Some Permanent Part

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Some Permanent Part

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Poetry

by

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Introduction

Before I was influenced by any writer, I was influenced by my history and by the western Pennsylvania geography, itself metaphoric of both my family and my own sense of my identity. I draw the inspiration for much of my work from my family’s western Pennsylvania heritage, evident in this collection beginning in the opening section of Pennsylvania poems and following through the second section of Florida poems, written almost exclusively in an attitude of being “not-Pennsylvania.” The third section of poems presents a series of portraits and draws upon more objective, external accounts of characters from the news or from direct personal observations. This third section allows me room to reflect upon the helplessness of the individual in relation to his or her social condition, as Malcolm succumbs to Alzheimer’s disease and Byther Smith continues to play blues to nightly inauthentic crowds of tourists. The contemplative death/rebirth poems of the fourth section return me to my roots, as my philosophical exploration stems from my own sense of loss and my search for some form of salvation or immortality.

My sense of history is defined by the stories of my family history and the social and geographical atmosphere of the Allegheny Mountains of western Pennsylvania that over four generations of my family have called home. My mother’s family were miners, carpenters, and Brockway Glass factory workers. In my poem “Meditation At the Mine,” I try to evoke the spirit of my family by coupling the vivid description of my great-grandfather’s long-collapsed shaft mine with the stories my mother and grandmother have told me: my great-grandfather laid the tracks himself, bought a used rail car, and pushed it by hand after he’d filled it with coal he’d loosened with dynamite blasts and a pick-axe. By condensing the historical information, I wish to leave only the implied sense of his work and to speculate on both the transition I’ve made away from this area and the futile but necessary attempt to reclaim the past. Likewise, my
grandfather, a self-taught carpenter, farmer, miner, delivery driver—a strong man tied closely to
the land—symbolizes to me an Appalachian renaissance man, an agrarian idol that I capture in
the poem “Breaking Down My Grandfather’s Garage.” As he “marks each mortar latitude line /
as square as he could measure,” his perseverance draws from me a poem that not only seeks to
capture the sense of his self-taught craftsmanship, but ultimately catalogs the remnants of his
legacy that are fast disappearing.

My father’s history also includes the people and the stories of Germanic immigrants who
settled in a town fifteen miles from my mother’s family. Historically glass blowers, four
generations of my family have worked for Brockway Glass as production-line laborers. In “My
Grandmother,” I attempt to define my identity in terms of the lineage Grandma Bee embodies
and illustrate the historical transition of the glass blowers becoming production line machine
workers. Ultimately, I wish to define myself through the blending of all family members in
discovering my identity as a historical creation.

Completing the geographic and regional link to my work is my marriage to a woman
from neighboring Punxsutawney with a heritage of Catholic, Italian-American immigrants who
have lived and worked for three generations as miners and railroad workers. My wife and I still
attend Mass in the churches of her grandparents and parents. My subject matter expands to
include a new sense of history and lineage in “Legacy,” where I posit a revelation/reclamation of
history through the metaphor of a tureen my wife inherited from her grandmother. When
Grandma Rosie “ladle[s] fish soup or groundhog stew” into the Italian tureen, she blends the
regions of Pennsylvania and Italy, yet she retains her own authentic heritage in the lingering
scents of anise and oregano. This poem ends the first section of the manuscript not only because
it details my most recent contact with the land but also because it represents a transition in my own identity.

As I write about later-stage issues in my life, I speculate more transcendentally on afterlife, death, and preservation of my heritage. In Section IV, I deal with reconciliation and atonement in “Improvised Ash” and “Eucharist.” I explore the nature of guilt and penance in order to speculate that there is something beyond death and something necessary that the subjects in my poems find in religion. In “Eucharist,” the old woman needs to take communion in order to transform herself into someone holy, even though the priest is, himself, unholy. The search for God, salvation, forgiveness, is the transformative moment I wish to capture.

