

Spring 5-23-2019

Summer Troubles and Other Poems

Jeremy Thomas Burke
University of New Orleans, New Orleans, jtburke@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burke, Jeremy Thomas, "Summer Troubles and Other Poems" (2019). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2593.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2593>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Summer Troubles and Other Poems

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
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Jeremy Thomas Burke

B.S. St. Ambrose State University, 1999
B.A. St. Ambrose State University, 1999
M.A. Washington University in St. Louis, 2002

May, 2019

Copyright 2019, Jeremy Thomas Burke

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my thesis director and mentor Carolyn Hembree for her dedication to her students, her craft, and her high standards. Her perspective, reading recommendations, questions, patience, support, and guidance have been invaluable to me throughout the thesis process.

Thank you to my mentor and teacher John Gery for his faith in me, his devotion to higher education, his close reading, and the meticulous care he gives all of my work.

Thank you to my teacher Niyi Osundare for his guidance in grounding my poetry in the orality of words and for urging me to strive for musicality in every line.

To my friends and colleagues who've inspired and supported me throughout graduate school—Betsy Houston, Shaina Monet, Sean Carrero, Shelly Rodrigue, Kelly Gangeness Le, Justin Lamb, Kate Aquilo, Michelle Lepori, Lee Monson, Michelle Hoover, Ellie Linder, Elle Magnuson, and Jacquelyn Nasti—thank you for sharing your talent, insight, good nature, and helpful feedback on my poems.

To my teacher Kay Murphy, thank you for helping me reconsider the way I structure my poems.

Thank you to those who helped me navigate my circuitous route into the writing life: Carl Herzig, Fr. Bud Grant, Owen Rogal, Paul and Bea Jacobson, Troy Johnson, and Luke Biel.

Thank you to my parents, Tom and Becky, for instilling in me a love of reading and allowing me to be so curious as a child.

To my siblings, in-laws, and extended family, thank you for the constant love and support.

And thank you to my best friend, my wife Rachel, for your encouragement, your faith in me and my poetry, your patience, your hard work, your courage, your tenacity, your vision, your honesty, and, most importantly, for loving me.

In addition, I would like to thank *Gloom Cupboard*, *Ellipsis*, *Helen*, *Panoply*, and *Quercus* for publishing earlier versions of "Across the Lagoon," "Perpetual Care," "A Banshee Wind" & "Ashbery Titles and My Sentences," "Gulls over Lake Pontchartrain," and "Last Evening in Lepanto" respectively.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
How We Go On: A Preface	1
Gulls over Lake Pontchartrain	9
Like Bison.....	10
The Future Arrives Sooner Than One Thinks.....	11
The Tricks of Today.....	12
Perpetual Care.....	13
Cake!	15
Pretend Christmas	17
Last Evening in Lepanto	18
Summer Troubles.....	19
Across the Lagoon	29
Mother Figures.....	30
Black Calm.....	31
Ashbery Titles and My Sentences.....	32
Picture of the Artificer in a Prospect of Hours	33
Failed Intervention from a Park Bench.....	35
Say Goodbye to the Atomic Bomb	36
A Banshee Wind	37
The Society of Endless Desire, Transcript of Congress 9.4 (Revised), Tuesday, April 3, 2018...38	
Last Lecture on Disruptive Innovation	41
Overheard in Moonlight.....	42
Travel Prayer.....	43
Akira's Ghost Whispers Goodbye.....	44
End Notes.....	45
VITA.....	46

Abstract

Following the example of Gary Snyder's "Axe Handles," I introduce my poetics and poems in the preface. Other influences, including Lucille Clifton, John Ashbery, and Anne Carson, are also explored. The original poetry that follows the preface attempts to enact the language of philosophical exploration, relationships, memory, conversation, and meditation while paying close attention to the musicality of everyday speech and avoiding clear and specific conclusions.

Keywords: poetry; John Ashbery; Gary Snyder; Lucille Clifton; Anne Carson; meditative poetry

How We Go On: A Preface

*Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe*

—Gary Snyder, "Axe Handles"

In his poem "Axe Handles," Gary Snyder describes the poet (Ezra Pound), the teacher (Shih-hsiang Chen), and the parent (Snyder himself—also a poet and teacher) as "model / And tool, craft of culture, / How we go on." More than any other, this 1983 poem first shaped my poetics. I returned to this axe, Snyder's pattern, repeatedly when I first began writing poems. Of all his poems, "Axe Handles," which I discovered twenty-years ago when I attended a lecture on Snyder at Saint Ambrose University, best represented the poetics I wanted to explore. While preparing this manuscript, I came to see evidence of his "model and tool" on almost every page.

"Axe Handles" begins by depicting a moment between father and son. It is late April; spring is about to bust wide open. Snyder introduces readers to three key elements of his poetry—a setting, the cycle of seasons, and particular relationships. Many poems in this collection cover some of the same territory: particular relationships, often grounded in a specific setting, and cycles or transitions. For example, in my poem "Cake!" the speaker has a wife, it is her birthday, and the dramatic action begins in the kitchen. By the sixth line, readers learn that speaker and wife are in transition, not seasonal as in "Axe Handles" but a life-cycle transition, in that the wife's job will end soon.

Memory also plays a role in Snyder's poem, and, so too does projection. Kai, the speaker's son, remembers a hatchet head in the shop and anticipates he could use it for his own hatchet. The speaker remembers a quote from Ezra Pound in lines sixteen through seventeen: "When making an axe handle / the pattern is not far off." He explains to Kai how they will shape

the new tool with the old one. In just seven lines, Snyder incorporates memory and projection, but also allusion and dialogue. Readers may see evidence of a similar approach in the poems that follow. For instance, memory and projection play a role in poems such as "Across the Lagoon." I allude to several sources in "Summer Troubles." Additionally, many of these poems use dialogue to allow for multiple voices and perspectives, including "Like Bison," "Gulls," and "Cake!" By pondering these moments in "Axe Handles," I began to see the possibilities of intertextuality. Now, often when I compose poems other texts, sometimes through memory, sometimes through direct quotation, help shape my approach.

