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Though We May Not Discuss

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Though We May Not Discuss

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

by

Kelcy D. Wilburn

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2005

May, 2010

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Preface: The Mouth of a Season

There's no question that the poems contained in this collection are obsessive, and when I attempt to recollect the origin of these obsessions, I can't help but think of C. K. Williams and a poem about blue balls. About five years ago, Williams first intrigued me during my undergrad years with the poem "The Gas Station," first published in 1983, the year I was born. The poem, ironically, also refers to philosophy, literary theory and criticism, disciplines I became interested in only recently, several years after first reading the poem. After encountering "The Gas Station" I sought more of C. K. Williams's poetry, and in his *Selected Poems*, I first read "Halves."

Though I have borrowed the title of this preface, "The Mouth of a Season," from a line in "Halves," the meaning for me (perhaps not for Williams) is quite literal. These poems were all initially composed within five consecutive months, what felt like a season of my life. Literally, they interpret that phrase, as they are the voice of that season. While the poems were composed during one season, they are not, however, confined to its time constraints. These moments and their meanings continuously change with each reading. They exist as redefinitions of previous influences, ideas, expressions, memories, and impressions.

Though the phrase, for me, signifies a period in time, it also signifies the physicality of the mouth: an entrance into and exit from the body, a source of sensuality, and the origin of speech. This collection is made up of what the body takes in, experience and impressions, and what the body produces and releases, the expression. There is expression of the general experience of the poet, the infinite impressions on the mind, and there is the expression of the specific experience of the poet as speaker, the moments within a five-month period that

inspired the poems. The physical nature of the mouth also mirrors the physical focus in many of the poems, the obsession with the corporeal rather than the spiritual.

While compiling the collection, I became aware of another obsession of mine: the focus on what is not—what is not said, not there, not done. The element of absence made its way into the poems, but instead of leaving these gaps, or lacunae, I decided to focus on showing what *is* to emphasize the sense of what *isn't*, which, to me, seems the focus of Williams's poem "Halves." The lacuna in a moment is what inspires me to write and analyze it, but in the analysis I find further conflict, and simultaneously, more and different answers or solutions. Walter Pater addresses the transitory nature of these impressions in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*:

Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. (840)

In trying to recreate a moment, I have simultaneously recreated and altered it, as well as allowed it to recreate itself over and over. This process also allows for the possibility of the absent to be continually recreated.

The first quatrain of "Halves" reads:

I am going to rip myself down the middle into two pieces
because there is something in me that is neither

the right half nor the left half nor between them.

It is what I see when I close my eyes, and what I see. (23)

The impossibility of defining the elusive “it” here is what fascinates me with the poem but also with my own experience. Why do some moments mean something when others do not? “Halves” defines for me the indefinable, and in doing so creates an even larger, less avoidable lacuna to attempt to bridge. With time, the poem’s meanings shift, so how can the reader ever be without uncertainty?

Writing these poems, I found I could not be certain of meaning in my own work. In “Halves,” Williams describes a physical splitting of the self because there is something in him “neither / the right half nor the left half nor between them.” The poems I have included, while personal, represent neither “I,” nor “she,” nor something between them. They are moments and experiences represented in signifiers, and as such cannot be actual or genuine. Pater also writes:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (840)

The world of my poems strikes me as mostly dark and distant, containing elements of isolation, illness, and ennui. The speaker or character that appears in the poems is often very alone despite the frequent presence of an intimate other. The poems also seem to obsess over

the transitory natures of relationships and moments, the quick pace with which everything changes, and an obsession with the ever-present potential for change. “Photos” addresses the transitory nature of relationships in a direct manner by following the thoughts of the speaker as she replaces a photograph of one person with a photograph of another. The title poem, “Though We May Not Discuss,” addresses the potential for change in a relationship with the speaker imagining her lover “in twenty years / washing your hands the same way but saying something / twenty years different, something inflated, / more meaning less, less of us.” Along with transience, lacuna also seems apparent in these two poems, as the obsession in both is with what is not said.

