments and use proper form—it does all kinds of things—it just does these things in a different way than prose does. To break the rules of grammar or to use odd syntax requires first an understanding of what one is not doing. (In fact, any time someone does something different than what is common, it is because he has consciously decided that for him, something else seems like a better option; maintaining the status quo doesn't require that kind of conscious decision.) And to say that a jazz musician is a phony because "he can just play whatever he wants" or that his music is less sophisticated because he doesn't practice a specific composition endlessly is to ignore that he has worked just as hard at his art as any classical musician has at his—except he called it "shedding" rather than "rehearsing." If a jazz tune has an extremely simple composition as a "head," then we cannot judge it by the standards of a symphony—but the solos played after that head may be just as complex as anything by classical composers.

But to return to the point—unlike a magician who creates interest simply because people don't understand how he does what he does, poets and jazz musicians tend to turn people off by hiding behind mystery, keeping the audience out of their realm of knowledge. Both artists hope or assume that their works can be appreciated, and even perhaps enjoyed more fully, without any cumbersome academic involvement in the technical study and drudgery that goes into producing their final work. They believe that the audience will be better off without knowing how that awkward chord progression was navigated so fluidly, or how this poem took two months to create and called upon numerous other readings and experiences, while giving the appearance of describing a fleeting moment and passing emotion. But they are often mistaken. Instead of thinking, *wow, that sounded amazing and must have taken a lot of skill, I should spend time trying to better understand the complexities of that piece of art*, people often think instead, *that didn't make any sense, can I have my money back?*

## 7.

“Charlie Parker was the essence of creativity. Bird wasn’t just playing, he was composing as he played. And where did it come from? Where in Kansas City did he learn to quote Stravinsky while he was playing?”

-Charles Mingus (as quoted in Bell)

Poetry and jazz have both made stabs at rectifying this problem. For years, jazz musicians guarded their secrets like stolen treasure. If you wanted to learn anything about jazz, you had to teach yourself. It was a tough curriculum, but it produced some incredible musicians, all self-reliant individualists with unique styles. But perhaps because so few were accepted into the realm of jazz, many people turned to other kinds of music; consider the rise of fusion, easier and more friendly than its predecessors. Thus, in recent years, jazz has attempted to make itself more available to the public. Most high-schools now have jazz ensembles. Many college music courses include not only jazz history, but improvisation classes as well. Music camps often have jazz sessions that work on improvisation. Books on improv are everywhere. Jamey Aebersold started a trend of producing karaoke CDs for jazz musicians; his rhythm section plays the changes while the listener works on his improv and studies Aebersold’s written lessons or videos. His motto is that “anyone can improvise.” Famous jazz musicians hold high-school band competitions and festivals. So now we have a million mediocre jazzers, which is fine. The problem is only that the kind of theory presented in all this new literature is not the same theory our favorite jazz musicians studied. People have come to believe that one improvises by learning patterns, chord progressions, and scales (the more of these you know, the better you play) which is not true. Those elements provide a necessary foundation of knowledge, but are not the key to playing jazz. Even many professional jazz musicians have come to play in such an academic way that the kind of thoughtful and inspired music we heard from Miles Davis or Lester Young is all but gone.

A similar thing is happening with poetry. People couldn’t be interested in reading it, but they would pay to learn how to write it. And just as books on “how to play jazz” fail to really teach someone how to play jazz, so do poetry workshops fail to teach people how to write poetry. In both cases, one has to study the art as it is done—study recordings and books of poetry—rather than spend all one’s time whittling away at one’s own amateur work. One has to know what poetry is about rather than just the rules everyone hears in poetry workshops: “show, don’t tell,” “use specifics,” “avoid clichés.” Learning scales doesn’t teach a musician to play with feeling or to create tension; workshopping a lousy poem doesn’t always make the poet better either, even if it might make the poem at hand a little more readable. Workshops can be very effective and productive, of course, but they can’t provide everything a writer needs. Poetry has dealt with this issue differently than jazz however, in that jazz has gone in the direction of teaching technicalities, whereas I think poetry has usually gone in the opposite direction. High school English teachers tell us how poetry can be about anything and it doesn’t have to rhyme and we should share our feelings. But we never learn a damn thing about how poetry works and why it deserves to be called “art” (rather than “funny looking way to write a diary”). I remember in seventh grade they tried to teach us about poetry. I don’t think we read a single poem, but we did learn about iambs and sonnets and “diamond poems,” whatever those are. We all wrote a short book of poetry, each poem in a certain form—*see, anyone can do it!* I called my book *Poetry Sucks*.

## 8.

“Because most poems of any value do posit paradoxes, paraphrasing is a feeble pursuit. Because they are conveyed in images, you have little of importance when you strip them away: Life is sad, Life is beautiful—that’s not saying anything.”

-James Tate (125)

Contrary to popular belief, an image narrative or a trumpet solo can make just as much sense as a story or a novel. There’s nothing about either medium that makes it less interesting, less logical, or, sadly, less dependent upon a cursory awareness of the medium itself. Many artists (at least in stereotype) bewail the notion that people aren’t smart enough or don’t pay enough attention to understand their work, neither of which is true. What is true, however, is that different cultures value different kinds of storytelling; modes outside the culture are virtually ignored. While contemporary western society knows that ideas can be imparted through music or writing, we are generally very specific as to how we expect that writing and music to be shaped. We expect paragraphs and thesis statements and conclusions. We expect novels driven by plot, by events, by cause and effect, by characters. We expect a paraphrasable meaning, something to discuss in our literature classes. We listen to music in terms of very generalized ideas about what music means; we all have similar stereotypes as to the difference between sad music, happy music, scary music, and so on. If music appeals to those known categories in the known ways, then we all understand. However, this is not a culture in which one can easily tell a story through image narrative and be widely understood. If we decided as a whole that we suddenly wanted to take image narrative seriously we would have to start over with children’s books and begin from there. Something simple like *a seed, a kitten playing, a construction crew finishing the top stories of a building, a young man shaving, a mother nursing, an old man sitting under a giant oak tree* rather than *the boy buys a fish, the store owner tells him not to feed it too much, he feeds it too much anyway, the fish gets huge, the store owner comes to the rescue*.

Neither mode is better than the other. Nor do these examples represent the only two ways to tell a story with words. Poetry is so agile and strong because it can use narrative events, images, dialogue, music, language, and anything else it comes across to do whatever it needs to do. Form doesn’t necessarily mean sonnet, terza rima, or ghazal—it could mean grocery list, bar napkin, or instruction manual. The problem, perhaps, is that not every mode and form is as well understood as every other simply due to its popularity, regardless of its actual value. If a poem is written using image narrative, with car stereos as a subject, and using a police report as a form, while the reader is not used to image narrative, knows nothing about car stereos, and has never seen a police report, it simply won’t be understood by that reader, no matter how great the poem might be. And most readers will not put forth the effort to go learn about image narrative, car stereos, and police reports, just to understand the poem; they won’t even finish the poem, most likely. It might as well be in Cantonese; indeed, many people unfamiliar with poetry find it to be much like reading a foreign language. Because a poem is in English and few English speakers understand it doesn’t make it a bad poem, nor is it a bad poem if it is in Cantonese and few English speakers understand it. The size of the intended readership is not important in terms of the quality of the poem. However, it is a limit that must be taken into consideration. I can’t write poems in a made-up language that only I understand and expect everyone to love them; I can’t expect those poems to affect anyone. But at the same time, I should not fear criticism from people who don’t know the language I’m using—the poems aren’t necessarily bad because they’re not understood. Charlie Parker used to complain that “Nobody understood our music on

the Coast. They *hated* it” (Ward 336). His concern was not that they didn’t understand, but that not understanding equaled disdain.

