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Inside, Outside

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Inside, Outside

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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

by

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B.A. Journalism Northern Illinois University 1986

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Preface	1
Chapter 1	
Heart and mind.....	5
Dangerous Propositions.....	6
On This Page	7
Bedroom Parabelle	10
Circular Logic.....	11
Swirl	12
Losses in the Park.....	13
Purity	14
Nightwork.....	15
Pious Grandiosity	16
Chapter 2	
Family	17
Bicycling Drunk	18
McComb, Mississippi Excavations	20
In the Hardware Store.....	21
Delinquent	23
Listen Here	24
Purpose	25
Roll Bones	26
Tethers	27
Chapter 3	
The World.....	28
Bombardier.....	29
Balance	30
A 21 st Century Crime Report.....	31
Eye.....	32
In Transit	33
Public Intersection	34
Mugging	35
Wounds.....	36
References/Bibliography.....	37
Vita	38

Abstract

The thesis “Inside, Outside” is a poetry collection of twenty-five poems organized by themes that fit into chapters titled “Heart and Mind,” “Family,” and “The World.”

Keywords: Poetry, Excavations, Mathematical Form, Tethers, Hardware Store

Preface

“We shall all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately,” Ben Franklin said to John Hancock at the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. This is an apt statement for any thesis. To paraphrase, if the work doesn’t hang together, it will hang the author separately. So, what I have been thinking about concerning my poetry is that which makes the center hold, because the kernel, around which a poem is spun, is key to what makes it cohesive. The poems’ themes help me to place them in my thesis. Most of the poems do not completely fit one category or another, but I have tried to place them using a mixture of not only their subject matter but also the thought and writing process I used to create them. The result—the overall effect of the whole poem—has determined the three sections of the thesis.

The interior world of thought and interpersonal relationships in the section “Heart and Mind,” is addressed in poems such as “Nightwork,” and “On this Page,” but this section features more mature themes as well such as “Dangerous Propositions” and “Bedroom Parabelle.” The second section, “Family,” harkens to childhood and stories set in a narrator’s past, such as “In the Hardware Store,” or “McComb, Mississippi Excavations,” and the final section, “The World,” spans past and present, and more subjects outside of the personal. But as often as past connects to the present, the personal connects to the impersonal. “Public Intersection” shows how strangers make unwanted connections, but how these lead to personal revelations.

The thesis could as easily be called “Inside, Outside, Inside,” for it reflects my way of writing as well as thinking. Sometimes poems go full circle, as in “Circuit,” others go in one direction as “Swirl,” does and “Wounds,” in “The World” section, definitely vacillates between outer and inner worlds, past and present. “Bicycling Drunk,” is placed in “Family” because the children in the poem create a defacto family that I hope appears more important to them: They

spend more time with their friends than with their “real” families because of the suggested dysfunction of their home lives. It could have ended up in “The World” because the story is set outside the bounds of the traditional nuclear family. But is family so “nuclear” anymore?

I think what is strong in my work is my handling of narrative, my ability to move from the broad to the specific or the specific to the general—to make logical leaps—and to include evocative imagery. With poems such as “Pious Grandiosity,” “Swirl” and “Circuit,” “In the Hardware Store” and “McComb, Mississippi Excavations,” there are narrative, logical threads hung on concrete images, as well as imagery that is slippery, ephemeral and more like language poetry. My aesthetic purpose is to write in such a way that not all is revealed in one reading. I don’t want everything written on the line.

I’ve used a compression of ideas and imagery to stir the imagination in “McComb Mississippi Excavations.” The narrator dreams of the fetus floating in formaldehyde and wearing hair ribbons. Of course no fetus has hair or needs ribbons, but the association of the hair ribbons evokes the image of the girl the fetus could have been. And although formaldehyde is no perfume, again, the reference to it *as* perfume suggests the woman who will never wear it. She is suspended in death, alive only in the dream of the narrator or as a bizarre prize for bored children who search for the truth behind one family scandal. The vision is what the story reveals about the narrator, the children, the familial relations. The poem evokes loss, of family members, of possibilities smothered because of rigid moralities, and of how secrets affect the most innocent. In this one poem, from the beginning, Aunt Anastasia is lost because she broke parental rules. I don’t explore what happened to her after the abortion. But I hint that if she kept the fetus in the jar and buried it, part of her died with it. If everyone is trying to dig up this fetus, this is more

than a children's game. The poem moves from specific people to a dream of being buried, lost, and frozen in time.