"Cake!" exemplifies how I attempt to utilize all of these tools in a single poem. The speaker remembers a comic book from his childhood, anticipates a "union proud" bumper sticker, and, in the present, hears the hum of a lightsaber. In section 2, two figures speak in addition to the primary speaker. The comic book guy vocalizes his thoughts while observing the wife, to which she responds with her own dialogue, quoting Darth Vader from the original *Star Wars* movie: "the Force is strong / with this one." In addition to opening up the lyric space for other voices and perspectives, dialogue allows me to reflect on the impact of utterance. I want the speaker of "Cake!" to act as witness and participant as his wife experiences major transitions: her birthday, the end of a job, and union membership.

Years ago, when I was working at the University of Minnesota, a former colleague (both an academic advisor and professor of medieval literature) said during a meeting that I write "philosophical poetry." When I returned to graduate school to study poetry full-time, several members of our workshop described my drafts as "philosophical" and "idea-driven." However, I did not set out to write such poems, which caused me to reflect on my life with my wife, Rachel. Marriage holds up a strange mirror to one's experiences. In it, I see my reflection, not quite as I

imagine it, but maybe more as I am. While Rachel does not point out each ontological moment in my poems, she does regularly remind me of my philosophical approach to living. I am often "in my head" considering another perspective and then another (and another and another), trying to see which best solves whatever problem I have encountered. Precision in communication is important to me. I debate my way through each day. To better understand my thoughts and experiences, I explore them through writing. Rachel reminds me of these habits.

Reflecting on my approach to life helped me understand what Lucille Clifton meant when, in the Summer 2000 issue of the *Antioch Review*, she said that "[t]he kind of person I am writes poetry like I do." I write philosophical poetry because I am a philosophical person—for better or worse. Instead of thinking of myself as narrative poet with lyric impulses, or a lyric poet with narrative impulses, as I once had, Professor Hembree suggested I might be a meditative poet, which resonates with me because meditative poetry can be quite flexible. It can take lyric turns or follow narrative impulses. This mode creates space for whatever a poem requires as it transforms the language of thought to poetry, the private language of the self to the public language of utterance. I try to listen to the poem as I compose it and take direction from what I hear. The kind of person I am seems to write an inquisitive, exploratory sort of poem rather than a more certain, declarative poem.

If such a distinction exists, it may be where my work diverges from "Axe Handles." By the end of that poem, the speaker seems in full grasp of the lesson. Through sharing with his son, he understands that poets, teachers, and parents shape us the way we shape axe handles. Snyder's speaker comprehends the significance of his experience and connects it cleanly to both his past and his future. My speakers are not so fortunate. They struggle to make sense of their relationships and their worlds; they grapple with big ideas; they experience each moment as fully

as they can, but the certain conclusion Snyder's speaker appears to realize seems to elude mine. They usually have as many questions at the end of a poem as they had in the beginning. Where Snyder writes his way into an answer, I write my way into a question in an attempt to meditate on my experiences.

For example, in "Cake!" I hope to portray a speaker who seems to recognize the significance of his wife's transitions while remaining unable to arrive at any specific judgment. He spins "like a crashing copter," stuck in the present while awkwardly gazing at his past and future. The speaker and wife end up returning home to the cake that awaits them, which due to the structure of the poem, is meant to represent both their past and future. They scan cars (their present) for a bumper sticker they will soon possess (their future). Despite occupying these temporal and physical spaces, they seem not to achieve epiphany. By avoiding clear and specific conclusions in my poems, I hope to encourage the reader to participate in determining their meaning. This is my attempt, as Yusef Komunyakaa writes in "Poetry and Inquiry," "to cultivate an open-endedness that invites the reader to enter."

To cultivate my own sense of "open-endedness," I have turned to poets who embrace questions over conclusions. A poet I now revisit often is John Ashbery. You will see his name appear throughout this manuscript. Ashbery's poetry rarely solves any of the problems I encounter in crafting a particular poem, but his work provides comfort by helping me embrace my problems. I dwell in a problem by writing my way further in, then back out, and sometimes all the way around. Ashbery dwells in the language of thought, perception, conversation, and in consciousness itself, which empowers me to dwell in the language of my own experiences.

"A Sweet Disorder," from Ashbery's 2015 collection *Breezeway*, remains a constant source of inspiration. It opens with a conversation between the primary speaker and a bartender.

The context provides cues for shifts between voices. Their conversation triggers a memory for the primary speaker—a memory that the *he* forgets. *He* could refer to the bartender or almost anyone. The identity of the *he* is not so important. What is? That the speaker remembers and *he* does not. Rather than resolving this problem, Ashbery allows his speaker to dwell in remembering and forgetting. He recalls the day, the music, and the wearing of neckties. Suddenly aware of the time, in line thirteen he says, "My gosh, it's already 7:30." This phrase, often uttered when we notice the time, interrupts thought and resets consciousness, our ability to be receptive to language. From here, Ashbery's poem could go in almost any direction and we could follow. In this case, he offers a litany of problems in rapid succession, from the identity of our containers to the speaker's state of consciousness. Ashbery raises these concerns, allows his speaker to dwell in them, then simply ends the poem. The final interrogative sentence, "Do I wake or sleep?" allows the reader to consider this question and respond however one will—with an answer, another question, or a *non-sequitur*.