Yet poets have always had some silly notion that they were doing something for “the people,” that their work was highly valued by the population. It seems more likely that poetry’s deviation from the normal mode of storytelling and from popular thought is what makes it interesting to a small population of artists and academics and, often at the same time, total nonsense to the general population. After all, Wordsworth thought he was writing in common everyday language, “the real language of men,” and intended his work for the commoner. But Coleridge knew Wordsworth was deceiving himself. Coleridge denied that there was such a thing as a “REAL language of men” and complained that “the language so highly extolled by Mr. Wordsworth varies in every county, nay in every village, according to the accidental character of the clergyman, the existence or non-existence of schools; or even, perhaps, as the exciseman, publican, or barber happen to be, or not to be, zealous politicians, and readers of the weekly newspaper” (116). Whitman likewise fancied himself as an inspiration for the common man, equating all men and praising all classes, yet among his intended audience, among those that he praised so highly, the simple poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were far more popular. Whitman was preferred only by academics. Try walking up to one of your buddies and reciting one of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* or something by Hopkins. Or Ashbery. Or most any poet. Yet if you read the first paragraph of most any good novel to the same people, they might show some interest or enthusiasm. Around here, we’ve been reading plots since we were three. Unlike poetry, comprehending plot is a necessary part of every curriculum from pre-school to the GRE.

## 9.

“A poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words.”

-Wallace Stevens (32)

Poems are culturally bound. They don’t make a good universal language, at least not compared with something like music. (That is, individual poems don’t make a good universal language—poetry itself does.) If you play the note A, 440 Hz, it sounds like an A everywhere (at least as far as I know—there could be exceptions if notes have individual values or personalities to certain people). But if you say “bread” it means different things in different languages to different people and to different cultures. Not only does the word for bread mean a different thing and have different connotations in Russia than it does in Spain than it does in Tennessee, but bread means different things to different people *within* a culture. Bread even means different things to the same person at different times. When I was a kid, bread meant Roman Meal—wheat bread. Now it means cheap white bread. Imagine what it means to a wheat farmer, or to someone who works in a bakery (or a bread “factory”). But that doesn’t mean poets should avoid the word “bread.” It just means they have to be willing to face the reality of using that word, that they should understand its various connotations.

In a way, this imprecision of words is what makes poetry work so well, not only for the writer, but for the reader. The writer uses each word as a springboard for the next. Perhaps, when he uses the word bread, it makes him think of Russian bread lines he saw in the newspaper (or stood in, even). Perhaps it makes him think of going to the grocery with his mother as a child. Perhaps it reminds him of playing Pac-Man or a cruise ship—something random. A poem can break off in a million directions at each word, yet each word limits the poem at the same time.

By using the word *bread*, the author didn't use the word *crust* or *food* or *missile-launcher*, and didn't go in the direction those words might have led. At the same time, the reader is making his own connotations and imagining something very different than the author originally thought of—that much is inevitable. Yet the author still has the power to lead the reader in a certain path. If the reader is making his own individual connections and connotations, then he is imagining and is caught up in the poem; he's right where the poet wants him.

But eventually there's no way for the writer to decide what the "reader" will think of a specific poem or what he will understand or not understand. Everyone will read it a different way. A poet can only hope that if he himself is excited by a poem he has written, that there will be some readers who will feel a similar excitement. I once read a poem and really enjoyed its language and imagination, the giant leaps it took. It was a poem about "green" and what "green" does. Then I realized what it was really about: an acid trip and flashbacks. Suddenly it made too much sense and was no longer imaginative. It was so much better before it was *about* something! Knowing that it was a labeled and documented occurrence, that it was not imagining, but recounting, was so disappointing. It was suddenly mundane. All the interesting connections and ideas I was creating in my mind were out the window. Hell, anyone can write about an acid trip and *ooh, look at the neat colors*.

#### 10.

"I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not."

-John Keats, in his "Letters" to Benjamin Bailey

Poetry relies on imagination, a powerful force that is common to everyone. Even those who will tell you that they have no imagination or can't form mental pictures can, and often do, just that every time they dream. Poetry has the possibility of following imagination wherever it leads rather than being forced to narrow it into a particular way of communicating—that is, it can be paradoxical (consider Keats' notion of "Negative Capability"); it can be true and yet have no topic sentences or obvious cause and effect relationship. And imagination is powerful. Imagination is what connects us with ourselves, with our subconscious. Wallace Stevens believed that the nobility of poetry is what protects us: "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (36). Imagination is why hypnotism can stop a cut from bleeding, can cure or cause ailments (including blindness, hallucinations, deafness, phobias, etc.), can cause or eliminate pain (to such an extent that people can undergo operations under hypnosis without feeling pain and without any drugs.) People can, under hypnosis (imagination, that is), cause blisters to develop on their skin just as if they were burned by something. Or they can be burned and show no blisters because they were convinced they were *not* burned. Or they can eat an orange and be convinced it tastes like an apple. Imagination is just as real as reality, if not *more* real. It makes our reality, defines the way we see the world, in the same way convention defines the way we speak of the world. We don't have to think in sentences or paragraphs. Poetry can escape convention—it can take it or leave it wherever it wants—in order to follow imagination.

But like all art, poetry is a craft. You can't erect buildings solely with imagination—you have to know something about math and physics and welding. A musician's talent only goes so far without intense and arduous training and practice. So it is with poetry. It requires knowledge, practice, and luck. Ben Jonson writes in his book *Discoveries* that "to Nature, Exercise,

Imitation, and Studie, *Art* must be added, to make all these perfect.” But poetry, again like other arts, is impossible to perfect—there is not even a model of perfection. What would the perfect poem do? What would it look like and sound like, what would it be about? Luckily, there is no perfect poem, nor even a poem everyone likes. Poetry just keeps spreading out, covering more and more territory one poem at a time. It has no goals, or even a purpose we can define and agree on. This is a relief, but also disheartening. The good news is that the poet is free from any expectation of perfection. The bad news is that he couldn’t create perfection if he wanted to. Poets never bowl 300. Perhaps only because they always stick around to see the machine put the pins back up when the game is over.

11.

“The destiny of Man—his privilege and honor—is never to achieve what he proposes, and to remain merely an intention, a living utopia. He is always marching toward failure, and even before entering the fray, he already carries a wound in his temple.”

-José Ortega y Gasset (Schulte 94)

I mentioned that poetry was difficult, impossible really, yet that it took hard work to do. How does one work hard at something that can’t be done? I think sports make a good analogy. And let’s use weightlifters. They train all year to go on stage and lift a weight. Now, the weight isn’t very much, really. I mean, they lift more than I lift, but not nearly as much as a bulldozer can lift. They don’t do anything particularly useful with their skill. I mean, they don’t use their incredible strength to support crumbling buildings or remove double-parked cars. But they do teach us a few things. For one thing, they teach us that *a human* has a limit. They also teach us that *humans may not* have a limit. Let’s say I’m a world-class weightlifter and I’ve been training for ten years. I even won an Olympic gold medal and held, at one time, the world record for the clean and jerk, 260kg. Today I competed in the Olympics again and only won a silver medal. Two things happened today: 1) I lifted two pounds less than I lifted four years ago and 2) the guy that won the gold lifted two pounds *more* than I lifted four years ago, setting a new world record. I was forced to realize that my body has limits, though I’m not sure that I ever reached my maximum potential. I know I’m now past my prime and will only lift less and less as I continue to compete, but I also wonder if, four years ago, I could have lifted just a few more pounds. *Did I get enough sleep then? Did I eat right and train right? Was I focused enough? Did I quit simply because I was winning and had a world record? Couldn’t I have somehow found the power to lift another few pounds? I know I could have!*

But I couldn’t have. What difference would a couple pounds make anyway? The record would still be broken eventually. There aren’t many records people can’t break. Someone will always find a way to do something better. And we’ll always be amazed at our own failures. You would imagine that if you really focused on bowling and spent all your time perfecting your bowling, you could eventually be a perfect bowler. Why not? Why couldn’t you hit a strike every time? The pins are always in the same place, you always roll the same ball, you’ve hit hundreds of strikes before. Why has no one ever been a perfect bowler? Perfect games, yes, but why not fifty perfect games in a row? Why can’t Shaq hit free throws? Why does *any* professional basketball player miss free throws? Why, after four years of rehearsing the same program over and over, could Michelle Kwan, arguably the best female skater in the world, not skate perfectly at the 2002 Winter Olympics? Why could none of the skaters skate perfectly? Hadn’t they practiced endlessly, hadn’t they devoted their lives to those few minutes of skating? Weren’t

they the best of the best? Yet not only did they all make mistakes (no one scored all 6.0s), but many failed to even perform the jumps they had planned to do. Skaters were, at the last second, deciding to do double axles instead of triples. At the moment of truth, they backed down. After doing the same program a hundred times, they couldn't pull it off. They fell on their asses one by one in a vivid display of how great and how imperfect we are at the same time. This is what we're striving for, I suppose—to reach failure. Our maximum potential is the exact point at which we fall apart.

