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Carrier

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Carrier

A Thesis

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

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

by

Jesse Manley

B.A. Baylor University, 2004

May 2010

To all the bastards who said I wasn't any good and that I would never make it this far;
you were only half right.

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Short, Unsweetened

I believe the most notable aspect of my poetic style is the short, compact nature of the poems. Clearly, to this I owe a great deal to the long tradition of epigrammatic poets, most notably Martial. When I started experimenting with this style, I was mostly writing the more traditional satirical and political poems that one usually associates with the style, some of which are featured in the second section of this collection.

Perhaps more profoundly than the classic epigram writers, a mostly unknown writer (who is scarcely called a poet) shaped a great deal of my style in an unexpected way. Felix Feneon, a turn-of-the-century French literary critic, leader in the anarchist political movement, and central figure in the Parisian art scene was the editor of *Revue Blanche*, where he published Apollinaire and Proust, employed Claude Debussy as a music editor, and is credited with discovering Georges Seurat. Still, Feneon attempted no art, himself, save for a translation of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

One of Feneon's journalistic pursuits, however, has proven to be a great wealth of artistic work, even if that was not Feneon's goal. As a writer for *Le Matin*, a Parisian daily newspaper, Feneon filled in extra column space with what critics have labeled *fait-divers*; Luc Sante, in the introduction to Feneon's book, *Novels in Three Lines*, argues that there is no direct English translation, but "fillers" or "sundry events" is apt. In these columns, Feneon wrote short descriptions of stories that may not have warranted an entire column, but are important, nonetheless. The subjects are similar to longer news stories in the paper.

Feneon's truncated stories have a haunting effect. Their brevity and gravity provide a glimpse into the daily life of a Parisian around the turn of the century, and many may resonate with contemporary readers:

Mme Fournier, M. Vouin, M. Septeuil, of Sucy, Tripleval, Septeuil, hanged themselves: neurasthenia, cancer, unemployment.

And

Eugene Perichot, of Pailles, near Saint-Maixent, entertained at his home Mme Lemartrier. Eugene Dupuis came to fetch her. They killed him. Love.

And

Finding his daughter, 19, insufficiently austere, Jallate, watchmaker of Satin-Etienne, killed her. It is true that he has eleven children left.

And

On the bowling lawn a stroke leveled M. Andre, 75, of Levallois. While his ball was still rolling he was no more.

While not devoid of wit, Feneon's aim is not to entertain, but to inform, providing readers with the (largely) uncolored facts of the situation, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. In doing so, Feneon penned poems devastating in their simplicity and frankness.

I attempt to draw from the principles of Feneon's *fait-divers* in my own work. I aim to be similarly compact and uncomfortable to read, and I try to juxtapose the brevity of a poem with the seriousness of a situation, hopefully achieving an effect similar to that of Feneon's works, which provide a glimpse of a single moment in time, often memorable for the wrong reasons. Like Feneon's works, which frequently leave the reader craving more, I hope to insinuate that there's something more to the story,

something to dwell upon. More to the point, I aspire to Feneon's economy of language, which emphasizes the situation, not the words needed to describe it. While Feneon's goal may have been more direct and mine more overtly artistic, I believe our methods are similar, and I hope that our results are similar.

I perhaps owe credit for shaping my style to a single poem more than any other stimulus. Upon first reading Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," I was captivated by the intensity of emotion Pound conveyed in so few words:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The concise way Pound uses a semicolon to replace multiple words without losing meaning led me to challenge myself to condense my own style and strip out any inessential phrase. I pored over older poems, tearing down page-length works into a few sentences or words that captured the same idea or sentiment, only more efficiently. For example, the poem "Visual Stimuli" began as a sonnet. I never felt that I lost anything in the process of reduction.