Ashbery's poetry opened up a space that I needed after being held under the sway of "Axe Handles" for so long. I could let go of the peculiar certainty of contained worlds and, instead, ask: "Are these our containers?" "Summer Troubles," the longest poem in this manuscript, begins with a promise to Ashbery that the speaker will write a long poem. However, as the speaker admits in the second section, he does not know how to write a long poem. Instead of avoiding this problem, I allow my speaker to dwell in his troubles. So far as I can tell, the speaker does not resolve any of his problems, but he does try to acknowledge them. The closest any speaker comes to an epiphany is offered by the italicized dialogue of the final section, which I imagine to be spoken by John Ashbery's ghost: "*At least, you've raised your own / summer troubles like a slice of toast.*" He points out, I try to suggest, that the primary speaker has exercised his will to

some degree. Ashbery's ghost also offers some advice: "*think / of Rachel before sleep, how she drops her hair / across your chest, how she warms / her feet with yours, / no matter what you've done / or may never do.*" I want the ghost to steer my speaker's focus toward his relationship with his wife, their intimacy, and her acceptance of all his temporalities. However, I hope to avoid a certain conclusion and create a sense of open-endedness for the reader by ending with a paradox: "no matter how tight I squeeze, / she feels as far away as fine wine / consecrated into blood."

I blame any confusion I might have about poetic modes on Anne Carson. When I read her *Autobiography of Red* in 2010, my poetics began to change. Carson's poems tell stories, incorporate other texts (and change them if she desires), take on other identities, and—heaven forbid!—use humor. Carson has given me the permission to experiment that I did not know I needed. I could be scholarly or poetic or both or neither. I could be lyric and narrative at the same time. In *Autobiography of Red*, she builds her version of the Greek figure, Geryon, and his supporting cast, through an omniscient speaker, but still uses humor. Carson's ability to embrace the contradictions of human experience have made a deep impression on me. Her work seems scholarly and imaginative, her figures distant and intimate, and her integration of poetic modes is seamless.

My poem, "Summer Troubles," would not have been possible had I not first read *Autobiography of Red*. The poem shifts between modes and voices as it unfolds across ten sections. It incorporates other texts: a Catholic mass, interviews with poets, phrases from Audre Lorde and W. H. Auden, an excerpt from a letter I wrote to Ashbery, a quote from LeBron James's 2017 NBA Finals press conference, and bits of conversation. The multiple speakers in "Summer Troubles," most prominently Ashbery's ghost, allow for a variety of perspectives and experiences to enter into the world of the poem. Through this multiplicity, I hope to create more

vibrant and textured sounds and images within the poem in an attempt to reflect the diverse world outside my poems. I am no Carson, but I strive to pay homage to her inventiveness.

Finally, in the spirit of Snyder, I also work to embrace the musicality of ordinary speech. "Axe Handles" doesn't use a fixed rhyme scheme or meter, but it sings through alliteration, assonance, and consonance. These sound patterns may slip by unnoticed on first reading but they quickly come to the surface when one revisits the poem. In "Like Bison," I attempt to create a similar effect. This poem uses common words and phrases in a way I hope calls attention to their musicality through the line breaks: "*Swiss cheese / means more / than the future / of mathematics.*" As I see it, the first line isolates the s-sounds and contains just two syllables, while in the second I want to highlight the m-sounds and pull in the s-sound again to create assonance between *cheese* and *means*, as well as to repeat the two-syllable structure. The third line should then break the pattern by doubling the syllable count to four, emphasizing t-sounds and using new vowel sounds. The last of these lines continues the four-syllable count and the a-sounds from the third line but should also echo the alliteration of m-sounds to create synthesis and closure for these lines spoken by the grandmother.

My poetics remain a work in progress. However, I hope readers will find in this collection my attempt to craft open-ended poems that meditate on relationships, memory, and time through multiple perspectives, intertextuality, and at least a little musicality. If I have done serviceable work, then readers might be able to participate in constructing each poem's meaning and draw some conclusions of their own. Despite any progress I may have made in developing my sense of an open-ended poetics while crafting this manuscript, I still feel more like the handle being shaped than the axe that does the carving. Now that I have carved out one crude model, though, I hope to begin shaping the next one. After all, as Snyder says, it is "how we go on."

*do the worlds continue spinning
away from each other forever?*

—Lucille Clifton

Gulls over Lake Pontchartrain

Sitting outside in long rows
at church festival tables—
you alligator sausage,
I golden fried shrimp—
we eat our poboy sandwiches
completely dressed. The beer flows
sweet as tea, while nearby gulls,
white as distant sails
of southern sky, drift
calling, calling,
dive.

Years ago, under pillars
of cloud like these, we unpacked
our Midwestern belongings
from plastic crates. Squawks
raised our heads. New
Orleans, now a home
caressed by the breeze, cooled
by sweat and naked
with promise. That night,
exhausted as a search party, we hunted
for folding chairs, then gave up,
collapsing instead
on the tile floor, to pluck
pepperoni from cold pizza.

*Tomorrow, I'll find us
some seafood, you swore,
convinced one day we would
hear our calling.*

Like Bison

When first we met,
my wife's grandmother grabbed me
by the cheeks, looked deep
into my eyes, and announced,

*You look just like
I said you would.*

She held my face a long time
between her hands. My mind drifted
into the beige carpet as her words
became my flesh, then the whole building
receded into Minnesota earth. Around us,
prairie sprouted as we became
bison staring at each other
with big brown eyes
sadder than holes poked in t-shirts
by self-inflicted insulin shots.
The bison that was me blinked.

*Swiss cheese
means more
than the future
of mathematics.*

Her words toppled over
the way her empty oxygen tanks
had fallen along the hallway floor.

Beside us, in his recliner, her husband,
who said nothing, pondered the television
or the horizon, gold as American Buffalo
bullion, burning down before him
to nothing but the night.

The Future Arrives Sooner Than One Thinks

Against this old, red gate, we lean
and ponder time. The switchgrass yellows.
Our October breeze rustles steady on, but
what about time travel
has she clarified?
She reads so many comic books
she's become an expert
in the impossible
particulars of clear thinking.

Maybe that bird is from the future,
I suggest, pointing at the female cardinal
perched on the barbed wire.