"Pious Grandiosity" is an *Ars Poetica*. The narrator fantasizes about being the world's greatest poet, first bragging in exhaustive detail about how wonderful and exciting her life as a poet has been, then withering to the poet's actual life—scribbling in a dank atelier, enjoying neither fame nor fortune. It illuminates the passion the narrator has for poetry despite the lack of success she has. It is humorous, ironic and sad. The poem suggests that, despite the narrator's momentary delusions of grandeur, poetry should not be relegated to the "ivory tower." The craft should be replete with recognition and rewards for the talented. The narrator's great energy in a portrait of imaginary fame shrivels into the uselessness of this gift, which is posited as more of a curse and a sentence to hell.

The part of this "curse" that I find most challenging, yet supremely necessary and satisfying, is creating stirring imagery. I see and try to hear a poem as I write it. When this mental sight and sound combine into meaning that is clear, the result is vision—the literal visual meanings and further extensions and associations beyond the literal imagery.

"Purity" is an example of a poem in which a reader—in this case a poetry judge—found meanings somewhat different from my original idea. But when the work satisfies the reader, and the reader grasps a version of my intent, I think the poem succeeds. If the reader finds something that speaks to him or her that I didn't intend, but makes sense logically from the writing, this enriches the poem for me as writer. Since everybody won't be writing to evaluate or comment on my work, how can I know a poem is understood? This is the struggle of all poets—to determine when a work is finished and finished well. And to finish well is my goal.

Some of my favorite poems in the collection are “Purity,” “McComb, Mississippi Excavations,” “Daddy and Mathematical Form,” “Tethers,” “Swirl,” “Circuit,” “Balance,” “Bombardier, 1944,” “Roll Bones,” and “Bicycling Drunk.” I love the wordplay of “Circuit” and “Swirl” and their metaphysical spin. I start small, spin out and return or start small and reach out into the universe. “Balance” is another *Ars Poetica*. It is a poem of a one-time “performance art” event. The nature of that event reflects the nature of art.

Why does anyone create art? There’s no guarantee of its permanence and it is usually a financially impractical profession. It does not, in effect, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, build housing, or save the environment. But it feeds the soul. And a satisfied soul can lend a hand in the practical world. Good poetry is good business: connects humanity, sheds light, opens some wounds and heals others. It can feed the hungry of spirit and the lonely, who feel stripped naked. It puts a roof of solace over our heads at times. If my poems do this as they are read in journals and other venues, I have conserved part of the intellectual and literary environment that allow readers to examine the values and quality of their human connections within and outside themselves.

This is why I use a variety of voices and scenarios in my poetry, just as Pablo Picasso used a variety of styles and media. I become a dervish, a bicycling drunk boy, and Mississippi children digging up a back yard. Though a single poem may only elucidate a few moments, the body of my work covers a broader spectrum. I only have four poems of 25 in this collection that are longer than one page because I prefer shorter poems. And I believe in form. Without the backbone of form, meter and rhyme, free verse, which is my preferred choice of form, can be sloppy. I have one sonnet in the collection. But whether using classic form or not, the best poems, in my opinion, work images and words into lightening strikes: They are sharp, brilliant

and therefore more indelible. The skill it takes for such compression is a challenge. Similarly, in every good poet and poem “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” as Robert Frost said.

Good poetry breaks down walls.

Chapter 1 **Heart and Mind**

Dangerous Propositions

I know you can't fathom
the power you have:
so skilled, beautiful
funny and interesting to me.

I like the way your brain works:
the way your legs curve at the calves,
the nasal voice that twangs
from the big-nosed, deviated septum.

I love the spotted-leopard freckles
covering you with a carpet of orange-tan,
the neon-orange of your hair,
your eyes—the setting sun of your eyes
when you rivet them on mine
as you talk passionately
about insects and ecosystems
in danger of disappearing
into the Gulf of Mexico
never to be seen
or heard from again.