I do include some playful poems, and I’ve decided to close the collection with these, in which the idea of transience arises again, the focus this time on language. During this “season” of writing, I encountered an extensive amount of theory and criticism, which pushed me to question language, its properties and purposes as well as its uses in poetry. Augustine’s notion of the Logos, Wordsworth’s Romanticism and inward focus, Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*, Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” Eliot’s formalism, the rebuttal of the reader-response theorists, and the undoing of language by the poststructuralists are just a few concepts that have influenced me, and my list of poets whose work has shaped mine would go on even longer if my “anxiety of influence” didn’t deter me from writing them down.

I can say the confessional work of Anne Sexton has always appealed to me, perhaps coming across in “The Catch,” a poem that explores the connection of both the internal and external pain of the poet. “Across the Courtyard, a Man Puts on His Sportcoat” could arguably be a response to imagists such as Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams,

whose keen attention to detail I value. I love the musicality and passion of emerging poets such as Richard Seiken and Jericho Brown and the eloquence and reflective nature of contemporary poet Jack Gilbert, who, in “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart,” wrote, “How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, / and how frightening that it does not quite” (5). Perhaps my title poem, “Though We May Not Discuss,” was shaped by the influence of these three poets’ work in its pacing, phrasing, and tone.

There is no strict equation as to how much one concept or style has influenced the work more than another. Impressions and influences are as transitory as a moment. Though these poems comprise the “mouth of a season,” they are not stylistically homogenous. Each reflects the moment it conveys, its physical and transitory natures, as well as the lacuna within it. I decided to group them into three sections, what I perceive as the season’s different moods, the atmospheres of my experience: isolation, suspension, and playful meditation. Perhaps for the reader, the experience will be something altogether different, and different still, time and time again.

*...so my life: there is this, neither before me
nor after, not up, down, backwards nor forwards from me.
It is like the dense, sensory petals in a breast
that sway and touch back. It is like the mouth of a season,*

*the cool speculations bricks murmur, the shriek in orange,
and though it is neither true nor false, it tells me
that it is quietly here, and, like a creature, is in pain;
that when I ripen it will crack open the locks, it will love me.*

- C.K. Williams, from "Halves"

I.

How We Separate

First, we move our fingers, slowly,
until the hands follow, wrists bend,
and arms straighten, lifting,
shoulders pull forward, pulling our backs,
and necks, chins lurch forward as heads tilt,
feet move to steady each body, first
taking one knee, one leg, then the other,
hips eventually catching up,

all the while lips moving, diminishing,
voices growing softer, and less
and less distinguishable
our words.

Return from Babylon, or “Tekel” on the Wall of Her Living Room

She writes checks as if
she is simply writing checks,
as though this day is any other
and the milk needs throwing out.

If from her checkbook
she were to look up, would she
see the face left wanting?
More likely, she would notice
only the argyle socks on feet
folded under knees in gray pants,
a black shirt, and perhaps,
the quiet tick of the clock.

She fingers the stamp, aligning it
along the envelope’s edge, perfectly
angled like her bedroom furniture.

Once the bills are paid:
the sound of running water,
smack of a toothbrush against the sink,
final click of the light switch

since there is nothing more to see
and no more for me to hear.

Morning As Broken

In the quiet between
nightmare and morning
sex, breaths were drawn, yours
louder than mine, deeper,
heavy with exhaustion.

Outside, a car door slammed,
an engine turned, gravel shifted
before the decrescendo
that comes with distance.

There were creaks in the house.
Shadows of leaves fell
across the window,
and suddenly

the first call
of the first bird
broke
with sunlight.

The Catch

The skin along my thumbnails is hard,
torn, dirty with dried blood. My nails'
constant picking ticks as a metronome

not hushed by song. Association
is the debt collector that calls, calls and calls despite
the change of address, phone number, last name.
Despite the debt paid. *There is no place to go
that is not you*, she said.

My skin, torn fresh from my thumb,
rolls and splits between my front teeth.
My tongue shifts mercilessly, catches
the broken skin, readies it for another bite.