While I trace the style of my poetry to the deep image movement as Robert Bly re-developed it, the deep imagist most influential in my work is James Wright. When I first read Wright’s work I wanted to imitate it, but later, I realized that I simply wanted to write like him—to preserve the rough terrain and the honesty of hard work, but moreover to write in a straightforward narrative where the images come to evoke the consciousness that underlies the image. His later work in free verse is rooted in place, detailed in image, and revealing in the “deep” psychic energy of ordinary experience. Like Wright, I celebrate the natural elements of the Appalachian region and my origins to establish my identity. We both respond to our landscapes, mine Western Pennsylvania and his Eastern Ohio, as the grounds of American Indians. To Wright’s poem “Beautiful Ohio” which speaks of “Those old Winnebago men,” (317) I have my poem “Echoes,” written about the Indian Echo Caverns of Pennsylvania and “[t]he Conestoga men” returning. Also like Wright, I realize that while my hometown is stagnant, largely uneducated, and poor, I will always return, at least in my own mind. In particular, narrative lines from “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” such as “one slave/to Hazel-Atlas Glass became my
father” (82), represent my own sense of place. Wright transforms into the escaped fugitive of Martin’s Ferry, Ohio while speculating on the life of the executed murderer George Doty because he focuses outward against the landscape to reflect his inner struggles. Likewise, I focus on my deceased ancestors and landscape to reflect my own inner struggles.

I also share with Wright an intimate connection with landscape, in general. As he writes “outside, the slag heaps waited” (124) in “Stages On a Journey Westward,” I kneel “among shale fragments” in “Meditation At the Mine.” I revisit many other thematic elements I read in Wright: defeated, small-town coal miners, sumac trees, and the dying town itself. Even in writing about Florida, I reflect on my own sense of sumac trees as they come to represent the land of my upbringing. The ferocious Florida trees replace the sumacs and represent my displacement from “home” by the dramatic shift in my geographic surroundings.

While my work has also been influenced by the “Florida” poems of such as poets as Elizabeth Bishop, mine seem to be more pessimistic, perhaps because I feel “out of my element.” For instance, Bishop captures “The Fish” of her famous poem in the vivid description of “his brown skin hanging in strips / like ancient wallpaper” (2715). While I might utilize her sense of simile, or more likely metaphor, her poem seems to celebrate the vibrancy of the landscape and the perseverance of the fish that has escaped from five previous “catches.” All in “The Fish” becomes “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” (2716). My Florida poem “Grass,” reflective of my Florida poems in general, utilizes images of nature overtaking and destroying the human world. The speaker in “Grass” seeks to keep the grass in check, just as he wishes to destroy the stand of palms in “This Tree.” Bishop, however, allows her speaker to release the fish in a display of something that might be called admiration of the fish’s fighting spirit.
I borrow also from T. S. Eliot’s sense of mortality. I found “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to be the most vivid depiction of aging and self-doubt, even when I first read this at the age of seventeen. As I continue to teach the poem each semester, I never tire at Eliot’s masterful use of rhythm, allusion, and implication. While I do not claim to have written a “Prufrock,” I find myself considering questions like “do I dare” and statements like “indeed there will be time” (1422) as I compose poems that deal with death, particularly in a poem like “Malcolm’s Piano” that laments Malcolm’s running out of time and his descent into Alzheimer’s disease. Coupling these ideas with a 2005 University of Tampa reading by Steve Gehrke, at which he read a poem about his own kidney transplant, I wrote my own transplant poem, “Organ Donor” to demonstrate multiple perspectives on the philosophy of a life that would otherwise have run out.

In revision, especially, I have begun to utilize Olson-esque notions of the line as unit of breath or utterance to liberate the unconscious, and I have also been influenced in a similar manner by James Dickey’s split line. While these features are not prominent in my work, I have begun to use them in order to expand on my voice. In “Meditation on a Drive,” “Improvised Ash,” and “A Poetics,” I allow the lines to dictate their positions and create multiple margins. The subject of “Improvised Ash” is the frightening and violent act of forgiveness by ritual. As the ritual unfolds, I want the lines to move the reader back and forth, breath by breath. The opening poem of my collection, “At the William Penn Museum” uses multiple margins to create lines as steps to indicate the ragged edges of the escalator, a machine that symbolizes to the speaker fear and destruction.

Furthermore, Olson’s themes provide a sense of guidance for me. Nina Baym, editor of The Norton Anthology of American Literature, claims that in his Maximus poems, “the facts of
Olson’s own life…are used as a point of departure for an ambitious effort to project the entire historical, geological, and social presence of the town” (2705). In part I, Olson celebrates

The roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks

of my city! (2706).