And that Ph.D. you're working on in Geochemistry:

*Past and present sources of terrestrial
marine and ancient sedimentary organic carbon
across the Continental Margin off the Mississippi River:
the application of kerogen, lignin and pigment biomarkers,*

sent me scrambling to the dictionary,
the Internet to figure out how big
that brain of yours really was.

You had the nerve to tell me I was smarter than you.
Ha! Flattery won't get you anywhere.

But that mouth of yours will and those lips.

You're the most dangerous proposition
of all the propositions.
You and those hands, that cock,
those hips that thrust into me.
You're the erosion of my heart.

On This Page

My heart leaches crimson-
burgundy, like flowering
bleeding heart vines
clotted in coils and dangles.

I collect modified
leaves and stems,
assemble them
into a bouquet
a bride would beam
to carry up the aisle—
except for the bloody hue.

But in past centuries
bleeding heart was held
by virgin brides
to keep them mindful
they traded pain for pleasure
as they would heal
in light of future pain
from childbearing.

And this is simply
the reminder that
my love for you is
deep as the black-red
in bleeding heart,
pure as white light,
green as young love,
though I am seasoned
and well-reasoned...

But young men like you
appreciate experience
and depth of feeling
in a woman who brings
more to the table
than youth and beauty.

I will not glow
on your arm
like fresh trophy wives
in Mercedes and Jaguars:
working out at midday,

never worked a paying job
and never will--
well coiffed, fed,
shod and pampered.

There is no equity
on this page.

The women who lunch
bleed too-- every month
they aren't fertilized
by husbands young
or old, sick or well.

Meanwhile the ruddy flower weeps
as passion flowers
did for Jesus on the cross;
even he had a love:
Mary Magdalene,
known as Miriam.

The Bible dances round this,
but humans wrote it, not God,
and Christ was God and man:
What of him was inhuman?
Surely not his body, made beautiful
for all to see and love and listen to:
How could Miriam resist; not fall?

And there are men
jealous of men
who love easily
and laugh hard,
or smile that Mona Lisa smile—
beautiful in its mystery,
perfect on men's countenances.

For men are beautiful
as the finest women,
more childlike than children
and more delicate.

They hide in houses,
labs, behind desks,
speeding in cars,
cursing cops

for tickets their hearts
lead them to,
and early deaths
in wars for turf and drugs.

They fear there will be
no woman waiting at the end
of the day, end of the lane,
end of the road or tunnel:
And I ask you on this page
to be the one to hold out your hand,
pull me in; wind me tight
like the dense vine.

Enclose me.

Bedroom Parallele

The long feet versus small tailor hands surprised me.
The long feet versus small tailor hands surprised me.
Warm hands cupped my breasts, cold feet used my ass for warmth.
Warm hands cupped my breasts, cold feet used my ass for warmth.
My ass, long cold, used for feet-warmth versus
warm, small tailor hands, my breasts cupped. The feet surprised me.

He ordered me to order him around.
He ordered me to order him around.
Being that he was a big man, I found this unusual.
Being that he was a big man, I found this unusual.
Around this unusual order to him I found
that ordered being he was: He man. A big me.

But something about him was dear and boyish.
But something about him was dear and boyish.
Yet, something inside me rose to the challenge.
Yet, something inside me rose to the challenge.
But inside me something dear and boyish rose.
The challenge to something was about him yet.

The warm, small tailor hands ordered me to order him around,
yet I found this unusual being that he was a big-feet man.
Long, cold feet versus hands. My cupped breasts;
hands used warmth for my ass.
But inside me rose the challenge to something about him.
And something dear and boyish surprised me.

Circular Logic

Chained to the bicycle,
links between my feet,
gears between my hands,
seat beneath my seat,
I pedal metal in revolution.
Pushing round a circle
doesn't ring of logic
as I ride on tires,
bounce on springs, spin my feet
in loops to loop
around the park
in hula-hoop circles
like a dervish whirling
in religious trance.
Not that dervishes spout logic
from stove-pipe hats-- their robes
flung out in circles—
energy transferred from God
to earth, right hand to left—
twirling from mystical beginning
to the end of their leg power,
within a circle of circles
and loop of loops that started
with the swim of sperm
into the circular, muscular cervix,
shot into the round egg,
plopped onto the round earth
from the oblong womb,
until jets fly us around the round earth
rockets soar us past a full moon
and into spiraling galaxies
of the great universe
then back again.