Vertigo in New Orleans

I.

The bed rocks
like a canoe,
leaving me
to question
this concrete

city—
longing
to be free,
to be able
to stand.

II.

She said she'd
call, or stop by, but
no word, and
now it's ten

in the doorframe
between the bed-
room and
living room.

III.

The blood gone
or not yet,
maybe the draining
or fasting brings

the carpet close,
the swirls of
green, purple,
blue threads pulsing,
magnified.

IV.

The lines don't
line up
from house
to house,
one at six

feet, one at four—
the one on
the brick mantle
still.

V.

At the lake,
the steps,
when going down,
go up
into the water—

that is to say,
the sky wavering
with me beneath,
baffled.

A Watched Pot

Perched like an owl,
this fluff of
orange and black
on your kitchen
counter, stares at me,
unmoved
by what she understands.

Eye to Eye

"Where'd you go?" she asks, as they do in movies.
The other's face distorts, realizing its displacement.
Wind blows the curtains wide, allowing light to lie

across the lie or lack thereof. Under the sheets, undertones
of violence, twisted, grey, damp. After a swift rise
from underneath, she interrupts the night with light

from the bathroom's fluorescent bulb, the white bowl
of the sink. The water she uses to splash her face is not
so cold as she expects nor as she wants. Returning to bed,

she finds asleep the explanation. The curtain lifts itself
toward her as she curls into the other's body, then
held back by wind no more, the curtain drops into place.

Photos

He is all black coat zipped over collared shirt, dark jeans hanging just below his waist, hat with ear flaps swallowing his face, mouth open with tongue stuck out in playful jubilation at the photographer. The girl is buried in his shoulder, arm not seen, holding onto his back, all grey pea coat and light scarf, right hand in pocket, only showing half a smile, hair in her face, eyes intent on someone, smiling for someone on the other side. To their right and behind: nothing but a void, four specks of light deep in the distance, the road at their feet the color of their clothes.

And she, me, now on the other side, sitting, staring at it, the photo, which just replaced one of you and me— the one they said we were sure to love, the one you thought was just okay, of the two of us in the restaurant the moment before the waiter dropped a tray and drenched me, the camera on the table obviously spared in the mess, the camera full of photos I had taken of my new baby brother, the one we'd both been so excited to meet, the one you will surely never see again.

Though We May Not Discuss

white walls lit, preparing the way for your home-
made love at twelve fifteen, your address
without twelve, add five and forty-three see

me looking at you and the perfect light angle
as you smear brown canyon over clean white nothing
as God did, and the screen of you in twenty years

washing your hands the same way but saying something
twenty years different, something inflated,
more meaning less, less of us, the cat gone

and everything with a hardness to it
like the canyon you paint over the white walls
in your new white home, the beginning

of us, the still soft shell that forms on skin,
tones shifting like canyon, grass cloth, and time,
though we may not discuss possibilities nor angles

nor the sum of your face, curls, or curls of smoke
lifting from lips paying service to some future

II.

Quarantined

The peignoir folds itself
into itself and into the acute angles
of her body, seated
mid-morning. Time is

a trick of the mind.
Outside, the daylight is dark.
In jeans and a t-shirt,
her body knows
oppositions simultaneously,

a gift of illness.
The breeze rolls in
before the clouds, and she
hears the chirps of birds
not fleeing the approaching storm,
the body in a drip. Suspended,

the curtain is held away
from the sill;
silently, the wind moves
the dusty blades of a fan
with pushes so slight,
they do not move
full circle.

Where...?
she wonders, running
her nail along a seam
in the peignoir, her still
white face open
toward the window.

Under Water

In New Orleans,
we open windows
not for air or music,
though there is music
in the train that brakes
along the river,
and in the humidity
that sends volts buzzing
across wire as, on the ground,
leftover rainwater soaks
upward into oaks and pant legs.
The weight of the air, too,
breaks the pavement,
cracks the sidewalks
where ghosts and strangers tread.
And voices, though muffled
and garbled, sopping and soaked,
do indeed settle
into the space between ears,
teeth, shoulder blades,
the cushions of a couch.
We open windows
not for air or music, but
to equalize the pressure
of what's inside
with what's out.