Just as I list the objects that define my family in “Breaking Down My Grandfather’s Garage,” Olson lists the items that comprise his town, and both poems announce the intention of the list, mine in declaring “What’s left,” and Olson’s in the exclamation “my city!”

In building my poems, I find that I also agree with John Ashbery who believes that language is ultimately a series of references that are further determined by a continually elusive series of referents both outside and inside language, itself. Ashbery demonstrates an “urge to locate subjectivity” (Norton 296) while working with shifting and multi-referential language. In his attempt to stabilize the shifting referents, Jody Norton continues to describe Ashbery’s thematic search for “self-knowledge” as being “constituted by a series of reflective glimpses, cinematic in their framed brevity, but lacking any governing directorial intention” (282). I try to capture my own sense of these glimpses and to minimize the shifting syntactical structures that lead to misunderstanding in my work. Coupled with Wright’s influence, I see my own use of these glimpses as the point where my work becomes deep image, where I want my images to create the experience and generate the meaning in an overall narrative structure. For instance, the “pink diluted mass” in the last line of “Eucharist” is the “blood” of red wine and the “body” of the Eucharistic wafer blending into one substance, diluting into a mass in her mouth that overlaps linguistically with the “Mass” at which the old woman would have, in Roman Catholic terms, “taken the host.” The physical mass of wafer and wine in her mouth makes sense to her, or
rather, the ritual of blending the metaphoric “body” and “blood” leads her to some sense of salvation.

On the most literal level, my journey is geographic, but I also make a journey in spiritual questioning. In the collection, I question my identity in terms of my origins and my history, and then I question what lies in the future. As the poems come full circle with this spiritual examination, I recognize that the world is a temporary place for us, and that as we build our own metaphoric rooms in which to live, we will soon outgrow these rooms and need to build others. Therefore, “A Poetics” becomes the final poem and summary of the series. This manuscript, “Some Permanent Part” seeks to discover the elusive “permanent” or lasting parts of my life, even if those exist only in my memories.
Works Cited


I
At the William Penn Museum

Escalator steps appear from the floor as if by magic then level out until the steps seem to be made of water floating to heaven. I first learned the difference between elevator and escalator when in the 1970s I heard the news:
the shoelace of a boy my age had caught between the moving steps and he lost his leg.
What did it feel like, being squeezed through this narrow, ceaseless succession of gashes to some hell below the museum out of reach of the coffin safety of the elevator reserved for old or handicapped people.

From the lobby later, I watched those stairs, broken by the jagged, cold spaces.

My brothers and parents shrank in the distance.
Even my little sister, beside my mother, rose safely to the second floor where they all waved. My sneaker hovered above that perpetual first step, where I was stuck, languishing for the first time.
Secret Passage

I saved the forgotten bicuspid with tooth fairy quarters in my copper toy treasure chest.

Maybe it was to remind me of my promise to wiggle it out, to get it over with by the end of Sesame Street.

Maybe I just wanted to salvage some permanent part of myself.

I didn’t know about DNA, the fragments that fingerprint or make new life.

Now I know one blood molecule is enough to create or convict. My father wanted to pull my tooth with pliers or the doorknob and string his mother had used,

but I couldn’t let him spill so much blood. I hid in the pine trees behind our house

and worked my tooth between my fingers.

I tasted my body’s salt on the back of my tongue when my tooth snapped free, leaving behind the throbbing space.
Centralia

At the turn of the century
miners stripped away pines, oaks, and earth,
loaded coal into train cars
for Philadelphia/Reading or Lehigh Valley.
Millions of square tons of anthracite
later, Centralians buried diapers,
table scraps, old mail, broken shoes
next to the vein.
Trapped methane bulged and gurgled
until the abandoned coal seam
whiffed and snuffed with a heat
too intense to be contained.

Smoke still creeps
From the dusty cracked ground,
buckling highways, swallowing homes,
and melting the rubber soles of sneakers
on Ashland teenagers who sneak
into Centralia woods with stolen beer kegs,
their dreams of escaping hidden
like the parched condoms in their wallets.
Echoes

The river’s fluted music hushes.
I descend the hill into the cavern
on the land of the Susquehannocks.

After the harvest, Conestoga men returned
from a hunt or silent war
to lie beside their wives,
women weary of pulling corn.

Enemy of the Five Nations,
this secret tribe canoed the Swatara,
stopping only to carve history
into granite outcrops,
bringing tan skin, pelts, and a tradition
of community.