This is part of why poetry is impossible. Because anything is impossible. Because Maurice Greene holds the world record in the 100 meter sprint, but couldn't go .01 seconds faster. No matter how good you, are, the best in the world even, you still aren't all that great. The best skaters fall on national television. The best weightlifters make lousy tractors (and, at their best, will collapse under the weight of two more pounds). The best musicians miss notes and have to practice constantly to improve or even just to maintain their skills. And of course, the best poets write endless pages of bad poetry.

## 12.

“It is a difficult business, being intensely conscious of all the ways the poem is working, and simultaneously hoping, nay, counting on, breaking into the vaults of the unconscious where valuable documents and priceless jewels are stored.”

-James Tate (137)

This brings up another misconception about poetry. Many people seem to be under the impression that any one poem represents all other poems—that because most poems aren't very good, all poems aren't very good. I have no idea why this should be the rule with poetry, but not with any other art. The large portion of any art, by mathematical definition, is average, that is, makes up the large hump of the bell curve. So most poetry isn't that great. The majority of music being made these days (at least the music we end up hearing) is very mediocre—and people know this, but keep listening to it anyway if there are at least a couple songs on the radio worth listening to. Most jazz, I can say from experience, is very average. It's usually too corny, or too academic, too busy, too showy, too shiny-buttons, too Kenny G, or too unrehearsed. Even my favorite artists come out with a lousy album every now and then. Wynton Marsalis came out with an album a few years ago that I hated so much I threw it out my car window—but I still like Wynton and I'll buy his next album because I know he does good stuff (usually). Even many of the “classics” of bebop are hit-or-miss because, since many tunes were not rehearsed and depended entirely on improvisation, every recording depended on how the musicians were feeling that day and how drunk or high they were at the time. Many of my favorite poets write books of seventy pages and only four good poems. That's fine with me, because I get to read four really great poems—and some of the others might be decent as well (or at least inspiring if they're bad enough).

And then, of course, there's taste. There are many things we look for in “good poems,” but there are no set standards (or if there are set standards they change every decade or so). Nothing is against the rules. I've read great poems about death, great poems about war, and great poems about donkeys or clams or words. I've read terrible poems about the same subjects. Most of the time I read terrible poems that someone else thinks are great poems. Richard Hugo writes a long list of dos and don'ts in his book *The Triggering Town*, including rules like “Make sure each sentence is at least four words longer or shorter than the one before it,” or “Maximum

sentence length: seventeen words. Minimum: one,” or even “No semicolons.” It’s just for fun. They’re funny rules to think about, and they make sense, but I can’t imagine Hugo actually follows them. I think it was Charlie Parker (or maybe not) that said you have to learn everything and then forget it all to play well.

It’s strange that academia has become the only place poetry can survive financially—it sort of hides out in English departments here or there and collects a paycheck. But it doesn’t create real good textbooks or “laws” like the sciences or mathematics. Physicists argue a lot, but when poets argue, they can’t even agree on what they’re arguing about. Mathematicians have to create “proofs” for anything they do. But poets are arguing about whether orange is prettier than yellow. They argue about taste and style. Whatever criteria we’re using to decide what kind of poetry is “good” is biased toward what we simply “like”. Billy Collins is one of our best poets right now and I can’t stand his poems (though I admit he writes skillfully). I’ll even say that I dislike about ninety percent of the poems I read, but that doesn’t mean I’m against poetry or that all the poems I don’t like are bad poetry. Workshops based on New Critics thinking don’t talk about whether or not they like a poem. They just talk about what works and what doesn’t work. They do, at least, attempt to figure out what a poem is *trying* to do—that’s a good idea since it means we don’t have to argue fruitlessly about what it *should* be trying to do. But it also makes us less aware that what we think “works” is still based on what we like and don’t like. We say, “This rhyme doesn’t work here,” instead of “I hate rhyme—this is stupid and *nothing* works here.”

Poetry is so great and so ridiculously impossible to define or make rules for because it does everything and incorporates everything. Whereas prose can’t do everything poetry does, poetry can do everything prose does. Whereas philosophy prefers a certain mode of discussion, poetry can use that mode of discussion and everything else too. Not only does poetry have the all-access pass to employ any kind of language and knowledge it wants—from newspaper language, to romance novel language, to bumper sticker language—but it uses the *difference* between these languages to create tension. Where poetry gives us trouble is when it reaches further than its reader can. We can’t blame poetry for that. It just knows more than we do and covers more territory than we can. If people like Billy Collins, then I’m all for him, I just won’t read the stuff. If people like poems that don’t make sense, then I’m all for it. I’m all for poems about death and farming and the limbic system and the Bible and space-men. It won’t make me mad if someone writes a poem about computer programming just because I know nothing about computer programming. The only rule I’ve held on to is that a poem should always do *something*. That is, it must change something, it must have some effect, leave us in a changed world, and all poems have that possibility. James Tate writes: “What we want from poetry is to be moved, to be moved from where we now stand. We don’t just want to have our ideas or emotions confirmed. Or if we do, then we turn to lesser poems, poems that tell you killing children is bad, chopping down the forest is bad, dying is sad” (2). A poem of invented words can do that. A poem about lymph nodes can do that. That’s not to say that it’s easy to change the world. If I describe the keyboard I’m using, I don’t change anything. You either a) don’t care because you already know what a keyboard looks like or b) don’t know what a keyboard looks like and therefore don’t care. But if I describe a keyboard as a metaphor for how we speak, for how we make language and communicate, for how ideas are processed, then it means something to everyone whether they know keyboards or not. It may not be a good poem, but at least it does *something*. That’s all I ask. I ask that the poem perform some action, however minor, in this world of unknowns—that is, that the poem discover something.

And there are millions of ways in which poetry accomplishes this “something.” I won’t try to list them. But the issue of language has come up again and again, as has the issue of poetry’s mingling of random forms, subjects, styles, tastes, and so on as a reason for its power and also its vagueness. Poetry does this same kind of mixing with language. Imagine if the poem above about the keyboard had likened the image of the keyboard to the image of a machine gun and compared the way the fingers caress each instrument. Or perhaps we simply set the language of the keyboard user against the language of the machine gun user. Those two people simply speak different languages. A “magazine” is a completely different item to each, and a “copy” is something the keyboard user makes with a printer, while the machine gun user only says “copy” when he is on his radio. This kind of combat of languages is at the heart of poetry and is at the heart of this discussion—of why poetry cannot be defined, and why it is important yet hardly thought of, and why it encompasses every kind of thought, art, and discipline, yet exists apart from all of them.

### 13.

“Language can be hazardous because it is our primary grip on the world. When language is skewed the world is viewed very differently.”

-James Tate (2)

I’ve heard that there are some languages so simple you can actually learn the entire lexicon. Speakers of these languages would find a dictionary to be a silly thing to keep around, which makes sense; if you know the language, why would you ever need a dictionary? But English, and, I suppose in my ignorance, many languages, are too complex for complete mastery. Huge chunks of our language go unused and unknown by most of the population. What does it mean if two surgeons, both of whom speak only English, are overheard in conversation by an English student such as myself, and the student finds their words completely unintelligible? Perhaps the student does not have the conceptual knowledge to understand what they are talking about, but in this case he doesn’t even understand the words themselves.

To begin with, English is a strange cocktail of languages, from its growth out of Old English to its annexing of French vocabulary after the Norman Conquest. But I mean to stress that even today, there are many languages within English that we do not recognize as being another language, but that might as well be. Not only is there more than one kind of English, but English is more than one language.

Again, let me try to narrow my meaning. I don’t mean to suggest some thesis that dialects and accents of different regions and ethnicities are actually different languages. Nor do I mean to study the nature of our language as a linguist would. I intend only to outline one of the tools used in poetry: that of using different languages, “language” here meaning a style of speech and a vocabulary distinctive to an individual or a group. Sociolinguists prefer the term “dialogue.” I’m terrible at this, so let me get on to the examples.

Let’s first create a hypothetical character who knows every word in the dictionary. In fact, let’s make him a robot who downloaded English into his system in its Oxford entirety. He’s driving down the road and comes to a stop sign. Let’s say we’re sitting in the car with him and we notice that he suddenly becomes terribly confused and frightened, asking us in a panic, “What does that sign mean?!”