This process of distillation alerted me to the "fat" which I had been stuffing into my poems. Soon, I began to see that it was not isolated to the number of words, but the diction I chose to employ. I realized I was needlessly using large words, mostly to make myself sound smart, but in doing so, I was sacrificing the precision of simplicity. For instance, in an early draft, the title poem of this work needlessly featured the word phlebotomist. It then occurred to me, "What happens if the reader doesn't know what a

phlebotomist is? The point will either be lost, or the mood will be broken by a side-trip for a dictionary.” By simplifying the diction, I feel I have achieved a few positive, albeit unexpected, consequences. First, a simple diction can give the poems a “grittier” feel, more likely to be spoken by a mechanic with grease under his fingernails than by a venture capitalist. Ultimately, these voices that appear in my poems are not ones of erudition and privilege, and I feel the diction matches the voice. Secondly, I think the simplified and targeted diction opens the audience up to some persons who may not be “poetry people,” people who perhaps don’t read poetry because there are too many consultations with Mr. Webster.

Likewise, I shy away from employing figuration, and I intentionally deny the senses here in an attempt to heighten the lasting consequences of these situations over the ephemeral sensations of the moment; this is a work about consequences, after all. I also tend to favor Imagism over Symbolism, where I understand symbolism as the use of a figurative device attached to a single interpretation and an image as a figurative device presented as open for interpretation. While I don’t use figurative devices frequently, I try to set up situations and lines of dialog that have a similar affect as images: a father comparing his philandering to a hand of blackjack or a statement made in anger and hatred that hinted at deeper meaning. When I use these tools, I would rather have them open to a multitude of interpretations; this may be a scary prospect to many poets, as it is to me in a way, but one of my critiques of contemporary poetry is that I find it to be too risk-averse, and my larger philosophy of art is that it is not a safe endeavor.

I attempt to write what I call “poems of implication.” By this I mean that I tend not to connect all the dots for the reader. I attempt this for a few reasons. First, I trust that my audience is bright, and that they are capable of connecting dots for themselves. I think that a puzzle solved on one’s own merit is more gratifying than one which is essentially solved for one, and I hope that by leaving some of the puzzle unsolved for the reader, the reader will have a great sense of satisfaction after reading it. For instance, in the poem “When My Flatmate Spies on Me Masturbating,” I try to stop well short of what the reader might suspect the poem will deliver, initially. The first implication is that the reader might anticipate a graphic account of an explicit act, but in not finding it described, feel slighted, and question himself or herself as a voyeur, like the “flatmate” in the title. The second implication in the poem is the one provided by the relationship. I never provide the actual nature of the two persons’ feelings about each other and the situation, but I believe there is enough detail to suggest the scene, if one reads carefully; the roommate’s steps are discreet when approaching because she does not want to interrupt the act so that she can see the show, but as she leaves, the discretion is discarded, as she wants the flatmate to know that she was there. The flatmate, on the other hand, knows that this act has occurred before and is likely to occur again, yet does nothing to prevent it from happening again, implying that he or she may or may not want it to happen.

Of course, none of these implications are strictly textual, which opens up the possibility that the reader may not find my intended implication and may come to an alternate conclusion. While some poets may grow frustrated at such an outcome, I

applaud this occurrence. I do not pretend that I have the most important perspective on the world, nor on these poems for that matter, and therefore do not wish to ruthlessly control the ownership of the interpretations and conclusions derived from these poems. I am confident that one of my readers, likely on this panel, will interpret something in one of these poems that is far better than anything I originally intended, which is why I claim to ascribe to the openness of the Imagist sensibility over the more narrow interpretation of Symbolism.