Not the Iroquois but smallpox
and the Paxton boys left them
extinct.

Now I kneel to study arrowheads
and thirst for the water
pooled deep in the cavern’s darkness
where they thought the devil himself lived.
Good Sumacs

I drive past leaves grown like fingers
and I wave back
in my new awareness of the red fruit
I read about in a borrowed field guide.

Old Appalachians make tea
or a paprika spice to sprinkle
over lamb or veal
from the tart, red cones

my parents confused
with “poison sumac,”
an entirely different tree.

I’ll dry and crush
the berries
over a roast
of last season’s venison,
a side of garden wax beans in hand-churned butter
and crabapple jelly.
Meditation At the Mine

Only a rusted, bent railroad tie
juts from the shale collapse.
My brothers’ footprints have washed away,
and jimsonweed and hemlock
cover the muddy path I once loved
to my great-grandfather’s mine.

The safety of loneliness has left me
kneeling among these shale fragments,
staring at the close mountains,
the trees that blossom
around me, the grass
that has no meaning in my visit.

I could have been a miner
or a farmer, followed those
footsteps until my own dissolved behind me.
Instead, I went to land-grant school
and “got the hell out”
as my grandfather warned us all.

I will not linger
at this grave of mine.
Breaking Down

Sumacs bookend
the mouth of hand-hewn wooden doors
on makeshift pulleys
of the crooked, yellow-orange brick cavern.
Defunct on the dirt and shale floor,
the flattened fur
of a groundhog corpse
disintegrates.
My grandfather’s thumbprints
mark each mortar latitude line
as square as he could measure with
the heft of a plumb-bob on fishing line.

I salvage what’s left:
a plywood top pool table chewed by mice,
two cracked helmets huddled together
as though sharing family secrets,
head gaskets from his old Nova ground flat
into pale dirt,
stubby bottles of Genesee
he died before drinking,
and a dry-rotted, monstrous corn planter,
ancient
as my grandparents’
single wedding photo.

Dragged halfway down
by last year’s snow
that’s long since melted into the shafts
of the blackberries’ white-blue stems,
the garage leans into itself
until I choke the sledgehammer,
splintering bricks into trembling dust.
My Grandmother

Widowed young, she walked through Brockway to the glass factory where she machined gobs of soda ash into smooth, cool jars. Her father had blown molten sand and potash into flasks, vases, and on good days, birds he gave to neighborhood children.

The town knew she was going to die when my grandmother coughed in front of the glass plant. How can you spit into the snow like that without being close?

Thirty years later, I tell myself the cold isn’t so bitter I can’t bundle myself warm in a brown leather coat like the one in my only good picture of her. In it, she’s walking to the plant wearing the horn rim glasses that are back in style. When I hear the tales of her raising my father and uncle by herself, I want to be the people of my history. I want to find a way to enter the woods penniless, chop away pines or grunt into blowpipes and make something by the end of the day.
Legacy

We can not open the box
with her tureen from the old country
for she died too quickly
and it was boxed too carefully.
But we know the story:

On the long boat ride
between the ball that’s always being kicked
and Ellis Island, the island of hope
where she didn’t drop
her vowels to fit in,
she clutched only this ceramic weight we know
is emblazoned in Arabian-Spanish
organic design, from Caltagirone.

She ladled fish soup or groundhog stew
into mismatched bowls in the thirties,
a miner’s family dinner in Wishaw, Pennsylvania.

After “The Big One,” she put it away
to make gnocchi from scratch.
Spaghetti didn’t fit, and smelts
needed to lay flat.

After her funeral, her granddaughter, my wife,
lifted only this duct-taped hat box
from the labyrinth of canning jars
and empty jewelry boxes on the floor
of the apartment still spiced with anise and oregano.
II
Writing Nothing About Florida

In the mountains and shale
of my beautiful Pennsylvania,
I sat among generations of pines,
among what we in my youth called “the bounty”
of crisp blackberries, however slight
the harvest.

How do I write my song
for Kyle Lake,
the frightening water drained every ten years,
where my grandfather fished at midnight
from his half oil drum boat,
the illegal fishing line trailing from his beard
in rings of mist?