“Well, genius-robot-boy, I thought you knew everything,” one might say. “The sign says “Stop,” which, I’m pretty sure, means to stop.”

“Stop what?! I didn’t do anything wrong did I?”

“Stop! Hey! Damn, you just ran that stop sign! Didn’t you download the driver’s manual?”

“No, I haven’t done that yet. I downloaded the car manual and thought it would all be easy enough. After all, they’re supposed to have signs that tell you what to do.”

But the signs themselves don’t really tell you what to do in a literal sense. The robot was confused because a big sign that says “Stop” doesn’t actually mean very much unless you know the language of street signs. To the robot, the sign could have meant any number of things. Perhaps it meant for him to stop whistling or talking or listening to music. It could mean to stop driving altogether (which could be dangerous). It could mean to stop here or stop somewhere else. Even if the robot knew that it meant to bring the vehicle to a complete stop in the vicinity of the sign, he would still have no indication of whether or not to begin driving again, and when. Perhaps it was a note left there for someone else altogether. Imagine what would have happened had he come to a sign that said “Exit Now.”

But most of us never consider all the possible implications. The meaning is as clear as “Would you like fries with that?” Because we understand the language of street signs, there is no hesitation or translation involved. So how did we learn this language? Certainly, one does not have to take a class or even study the DMV’s driver’s manual to know what to do at a stop sign. Most likely, someone told you what it means (hopefully not a police officer, as he wrote you a ticket. It is not necessary, after all, to know English as a driver on U.S. roads, but to know the language of street signs.) The other way you could learn is by context. Even if the sign confuses you, you might figure out from the reaction of other drivers to the sign what the proper action is. After all, it makes sense to stop the car before you fly through an intersection. It also makes sense to start driving again once you have made sure your path is clear. In other words, there is a big picture into which this little part of language fits. Without all these clues no amount of fluency in written English is enough to decipher even the meaning of the word “Stop” on a red octagonal sign.

We could take a green-light as an example as well. Most people say that a green light means “go”; but why would it mean that? The street’s existence means “go”. A sign or light indicating that the street may be driven on is unnecessary and even redundant. So the light indicates something else. It is part of a context including a yellow light, a red light, and a busy intersection.

#### 14.

“No longer is our speech appropriately saying what we think but it is only a manner of speaking.”


-José Ortega y Gasset (Schulte 108)

Readers often come to poetry this way; that is, fluent in the language it is written in, but not necessarily fluent in the language poetry uses. Most people don’t realize poetry is a foreign language because all the words look so much like words they know. They become confused at what “Stop” means simply because they fail to look at the scene in front of them, to acknowledge context. They fail to ask around. They don’t even look at the driver’s manual.

Of course, this failure is understandable. The driver's manual for poetry is poetry itself, a rather extensive handbook. And the effort involved in asking around may be more than seems worthwhile for many people; after all, poetry is not as much a part of everyday life as a stop sign, at least not for the average citizen in this country. Poetry is not likely to save you from rear-ending a Mercedes and it won't help lower your car insurance rates. But in any case, if we do plan to read poetry (or drive on the road), to neglect context is a mistake. And the context of a poem may not operate in the same way it does in a sitcom or romance novel.

Poetry creates its own language, defining itself as it goes. Thus, it is different from the examples above, the doctor language and the street sign language, in that it is not a code or a specific lexicon set aside from usual everyday English. Doctor language can be deciphered in a book. Street sign language is defined in a manual. But there is no dictionary or chart to define the language of poetry. I don't mean to say that we can't define the language we use to talk *about* poetry: "alliteration," "assonance," "rhyme" and so on; those are simple enough. I mean that each individual poem creates a new kind of language that can only be defined by itself. Yet it is still different than technical terms in text books, defined and glossed on the spot. José Ortega y Gasset writes that "an author's personal style . . . is produced by his slight deviation from the habitual meaning of the word. The author forces it to an extraordinary usage so that the circle of objects it designates will not coincide exactly with the circle of objects which that same word customarily means in its habitual use" (96). Very often people expect to be able to interpret a poem literally; a dictionary definition of each word and an encyclopedia to catch all the obscure references should provide the answer to what the poem "means." But poetry, more than any other literary tradition, involves the reader in its own creation. Just as we found "bread" to mean different things to different people at different times and places, a word in a poem has its own time and place, its own context. And context, in poetry, allows us (or forces us) to consider all possible meanings of each word. While prose uses context to direct us to the correct meaning of a particular word, poetry does the opposite, maintaining and utilizing all possible meanings and connotations, amplifying each word's power.

Perhaps the average American today doesn't really want to be "involved." Reading poetry isn't always fun, even the good poetry. Sometimes it's fun like a war museum is fun. Sometimes it's fun like a roller-coaster without safety regulations that doesn't have a seat belt—and you never know where it will end. Sometimes it's frightening in a sublime sense. I'm not sure what people think of poetry exactly, but I do know that I'm planning to practice for a career in selling poetry by selling books written in Sinhalese. Yes, I know, the books in Sinhalese will sell like porno at an Eagle Scouts convention compared to poetry, but one must start somewhere. To make the task more difficult I could only sell in areas with a low density of literate Sri Lankans, say, Mobile, Alabama, or anywhere outside of Colombo for that matter. I'm already working on my pitch lines:

These books are hot off the presses—try them as hand warmers!  
Chicks dig a guy who pretends to know a language she's never heard of!  
Symbols like  look fantastic on a white background and make great flipbook characters!  
The copyright page is nearly half in either English or arabic numerals!  
See letters you didn't even know existed! It's like discovering a whole new color spectrum!  
Special Tamil translation edition for a limited time!  
Rated R and two thumbs up!  
Collect 'em all!

It might be true that poetry is something one must be involved in to appreciate. Most people I know who study poetry also write it. I came to poetry first by writing and then by reading. Bob Hicok did the same thing and still admits that he'd rather "write poetry and read the comics." There is a misconception that the only way to become a poet is to read immense amounts of poetry and know everything about it. It's true in part—you can't write poetry without reading it. For example, my musician friends always complain that they can't play jazz no matter how hard they practice or how much they learn. The problem, of course, is that they never listen to jazz and have no idea what it should sound like beyond a few vague ideas. Jazz musicians all learned by listening carefully. Poets do the same thing. But that's not all there is to it, and that's where the misconception lies. Reading poetry is not like doing push-ups for our pens. We can't put our Muse on the treadmill by blazing our way through every book we can find. Hicok, in fact, suggests not reading too much poetry—you don't want to be the guy that can list offhand every magazine or journal Mary Ruefle has ever been published in. A poet reads other things and is interested in other things. William Matthews had the same idea, or so I heard. James Tate became a writer because, "according to my fantasies . . . you could read books on horticulture and Buddhism and say that was part of your work" (113). Poetry is the craft we use to assimilate everything we learn and struggle with in the world. It would be a shame if poetry could find nothing to talk about but itself. So I consider my love of poetry to be like my love of anything else—let's use football again. I love football. I watch football every weekend in the fall, and I miss it terribly in the off-season. Because I watch a lot of football, I learn a lot about football. I would probably do okay in a football trivia competition, but not great. I don't watch to learn trivia, or because I feel I have to increase my knowledge and stay up to date. I wouldn't watch Troy State vs. Eastern Kentucky just because it's on and, dammit, I like football. Well, sometimes I would, but that's beside the point. Sometimes I read poetry all night instead of going out, instead of doing work, or even instead of sleeping. Sometimes I read poetry on the toilet. Sometimes I can't bear to read three lines of poetry. Sometimes I'd rather read the comics.

15.

"If brass awakes as a bugle, it is not at all its fault."