Lastly, much of the subject matter is “unpoetic.” When someone writes or tells me that this doesn’t really sound or read like poetry, I am always sure to thank him or her. I choose tough and challenging subject matter to couple with the frankness of the form and diction in a desire to make people feel much by using little. I imagine it as orange juice concentrate or a boxer’s left jab, and here is where much of the aforementioned influence of Felix Feneon comes into the picture. Personally, I grow frustrated with contemporary poetry because I grow tired of reading the tropes of love, nature, or metaphysics, and I have a hard time defining or connecting to those topics; in this aspect, I don’t feel like I’m alone, and I think this is why a good number of people never read poetry. I write about people who are broken, and I expect that most of my readers have been broken once or twice, or at least can identify with someone who has, and maybe that brokenness allows each reader to connect to some of these poems in a different way from those by the Romantics or the Transcendentalists. I think the common notion of the way people relate to poetry is something akin to watching an idyllic sunset and thinking, “My, how poetic,” but I doubt the number of people who regularly watch

sunsets (I see them every day, but I never watch them) is any higher than the number of people who regularly read poetry. I tried to research the number of books of poetry sold in a year, but I couldn't find it. I did find the number of novels sold, nonfiction books sold, trade paperbacks sold, cookbooks sold, self-help books sold, religious motivational books sold, and comic books sold; it is my solemn fear that the number of books of poetry sold is smaller than any of these. However, people are confronted with broken relationships every single day, and I don't think that is a time when most people think about poetry. I'd like to change that.

I

There's an ancient saying, old as man himself:
men's prosperity
 never will die childless,
 once full-grown, it breeds.
 Sprung from the great good fortune in the race
 comes bloom on bloom of pain--
insatiable wealth! But not I,
I alone say this. Only the reckless act
can breed impiety, multiplying crime on crime,
 while the house kept straight and just
is blessed with radiant children.

 But ancient Violence longs to breed,
 new Violence comes
when its fatal hour comes, the demon comes
to take her toll--no war, no force, no prayer
 can hinder the midnight Fury stamped
with parent Fury moving through the house.¹

--Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

¹ Herald, lines 744-760. Translated by Robert Fagles: 1977.

Carrier

When she was pregnant with me, my mother, a nurse,
caught hepatitis from a needle stick,
so I'm restricted from giving blood.

My father, a wife beater and drug addict,
infected me far worse as a child.
No restrictions.

Double-speak

At the end of her late shift,
my mother would sneak into my room
and in the dim light wake me up
to say what mothers say
when they put their sons to sleep.

In return, I would mouth, "Elephant food,"
because it looked like what sons say
when mothers say what mothers say.

Now, in the dark, alone in my bed,
I say it for real.

The Thing My Mother Said

The only thing worse
than never letting me swim in
the deep end of the pool
was watching me dive
headfirst
into the shallow one.

The Thing My Father Said

I'm not much of a black-jack player;
when I've got two queens,
I split.

Advice My Father Gave Me on a Camping Trip, Which Only Later Did I
Appreciate as Profound

Shut the fuck up
and listen to the river.

My Father, Upon Arraignment for Domestic Violence

I'm a first-time offender
three times over.

Why I Plug Appliances Directly Into the Outlet

I was young, five or six at the time,
and we were too poor to fix a car that wouldn't start
or hire a babysitter when we needed groceries.
We rode two miles to the store, a child's seat on a ten-speed,
pedaling through one hundred-plus heat,
her feet driving the bike, mine pedaling in the air.

Returning, I carried the load: milk, eggs, bread,
the last of which I let fall
to the street, lost to the traffic.

Two beatings with an extension cord.
That week: stale bread, moldy parts cut away.
When that was gone, we went without.
Between the mold, the hunger, and the extension cord,
I understood the bread's value.

Playing Music for a Lover

Get her in the mood first,
before you start to play her.

Feel the curve of the lower bout,
the curve of a woman's hip.

Silver tuning keys,
earrings that frame the face.

The nape, that spot where
slender neck meets body.

The frets, lovely bones
felt pressing through the skin.

The taut strings, tendons
in the pit behind the knee.

The perfume of rosewood
reminiscent of old cedar.

* * *

My mother's old cedar chest could endlessly change form,
a coffin for a vampire or an Indian canoe.
Once, a treasure chest of pirate gold,
it brimmed with Spanish doubloons,
jeweled swords, and rubies the size of apples.
Captain Greenbeard's mom kicked down the door,
and discovering his great hoard,
she beat the shit out of him
until he could no longer muster a cry,
just a low moan-sob,
spoken into a puddle of blood and spit
that pooled on the mattress.
Face down, twitching with shame,

he wet himself.