Here, the dirt is sand
and lakes teem with Anhingas,
feathered, winged fish,
that do not sing
like chickadees or cardinals
but cry like feathered beasts
breaking the darkness
that hides nothing.
La Florida Redux

A fish jumps
into the alligator’s mouth

and Spanish moss sways
from scrubby oak trees

like an old man’s beard.
Palms drop blotches
of acorns onto raspy grass.

The sun melts through
my hair, scalp, and skull

even while gray-green trees sway
in gentle sea breezes

in this country shaped like a penis.
Black slime gathers into rainbows,
the oil of the day gurgling

up through the sand my own family
never knew, nor the wet-hot air

of citrus and spiny palmettos,
or cockroaches the size of maple leaves.

The woods hide criminals
who slosh through cedar knees,
sink in muck.

Animals with harsh hides
and glowing eyes distrust

these humans building
another condo for retired widowers

who drive old, shiny Cadillacs
away from early-bird platters

of snowbird specials every evening
and return to empty trailers every season.
Grass

St. Augustine grass bends
in the shape of my bare foot
then springs back new, creeping
over sidewalks, across exposed
tree roots, and up the fence.
Planted in sparse patches, it scrambles
to fill the sandy strips
of yard, barren flats
so dry that rain simply runs off.

The grass sculpts itself
into a lawn chair
forgotten in a corner
by the fence.
If I nap too long, the grass
will form a second skin over my own,
encase me in its delicate,
strong arms, and if I’m not careful
to mow it, root into my pores.
Tree

If only I had a chainsaw,
the tree
would fall, no longer
reaching around itself
with its knotted, native fingers.

It will not
die. I’ve whacked and whacked
at the knees of this date palm
cluster. I’ve cut it back and back and back.

But its green torso rises again
like feathers
from the black, crumbling gut

and the half dozen trunks reach
like a scarred hand
from rough, sandy flesh.

Whack—a cockroach—whack
a scorpion—whack—a sow bug
presses blunt shoulders
into the forest of coarse grass.
Birds

The grackles won’t shut up.
They screech,
    a thousand or more
it seems, poking their heads
from the kudzu.

A sign
at The Pelican Man Bird Sanctuary
insists we need
to hear birds in the morning, but
all day? I just want
a moment’s silence.

I trudge
to the end of the yard,
clap as though I’ve seen the best stage play ever,
clap my coarse hands as fast and jumbled
as possible,

and up they flee,
    circle like a rising spirit
above my tree, and settle
into a jagged cypress
    further away.
Mark-er

A dark stretch of the berm
between speeding machines
and alligator tree lines
darkens with the secrets
of a forgotten past.

Coke cans flat
as paper, shards of glass and plastic
from forgotten accidents crunch
beneath my rapid steps
along with purple, scentless wildflowers.

Red lights trail
south against the gray shape
of the mile marker I’ll read
into my cell phone,
something the tow truck driver
can measure.

One fading amber flash
after another
calls

My own failed car,
a beacon to gauge
my steps one amber flash
after another,
reminds me
I can leave this all behind
If I keep walking South
or into the Everglades.
III
Meditation On a Drive

Where were we
    going when we thought
of each other the way
lovers think
    when they smile?

We were driving
    through country roads
that wound around hills
north to the country
    of our home

across miles of static,
    quiet,
humming engine,
you, asleep, one hand on
    your chin.

I blinked into the lanes of I-95
    where, migrating south,
we touched fingertips
    three years ago.

Traveling with the fear,
    and lust of passion
that can tear people into shards,
we crossed into a southern wilderness
    we didn’t know.

But we braved the passion
    rode unbuckled and free
into the distance of summer,
north on the highway of sparkling
    asphalt, glinting against sun,
lighting our way back home
    again
to our country.
Blues at Kingston Mines

White Chicago tourists
wait for the next cab.
Byther Smith makes the faces
he knows they want to see.

Tapping my own foot, I think
maybe Baraka was right: art is
a way to keep from killing:
cut their throats & lose
a poem, a song, a painting.

Tonight, Byther paints notes
through the air, his pink-nails
turning dark hands into wings
that soar to the sunrise-
orange drop-ceiling tiles
& back down, each note
slicing through us all.
Retiring

When did we get so busy?
Just ask Jim,
his sailboat moored in the bay
for one more term.
Now, he drifts through cubicles
marked “adjunct”—nonessential—
and waits for his turn
on the computer to check emails
he thought he’d never read again.
He thought he’d have more
money, more time.