-Rimbaud (as quoted in Tate)

It's true that there are all kinds of poetry—we have coffee house poetry, religious poetry, poetry by young people, "world" poetry, poetry by Presidents and rock stars, poetry made especially for some particular holiday, political poetry, limericks, language poetry, bathroom stall poetry, and so on. People like to draw lines between which kinds are good and which are bad. Obviously, free verse is stupid and sestinas are the only way to write anything. Also, poetry set in the country is much better than poetry set in the city. And all poems must have a setting. Glad that's settled. To be honest, I find that there is only one way to deal with the situation: use a football metaphor. Each kind of poetry can be a position on a football team—that way we can think of all kinds of poetry as working together for the sake of poetry as a whole. You snicker now, but how would you like to go up against a team who had surrealist poets as wide receivers? If a receiver can drastically change perspective and make huge leaps at any yard marker, should you play him tight or just try to keep him in front of you? They make a little more sense now, don't they? How could you even think of taking on an offensive line made up of epic poets? You can't knock down Homer and you can't get around Dante. Ezra Pound would be the assistant-

coach-who-thinks-he's-smarter-than-the-head-coach and the head coach might be Shakespeare (though they're thinking of hiring Jorie Graham because Will is always cussing out reporters and no one ever knows where he is). SLAM poets can be the cheerleaders. Experimental poets are in the XFL, formalists are actually playing soccer. We can put all the chatty poets in the play-by-play booth. But really, we should be even more specific. If Ovid is our game-calling man, then who does the color announcing? Whitman? Who's the sideline reporter? Coleridge? And if we let Neruda run the ball, we'll need a fullback like Dickinson. Swift can be our dirty rule-breaking, fine-taking, trash-talking linebacker. I'm not picking a quarterback, but I do know we'll need a couple backups. We used to start Wordsworth; he was great for a while, then he started throwing interceptions. It was a blessing in disguise; we found out Pope was really good at *catching* interceptions. We'll need lots of people. Don't hire too many tight ends and watch the salary cap. Keep a few veterans around for morale.

16.

"The dictionary is there to remind me where words have come from, in our lovely, perverse tongue, and what sort of life they have lived. But it is the writer who keeps the dictionary up to date. His sensibility revises the meanings of words to accommodate new thoughts and feelings which his fellows are trying to think and feel."

-William Meredith

How to Write a Poem: First you'll need a word. Wait, first an idea. No, maybe first just a word, at least according to W. C. Williams, who knew about poems. Even Wallace Stevens once wrote, "above everything else, poetry is words" (32). Before you use this word, you should be careful to know what it is. You may feel free to discuss the matter with the Oxford English Dictionary, as etymology is important. You'll need to know where this thing has been so as to be aware of what STDs or parasites it may be harboring. Study the history of each letter and sound in the word. Then, as a matter of professionalism, you should break it in. Say it to a few friends and strangers. Listen to *them* say it. Live with it to study its moods and fluctuations. Examine its daily habits and monthly cycles. Say it in different accents, time periods, costumes, and attitudes. Sing it and rhyme it with something. No need to say it backwards, we mustn't waste time on frivolities. Say it in all of its possible listed meanings and then say it to imply shades of some undocumented meaning as well. For instance. A tree grows in the yard. This is a tree. Hello, tree. TREE! What tree? Be a tree. Are thee a tree? Or a tree-house. A tree leaf perhaps. A golden tree. A money tree. A family tree of knowledge. THE tree. Its bark is worse than its tree. One plus two is tree. I'll tree you, Tree. Eventually, you will become confused as to the word's actual spelling, pronunciation, and meaning. At this point, you may confidently do with it as you please. If you put the word in the poem you plan to write (a very rash and predictable decision, if I may say so, considering all the worthy words you just left out) then you must be careful to put it in the right place and amongst words it will either get along with in a productive way, or battle with most famously. There should be sparks in either case. Time is not allotted for fireproofing the paper—work quickly.

17.

“PREMATURE EJACULATION

I’m sorry this poem’s already finished.”

-William Matthews (45)

Bob Hicok once told me that we know poetry must be important to society simply because it has never disappeared. No matter how small it gets, it always sticks around. And being small is okay because that allows for complete freedom—no one writes poetry for the money or because their parents pressured them into it. Politicians don’t hire poets for their campaigns anymore. James Tate writes: “Amazingly, year after year, surprising, subtle, profound, funny, and sad new poems are written and published. Poems we now know we needed. There is no end to our needing poetry. Without poetry our Culture and, more importantly, our collective Spirit, would be a tattered, wayward thing” (1-2). I went to dinner recently with my dad and he likened poetry’s situation to urbanization. “Poetry is sort of like trees,” he said. “People need them. No one knows why. The first time I went to New York City I was amazed because in the middle of that huge mass of concrete and steel, right smack in the middle, there was this damn forest! It was like an oasis. Every city has to have parks.” Truly, no matter how industrialized an area gets, people save a spot for some grass and trees, no matter how silly it may seem in the middle of a big city. Poetry lives in the same place—in a rather awkward place where it doesn’t seem to belong sometimes, but it’s there nevertheless. It has to be there.

## **This is Not a Dictionary**

### *I. The Zwitterions*

These are a migratory group,  
Neutral at the isoelectric point,  
Living in a fragile balance of protonical power,  
But with a propensity to wander  
Into baseness or acidity.  
They do not exist un-ionized in a solution.  
The Zwitterions live in asymmetrical structures,  
And harbor a love for constructing and metabolizing.  
They don't bother with hard hats or sack lunches.  
They are workers. They are tools.  
They are three-dimensional,  
But they have no love for pets.  
The Zwitterion cannot tell you his favorite color,  
Nor hum you a ditty.  
They are not in concrete.  
They are prisoners, living in cells.  
Sometimes, they don't do anything.  
The Zwitterion is illiterate and of questionable intelligence.  
Their children go unnamed. They have no sense of fashion.  
They, like bricks, are all the same.  
Their comedians are horrible.

### *II. King Alanine, M.D., of the Zwitterions.*

I, the Glycinate Cation, am the greatest  
Of the aspartic acids, prevailing  
Over my glycine brethren in their honest simplicity.  
My favorite color is red.  
If I had limbs I would drive a Saturn L-Series.  
Their ads are humorous.  
My presidential robe is of crushed velvet,  
Lined in periwinkle satin,  
Imported from the Leucines.  
My jester is horribly unfunny. He is a lousy Queen.  
My subjects, however, create excellent sitcoms and musicals.  
My favorite is a documentary: "The Enzymic  
Inhabitants of Arginine." I am left handed.  
I use my right hand with scissors.  
I hold the Zwitterion record score in both the verbal section of the SAT  
And Galaga. I dislike poetry and prose equally.  
I worry that I need more perspective.

I, the King of the Zwitterions, am a podiatrist.  
I am a cleaner of the streets. My brushes are the biggest and cleaningest.  
I am a model. I am Nitrogen.  
I am the subject of a great King!  
I bring him gifts of unmetabolized nutrition!  
My neighbor's dog, King Junior, prefers my bushes.  
I have a tattoo of duel rifles.  
It is on my wing. My wing doesn't work.  
I only have one wing.  
I am concerned with my people's safety.  
My people are concerned with my safety.  
This, despite much legislation from the kings and pets,  
We duke out till Christmas.

### *III. Markus, Poet of the Zwitterions*

The poet is neither Markus nor a Zwitterion.  
He has left both accounting and game-shows  
For the Marines. He is made of flour.  
In June, he collects the sun within his skin.  
Winter, for Markus, is time to make more quilts,  
Even in the oven he often lives. Sometimes,  
He doesn't. Indeed, he has little  
Ones under him, and has what he has to say  
For them. What a giver, a charity himself!  
When he walks, he leaves dents everywhere,  
His voice shatters even tupperware! No where  
Is his presence more present than in celebration  
For he is old and wet and statistic. Markus,  
A dandelion, will always be called dandelion. Markus,  
A cook, will be afraid of yeast. Markus,  
A lover of zoos, will find himself flapping,  
Perched above the eagle's cage,  
Watching his feathers fight the air below.

## **Bad-Ass Poem**

My masterpiece poem will be bad-ass,  
Everyone will sort of hate it,  
But it will be incredibly famous,  
“The first famous poem ever,” they’ll say.  
People will wish they wrote poems like me,  
Or remember they don’t like poems.  
It will start out with some catch premise  
About penises, but before long it will  
Reveal its sensitive side: the meaning  
Of tall buildings. Then it will be about  
The human spirit,  
Or that’s what the language and imagery would suggest.

You know, the buildings would start to crumble  
And the old architects would become impotent,  
But, not quite, not a story like that.  
No, it would be jumpy and weird,  
This and that, entangled somehow,  
Something for everyone really,  
With the penises, the architecture,  
And some internal slant rhyme and alliteration,  
Strange word associations, allusions to about ten dead poets.

