Poetry, Poetry, Blah Blah Blah
A Thesis of Self-Discovery

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Jeanne Terheide Lemen

Thesis Advisor
C. Wade Jennings

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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PURPOSE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis is one of reflection and of creative discovery. In Part I, the work and poetic principles of six major poets are discussed in regard to how each poet’s work has influenced my own poetry. In Part II, I bring together all that was said in Part I, and formulate what I consider to be the assumptions I carry about the crafting of poetry. The final section, Part III, contains my most recently-written poems. While the discussion of the poets is not meant to be exhaustive, all-encompassing, or strictly academic, it is hoped that the reader—and the writer—will gain a better understanding of the process and set of assumptions by which the crafting of poetry can be achieved.

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Jeanne Lemen

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The sketch "Katie" © 1993 by Matthew P. Foreman.
INTRODUCTION

There are very few things in this world that truly daunt me; a blank computer screen is one of them. Fifty years ago, an empty typewriter sheet may have been my worst fear. One hundred and fifty years ago, blank parchment and a dripping ink pen. The idea is the same, and writers from all ages and walks of life have experienced this same fear.

This thesis presents an enormous challenge to me, since I will attempt to face not only my worst fear (that blank computer screen), but I will attempt to come to conclusions about the process by which some computer screens (mine particularly) are filled: the crafting of poetry.

In this thesis, I will attempt to discover some of the poetic principles of six poets. The band of bards I have chosen covers many times, styles, moods and techniques. I have a Romantic, a traitor, a feminist, the "father of American poetry," and others as well. It is quite a gathering! I have chosen each of these poets for one very non-academic reason: they have each touched my life in one way or another with their work. They have contributed something to me, and as logic follows, something to my own work.

This thesis is one of discovery and self-reflection. It is not meant to be highly academic or even particularly conclusive; but by looking at these poets, I hope to come to conclusions, in the end, about my own work. I hope to understand some of the poetic axioms under which I craft my own work.

Part III of this thesis provides the reader with some of my own work for perusal. Perhaps the reader can find traces of Brooks or whispers of Whitman therein.
Part I

Six Poets and the Laurels That Match
John Keats 1795-1821

I first encountered the work of John Keats in my second British Literature survey. While his cronies (Shelley, Byron, Coleridge) did not particularly charm me, something about the young Mr. Keats took my breath away. Perhaps part of it was that he died so utterly young--at 25--and still managed to leave us a huge amount of poetry. I am now nearly twenty-three, and I cannot imagine having read as much or having thought as deeply about literature and life, let alone having written as much. He was a marvel in his time, and the loyalty of his friends to him confirms that he was also well-liked and respected.

If one looks at selected letters which Keats wrote to his friends and family, it is possible to see some of the assumptions with which Keats wrote. Several of his most well-known poetical axioms, such as the concept of "Negative Capability," come from his letters.

This idea of his has spurred a horde of commentary by ages of critics. Written in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, Negative Capability is a term which Keats used to describe the difference between a "subjective" poet and an "objective" poet. The editors of the Norton Anthology of English Literature explain the difference in a footnote to this same letter:

...Keats is concerned with a central aesthetic question of his day: to distinguish between what was called the "objective" poet, who simply and impersonally presents his material, and the "subjective" or "sentimental" poet, who presents his material as it appears when viewed through his personal interests, beliefs, and feelings. The poet of "negative capability" is the objective poet (Abrams et. al., 1873).

Although the term "negative capability" is still somewhat ambiguous (as I believe it is to a good many other scholars), I can grasp the central idea of what Keats believed: a poem should necessarily come out of one's own experience. It should be laced, at least partially,
with the experience and beliefs of the poet, or it really is not true poetry. I do not think that Keats meant that poetry should be overly emotional or absurdly sentimental (as some of his first works have been accused of being). Rather, Keats wanted poetry to come, at least partially, from the poet’s internal sources; poetry shouldn’t be artificially or painstakingly constructed, as a scientist would piece together a formula. Indeed, "...if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."

Keats’ sonnet "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be" is one of my favorites. It is an intense work, one which brings the reader immediately to an understanding of the speaker’s feelings. The poem is also crafted well; it is a sonnet which is both truthful and beautiful. There can be no doubt that Keats truly felt what he was writing of.