Swirl

The whorl from where
hairs spin and descend
to the inverted peak;
where peak meets nape
on a man's neck—
that tender vulnerable curve
barbers trim and hone
and fingertips graze
or loop in cogitative twirls,
inward or spirals out
to galaxies of dark matter.

A simple brush
of maintenance
trains complex
space-time curls,
tames hairline rifts
in psychic physics
of brain and cuticle,
blood and stars.

Losses in the Park

The young man turned his face toward the girl
and asked her plaintively if she could be
the someone he had waited for. If she
would mind too much to be part of his world.
The girlfriend ran her fingers through her hair
considering its color, thickness, how
she'd possibly afford a good cut now—
but turned her thoughts toward the question there.
Nothing put her off as much as begging.
She knew she could attract another man,
so tapped his shoulder, shook her head, said, "No,"
rose from the bench, stretched and tugged her legging,
smiled only as a leaving woman can,
tossed her mane, so he'd watch her as she'd go.

Purity

If I could burn my skin
coal black and swell
my lips three times their size,
make the waves
of my hair kink, kinkier
than the tight threads of screws
the heads of which
black angels dance upon,
I'd be pure again.

Those little black angels
with brown-pillowed lips
and hair so nappy
they never brush or comb it,
robes so blue-black
Satan barely sees them
singing Hallelujah

but pokes them
with his pitchfork
to "Shut up, already.
I got to sleep to work my mischief!
Damned black angels –
just like your mummies were
in those plantation houses
I lured them into.
And you got all washed out
into yella gals, caramel and café-au-lait.
But dead and gone to heaven
you turn black as spades again
to beat the devil with your purity."

Nightwork

Cypress branches paint thin shadows
on blue-white frame-house columns
at dusk, fade into the pale glow
and become the stone they dress.

Trees and columns seem to hold
the sky at bay, the house up.
Then night is pinned in place the way
boys pin girls against walls
until veils fall, like the seventh one
Salome dropped to earn the head
of John the Baptist.

John said she was the child of sin.
She urged his death for pleasure;
would not heed the Baptist's warning
to leave her parents' palace or lose her soul.

Still while the earth is in full moon
outlines of phallic trees and poles
uphold our blunders toward each other,
and we are pulled by old forces
that unfold and enfold us.

Desire catches us in actions
that unveil our souls,
could send them heavenward
or to the other place.

In the dark we dance with danger,
like Salome, instead of listening
to veil ourselves with grace.

Pious Grandiosity

I hope to jam the television, radio waves,
ears and mouths of billions with word-fucks,
pen-shits of glossalalia, to overrun lakes and rivers,
seas and oceans with consonants and vowel-sound wows

to cover the Catskills, Blue Ridge, Rockies, Urals, K-1
with spray-painted dictums, so many cans emptied
the Ozone hole ignites Australia, plunges it, Atlantis-like,
into the depths and New Zealand dubs me poet laureate

to ascend a Maori throne, tattooed head to foot
in my most famous odes, then walk over live coals
to prove I can compose a sonnet on volcano goddesses,
and on the 8,000-mile paddle to Pele's garden,
be beatified by the Roman Catholic Church
as dead and holy, an example of pious grandiosity.

Back in my outrigger, my strength flags
and I consume the final power bar before I walk
pearl-black sands up Pele's sides to take the leap
into eternity and worldwide regret over the loss
of my voice due to the demons I couldn't overcome.

And as I look up from this crack in Earth's crust,
the heat waves leathering my skin, flights
of punk-haired angels, every orifice pierced,
flock to spirit me to my dream heaven –
fountains of fried chicken, 20-year-old scotch straight up,
oysters on the half shell in hot sauce, horseradish,
rock'n'roll and Rastafarian hand-rolled blunts.

But I write in an old house, populated by Keats,
Byron, and Hughes. Sexton rides her broom and shakes
her booty, laughing – all knowing that God is likely Shakespeare,
and none of us will take our rest until our pens are still.
And maybe if we slide to hell, not even then.

For hell means to do the thing we love until love
is worn off like the nacre of a pearl,
and the luster and the color lost.