My masterpiece would be about Zeus and God  
And Hicktowns, but mostly sex,  
Something current, but that word turns the poem  
Into a river or around or over like soil.

Ah, yes, similes, great strange ones  
One would never think of but absolutely right,  
Like “her legs were like two penguins.”  
Yes, it would be a very funny poem,  
Witty, understated; I would even account for laughter  
In the rhythm of the lines,  
Invisible laugh tracks.

I wonder if I should mention flowers,  
Specific ones, and how they’re like women.  
Better yet, it would be about corn,  
Or the complete absence of corn,  
“A Study on a Kernel of Green Giant Sweet Niblets” or  
“Poetry of the Dust Bowl.”

## **What to do for lunch**

If I were to walk into Friday's  
as I do, and you were the waitress  
that day, and you were to ask me what I'm having  
and I said nothing, you'd know I wanted  
something, and you'd say won't you have  
something, and I'd say I'd like some water  
and you'd know I don't really and I'm  
not hungry but have an empty lap,  
and you'd sit down and regret how light  
my shoulders are and so put your weight there,  
and glad as you'd be, dangling your feet,  
you'd still feel tired and swollen and looked at,  
and I'd have to reach around you to my water.

## Angelocracy

After all this searching for a hole  
in the ground, we come to a hole  
in the ground. My watch died,  
I show everyone who needs the time.  
I am a winter  
oak, but I am thick and green,  
I'm in bloom. I have been out.

CAUTION:  
ITEM UNDER SPRING  
PRESSURE, KEEP ITEM  
AWAY FROM CHILDREN  
AND FACE WHILE OPENING.

In the space age, no one cares  
about space anymore, not anymore  
than one cares about zygomorphy,  
despite the inherent arrangement  
and applicability to flowers.

NOTICE:  
THIS RICE COOKER / FOOD STEAMER  
COMES WITH A STEAM RACK FOR  
STEAMING PURPOSE. A HEATPROOF  
PLATE MAY BE PUT ON THE RACK  
TO HOLD SMALL PIECES OF FOOD  
FOR STEAMING.

Here's dad, in a two-seater,  
on the interstate. He's not going anywhere.  
Better than the crowded bus  
he says sometimes. He's amphetokous.  
This is the way things are here.  
I'm the support system.

## Poultry

I'm all chest. Feathers I throw about.  
I'm not dinner. I have upholstery.  
All this grain, what's a thing to do?  
What's a thing? Scratch, roost, guffaw.  
I'm all roost.  
I sprang up like a tree from seed.  
I'm a tree. I'm at the top.  
I'm part of the show.  
I'm part Chinese. Spicy.  
I scratch, I roost, I cock.  
I'm made with rib meat, for the sake of Peter.  
Here I am in binomial nomenclature:  
No, really I'm just a rhythm,  
A cycle, a fifth, a fourth  
Hollow bone. I'm drunk with Roost.  
I'm really cookin under these feathers,  
Really flyin. Shootin some Js, shootin the shit,  
Shootin some chickens. A ballad,  
Indeed, is I. CAR-NI-VORE.

Always first am I, cluck and brawny,  
This way and egg brunch. Baby Killer Bernie's  
Me, laid a lot of hens. Screamin bitches.  
Love tail. I kicked the wolf's ass  
And bit wife 9 myself. Yes, first to the fight  
And first to the processor. We don't teach  
Math here. Boxing, voice, frying  
For the hens. Who knows  
Who's missing? And my boy's a real  
Gutter. My head's a real tractor.  
Working the dirt, singing gospel.  
If I have to be here, so do you.  
If it's not chicken wire, it's dirt.  
A place to put this tractor head.  
What I'd do for a shovel or a dog.

## **Pee-Wee's Big Adventure**

There she was, ripped and ravaged in the yard under my balcony.  
She was completely still when the breeze died.  
You could hardly tell she was once a hot piece of ass.  
She was in too many pieces.  
The next day, her shoulder stumbled by me  
in the parking lot, completely naked.  
I pulled over and wrote for hours on a McDonald's bag  
the true theory of poetry, replacing  
movement and development with "fucking it all up"  
and strong, interesting language with "good shit."  
But why explain? In poems the horns  
of rhinoceri and purple greys of "therefore"  
do not co-extinguatate carpet-bagging rubber rabble.

*Oh, that's a lie Pee-Wee, you double-talking flim-flammer!*

No, take my word for it, a fanny in a wicker basket  
is worth polio vaccinations in Uganda  
and 3.5% unemployment of the Panamanian Panda.  
The CEOs of Cheerios and Texacos  
clip their nose hairs with riding mowers!  
I know, I was there! when Napoleon couldn't even control  
his runny bowels. I watched from the bower  
when the god of the sea drowned, hardly able to doggy paddle!

Dear God, dear Love, dear Death (he says,  
suddenly in tears), I've been digging,  
digging holes everywhere I go  
as if something, some bottle or lost email,  
or some new prophet or war or blonde might be living in some future hole.  
But every time, in goes a corpse,  
before I'm even finished digging.  
There's no remedy for this.  
I've waited in ambush at the bottom to push the caskets back out  
as they fall, but dirt always follows the dead  
and dirt is tougher to push around than bodies.  
Holes are the home turf of gravity.  
I end up screaming for help before my words  
are covered in cemetery soil.  
I imagine I'm digging the wrong way.  
I need an air shovel to dig those stale old molecules out of the way,  
to find neurotygen in the place of oxygen  
and falson flamboriride in the place of carbon dioxide.  
Then, in this old hole in the air, there they'll all be, at a card table.

There'll be Death, flicking coffins around,  
there'll be Love, thumping God on the ear,  
there'll be God, playing crossword puzzles  
with Pee-Wee, winning every damn game  
with words like, uh...  
chrysanthemum or xö&splechfler or some other ridiculous thing.

**How anesthesia affects Boxer's memory which in turn affects sea level which leaves us with little unaffected space in which to think clearly, which reminds Boxer of the apple, which he will now discuss.**

The apple is absolutely red with  
the exception of a few great strains  
which have inevitably hobbled its development.  
This reminds me of my childhood,  
which, though pretty, was mostly a storm.  
When I was a baby, remember, I had not  
even teeth, yet chewed my mother to death.  
My ambition was bounding, which I should say  
got me halfway to the Olympic trials.  
Disregarding a few spare moments of heightened awareness  
(when, for instance, my father hilariously floated  
Condom Good-Year from our hotel window over  
Olympic Park and later heaved I should follow if not  
for my auspicious talent for obtaining endorsements) I  
was nearly landlocked entirely. This has been  
the case in every circumstance. That is,  
I walled the door, he threw me to the floor.  
I'd give him a shiner, he'd give me one finer.  
In to the shrink, who tickled me pink.  
I have stumbled to tell you this, but am reminded  
how vividly I almost forgot the time I almost died  
and was basically *in* the handbasket tracing  
all the good-byes I could remember into the air with my finger  
when a young girl in another basket said to me:  
*What you gotta realize is we gotta exist here  
with these materials on this wicked-ass earf.*  
That was it for my leaping. I was demoted directly  
to soft foods. Visitors visited (albeit slow and quiet).  
And I remembered, eventually, my father crying  
so his wrinkles made almost a tiny delta, streams  
offering him to the ocean around his face, where I lived.

### **Letalska: A Postcard**

In most of the world, I'm illiterate,  
But here I'm a scholar,  
And in sweaty Venetian slums, I'm a tourist  
In the wrong grocery store.  
A woman hurries me out,  
But the water is cheap and cold.  
The temperature is never too anything.  
I wear layers. When I burn, my skin  
Peels painlessly away. I never miss it.  
In fact, I've forgotten  
Rubbing sunscreen on your shoulders, lightly pushing  
The straps of your purple swimsuit aside.  
Today, I went to—oh—  
Some church. I interrupted worship  
To admire Titian. My shoes  
Squeaked over every marble tomb.  
And you were studying something.  
Or maybe eating. Maybe it was cold.  
There are advantages to being insensitive.  
Mountains aren't inspiring—just a mound,  
A rock that won't skip, a miser  
Hording sunrises, an obstacle  
Clouds must detour or be sliced apart.