Maybe next summer
he’ll scrape barnacles again,
tool off from the harbor,
and forget his legs are bowed,
his back stooped a little more
than last year.
He’ll find his way back
to where he can disappear,
finally,
drifting among catamarans and cruise ships
through tranquil Gulf waves to Veracruz
or Havana.
Malcolm’s Piano

Even as Malcolm no longer remembers
his wife, daughter, or birthday,
he plays piano.
When he used to walk with his wife
through the field
to gaze down the rocky cliff into the sea,
he caught field mice among the swaying weeds,
scratched their ears,
then turned them loose.
Now his eyes no longer focus,
and he draws further away from the window
overlooking the field, further into a place only he sees.
But sit him at a piano and he stops
clasping and unclasping his hands.
His fingers find their way
to the soft sequence he can’t otherwise manage—
the melody easier than the words
he can no longer find.

Maybe that’s why I play guitar:
so when I’m losing control,
when I forget my wife or my son or how to eat,
my fingers will wrap themselves
around the frets and remember
distant chords I can play before my family
decides where I should die.
As I slip away from myself,
babbling and slapping at nurses
while they watch me descend,
I can play one last familiar tune.
Memorial for Three Alumni

Across the twisted scrap
of Pittsburgh steel, mounted
on a gravel tomb, spreads
the moss of dark rust.
A bronze plaque to the left
marks the spot:

Found in New York and transported to
this university in western Pennsylvania.
We’ll never know which floor
it came from, how
it would fit back
into place, or how long it would
have stood,
but we’ll feel the scratchy truths
a long time.

The plaque says there was a vigil here,
and candles lit the courtyard.
Moments of silences spread
across campuses, parks, and offices
fortunate for the safety of distance.

One student reaches into the grave’s secret spaces,
once filled with bones, papers, or desks.
Without crying, he looks into the clean creases
of his orange palm. His future forever touched
by this death

is now clear among the whorls of chaos
that stand here, gathered into angles
most people walk past.
Conflict Resolution

Lost in metaphors
of our own long workdays,
our students’ papers languishing
on the sofa like retired generals
where we dropped our bookbags,
we still can’t help but grade each other:
Unclear thesis. Insufficient support.
Verb agreement.

We hiss thick and acrid Marlboro skirmishes,
smoke purified by our lungs
obscured from tar.
Our egos
climb through the cooling night,
in eddies of venom
and roiling stings.

We just want to command
the glory of our own discourses,
so we fall in on each side
of the line of demarcation: eleven soldiers
of empty Miller Lite bottles on the back porch,
with one unfallen left between us.

When the last beer is martyred
we stumble to bed dizzy. I retreat to the couch,
the cliché of a man who has lost.

In the morning, except for the teakettle,
toothbrushes rasping venom from our stained teeth,
and the muted morning news
reporting disasters elsewhere, all is quiet.
IV
Organ Donor

To achieve immortality
   Ancient Egyptians required
   the body be intact.
   All must be gathered,  entombed together
   for afterlife
   inspection.

Death is an accident
   waiting
   to take from us
working parts
   that can be lifted out by careful or quick hands
   and planted like moist lilies
   into new bodies.

Life brought back in
   the new
body matures into two souls, one
   trapped,
the other alive. Does the old soul remember? Does
it cry out silently inside, wait for an exhalation
to rejoin the the missing frac-
tion that like Osiris wanders outside
the gate? Does it look
with borrowed corneas for a
liver, a heart? Could they be bartered outside The Gates when the borrower finally fails?

Skin blushes pink
from ash-blue death,
or yellow infection.

Blood swells

the new organ with the breath of a new owner

who will spend the rest of his life

rejecting it.

"Every day is a gift"

and the gift of

this meat-colored organ,

this soul-particle,

swims

in the wet cavity

of a new body,

tries to escape-

to find its way back

home,

now buried or burned

to ashes.
Improvised Ash

God im-
pressed
on your forehead
his thumbful
of soot
to wash away

sins

while you give up smoking, drinking
or swearing
for a few days
before you fall
from grace
again.

All day your sooty head
claims you as
you claim
your own name

and the black priest-thumb
washes oil
into gray paste
on the heads of
saved-from-sin-again

lambs
Eucharist

He melts the flesh of Christ
onto forgiven tongues
dry with calling. Last in line, one old woman
mutters at the ground,
seeking through her cloudy eyes
the old, soft priest who married off
her young girl pregnant with his own dark son.