It is useless to quote just a few lines of that sonnet--all of the lines are dependent upon one another--I will instead give the sonnet in its entirety, as taken from The Norton Anthology of English Literature.

When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactry,
Hold like rich garners the full ripen’d grain;
When I behold, upon the night’s starr’d face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the fairy power
Of unreflecting love;--then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.
John Keats, 1818

It is obvious from that poem that Keats practiced what he preached; he wrote from his gut—from his own beliefs and feelings. This is the kind of subjective poetry Keats was after.

I also believe that poetry should come of its own volition. A poet cannot "will" a poem into existence; rather, she can only assist in the birthing process. A poem will come when it will.

As for the fundamental differences between the so-called objective and subjective poet, I can only add this to Keats’ observation: beauty can only be judged from within. There are no scientific formulae for determining what is beautiful. Therefore, if poetry ought to be beautiful (as Keats asserts over and over again), then it must also be subjective.

Keats said that beauty was in truth; if that is the case, then I can agree with Keats. Not all poetry is beautiful in the common sense of the word; a poem dealing with suicide is not normally considered a "pleasant" poem, but if there rings an ounce or two of truth, then the poem can be considered beautiful by the very fact of its truthfulness.

In my studies and my readings, I have found over and over again that the poems which truly strike me, which move me from the inside, are the ones which I feel are truthful.

Walt Whitman 1819-1892

When I think of Whitman, I feel I should make the some religious gesture or genuflect next to my desk. Whitman is to literature what James Dean is to outlaws: a prima
donna of poetry. All of this flattery may seem a bit overdone, but it has been drilled into my head, time and time again: Whitman, "the father of American poetry."

Is Whitman worthy of such adulation from literary personae all over the globe? Well, yes. He is. Whitman took the poetic mold and broke it over America.

Whitman's self-proclaimed mission was "to write up America." Such a mission was not only courageous, but it was a new one for his time. Most poets were still stuck in the prescribed models of poetry set forth by poets who were almost entirely British; Whitman felt that these models were no longer adequate for the needs of America, and set about the process of creating an American literary tradition. He wanted to write America.

Whitman composed his own notion of what "poetic material" included. He did away with many of the extended abstract ideas most "serious" poets worked with. Instead, he went about recording things which were distinctly American.

Like Emerson, Whitman saw America itself as a great poem. He considered his poetry as analogous to that of the epic bard who mythologized the distinctive social and cultural characteristics of a country and its people (Di Yanni 106).

Whitman was a great catalogue-maker. He listed, one by one, specific things which constituted his idea of American-ness. See this excerpt from section 15 of Song of Myself:

[15] The pure contralto sings in the organloft, The carpenter dresses his plank...the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp, The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the alter,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big
wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats
and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case,
He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's
bedroom...

Whitman uses approximately one hundred such enumerations in this section; I have
provided only the beginning. The last two lines of section 15 are particularly important,
however:

All these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.

It is essential to understand that the "I" throughout the poems in *Leaves of Grass* (like
"Songs of Myself") is not a personal "I." As DiYanni puts it: "The 'I' we hear throughout
*Leaves of Grass* is the American self--the larger-than-life embodiment of the national spirit
that Whitman employs to establish and sustain his vision of America" (109).

It is an "I" which is the voice of Americans. To me, that seems a huge undertaking.

So Whitman refused common poetic principles and explored new territory; he wrote
about America. What does this mean to me? Quite a bit. Whitman had the right idea--*write
about what you know*. He knew about America, American things, American people, and
American experiences. He lived through the Civil War; an experience which must have
given him a vast education in American-ness.
Instead of putting all of these ideas and situations into high literary abstractions, he set them down in detail, methodically, and in a fashion which was not only poetic, but fresh and unique.

I think that unless you are writing about something that you know, you are blowing a lot of steam up someone’s dress. That is not to say that everything one writes about must be factually true; fiction writers can know their characters and settings, since they are real in their imaginations. But I would be writing falsely if I were to sit down and write an epic poem about Ireland. I’m not Irish. I know nothing of Ireland. For all I know, leprechauns are real.

T.S. Eliot 1888-1965

A little word of advice to my peers: don’t take Eliot lightly. I had a difficult time with Eliot, but I stuck by him for one reason: The Waste Land. Whoa. The title is intimidating enough just by itself.