The tools of his trade
lay broken on the floor:
his sword, forged of paper towel rolls,
his hat, fashioned of newspaper,
his eye patch, once held fast by a rubber band.
“Go in there again
and I’ll keel-haul you,
ye scurvy dog.”
But, even at seven, the buccaneer understood this as,
“He hits me, and I hit you;
that’s how things work around here.”

* * *

Soft arpeggio.
Brahms’ Lullaby.
Sad blues riff.
Syncopated strum.
Heavy palm mute.
Hammer on the “b.”
Powerpowerpowerchord.
Choking bar chord.
String
Snap
Silence.

I broke her.
It. I broke it.
The guitar.

II

Entire ignorance is not so terrible or extreme an evil, and is far from being the greatest of all; too much cleverness and too much learning, accompanied with ill bringing-up, are far more fatal.²

--Plato, *Laws*

² Athenian, Book III, pg. 480. Translated by Benjamin Jowett

When Faction Dictates Fact

I lose no sleep
over a self-interested man.
What scares me
is when two men gather
in the name of the greater good.

Lessons in American History

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson
hated each other,
died on the same day.

The Politics of Aviation

Whatever plane the President boards immediately renounces its call letters and becomes Air Force One.

Manifest Destiny

The American Dream
is turning cattle herds
into cattle hordes.

Adding Insult to Injury

Which was more unbearable for Georgia:
Sherman's march to the sea
or King's march on Washington?

“Flash.” “Thunder.” “Welcome.”

*Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for
he could not frame to pronounce it right.*

Judges 12:6

ESL students have trouble with idioms;
native speakers take note
when a Turkish freshman
writes “the 25th frame”
instead of “subliminal message.”

Those confusing the “W” and “V” sounds³
could soon find themselves
engaged in discourse
with the business end
of a M1 Carbine⁴.

³ American paratroopers landing in advance of Operation Overlord would use the verbal challenge “Flash” followed by “Thunder” to identify compatriots. The “Welcome” part was added because English-speaking German troops would pronounce the word with a “V” sound.

⁴ A WWII US Paratrooper’s rifle.

Visual Stimuli

Looking at pornography
can arouse a man,
so why can't a picture of the sun
make a man sweat?

Martyrdom Is a Dance

Every Jesus needs his Judas,
lest he die of old age.

A Theodicy

The cruelest thing about the world
is neither the abundance of evil,
nor the scarcity of good,
but how the mere presence of good
makes us think we deserve better.

How to Grow up Paranormal

Spend eighteen years in a house
haunted by the Holy Ghost.

How I Once Saw a Praying Mantis Impale and Devour a Hummingbird While
Hanging Inverted From a Twig Near a Honeysuckle Bush, Splashing Rivulets of
Arterial Spray onto the Soft Yellow Blossoms, and How This Singular and
Relatively Insignificant Event Came to Represent the Question of Theodicy for
Me That Led Me to Doubt the Benevolence of God.

It was quick,
then it simmered.

Strata

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

In one epoch of my life I followed a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth
In another, a Jewish folk singer from Minnesota
In another, I followed Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty
In another, I followed

My first car fell apart, despite my efforts
My second car fell apart from neglect
My first girlfriend treated me like a nun
My second one treated me

In my iron age I made war and it made me
In my dark age I both knew and did not know
In my ice age I was unloving and unlovable
In my stone age I was

When I was a chef, I hated people who ordered steaks well done
When I was a barista, I hated people who ordered soy cappuccinos
When I was a teacher, I hated people who wouldn't read to their kids
When I was a preacher, I hated

III

For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection.

-- II Timothy 3:2-3

First Communion

I attended my first Sunday school
so I could sit next to a girl
with red pig-tails
and freckles on her shoulder.