## The Story of the Lipstick

I don't know the story of the lipstick  
except that it loves me (the story and the lipstick),  
to journey so endlessly. Wednesday it was in the lot.  
Thursday it was below the stairwell. Friday,  
after a long and depressing game for which  
I dropped everything, it was resting on the landing,  
halfway up the flight. Saturday the cap had been left behind  
at the top of the well; the lipstick, broken and naked,  
waited alone by my door. I was returning  
from some shabby meeting. That night, the moon  
was welling up as large as ever, drowning out a starless sky,  
I was so lonely. Sarah felt some disturbance  
in the cosmos, she told me, "something's wrong."  
"You would be surprised," I told her. When it rains  
next, the walkway outside my door will flood, and the lipstick  
will be inconvenienced. Plans will change.  
By this time next year, I'll be somewhere else, too.  
My grandfather will almost surely be dead.  
A couple days ago, this old man was limping along  
the interstate. I saw his old woman in their old Lincoln nearby  
and stopped to help. "Found me a lock," he said in the noise.  
"Do you need any help?" I asked.  
"I'm a locksmith," he said in a quiet Irish accent,  
the cars zipping by so close his hair noticed.  
"When I see a lock on the highway, I stop  
and pick it up." Tonight, I was taking out the trash  
and a broken bottle of spaghetti sauce occupied  
a space in the lot. The jagged shards sparkled  
under the streetlight their clarity. The sauce had glazed over  
in a fantastic red. I also remember a golden valve cap,  
lost in a crack in the sidewalk, on the way to class.  
It looked like an earring. Like I told Sarah,  
I have to do some more reading. "Don't go yet"—  
she was upset, but really I didn't even flip  
through the pages, I was so busy with worry.  
In a month, she'll be hidden under the winter.

## About an Hour After Lunch

I am out walking  
my dog, a Grizzly Bear.  
Perhaps, one day, people will wait  
outside my door for us  
(him), to come barging out,  
but for now, people, I suppose, are scattered  
about in their own business. But they love  
to see us, him, crashing through  
their line of vision, upending  
traditional modes of transportation,  
leaving Grizzly doodles where he pleases,  
splashing through town,  
me, sort of slapping against things  
(mostly ground, here and there a tree,  
sign, automobile, or neighbor),  
and generally flapping about,  
enjoying the strange flashes of scenery,  
and a certain closeness to sky and dirt.

## The Funeral Photographer

He is zoanthropic and wears a skull cap.  
He would prefer to be Frederick the Wise.  
Today, he has decided to pack a mirror and stuff  
with importance an oak casket. He is clearing  
his throat, winding his film, and has forgotten something.  
Not his father, who worked in cowboy boots and a suit,  
who lectured on Andy Rooney at a baccalaureate.  
Not the prolonged conduction velocities of signals  
along the brain stem. Not even the bulb garden he helped plant  
by the porch and the naming of each flower: Daniel, Alan,  
Kerry, Aunt Pat. He is searching for periods  
and better, ends to periods. In this, he understands  
the diver who enters the water through a hole  
dug by his own hands, and fills that hole  
with his body. Nothing left above,  
not a splash. This should conclude his employment,  
but will not. He will work holidays.  
Today, the rain does not splash on his shoulders,  
but fills him to the eyes, until he feels himself swimming  
through the service, swimming through the procession,  
leaving droplets of his own feet in the cemetery grass.  
No crying ladies embrace him, for he would splash onto their dresses.  
He growls, and there are words, old words, and he remembers them  
as if they had been kept in a safe, and he scratches some out:

*I'm filling with rain, mother.  
I never would have guessed you  
and I have taken many pictures and they are good.  
This one I am scared.  
I need more words.*

## **I Can't Sing to You**

I have to write to you.  
I have two thoughts.  
One is busy  
or doesn't answer  
or is trying to see lakes and streets and distant cold  
from a southern river, pushing  
the soil down and away to warmth.

One is closer and slower,  
stiff, pale ears,  
a pillow, something dead,  
something the sun can't make bright.

I thought I would ask if you're cold  
or if you ever hear someone's stomach  
rumble and think of me.  
Maybe you just keep reading or talking  
because a loud stomach is distracting.  
It has nothing to do with poets  
unless they write noises.  
I think you might worry,  
I'll write something else.

I write you grey carpet  
and exhaust pipes so you can be still.  
I write you throwing stones at water  
and floating in crowds  
and reading poetry on a bed,  
just any bed, I can't see it,  
and thinking about other business.

**I lost my virginity on the top bunk.**

Then we went to Baskin-Robbins.

I asked things like why ice cream never scoops so neatly at home and why people don't wash their shoes.

It's easy

to crawl through drainage pipes with plastic swords and forget mom's stories of drowned kids in flash floods like mice swallowed by snakes.

I wonder if Shakespeare knew

he was as good as it would ever get.

When he wrote stupid puns

and fifteen words for dick

and numbered sonnets like combo meals

was there any way he could have known

that was it.

## Varicose Veins in the Vernacular

Exactly. Why?

There's no business like show business.

Yet, Jesus wore no sneakers.

Walking from here to there through hot sand,  
perhaps he resented those sticky apostles  
and walked across water to lose them.

They still hate him. Today's paper:

"In Nazareth, hundreds of Jewish settlers reportedly  
attacked the homes of Israeli Arabs."

See how angry they are?

And they even have sneakers now!

Californian drug dealers hang them on telephone wires  
in celebration! Jesus was poor,  
but not us! We have sneakers!

See, look through this American woman's window—  
there she is, peeling carrots, her rings in her pocket.

When her husband comes home they always play the same game,  
pretending to have won the lottery.

No, they don't play anymore. He hated it.

They play a game of magnetism. Not even one wall is enough  
to block the repulsion. He might bump into her  
while walking into the kitchen and be propelled  
to the other end of the house, or into the garage  
where he relentlessly works away at slabs of wood.

He might look out from his garage and see  
the elm in his yard that grew to engulf  
a wire fence. How he wishes he could still  
grow, his scars healing over like the elm's,  
letting his feet grow right through the ends  
of his shoes, wearing his house like a skirt,  
breathing rain to soothe his dry throat.

People would certainly pay to see that, he thinks.

## Considering the People in My Liver

Here I am making apples, feeding the hungry,  
sitting at the dinner table in wet clothes,  
keeping the grass green in shoulder blade  
suburbs. The traffic is incessant, the comings  
and goings, the autos racing through my guts,  
this or that capillary. But I'm pot-holed.  
The air startles on, I inhale  
the breeze and the farmers  
sigh relief as their alveoli harvest bursts  
into produce. A sip of flat Coke,  
a bit of turbulence for the pilots  
of red blood-ways. So I chew slowly.  
I wait for night, every 37 hours,  
to dry, bathe, and paint trains,  
boneyard cars, the tiny crevices in steel  
where someone is still bustling about,  
perhaps finishing a paper route, I paint.  
I creep into bed, an inch at a time,  
set the sun, smother civilizations  
at each dark pore. These natural disasters  
keep me alive. Two days later,  
or three or four, I start to contract,  
roll my vertebrae apart, slide to my feet,  
to my careful padded slippers,  
but someone's dying, off balance, someone's art  
wrecked, somewhere in the cartilage  
of my ankles, someone miscarries,  
a garden, a mailbox, under my toe, is upset.  
Even crying is too violent. God's a rock.  
God, even those are chipped, eroded,  
tumbling, never guilty or selfish.

## Superman in East Africa, 2017

There was a dogfight in Tanzania, I remember,  
both sides willing to waste ammo on me.  
So I went to the cockfights. Didn't spend a dime.  
It was noisy, so I stayed late. Didn't drink a drop. I let  
a guy punch me in the face, he was so angry. When I left  
and wandered out in the cold savannah, I could hear  
the moon glowing and creaking. But I hadn't the heart.  
I wrote you a letter, much like this one, and left it  
hanging from a tree branch. But this one is different—  
because tomorrow I will work with the ants, gathering  
their food, repairing their falling tunnels.

But I still hear—perhaps it is only memory—  
the gossip at the paper, back in town, but not a sound  
as I fled the battle, hardly able to breathe. I recall faces and voices  
and the air. I destroyed a baobab tree that day in anger. I gathered clean  
ice and fruit for the locals. No one would eat it but rats and flies.  
I distracted the children I found hiding in dumpsters,  
strangling each other in rage. They watched me make iron dogs  
out of scrapnel. They even laughed when I lifted  
their dumpster and spun them in air like a carnival ride.  
Their shouts echoed inside the metal walls. Don't worry—  
tomorrow, I will water a farmer's field.  
No, not even that—tomorrow, I will plant my own,  
and nothing will come to harm it! I will plant corn  
and it will grow proudly, straight up at the sun,  
and I will do this for the crows.