*I'll bet we see it in our future
when we get there,* she laughs.

I listen like falling to the grass.
The way clouds drift
in no apparent hurry
she displays her patience.
The neighbor's cows
pay us no mind.

See, our cardinal is here!
Laughing again, she closes
her eyes as orangegrass fluff
zips over our heads.

I sigh, *You have it all
figured out,* then try to think
of clever things to insinuate
about the clouds, slumping
beyond the steadfast cattle.

Look at that one!

She lifts her gaze, but my words
in their thought bubbles
remain trapped while my mouth fills
speech balloons with sound.

Under her nails, the gate's rust flakes.

The Tricks of Todayⁱ

Hide your handsaw, scissors,
knives—unless ready-mades
by Duchamp. Metaphors
fear each cleft, but thrive
when language catwalks
across another chasm.

Please note: words shall hum
and spiders crawl forth
from the collapsing fissures
in clutched pages.

No—each utterance
that cuts you to your knees
will not summon such strange arachnids;
kiss cogitation goodbye. Critics
report rare instances. Dark critters
surface from this page
how? Web born by breeze,
their delicate rise rests
on this: life requires the words
to span a sigh, but only come
when we embrace *not-I*.

Perpetual Care

Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.

So says Li Po (701-762), if one asked
Ezra Pound (1885-1972), who called
the Chinese poet a Japanese name, *Rihaku*,
and could not read Chinese in 1915,
the time of this translation. I read neither
Chinese nor Japanese but (in spare moments)
do study *Kanji* (namely, never), a Japanese system
of writing that utilizes characters borrowed
from Chinese: *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*,
10th ed., 1993, given me by my maternal grandparents
in 1994 when I graduated high school
in Goose Lake, Iowa. I already owned a Bible,
because back then, in those parts, scripture
had priority over dictionaries. Still, Leo and Rosalie knew
I was college-bound. Rosalie now prays every day
while Leo rests in that Trappist pine beneath the cold
Iowa dirt atop my favorite hill. It is a desolate castle:
just the dead, the grass, the stones; where sky spans
wider than the deserts
between words.

*

A tire's vulcanized rubber blathers

over a potholed road

blocks away. Hounds

lick themselves, chained

to stakes in uncut grass.

As kin, the wheel's bay

met briefly

before each tongue

resumed its wont.

*

The ant's a centaur in his dragon world,

says Pound according to *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 3rd ed., 2003, Canto LXXXI.

Pound's a centaur in the anthologized world
and Rihaku in his Orientalized world, while I'm the ant
in his centaur world. Iowa, the home of graveyards, where
Leo was alive long-ago where Rosalie resides still
in one of Westwing Place's seventy-seven intermediate beds
in DeWitt for long-term nursing care. With convenient access
to all hospital services (such as radiology, laboratory, therapy,
and emergency), she the dragon in her daughter's ant-days.
A dictionary's the Bible of my dragon world. Poetry's the centaur
I ride through each page, yelling, *Forward!*
But she turns her human-looking head
over her human-looking shoulder:
Truly, Jeremy, I'm right here.
No need to shout anymore.

Pretend Christmas

Green needles flutter
overhead. Each branch
bounces, pine cones tugging
a slight breeze. Pastel stones
pock the sky above me, clouds;
below, I see from the deck, I assume,
a family minding the otherwise quiet campus.

Two cones fall. The sister
picks them up, pretends
it's Christmas again:

*Mine's a baby bird.
You can have this one—
an airplane.*

And I remember Christmases—
pine pine
pining for the Millennium
Falcon

Her brother runs, pine cone
in one hand, scanning the grass for more.
Sister holds hers aloft. Father laughs,
then turns from the south to finish
his business, pecking at his palm,
which holds a glass screen, then
he speaks. Gray lines of sidewalk
stretch on.

and snow off to Grandma's
church—dash dash desire
to be dashing in hand-me-downs

Concrete diminishes in the diminishing
daylight but keeps the clover
from choking off the path. Green, the needles
flutter to the ground.

another needle another
green unraveling
Christmas sweater

Last Evening in Lepanto

Along the outskirts of Lepanto,
across a dirt road from a cemetery,
sat the drive-in movie theater. In the good old days,
Elvis used to ring the sheriff to request an afterhours show.
He'd pull up, put the top down, and watch John Wayne
strutting across a night sky, all *pilgrim*
this, *pilgrim* that. Dressed as Genghis Khan?
John Wayne, I mean. Elvis would have stood out
in that rural Arkansas dark, donned
in twelfth-century Mongolian garb.

Now beat as an unknown cowboy,
I check the time before entering
Mongolian Grill for supper.
The glass door chimes a hanging
bell. When the plastic seat *thunks*
from the notebook I chuck
into a booth, a tableful
of police officers eyeball me
and suddenly I hanker to ride
out my last evening
full of rumination
in Lepanto.

Summer Troubles

I.

Summer approaches quickly, never
slowly, unless, of course, vacation
begins June 21st, making late spring blossoms
take forever to fall. I have no vacation days,
but live instead as if on holiday
or always working, which means, I guess,
following my passions to an early grave
or maybe one late, late Irish wake
if speculative medicine finally blooms.
Writing season never ends.
Besides, I promised John Ashbery
I'd write a long poem
and confessed this to his publicist
via letter. Before his death that summer,
Ashbery likely never learned my promise.

*Consider: Is it still an oath
or just a kiss
blown to a blind lover?*

But I honor this promise
as I'd follow up on that kiss
by writing a letter in Braille
and mailing it to Seoul
if for no other reason than to say,

my love—
as you leaned against the ship's rail
and the plank was raised, I pressed my hand
to my mouth, kissed my fingers, waved
you what remained. So anyway
how's that famous Korean barbecue
everyone from all corners extolls?

II.