Chapter 2
Family

Bicycling Drunk

On black pearl sands of Kalamea
smoldering drunk on Strawberry Hill –
\$1.25 a bottle and we had six
among us five howlies –
OK, Andre was Japanese,
but we never counted him
he was so chill.

We rode the cliffs
banana-seat bikes souped up
to pop wheelies
half a them scavenged
from the dump
or someone's sister's
so Charlie's was pink,
but he was a big motherfucker
and no one teased him
on account a that.

We stayed wasted teeter-tottering
along the bluffs and playing chicken
until Gregory lobbed off the side
and split his head then it gushed a red
that wasn't real we were so blurred.

He called my mom a slut and Edgar's too
until we told him shut the fuck up
or we'd leave him there.

It took the four of us to wrestle him,
the skinny bastard, flailing at us,
swinging wild, and even Charlie
dropped his ass and said, "Oh fuck him!
Leave him here to bleed to death."

And Gregory howled inside the circle of us.
"Ma's a fucking whore! That bitch. I'll kill her.
Thirty-dollar cunt for sale. Two tricks an hour
pays rent and groceries. Where's she when
I bust my head? Her legs are open!"

We lifted him again and hauled him up
the slope half dead and Jimmy's brother
drove us to the hospital.

Greg lost a tooth and broke a kneecap,
halfway cracked his skull.

We never heard him call our mothers sluts again,
and never asked him how his mom was either.

McComb, Mississippi Excavations

Grandpa told that girl she shouldn't drive –
not ladylike to grab a wheel,
handle a large vehicle;
less so to spread your legs
the way Aunt Anastasia had.
So the fetus ended pickled in the jar,
then buried in the back yard.

Every other weekend
we chose a spot to dig up
looking for the little girl –
the fruit of Anastasia and
the man who sullied her.

We whispered “sullied” gently
‘cause we liked our maiden aunt,
though Telly spread his legs
and crossed his eyes in that vulgar way
pretending he was coming with a flourish
of flapping arms and writhing hips.

Telly was a fool and ended up
in prison for sullyng a younger boy.
We liked him, too, though,
and forgave his slip. He never
laughed after they let him out.
This drained the joy from digging.

At last we gave up, thinking
someone else would suffer
like Anastasia, Telly or the fetus girl.
I dream of her hair ribbons
drifting in that jar, the scent
of formaldehyde her only perfume.

In the Hardware Store, 1962

The nails could fit my hand, I thought,
as the clerk eyed me with suspicion –
I was alone at bins that towered over me
crammed with three-penny, six-penny nails.

“May I help you?” he asked, unsmiling,
folding his arms in a cloud of doubt:
What little Negro girl needed nails?

“I’d like 20 six-penny finish nails,” I said,
in my firmest 6-year-old voice.
Daddy had schooled his child,
sent a sample if I forgot.
I squeezed it tight in my hand.
Didn’t show it.

We’d been here many times.
I’d fingered nails,
examined shine and color,
shaft thickness, knew “finish”
meant finer carpentry
than “framing.”
You see the finish,
though framing needs
to be just as true.

The vendor bent to my three-foot height.
“You sure girl?” he said, annoyed.
It was my first time by myself,
around the corner from my house.
I held out the gunmetal-gray, slim nail,
its red line marked my palm.
“Like this one. Daddy sent it.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line.
Knew my mission.
“Yes, indeed,” he said more friendly-like,
pulled himself to his full height, smiled,
then glanced back at me a second
while he counted nails and I watched.

“That’s 17, mister. You forgot three.”
He blushed, recounted.
“So I have. I’ll give you 21.”

That's a lucky number. No extra charge."

He thought me stupid,
I supposed.
But I kept quiet,
handed him four bits,
got the sales slip, change,
and counted it slowly
as he watched, mouth agape.
"Thank you," I said, nodding.

Jaw set square, chin high,
I jingled nails in the bag,
change in my pocket.

Delinquent

He never lies about where he is,
a wrong place
the wrong time--
though angry
I forgive
because I bore him
14 years ago and
his mind is mixed up,
thoughts aquiver.

His brain sparks errantly,
flits like a butterfly
from video games
to sprints out the front door.

He likes to laugh
and makes me too
when he recalls
the joke.