When I first approached Eliot, it was with a great amount of trepidation. His work just isn’t very accessible; The Waste Land requires as many words in footnotes as are in the poem (maybe more). One has to be highly educated in the classics (at least, much more so than I) in order to grasp the vast number of literary/mythic allusions he incorporates. It’s overwhelming, and in my opinion, cumbersome.

So, what do I like about it? For me, the most powerful aspect of The Waste Land is that it displays a keen sense of observation. Eliot has pieced together fragments of society and individual lives in a way that is startlingly real, and amazingly poetic.
For example, the famous passage in part II, beginning at line 139:

*from The Waste Land*

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said--
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.

And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
Oh is there, she said. Something o'that, I said.
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look...

-- T.S. Eliot

In that small part of *The Waste Land*, Eliot demonstrates his keen eye for observing society around him. The detail he records in just this scene is really wonderful; the barman trying to close up shop ("HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME"); the way the lady who is speaking rambles on and on in a gossipy fashion; the speaker's decidedly British--perhaps even Cockney--accent. The speaker draws the reader right into the gossip with her narrative style, and one gets the distinct impression that the lady is talking directly to him. That passage is a prime example of Eliot's observational eye. Eliot's "eye" is evident throughout *The Waste Land*.

The whole idea of the power of observation is a very important one to me. I think it is a key ingredient in poetry; if you cannot learn to observe things, or other people, or even
yourself, then it is hard to really "know" a thing/person well enough to capture it in poetry. Observation is a truly powerful tool.

In my work, I can see examples in which I used an Eliot-like approach to observation. *Mud Grins* is about a fictional character, but there is still a good deal of observation involved—observation of the character in my mind. What is he doing? What is he thinking? What's the weather like? *What It Is (upon listening to trombone)* is a different kind of observational piece—observing a situation and then "translating" it for the reader.

Although I may have always tacitly realized the importance of observation in my work, I think Eliot really taught me to acknowledge it, and understand it. While I have misgivings with a few of his other techniques, his sharp use of the power of observation in his poetry will keep me trying to decipher *The Waste Land* for a very long time.

*William Carlos Williams 1883-1963*

I think it was unfortunate for me that my first encounter with Williams was with his infamous *The Red Wheelbarrow*. My honest first impression of Williams? "What a pretentious weirdo." I think it is a big mistake to introduce Williams to students with that poem.

Thank goodness I had the opportunity to read some of his other works, and even, in time, to appreciate *The Red Wheelbarrow* for what it is: a minuscule treatise on poetics.

For those who don’t have a monstrous poetry anthology sitting at his/her elbow, here’s the *Wheelbarrow* in its entirety:
The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

- Wm. Carlos Williams

Without going into a lengthy explication of this poem, let me summarize my reading of this; it is relevant to the point I am about to make. As I said, this poem is a treatise on Williams' idea of poetics. "So much depends/upon" the color red in stanza two, the shape of the rain drops in stanza three, and the relationship of that wheelbarrow to everything else in stanza four. They are concrete images for an idea: poetry depends upon these concrete images which represent ideas, tones and abstractions.

"No ideas but in things," a line from Williams' poem A Sort of Song, is Williams' poetic battle cry; however, he was not opposed to ideas in poetry. As DiYanni explains:

...Williams valued an idea as much as Eliot, Frost, or Stevens did. His motto, though, summarizes an aesthetic that does not so much rule out thought as insist that it be embodied in images. By omitting discursive explanation from many of his poems, Williams created works that do not insist on a "meaning." Instead, his poems shape and organize language aesthetically (255).

It can be seen throughout Williams' work that he truly believed in this axiom. Spring and All (one of my personal favorites) is filled with concrete images. Stanza three:
All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines--

These pictures begin to structure the idea of death and decay, which, in turn, are
counteracted with birth and rejuvenation in later stanzas.

My judgment? Wonderful. I chose Williams for this thesis because I am truly in
love with this idea of his. But when looking through my own work, I don’t think that I have
really demonstrated my acceptance of this credo; at least, not in the same manner as
Williams. I suppose this is really not so bad; one should not write exactly like anyone else.
I do like to make a conscious effort to stay away from lofty abstractions, although poems like
There are No Rocks Big Enough are admittedly abstract in a different way.

In some of my works, however, I can find little hints of Williams: the cat
contemplating riddles in Katie’s Vowel Problem, the broadsword in The Man, The Carpet,
and The Dog Who Sniffed. It’s a technique I would like to see in more of my work.