Black, a blank screen peeks
through an open doorway,
calling as if cognizant of my sin.
From where these words? How rapidly
my fingers pinch across another white page.

When to pause writing a long poem?

*I suggest when birds fall haphazardly
from the sky, the way hailstones plummet.*

Birds already have fallen.

*Well, then rake the dead into piles
and burn.*

Soon shall I whistle through incense
and organ wind.

*So, this is how it unfolds.
Always already in the middle
working toward no conclusion,
only an end. Just like you, me,
and that one over there
laying out her white dress
to match her Sunday heels.*

III.

Easter lands like another dead bird.
Mass, too, nears its exacting end.
I turn to a woman in a white dress
to shake her hand, as I will my old friend
Jack when he climbs
from his brand-new Honda coupe.
I am not her lover: no kiss
on the cheek, no side-hug,
just *Peace be with you*, we utter
in unison, then shake hands
briefly—one downward thrust
toward the wooden kneeler
resting at our feet—my black dress shoes
obscured by the kneeling pad, her heels
hidden, just ankles rising from the checkered floor.
Then, leaning over the pew in front, I squeeze
an old woman's hand and repeat, *Peace*.
From her seat, looking up through large-framed glasses,
she barely squeezes back, eyeglass chain trailing
into her blueish-white hair. She almost smiles.
Saying nothing, her son shakes my hand, then I,
my father's, my mother reaching past him

to shake mine. Peace signs pass
like a spray of sandpipers over water
throughout the nave. Summer, we feel
summer sneaking up our pant legs.

If you ask me, I will tell you
I'm a post-Catholic Zen Buddhist with Taoist leanings.
Everyone laughs when I say this.
They know it's not true.

Now, down the aisle come two priests with aspergilla,
sprinkling Holy Water across the faithful,
the faithless, too. Hit squarely between the eyes
(his aim apparently truer than a sinner would guess),
a drop rolls down to dangle beside my nostril.
I leave it as I would a tear, my Easter doused
as if it took some effort
to make it this far
with ebullient pride
from the fast-fading spring
into almost-summer, the utter end
of my first mass in thirteen years.

*Out you walked whistling,
"Wade in the Water."*

IV.

My poem's not as pretty as that song, JA;
forgive me. I see stars spinning

through the living room
shades while I stare through the slats
at my neighbor's television: November,
1983, three boys in an Indiana basement
held rapt by their Dungeon Master's cadence
until onto table he slams a plastic Demogorgon.
When they jump, I jump, too,
and the dawn sneaks past
the way a sacrament—

Never say, "Extreme Unction."

Fine. My lines grow too long and ramble on anyway, if you ask some people
who read texts,

tweets and email
on tiny screens they slip into
tight pant pockets purchased at Goodwill, each one a steal or gone for a song.

De rigueur.

I guess, but to write
short lines
like Creeley—*he's given the possibility
of poetry
by what seems to be
a very mysterious
process—*

or Clifton—*the kind of person
I am writes
poetry
like I do—*

my new goal
for another summer,
full before the dirt
grows warm.

*Yet, summon the difference
between poetry and rhetoric;
be ready to kill instead
of children, yourself.*

*Remember, Audre Lorde
taught you that.*

V.

Suddenly arrives
Rachel! There, up,
down, sits,
 stands,
off for coffee, her eyes
yoked to an invisible chain,
samsara—old troubles,
tug me to my knees,
too. I can't stay
present long enough
to appreciate her advice,

washing my hands
in fresh blood.
Like Job I tear my garments
and pray to grow into a greater
Buddhist, head shaved,
instead of bald.

*Would you smile then?
Content?*

*To be small and clear and free,
such transformations function
(from what I've been told),
the way a heavy period,
like that herd of elephants
tended by the angry clown
on unicycle, leaks through
at the most technological moment.*

*Your star was brighter perhaps
when it had water in it.*

VI.

Distant afternoons
decay into dusk:
What is love?
What makes
time? Longing
to trap her father
in conversation, she stabs
at new-city loneliness
with her inquiries.
*Go forth, write
each question down,*
her father replies.

As their decade wanes, he ponders,
then types each answer into letters,
correspondence he seals
as if bound for Seoul
instead of a pillow
in her room a door away.
Never did she desire mail
though once she received

someone else's, a letter
addressed to some poet's publicist:

The end of the weekend has set
upon my small, wooden writing desk,
another in a series of darkening
horizons I hope continues, as my countless
days crawl toward being numbered.
Your work will be among the last things
to occupy my thoughts until I collapse
into bed with my wife, Rachel, a painter
whose work you've likely never seen
(maybe someday),
and turn my last conscious hours
toward more immediate pleasures.

After your last weekend
has drawn to a close,
what is it like to know
you will live on
in other people's bodies?

Childhood dissolves into echoes
of divergent voices.

VII.

*This morning, your wife asked you
to sit while she ate her eggs
and drank the coffee you brewed,
but you wouldn't let time turn
toward her: Keep talking, you said,
I'm going to finish these dishes.
As if this was the only possibility,
she continued, and the past
rolled out as it did.*

*Moments later, she descended
from your third-floor apartment
carrying on her way to work
a plastic bag of trash to the blue
dumpster across the parking lot.
She'd added that she anticipated working late
again, and you'd listened, but she couldn't see.
Your stubbled face hung above the soapy gray.*

Don't overdo it, Love.

*But you couldn't squeeze her arm.
You'd chosen a task instead
too distant for a body to cross.
Now, though, you long for that gone body,
out the door, down the stairs
to the everlasting asphalt
of walking-dully-along.*

I remember that homemade treatise
on love and time.
Screw efficiency.

VIII.

New Orleans to Minnesota, I fly
on business, I guess, though
truly, education is my trade.
Honors students need more advice
than tax-payers would care to admit;
when an advisor's summer plans
change, another must take her place.