He never aims to misstep.
Smiles, curls, compacts into me
as I lounge on the sofa—
still long-limbed and slim.
Seeks the old affection
now and then:
a hug, a kiss. Calls for them
in bed early mornings, or late nights,
half-dreaming his child-self.

I weave synaptic safety nets—
me, the old spider,
seeing him spurt and flail as aerialist,
knowing fearlessness
in children shields *and* sinks them.

Do I eat or free him?
The practice
seldom satisfies;
is blood and guts
and loss for both.

Listen Here

I suspect attention deficit
is a form of autism:
sufferers rub raw
from too much input.
Yet music is his bridge.
He drinks it, talks about it
constantly: names, artists, songs.

Yet my boy often forgets
the shortest factual list—
too much information—
or can't judge when it's time
to stop laughing at a joke,
even when other kids do.

Still teachers note:
He's so "bright, so smart."
And his charm makes them
like my half-grown son.
This is lucky.

I think of Van Gogh—
brilliant artist
lacking social skills.
He chose an asylum
over the world for peace
to heal and paint.

And I don't know how hard
it is for my son to navigate
such details. Don't want
him to hack off bits
of himself in despair.

So, I'm rooted here aching
to listen for his music.

I offer instruments
to help him write his song;
hope he'll let me listen,
maybe hum along.

Purpose

Daddy told me he could see
German faces across the Rhine
through frosted air:
the coldest winter
in living memory.

U.S. soldiers burned gasoline
on the ground to keep warm,
the black plumes raising
a curtain of soot
between enemies in the snow.

Though daddy worked motor pool,
he too lay along the banks, rifle in hand.
No one shot anyone, he said.
“We all just wanted to get home alive.”

He was 19, 20, they were too—
he remembered gumbo from home,
they, streusel, if their mothers’ kitchens
weren’t bombed to dust by 1945.

Daddy soldiers on,
takes my 14-year-old to school,
tells me to check my engine oil,
says, he didn’t mean to just get home alive.
He meant to live with purpose.
And he’s helped his dying mom and wife;
his living daughter and grandson.

Despite diabetes he drives on.
“I got to keep moving,” he says,
to keep out of Death’s cold sights,
just across that river.

Roll Bones

Marty was a man's man, big and handsome,
as strong as my ferocious mother
who barely knows she's wed to him
and can't change his diapers.

The blessing is their memories' gone
and mother's drugged through midnight groanings
of remembered racetracks, craps and Vegas slots.

Asleep, he flings his good left arm,
shoots long-lost bones across the room
to ricochet off the wall, land on the carpet
and roll snake eyes to my feet.

When he's awake and clearer,
his rheumy eyes water at me,
then he muses, "Who woulda thought
a man like me would come to this?"

I peruse his right thigh stump, lost foot,
and greet the sitter who lets himself in,
unsure of how to comfort my father
or tell him where his manhood lies.

In dreams, I see an armless, legless self
strapped to a wheelchair so I play
the slots by tapping forehead, chin.
Blind, I listen for the clicks to tell me
if I've hit before coins pile and clatter.

A waitress crushes breasts against me
to help me sip my complimentary drink,
but tips me on an angle, spilling
gin onto my crotch. "Sir, I'm so sorry."

She blots, and as she rights me,
I feel my absurd prick stiffen
as she daubs, diaper lining crackling
in distension. "Sir!" She gasps, moving
her hands away to deal me silence.

"Madam?" I contend. "It's just a little gin
and I'm an *old* man. Pour me another."

Tethers

The blood leaks in small spasms
from her lips and mouth like Kool-Aid.
Her eyes roll with her moans
and intrusions of the suction tube.

This is my mother's death
in a room that's not hers
four floors in the air.

At the nurse's station the doctor says,
"All her systems are shutting down,"
his voice desperate, searching.
He pores over the steel chart
hoping to conjure solutions.
I feel sorry for him.

I lean onto the counter as he reads.
"I wish you could've seen her," I say smiling,
"When she held my son on her lap.
He was 1 or 2. She was so proud.
So many of her students tell me
she was their best teacher," I pause.
"There's nothing else," I say. "No more to cure."
He looks up, blank, as I go back.