In the old country,
her daughter would have become a novice
then a nun, hidden
the scraped, bruised fetus
behind loose stones in the convent wall,
and spent the rest of her life
praying.

Today, the old woman
with a cracked tongue
waits for the dry wafer
to cleanse her again.

What will she think
at that instant the wafer ceases to be
a wafer, becoming flesh,
absolved
by years of rosaries and novenas,
counting days until Sundays,
until confirmation, counting weekly sins
against herself and God to the priest?

With the safety of the pulpit behind him,
the new Father lays the wafer
quickly into her mouth,
where she holds it,
then she swigs a violent swallow
of sweet wine until the flesh
is a pink diluted mass.
Back to Dust

What’s left of me
gathers into whorls
and sticks in the bathtub drain.
Each morning I lift the dripping spider
of hair from the tub and fling it
into the plastic trash bucket.
Should I save it
somewhere—comb the soap scum
away, condition it as smooth as
what’s left on my head.
fill zip-lock and grocery bags,
lawn and leaf bags—
to donate to myself
as if before surgery?

Dust is mostly dead skin cells,
so every time I wipe the floor clean
to the corners or vacuum behind the couch,
I’m my own coroner,
wiping up the evidence
of dust I’ll return to.
I shake myself free
from the area rugs,
and the wind sweeps me
into the dry leaves
swirling on the back porch.
I scatter, carried upward,
speeding toward some destiny I can’t know.

The dust of me washes away at the beach,
bobbing forever with sea froth that drifts like laundry foam.
Will I be scavenged by the seagulls,
forever wandering,
combing the beaches clean
of sand fleas and shellfish?
Every evening they glide
into sunset, folding the sea beneath their wings,
and I return home
to shower off sand and hair,
then dry
off in the dust of evening.
Memento Mori

I want to find the man
strong enough to carve
the commandment my life
in scripted letters--bits of granite falling
to the ground. But what if he should
scrape together those shavings to form words
my mouth can't say, the words
“I am happy to live, but not here?”
Those bits of dull, blackish stone would know
how I love to gaze at the stars
my grandfather gazed into.

As the letters of my life dive into the stone,
what will be unwritten about me?
Maybe “only in another life
could I like the sad, Spanish trees
drooping into slow waters
or study the threads of veins
that run through the wings of a giant cockroach.”

While I watch the stone carver
chiseling my future, my eternity away,
I read not the stone, but the blackened scraps
like tea leaves or the spidery
creases of my palm, and realize I'm reading
what I choose.

Maybe like the Etch-A-Sketch
that leaves a palimpsest of random design,
my stone would say more by its absences
of letters not there.
A Poetics

We build shelters
where we can hide.
We balance 2x4s and shingles,
bite the 16 penny nails
in our teeth,
our hammer poised.

We keep our saw,
hammer,
and the little antifreeze bubble
that straightens it all out
in some shed of cobwebs
and dust.

Its joists will be crooked
when we look back,
drywall seams
showing like a slit
in what is otherwise smooth
or orange peel.
Vita

Jeff Grieneisen was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and received his B.A. from Penn State University and his M.A. from Clarion University of Pennsylvania. He teaches English, literature, and creative writing full-time in the language and literature department at Manatee Community College in Bradenton, Florida and writing studio, creative writing, and advanced writing at Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida.

At Manatee Community College, Grieneisen has served as chair of the honors program cross functional team, department representative to the Institutional Technology Advisory Council, faculty advisor to Pentangle, the student literary magazine, faculty advisor to the Rho Gamma chapter of Sigma Kappa Delta, the English Honor Society for Two Year Colleges, and is currently the Bradenton representative of faculty senate.

Grieneisen has published work in The Sylvan Review, a western Pennsylvania literary anthology, Pennsylvania English, and is contributing editor to Edgar Allan Poe in Harold Bloom’s Biocritiques series. His poetry was published and translated into Portuguese in the Brazilian journal Revista Espaço Acadêmico. He co-edited the literary journal Red Raven Review, and co-founded and currently co-edits the literary journal Florida English. A manuscript is in the process of publication with MAMMOTH Books. He has just been appointed to the Board of Advisors for Calusan, a Sarasota literary arts council.