A flight attendant soon will offer
coffee, I presume, and wait
and notice all the flight attendants
this time around are black.
Among the passengers, I count
only three who aren't white like me:
DC-10's hold two eighty-five.

After scrolling through in-flight games
and movies, I find the flight map
to trace with my finger a blue line
drawn along the Mississippi.

Far west from here
stands the front gate
of LeBron James's Los Angeles home,
on which, in 2017, someone sprayed
NIGGER. Later that day, at his NBA Finals
press conference:

*I think back to Emmett Till's mom, actually;
it was kind of one of the first things I thought of,
and the reason that she had an open casket
was 'cause she wanted to show the world
what her son went through
as far as a hate crime
and, you know, being black in America.*

Baton Rouge? Check. Ferguson?
Check. Saint Paul? Check.
Even at 8000 feet, troubles
obscure the way
a can of paint can spray
hate over any opening.

Four years
I advised 400 or more honors students, only
three black men among them. In America,
reside 21.5 million black men. These numbers
add up to another injustice
I overlooked
from my office window,
sipping fair-trade,
organic, shade-grown coffee
on Northrop's third floor.

IX.

In the middle of the night, I wake
to rapid taps at my window.
Rachel, I say; has she reverse-
engineered the Mississippi
to float nine hundred miles up
to visit the summer north,
lit only by ancient heroes, gods
and victims? Cloaked
in her walnut hair, there she stands
on her homemade raft
of empty paint pails
lashed together by socks
I left behind
that she wove into rope.

She needs no compass, no sail.
Through her spyglass, she surveils each city

I'd flown over before June
cracked like an eggshell
on a flimsy fry pan.

One the stove-top, green numbers: 8:35.
I opt to roll from my strange bed anyway.
Instead of watching her climb through my window,
I see downtown emerge
from dissipating storms
one high-rise at a time.

*If you'd helped her cross the threshold,
what would you have said?*

You confirm my drowning
in the light your body lets in—
photons, the light of the world
converted into matter;
transubstantiated.

X.

Outside Northrop, I wait
until, finally, Jack pulls up
in his Honda Accord.
I jump in; we shake hands, smile,
then sail on to happy hour.
Eighty-five degrees, a Thursday
afternoon, everyone in Minneapolis
aches to be outside drinking
good beer, buoyed by another summer.

Mitch beat us here, has gotten us a table, menus,
and himself a Coors Light. Two more
beers, for Jack and me, for summer.
Next Tom arrives, 6-foot-7, almost smiling
like a blue-haired Betty during the sign of peace.

We all want
nachos. Pretzels. Olives (me).
More beer. More food. Brisket.
Pulled pork. Bratwurst.
Salmon toast (me).

Mitch: *So, how's your poetry*

down in NOLA?

*Good, I say, Two more
accepted just yesterday.*

Glugs and stares
into pint-glass bottoms.
The plate of Korean-style barbeque
finally arrives.

Jack belches
to change the subject:
How long you in town?

Until summer's end.

You fulfilled one more prophecy: he who lacks faith spouts with less vigor.

On the menu,
in the margins, I list
the things I do not have:
FacebookKidsHouseTruckVacationPlansGolfClubsGunsBoss
—until I'm out of ink.

*At least, you've raised your own
summer troubles like a slice of toast.
Now, set down your pen and think
of Rachel before sleep, how she drops her hair
across your chest, how she warms
her feet with yours,
no matter what you've done
or may never do.*

I always tug at the waistband
of her briefs, trying to start something
because, no matter how tight I squeeze,
she feels as far away as fine wine
consecrated into blood.

Across the Lagoon

From the footbridge, I watch the rain
stir the lagoon the way diminished voices
agitate history. Folks always tell me
What a memory you've got. Sodden, I recall
forgetting everyone who said this.

Gar surface, swallow bugs,
splash. Fishermen
pull in, park in the grass
at odd angles, jump from trucks, cast
and wait, cast and wait, catch
or don't, climb back in, take off. Drenched
on the bridge with no pole, I stare
just below the surface, listening
for some echo.

But I recollect nothing—cut off
like snapped, neon green fishing line
—until a turtle climbs the depths
with slow strokes. Its head emerges
and glass turtles from my mother's bookshelf
swim through my mind. Over the iron rail,
I lean until the turtle sinks
into green algae, disappearing
like Mom's last name
on her wedding day.

The rain retreats
back into clouds
while I wait
and watch the water
in full sun. Again,
the turtle takes a peek
at me, reemerging
a good cast away.

Trimble, I whisper, floating
my mother's other name.

Mother Figuresⁱⁱ

On her hillock, after accepting olives
from her daughter-in-law, she heard *splash*.

Do the olive pits spit from John Ashbery's mouth equal the hills Lorine Niedecker crested—

he in New York, and she on a small island in rural Wisconsin?

Ashbery's words made scratch despite public-radio-interview misunderstandings.

But mothers may figure such things out (Helen taught biology) better than interrogators.

Teaching English prepared Daisy Niedecker to encourage her daughter's predilection to write.

And over the hill, in the old burial ground, her rutabagas run feral.

My mother excels at customer service & employee relations, also reading my poems when asked.

Yet, she prays I might return to the Church.

Ah, how may I figure my way in and out of mother's story?

I close my *Breezeway* and open *New Goose*.

Flesh from pit and yellow root beneath a purple scratch.

Then Icarus, poor sopping pillock, sank
deeper, more distant from his mother's sun-soaked slope.

Black Calm

for Kay Murphy

The silence she solicits before each
poetry class—an interruption that
arrests me from the daily pit-a-pat;
our chatter ebbs permitting her to teach—
reminds me of the din of childhood speech,
the broken conversation when we sat
for mealtime prayer leaving us feeling flat,
our transcendent intention out of reach.

I see my solemn image bouncing back,
reflected in my purple *Ball* glass jar,
a quiet witness to a burning year.
Strain, wrinkle. My eyes seek the distant black
calm surrounding every Iowa star,
a natural stillness that worries fear.