In her room my father suctions
scarlet spittle and we listen
for words to understand.
There are none to filter
among wheezing machines,
gurgles and the beep
of the heart monitor.
Daddy sighs, then says,
"Let her go,"—just like that.

We stand together in the room,
looking out the picture windows
at fern-feathered oak branches.
"It's a good view," my daddy says.

Chapter 3
The World

Bombardier, 1944
for Randall Jarrell

I pressed the button
and the wind's whirr
past the cylinder
was like the pure sound
pushed past puckered lips
when Harvey whizzed
the baseball hair-close
to my ear to spook me.

Harvey was a mean girl,
and I grew up to be
an evil man—
dropping metal shards
on would-be
little leaguers.

What a death!

Their shriveled lips
were split and
bloodied.

I saw the photographs:
piles of pale corpses
with beribboned braids--
in blue gingham and
white, lace-edged anklets.

Some were still
so pretty in silence
like Harvey used to be:
face screwed up,
ball cocked back,
aiming to hurt me.

Balance

On wire 3/4ths of an inch thick,
Philippe Petit tightroped between
the World Trade Centers eight times in 1974
when he and they were young:
the tallest buildings on earth;
the highest walker.

He had danced between towers
of Notre Dame in his homeland,
slid slippered feet above girders
on the Sydney Harbour Bridge
in plain, black catsuit,
the bending balance pole in hand,
serious as a priest at Mass.

He called it his “poetry in the sky,”
a passion he took up on his own
in late adolescence:
not stunt, nor circus act,
but ‘theatre and art.’

There was no reason to it.
It was unfathomable as ballet,
writing or a master painting:
something out of nothing,
never danced, penned or brushed before;
ephemeral as the wavering winds.

A 21st Century Crime Report

Gasoline cities--
no sidewalks
so people singed
by hubcap pain
till they frown:
No black, white, brown,
just charred flesh.

Fried hair kinks
into knots,
shrinks into afros,
so plenty people
perm they hair straight
to look regular.

People so burnt
can't see 'em at night.
News reports roving
rapist attacks.
Some smell
of ammonia
hair-straightenin' kits.

Unfried folks feel
scared cause they know
the fuckin' comin'
from gasoline-car-rape-
hair-straightened-felons,
crazy-stuck
like theyselves,
in the 24-hour
HOV lane
plenty people
be callin' home.

Eye

Walled by winds, nothing stirs.
Silence like the peace
of armistices—momentary.

Sitting inside, dry, unruffled
the boy is lulled into complacency:
cat's asleep in his lap,
dog snorts in the corner dreaming,
lights flicker back on. His head nods.

The last half of the storm's left
to raise hairs on the nape of his neck,
start the dog baying and the cat
skittering beneath the couch
to escape the sweep
of his father's heavy hand.

Dad isn't home, so he dreams the fear
of the hand's recoil, its slap,
tough as the bite of leather,
he's felt before.

It's the unknown beating
hanging in the air, promised,
and the imagined pain from it builds
like unforeseen storms.

In Transit

The people at bus stops look drab, drained,
older than their years.
In busses no bubble exists
to insulate one passenger
from the misery of another.

Soaked, we smell like stray dogs:
the damp odor permeating
too-conditioned air.
We often need sweaters
in summer to ride.

A man spills milk from a grocery bag,
another, his pants cinched tight,
reeks of urine. One repeatedly
sits next to me on this route.
There's something odd
about his blank expression.
He presses me to the wall.
There are empty seats elsewhere.
I'm trapped.
He never speaks, nor do I.

I choose a window hoping to see out,
but it's as soiled as the passengers:
the view dusty, distorted—
as poor as the buses are late,
so riders plug in music,
talk on phones, play computer games
to pass the time in this ferry
to worlds we're forced to,
and to some we choose.

The route is *Elysian Fields*,
the final resting place
of the heroic and virtuous.
But I think I see Charon
the driver in sunglasses,
begging pennies with bony hand,
to separate living from dead
as the wheels rumble.

Public Intersection

It's no wonder we wrap up in cars,
alone for the silence, or lack of people
who might sit next to us and reek
of perfume, alcohol.