## The Human Parking Lot

Me and Wes, we thought up all these inventions,  
million-dollar inventions, a bunch of them.  
Umbrellas that work no matter how windy,  
light-weight, off-road, four-cylinder wheelchairs,  
shoes that do the walking for you.  
He hates his career he hasn't started.  
He's studying therapy.  
He studies the muscles of cadavers.  
They don't work. Broken muscles.  
He cuts and looks and zips the bag back up.  
I wonder if I like my career I haven't started.  
I started to write a love poem. (I'm fearless, I don't care.)  
I called it "This is About You."  
It was easy not to write flowers or mountains.  
Harder not to write a Dead Man poem.  
First I think poems are Darwinian—  
me and Alan wrote a story about a guy with a Basset Hound  
for a leg. I don't know what happened to it.  
We had a hard time deciding whether the dog  
was dead or alive. Petrified, maybe.  
But there was that guy, eating oatmeal anyway.  
Hard to tell what's under those jeans.  
So maybe poems are butterflies—that's more specific.  
Caterpillars aren't worms.  
They don't eat dirt. They have legs.  
They're never fooled by rain—too focused for that.  
If you cut one in half, it just dies.  
Probably chewed through a leaf first.  
The next day it's ant food.  
Come fall, the hole in the leaf makes less leaf to rake.  
All these suicidal poets, all these words left sitting around—  
even in a cemetery, it's rock and epitaph.  
Each year another layer of death for a blanket.  
But we like a head start. We like to be deeper  
in soil. Tombstones even sink.  
The earth is full of itself.  
I'll have to dive in if I want a space.  
MJ says he wants to live forever.  
He's made of helium I suppose. But even space is dirt.  
The more skin cells quit and fall away, the more  
his tiniest particles make a graveyard of his body—  
The weight will make the ground look more inviting.  
In time, he'll be so full of dead pieces of himself  
he won't recognize the difference

between dying and immortality.  
That's what I mean with butterflies.  
So much life, such a fight against gravity,  
they can't endure long.  
But there's something to it—a larvae climbs  
up a tree—a caterpillar collects his strength  
to grow wings but then hardly has enough left  
to keep him from falling.  
Leaves flutter down to the rot,  
birds swoop to pick at worms.  
Listen, I'm not trying to tell you in some sad way  
everything dies. I'm not expressing regret  
over trashed poems or an urgency  
to comply with gravity and fear.  
I have things to do.  
Even if this poem ends up in a—or even just ends—  
even if it fails to build four-cylinder wheelchairs  
or define why exactly words pile up  
everywhere like compost—  
well even without a handful of legs,  
even if it's just pieces of time  
(even without the fluttering of Shakespeares)  
in a calm amnesic loss of consciousness—  
there is at least half-eaten paper and hours.  
Less to fool with later.  
I mean that Wes and I aren't millionaires, and I love him.  
I mean I'm sharing my death with those in need.  
Just imagine me and Wes sprawled out in the living room  
laughing wildly at all the dirty dishes and stuff we never do.  
The earth is the same—it stopped cleaning up after itself.  
When the earth comes up with a million-dollar invention  
it just laughs at the waste and keeps dying.

## **We Wanted to Live in the Clouds**

Here, there's nothing like clouds.  
Not even the way the plains stretch out  
like a blanket of worshippers to the horizon,  
not even the thick canopy over the rain forests  
that hides all the dirty business below,  
the whole world. I have seen clouds stretch out  
unbroken and endless so that from above  
it would be impossible to know whether it was the sky  
or the arctic if not for its slow migration,  
sometimes a flock of gulls,  
sometimes a herd of bison,  
sometimes only the shifting of the continents,  
impossible to know there could be no life  
scurrying under its folds and drifts.  
Sometimes the clouds are only an ocean  
so white they show me the scratches  
and imperfections in my own eye.  
If you look closely you can see  
specks of light bustling through  
the clouds like whitecaps. Below, there are no people,  
only the signs of them, only their cars,  
only their empty shells everywhere.  
Yet even here, a new town every time the wind blows,  
a constant fear of homelessness, a perpetual displacement.  
Even now, I can't tell if we're one thing or another.  
Even now, everything is evaporating and reforming.  
Even now I can see how you stretch all the way to the horizon,  
how if you clear away and reveal your world  
it is only another empty and beautiful landscape  
revealing yet another underneath it, how you are  
never the same sky and I am never the same earth  
watching you, embracing the shadow of your every curve.

## **I'll Take Post-Modern for \$500**

Mimes know narrative, easy as falling.  
Knowledge has come to a conclusion and it is nothing.

One more break, more time for dawdling,  
Looking at chalkboards and knowing nothing.

Like begging for a replay of the miracle happening  
And laughing because it means nothing.

Once a war boat, now kept from rotting  
In a museum, but for me it knows nothing.

If I could pinch these veins from me, bleeding,  
I could see exactly and graphically knowing nothing.

Once a war boat, now kept from mourning,  
I know tragedy and conclude knowing nothing.

One more dawdling break, easy as rotting  
And laughing, graphically knowing nothing.

Mimes know narrative, but not bleeding.  
They know begging means nothing.

Pinch these veins from me like a miracle, easy as falling.  
Knowledge has come to a museum and it is nothing.

## **This is About You**

Just ask someone who spends his days with the dead—  
Not the mortician—he made his own mistakes—  
Ask the professional mourner—he has other things to do.

Just ask someone who knows rockets,  
Someone who knows the personalities of—no,  
Someone who understands the psychology of chemicals.

Ask someone who leaves the breakfast table to be  
Instead with dirt, who recognizes the language, the regrets,  
The arthritis of topsoil and even the skeletons of leaves.

His son, who builds ant cities of clay and dry twigs,  
Who places the carcasses of wasps in the town square  
For the local ant cookout, does not whine before dinner  
That his hands are dirty, but that he cannot yet reach the sink

His mother had scrubbed the mildew from.  
This is a town of timber and Lysol  
And freezers. And here you are, asking questions.  
Here you are, studying something that may once have been  
Of value—a tree, a recollection of dead G. I. Joes  
Buried, and marked with popsicle sticks.

**“The Flood”: (the song that the Sapa Froggy sang)**

Therefore the frogs ran across the yard on hind legs, up the hill and under the porch. Here they would build temporary huts of mud or soggy sleeping bags. Therefore the Sapa Froggy called a great meeting at which he played the harpsichord and sang a dirge to the sun. Everyone cheered and wept, at which the grass bubbled something like a sneer, but even I, inside my home, wept aloud. There was too much rain. Not even the rivers were happy. Not even the corn, nor the eroding mountains. The frogs threw their cell phones into the swollen lake, knowing their voices would not be heard there again. I splashed through my garage to rescue the washer and dryer. The frogs shot poisoned arrows straight into the sky. The whales had a bad feeling in their stomachs. The trees moped about and eventually discarded their sopping leaves. Some of them fell and would not float. Even in my house, now ankle deep in water, I had to wring the tears from my shirt. My son was in the bathroom, red-faced, trying to flush everything away.

## Emergency Evacuation

In case of tornado, avoid windows and abstraction. Utilize your best choices, which should have been carefully projected: snit, hablábamos, scruff, emphyzema.

In case of death or sudden loss of faculty, do not guess. For safety, paint chest and legs in necessaries, and firstly apply them to the face: doggie, scrooge, phase, duck.

In case of fire, bury your words quickly, as if you lost them (you may have). Get them out. Avoid discussion, modifiers, but if necessary tie them from dainty ankle to ponderous file cabinet, leap from the most comfortable story. Shout soft things: *Ruffle! Ruffle! Ruffle!*

In any case, breathe deeply. Certain subtleties may be preserved.

In a case, you should be fairly safe.

In case there is no safe case, avoid abash or flabbergast. Use the stairs. Direct what bits remain (lungs, scruples, rollick) down the well ahead of you.

In case of entrapment in a well, descry (and firstly ferret out) the location of water. If absent, do not swim, in any case.

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