Ashbery Titles and My Sentencesⁱⁱⁱ

Some trees spurred the poem. They stalked rivers and mountains obscuring the sunrise in suburbia while we sang three madrigals. Not even a fragment of a distant evening in the country could destroy our double dream of spring, the desire to sip the spirit of the south, which sank. Each poetic utterance deep beneath the silt of unknown cowboys. The serious doll painted my portrait in a convex mirror. Captain of our houseboat days plots to escape the shadow train careening toward the way a wave of April galleons absconds from Arctic ice storms. Devour the haibun. A flow chart for the bellhops at Hotel Lautreamont. Our books stud the lawn, each one a star shining toward heaven while closing the door on another worm's meal. Can you hear, dove? That is the thunder of wakefulness. Write your name and follow, as umbrellas follow rain. Wisdom cannot be carried like Chinese whispers. It is not wonder. No more shall we wander the frozen north, this worldly country. Abandon our planisphere as you would. Quick question, in the breezeway roar? Through bundles of flight, the commotion of birds.

Picture of the Artificer in a Prospect of Hours^{iv}

I

See good news circle the kitchen
sink drain that is bad news.
Professor Mann pats hard
on J.B.'s lapel. "Your idea
merits an attempt. Pursue it."
J.B. straightens his jacket,
then coughs into his sleeve
attempting to maintain a fair aspect.

"Oh, he tossed me some handsome words,
but I don't understand creative nonfiction
despite David Foster Wallace:
'*Creative* suggests the essay's author
wants us to see and understand
her as the text's maker.'
Durst I still take offence?"

Within a hard drive
the read-write mechanism
transforms electrical current
into magnetic field.

II

So deeply engrained is bad news,
lost work, data entry, and the overt
banality of kitchen notes that even this
drudgery, dear students, must be
relinquished to approximate
a product finished in
the zero-sum game
of completion. Sure, you may
stare at the vanishing point
until it stares back. Only then
will the long walk
off a third-story landing result in sky
that holds as you place one foot
in front of the other.

To stroll

above Lakeshore Drive and wave
down at commuters as those late-night lecturers
dream of good news for whomever
can afford to work one job.

III

Crossing the lake to bow
my head in Breakwater Park,
I pause to watch the shifting line
where lake becomes beach
over and over, again and again—lake,
foam, wet sand, beach. Yet, how
such borders bore! Into cloudless night,
I lift my head to espy new favorite stars.

But gravity favors the drain,
a simple crash into bad tidings,
debris scuttled in the wash.

Failed Intervention from a Park Bench

Crème brûlée and a bouquet of balloons, each color strains the string—he really has it all. He's not even looking at his balloons. Just stares at the brûlée in his lap. Is that clown watching him from behind those shrubs? Leering. Can't tell. His giant face-paint lips obscure his emotions—that *ginormous* red smile. Creeps me. Now, the clown clasps hands. Praying? Wait. The brûlée guy reaches in his pocket. Pistol lighter. Can one smell hydrogen? What horror? The clown laughs—no, cries—no, laughs and runs down the alley. Into air the pistol; ready to torch his crème brûlée. But the hydrogen in his balloons? A new form of terrorism? Hydrogen balloons and brûlée on Sunday-afternoon park benches?

NO.

DON'T LIGHT IT. DON'T

PULL THAT TRIGGER. EVERYONE WILL

pop!

Say Goodbye to the Atomic Bomb^v

He's the one who's been invading my head all along.
Tetsuo, in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*, 1988

These murmurs echo down empty alleyways. Why 2000 red horses prove too wild for stolen children—this instinct I will never understand. Sunlight invades each blade of grass the way a savior never lands on solid ground—she floats instead, translating air into breath for those bound and gagged. Red ghosts scream across concrete canyons. To drift, children, down from lightless night. One bright beam drills a tunnel before it separates into three—how you, me, and the savior race through darkness in order to abandon it. A round whirly-bird window is no outdoor spigot turned on for the first time after a hard winter; blood still spurts in fits from the unmasked face. Say scrambling pedestrians as they run stare at phones in one hand and with the other toss empty paper cups toward empty garbage cans. Atop a playground slide, see the shadows like piles of bricks left to crumble in the harsh light of another lord.

Listen to traffic roar itself out. Emerge from this tiger's mouth to contemplate the tree under glass. Crumbles today to bits. The way helicopters fall from sky, hear laughter fall with no purpose from these pipes. Say you see a boy dissected at the altar of science; his organs held in glass reliquaries, arranged, examined. Remember a child, any child, before everything falls up toward heaven. The ground will sigh in disbelief. I have always believed names prove an origin, lineage. Stand in twilight on this wreckage. Shrink back into a boy, a past, lineage: *Tetsuo*.

The Society of Endless Desire¹, Transcript of Congress 9.4 (Revised)², Tuesday, April 3, 2018³

[Chancellor C. Love] For our late start, I apologize.
Down the road, I promise to be more
punctual. Welcome, please,
our first confessor, **** *.

<applause>

<**** * takes the podium>

[**** *] Thank you. Thanks.
I always feel a little like a pageant
contestant in this loose confessor's gown,
but, you know, traditions.
Well, first, just let me say, next time
I want a gown that fits a bit better,
especially . . . in . . . this . . . area . . .

<waves hands in front of entire body>

or maybe even a suit. I'm not sure
why we don't allow confessor suits.
Secondly, I want world peace.
I mean, who doesn't?
When you don't mention it,

<points finger into congregation>

you look like real jerks,
Bob.
Anyway, I want the dodo back. What a cool bird!

¹ Each regional congress of the Society of Endless Desire meets the first Tuesday of every month. Members take turns confessing desires to full congregation. Customarily more reticent, a transcript from the cruelest month leaked anonymously to press.