Noises Heard from Bed While Sick with Fever

Last night's heavy footsteps
from the dead man's room upstairs
become the ceiling fan in morning,
by midafternoon, the steady *clang-*
clang of construction.

Work

morning rush
hour in the veins

air cold on the face, taking
the escalator up
to this morning's work
and roll call

some eyes scan others wondering
what malfunction
while others scan
bodies in machines
during these journeys
to diagnoses we

don't all look sick,
sitting and scanning papers

but, thick like red jam, our blood
looks sick as
it's taken from us

until lighter, less alive,
we leave

Countdown

sinking feeling the mid-afternoon march
from four to five to six to twelve
the sigh the slow movement of the head looking up
facing to say *bye, have a nice night trip weekend*
small moments of don't look back
hurrah of the shirt and bra coming off
the laughs pouring out the open door
onto the street from the badly tiled floor
sticky from spills of years and more years
and the last hour and the last minute
and the look on your face that spilled out
sadness fatigue and depression
the invitations dropped
in the mailbox inbox outbox checkbox
the status left unchecked since home is where the
heaviness is the night sweats and race brain
and eye roll until everything rolls on
roles up and the stage lit curtains closed
opening again with new light new face
good morning

Closure

Flags, jagged yellow shark's teeth, dangle
from the roof of the building across the street.
This road off the main road leads
to empty parking lots, empty stores,
empty words. No phone calls today.
Two walk-ins, a couple, made no promises

like the hum of the emptied coke machine
and computer's fan, the occasional delivery
truck that rumbled across potholes, the high-pitched pop
in the ears when swallowing spit. A sporadic cough,
the hard snuffle that slaps mucus against
the back of the throat. Another pop.

“Need a bag of Natural Gray.”
“Twelve ninety-six, sir.”
He looks at me hard. Looks like stone.
“Thank you, sir.”

The flags wave in the wind,
one or two at a time
like loose teeth.

Migration: The Art of Finding Work

I.

The road is much busier here, though the foot traffic is sparse. Independent now from mother's wing, this bird has flown alone. Feather-foil and foiled plans together under a constant ticking clock, like my grandfather's, though not ticking, more tocking, swinging like Poe's pendulum. Every Thursday,

the old man mops the floors, the old man Joe who looks like my grandfather, who once mopped floors, too, his broken wrist protruding as with a golf ball lodged beneath his skin, maybe an extra heart he kept so he could smile when threatening to buy himself a Cadillac. Father doesn't know why he left the tobacco fields, the others, behind.

As the days go on, we know less and less of what to expect. But like starling after starling, for better or worse, we follow, we fly.

II.

Instead of a family calendar or pot-holder on a hook, a ticking clock hangs in my kitchen, the same clock as from my grandmother's kitchen. Before, the clock didn't mean *time*; it meant everyone gathered at the table; it meant ham and pie. Here

no one mops the floors, and the old man Joe knocks on new doors, hoping someone will trade twenty dollars for sopped floors and horse-track stories, a smile that threatens another story about the latest nineteenth century self-help book, its promises that money won't make you happy. Maybe someone will note the authors' names.

The painting on my wall reads "Nighthawks": two black birds, carefully placed, head near head, as if to cross paths despite their fixed flight.

Across the Courtyard, a Man Puts on His Sportcoat

Slight shift of darkness—tensing muscle of bird's wing, the pause before flight.

To Have the Last Laugh

Driving west, New Orleans to Lafayette,
she passes tall crosses and short cypresses,
the dead that litter the road's shoulder.
Why must possums scale interstate overpasses,
wastelands of concrete and cars, to scavenge
only cigarette butts and empty bags
swept to the edges by passing vehicles?