Years later, I broke another girl's heart
because when she laid hands on me,
it was not in prayer.

Now, I say my rosary
not to the Son, but to a daughter,
as I eagerly await
her second coming.

The Poet and the Prime Number

The Poet's Two Loves:

Myself	Ourselves
Yourself	Yourselves
Himself/Herself/Itself	Themselves

This, and something new

The Poet's Third Eye:

One's eyelids may hide one from the world,
but one is perpetually stripped bare
when one examines oneself
from the inside out

The Poet's Fifth Wheel:

Pregnant with the future,
three months and showing,
discarded in a Greyhound station

The Poet's Seventh Circle:

My wife and I sleep head to toe

When My Flatmate Spies on Me Masturbating

Her footsteps
are far more discreet
approaching my window than leaving it.

Confession of a Womanizer Part V

I have yet to meet a woman
who I didn't fall in love with,
who didn't break my heart.

Confession of a Womanizer Part VIII

You tell me you love me.
I believe you.
It is in my best interest to do so.

You depend on me;
equally, I depend
on your dependence.

What Scares Me Most About Our Relationship

If I went steppin' out, by the time I got home,
dinner would be on the table.

A Justification

I'll have nothing left
to prove I'm right
if I sober up,
then let you down.

Backhanded Compliment #42

I like how that shirt
brings the red out
in your eyes.

Artistic Differences

On a compositional level,
we blended like oil paint
and water colors.

Preemptive Rejection Form Letter

Dear _____,

I understand you are about to dump me for being (circle one: solipsistic/
condescending/ unfaithful). Please spare me the details.

Unfortunately, this particular relationship doesn't fit my current needs, either.
Don't worry about apologizing; I will canonize you and hold this against your
successor. Be persistent; you'll find someone one of these days.

Best,

J. A. Manley

Laundry List

You drink too much.

You self-mutilate.

You lie to me for no reason.

You yell at me in front of my friends.

You withhold sex to get what you want.

Inexplicably, you have two different eating disorders.

You are physically abusive because you know I won't hit back.

I left the back door unlocked.

Please let yourself in.

Today I Threw Out Your Toothbrush

Now only two things of yours remain:

The stain on my sheets from that time
neither of us could wait

and your running shoes,
which maybe you'll return for
because they still have some miles left in them.

The Elements of Solid Relationships

Denise was carbon:
brittle,
bonded with anything,
I felt dirty after touching her.

Veronica was lithium:
reactive,
mostly unstable,
just looking for a reason to explode.

Sarah was zinc:
useful,
unremarkable,
too stable to be interesting.

Betsy was gold:
I could hammer her into a sheet
so thin, her atoms lined up
one by one.

Me, I'm uranium:
toxic,
radioactive,
but slightly magnetic.

Weapon of Choice

My father would punch the girls
and make them cry.
Myself, I'm a pacifist;
I prefer the kiss.

Vita

Jesse Manley is a native Texan, though it took New Orleans less than 26 days to win him over. Arriving shortly before Katrina crashed the party, Jesse's pioneering spirit and questionable judgment led him back after the storm. He regrets nothing. His cover-story for being a New Orleanian was pursuit of his M.F.A. at the University of New Orleans, which seemed like the next logical step after spending four years in Waco, Texas earning his B.A. in Professional Writing from Baylor University. Jesse has published poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and journalism in multiple journals, including one you may have heard of. He has two publications forthcoming, one in *Rio Grande Review* and one in *Words and Images*. The latter was short-sighted enough to compensate him with money, so now he introduces himself as a professional poet. He is noticeably more amused than others. Jesse also has five years of editing experience, for *Ellipsis* as Managing Editor and Poetry Editor, and *Bayou* as Associate Editor, Assistant Editor, and office lackey. In addition to dabbling with words, Jesse has been an improvisational and stand-up comedian for ten years; the latter is not to be confused with "a stand-up guy."