² However, keep in mind that this society remains utterly fictional. Thus, even named sources would be anonymous in the sense that no one exists to whom such information could be attributed.

³ Nonetheless, truth sometimes is best absorbed through fiction. If lies shared nothing with the truth, they would have proved ineffective and ceased to exist after the first such utterance, which, in reality, was likely *Homo habilis* X aping a frightened face and pointing toward the sky before bounding off with *Homo habilis* Y's breakfast eggs and tubers.

And I want to fly through space
on a surfboard like that Silver Surfer
and get in adventures and stuff. You know
there's probably other . . . people . . . beings . . .
things out there who could really learn a lot
from our mistakes.

Hey, God—just show up
or stay the **** away. I mean
God's already here
or already gone
and things look pretty much the same
as they did yesterday

To visit Atlantis—either in the past,
the future or under the ocean—I don't care which.
Eight days a week in my book
lost civilizations trump lost gods.
Though, I start to wonder where our dodos would live.
I mean, their habitat's devastated . . . and we've got
all these pigs. Do you think Atlantis
had dodos? Atlantis . . . why not
Atlanta? Couldn't the people there
teach me about loss?

I'm sorry. I drifted off track here.
I want everyone to win, if nothing else,
the lottery, and have enough to eat,
a place to live and practice quirks and habits
religiously as they want.
Or does "world peace" cover that one?
Either way.
What comes after world peace?
Keeping it? That means everyone
will be very busy. Winning the lottery
might not solve a thing.

To be honest, I don't even know how
to surf. Maybe I should start
with a board in the Pacific. I guess
always there will be another gown,
a better-fitting suit.

I want nothing.

Thanks for listening, though.
I mean—it was my turn. Anyway,

I'm quitting. I see my reflection
back there in glass doors and I want
to stop wanting now.

<leaps from behind podium, runs frantically through crowd>

<end transcript>

Last Lecture on Disruptive Innovation

after W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

Well, as the secretary of the Founder's Club
has instructed, I shall place myself upon
a multi-ordinal matrix before I begin: imagine
a map of the stars. Not one that details each
mass between holes in our night sky,
rather, you know, one that shows us
exactly where Sam Jackson resides
in relation to Scarlett Johansson,
their hand-drawn faces hovering
over a technicolor city.

Now, instead of something flat,
visualize a holographic sphere.
Do you see it?
Then I will point
right . . . there,
a position per-pen-
dicular to the more established
value networks and say, yes.
There.
Okay, I can commence.

Only in recent years,
since entrepreneurs lassoed their guiding star
and executives slammed well-lotioned
hands upon their cherry tables
in fits of laggard cheer,
do we have the requisite verve
to disrupt . . . sorry, I simply must
take this—what? yes. no. i'm leaving
now—so sorry. I am afraid I must
move along. A personal matter
requires my attention elsewhere.
There shall be nothing
further. Enjoy the rest
of your evenings, but don't
forget: what you cannot
corrupt, disrupt—yes.
i'm on my way—

Overheard in Moonlight

Look: this period-
red sky retreats into dark;
out sulks eventide.

An expert on sedge
and rush when faced with a heart
attack on a stroll.
Rise, moon. Spill that hand-me-down
fulgor on your disciples.

What you drop on us
may we never share with D.
A. Powell, Lucille Clifton,
Jorie Graham, and all.

But poetry is
our heirloom—an ownerless
bouquet of grasses
to be passed on in the dark
corner of need.

My point exactly—
when you get something for free
aren't you the product?

Airplanes are poems
made hundreds of years over
by children, thousands
of women's, who did not know
how else to spend a lifetime.

You ought to spend more
days in shadow.

where such souls forget their afterlives shoes clonk along the moonlit walk

Travel Prayer

How terrible these slaps,
from concrete airstrips
to each overflowing gutter
in our sunken city.

How lightning pink
from heaven scares me just
as fourth grade scoldings once.

O Sun, you who fade
the machines abandoned
in the dying summer grass,
please

surface—to brighten
her road home. Hold her
in your harbor of light

as straight through darkness I sail.

Akira's Ghost Whispers Goodbye

alleyways empty
two thousand horses
 stolen an instinct
each a savior solid ground
floats breathes across ghosts canyons
 other murmurs night
down one beam tunnels you
 darkness
abandon window spigot first winter
blood unmask run see shadows harsh
 mouth tree the laughter the pipes
the sky altar subjects remember before
 wreckage light
 lineage:

End Notes

- ⁱ "The Tricks of Today" (12) This title has been lifted from a quotation attributed to Marcel Duchamp: "I tell them that the tricks of today are the truths of tomorrow."
- ⁱⁱ "Mother Figures" (30) This poem responds to Carol Ann Duffy's "Mrs Icarus" using some of her language in the opening and concluding couplets. Her poem considers the perspective of Icarus's wife while mine considers that of his mother.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "Ashbery Titles and My Sentences" (32) The titles of John Ashbery's collections that appear in this poem do so in chronological order.
- ^{iv} "Picture of the Artificer in a Prospect of Hours" (33) The lineage of this poem, for me, begins with Ashbery's "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers" and through that to Andrew Marvell's "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers." In addition to the structure and title, I have also incorporated some language from both poems.
- ^v "Say Goodbye to the Atomic Bomb" (36) and "Akira Whispers Goodbye" (44) The two ekphrastic *Akira* poems respond to Katsuhiro Otomo's 1980's manga series and anime film, both entitled *Akira*.

VITA

Jeremy Thomas Burke, an Iowa native, is an MFA candidate studying poetry in the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans. He serves as a poetry reader for their literary journal, *Bayou Magazine*, and teaches English composition. His work appears in *Helen*, *Panoply*, *SPANK the CARP*, *Gloom Cupboard* and elsewhere. In 2018, he won the Vassar Miller Poetry Award judged by Ava Leavell Haymon.