She remembers the unwary comedian who
once asked her grandmother
why the chicken crossed the road,
and to whom she replied, sweetly,
"To prove to the possum that it can be done."

Now, supine on the side of the highway,
the possums, like dots, define her journey
and its circle back. Never, she thinks, will she leave
this place, and suddenly finds herself laughing
as she turns the wheel with the turns in the road
and wishes for tears that must mean love,
that say *cypress, possum, cypress, home*.

III.

Every Apple Has Its Worm

In the beginning was the worm,
and the worm was with God,
and the worm was God.

The worm hole in the apple
created the apple
and its falling
not far from the tree
where it grew with the worm
crawling through.
The hole forms the bridge,
the way, the light. In truth,
it makes way for the eating,
the need for an apple.

And thus, the problem
of which came first:
the worm or the apple?

That is, who eats whom?

Dead in the Water

Some months,
funerals crawl like ants,
one by one along the log,
carrying pieces of us
and our dead
into holes.

Why, death,
do you choose that verb?
That simile?
This dog?

Yesterday, somewhere deep
in the surrounding woods,
someone shot a gun
ten times. After the noise,
expecting something dead
on the bank of the Tangipahoa,
I looked around and found it
floating by my canoe,
dark and wet, the only thing
dead in the water,
driftwood.

This Is Not a Conceit for Poetry

What the vacuum holds:

the crumbs of our casual meals
the dirt from the yard and beyond,
the cat's hair, my
hair, your hair
and dead skin,
the all that falls between.

When it gets full,
take out the filter,
shake everything loose,
and dump all that's been collected
into the garbage bin or
onto the sidewalk or
anywhere the wind carries.

There is always the risk
of losing an earring,
a coin,
a treasured ticket stub—
but that's the price you pay
for a clean, less cluttered house.

(No) Communication

She finds a monster underneath the molded spam in her inbox, the bold letters not saying the expected “Happy birthday,” but yelling **inappropriate** and demands and **thank you**. Puzzled, she stares at the thing, says *no thank you* in her head and *fuck off already*. Bigbrain, not Birdbrain, then interrupts the moment welcomed, announces (aloud), "Okay, there is one word I really hate, and that's 'inappropriate.' Anyone who uses that word is just a total fucking asshole." She laughs aloud and the monster's gone, erased, but the repercussions aren't and aren't yet realized. So she gets her time machine fixed, goes back, and—wait, she was never there to begin with. Nothing now is inappropriate except **excepting**, and now already she's used the word, but still she laughs, *laugh, laugh*, laughs, and there is no thing to stop her. There *is* no thing.

Grammar Lesson

Sentences don't begin or end.

The participle has no parts.

Infinitives are not infinite.

Words mean an undifferentiated mass of mean(ing, the gerund, for example).

Punctuation means no

thing— no purpose,

no rules, no grand

intention; no cause

for clause, no clues to use.

This is not a joke.

Afternoon Conversation

From this moment, there are three more. And three more with bubbles. And bubbles with bread. And bread with aches. And aches with hatchets. And hatchets with sour. And sour with ice. And so on.

Someone told me, be concise. What is concise? A point. To have a point, in here, sharpened like a pencil. Your job is to shave around the lead, my job to erase. Or vice versa.

So tell me. If you ask for something, do you expect to get it? The lack of expectations clears room for other things, like air. You can typically find lots of air in the park. If not, try the water.

We could go back and forth this way for hours. My eyes are getting tired. Are you listening to me? I'm thirsty. Look how the sun peeks through. Someone once told me to follow my heart. Someones say all sorts of things. And so on.

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Vita

Kelcy Wilburn was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, before relocating to New Orleans in 2001. She received her B.A. in English from Loyola University New Orleans in 2005. She has been published or has work forthcoming in *Maple Leaf Rag IV*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Big Bridge*, *Waccamaw*, and *Hobart*. The poem “How We Separate” was an honorable mention for the The Academy of American Poets / Andrea Saunders Gereighty Award in 2010, judged by Celia Gilbert.