A young man next to me on the trolley,
neat as a hip-hop pinup,
tells a tale out of school
to a cell-phone buddy:
how he slammed this "ho's" head
into the wall the day after Mardi Gras,
" 'Cause bra, she liked it rough."

And it'd be fine if this titillated me,
his bragging of sexual prowess,
him, all of 20, 22.
That this is his best boast
merely saddens me.
He calls the woman 'ho,'
feels it important to make it clear
he's rough-and-tumble in bed.
Paints it base and pornographic,
because he knows no better,
or maybe, that was all it was.

If he were in his car, music blaring,
would he tell the story differently,
with no audience?
Did he leave money
on the bureau as he watched
her smooth, sleeping face
before he left, because
she never asked for cash
and her pantyhose was torn?

Mugging

He'd had too many drinks,
for late and dark—
so dark he hardly saw
the young man's face
that mottled into shadow:
eyes skittish,
flicking side to side,
whites yellowish and rheumy.

He heard him sniff
and mumble something,
knew it wasn't anything
worth hearing.

"I said to give it up."
The youth cleared his throat
but barely whispered,
pointed something
at the white boy's waist.

The college boy weighed options:
saw the hand pretending
to be gun was shaking,
saw how thin and young the mugger was,
knew he had 30 pounds of muscle on him—
slapped him sharp across the face.

The youth yowled, owww,
held his cheek
in pain and disbelief,
and wild-eyed, spun and sprinted off.

College heard him snuffle half a block away,
fell to his knees, leaned,
retched the booze and bile,
then wept in deep, hard gasps
at blind luck; the stupidity of it.

Wounds

This is winter in broken New Orleans—
five years gone from Hurricane Katrina.
So much promised:
Yet shabby, damaged houses
sink further into disrepair,
and more and more are razed:
Black windows stare accusingly.

The city sags under millions in debt,
hemorrhaging from demographic shifts
to suburbs, and prosperous cities.
We are America's Venice:
levees unguaranteed, storm plans shaky,
an old guard dead; the new struggling.

In my grandfather's cemetery, few place flowers
and clean graves on All Saints Day,
though I remember picnics
sweeping and whitewashing crypts.
Families were Italian, Irish, black and Creole Catholics
performing the ritual of remembrance.

At 85, my dad is too old to climb and clean
the 12-foot tomb where my mother rests
and he expects to lie, but leaves flowers.
And I have not made my teen-age son
clean it as tradition warrants,
or place fresh flowers.
It is painful that he'll miss
the celebrations I knew but
in this half-dead place I still see
my father in my boy's face
and know I owe him more.

References/Bibliography

The references for this thesis are noted within the Preface. As it is a collection of the author's poems, it does not require extensive supporting scholarship other than those works mentioned. There are no additional works cited necessitating a Bibliography.

Vita

Ann Plicque was born and raised in New Orleans, La., a bit more than 50 years ago. Her mother was a high school English teacher who died in 2006. Her father, a retired postal worker, is alive and well at 85 and drives her 14-year-old son to or from school nearly daily. He and her mother have given her a deep sense of family, place and belonging to her culture, which includes African-American, American Indian, French, Spanish and German roots—in other words, the ubiquitous Creole gumbo of New Orleans. She speaks a little French and Spanish and has visited Paris and the Yucatan.

Her family stressed education as a key to success and she believes this and tries to instill these same values in her son. She was raised Roman Catholic and attended Catholic grammar and high schools. She would call herself spiritual these days.

Though she attended The University of New Orleans and Louisiana State universities after high school, she earned her bachelor's degree in 1986 from Northern Illinois University, in the suburban Chicago area, in Journalism. She spent more than a decade being bored as a copy editor at a mid-sized Texas paper and later at The Times-Picayune in New Orleans. This is not to say the staff were boring: Quite the contrary. The work was tedious and uncreative, but news people at both papers were colorful and talented.

Ann edited her grammar school newspaper and wrote poetry as a child, as well as in college. She decided to return to school for a masters in this first love. She has won the Vassar Millar poetry prize in 2008, and the Academy of American Poets Award in 2007 and 2008 at her university level. She has two honorable mentions in the Vassar Miller contest in 2009 and 2010. and an honorable mention in 2010 from the Academy of American Poets.

There's more exploration ahead. But a certified diver like Ann welcomes that.