Gwendolyn Brooks  b. 1917

Gwendolyn Brooks gave a reading at Ball State University in October of 1992, and it
was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. She had remarkable presence--she is
a woman of tremendous stature and sensitivity. She is also one of my personal favorites.

Brooks is a poet with an authoritative, but not necessarily belligerent, voice. She was
born in Kansas, and has lived in Chicago for most of her life (she is poet laureate of
Illinois), and it can be said that a good deal (if not most) of her poetry comes out of her
experience as an urban black woman. Her intended audience is very specific. In an essay, Brooks wrote: "...black literature is literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks, directed TO blacks" (Brooks 3). Brooks wrote with clear purpose; she wanted to write the story of women, blacks, and black women. Indeed, her main poetry volume is entitled simply: Blacks.

Her syntax follows the language patterns of America, and when appropriate, the speech patterns of black America. To me, Brooks’ vision seems to be one of directness and truthfulness; it is a voice which is always fresh and new.

Brooks wrote poem after poem which featured specific women or the condition of women in general. One of my favorites, Sadie and Maud, details the expectations which young women, then and now, are forced to either accept or reject. Brooks’ lines are short, rhythmical, and easily reachable:

from Sadie and Maud

Maud went to college
Sadie stayed at home
Sadie scraped life
with a fine-tooth comb.

She didn’t leave a tangle in.
Her comb found every strand.
Sadie was one of the livingest chits
In all the land.

Sadie bore two babies
Under her maiden name
Maud and Ma and Papa
Nearly died of shame.
Everyone but Sadie
Nearly died of Shame...
...Maud, who went to college
is a thin brown mouse.
She is living all alone
In this old house.

- Gwendolyn Brooks

I've read many poems written by my peers (most of whom are in their twenties and have claimed the title "poet" for five years or less). From reading these poems and by studying some of my own early attempts, I have made this observation: when poets wish to use fresh images or language (as is usually the case), they are sometimes tempted to construct poems which contain little-used or archaic words, baffling structures, and indecipherable or unyielding images and metaphors. It is an easy trap to fall into. I used that technique in the beginning; I felt that a well-written poem must, by nature, be complex and unreachable. Why? I can most probably blame that notion on my high school teachers, but that is another thesis entirely.

Over time, and after more exposure to contemporary poets (post-Whitman), I finally began to understand that poetry needn't be selfish; in other words, it's admissible to let readers have painless access to your work. Gwendolyn Brooks helped me to come to that conclusion.

Just for giggles, here is a poem which was written during my trip through high school. I think it illustrates my early security-blanket need for pretentious-sounding verbiage.

A Little Too Much

These blood-stained eyes
have seen too much of too little
and cried tears of fury
at the injustice that they’ve seen
and stared at the broken ones
who stare back and cry;
We’ve lost.

Yet these same eyes
that have seen too much of too little
belong to a heart of determination
that beats faster with every injustice
and yearns to shelter the broken ones
but, alas, the heart is broken too
It has lost.

These eyes, this heart, they are mine
and they are too much and too little
but they see fury, and they beat faster
and scorn the blood-stained injustice
And they still yearn to shelter the broken ones
But this heart, these eyes tell me
That I’ve Lost.

Notice "yearns" and "alas" in the second stanza. "Blood-stained injustice?" Do these sound like words a 17-year-old growing up in the 1980’s would use daily? I don’t think so.

But I thought for sure that was the way to do it: big words, scary phrases.

My poetry these days tends to stay almost entirely in the narrative, colloquial mode. There are very few of what I would consider overbearing words or phrases. Case-in-point: Sans Feathers. There is nothing like "determination" or "alas" to be found. The most pretentious word in that poem is Sans, and that’s pretentious only because it happens to be french.

Brooks helped me to find my vision, and to shed my prior assumptions about the craft. My poetic purpose is still undefined; when (and if)I find it, I hope to speak to it using the language of my time and my people.
**Gary Snyder**  b. 1930

My friend Brent Royster, upon hearing that I was beginning my study of Gary Snyder, said this: "Start with *Riprap.*" He was right. *Riprap* is, to me, quintessential Snyder, and a good place to start. Robert DiYanni, in his extremely brief bio of Snyder, states:

His poetry reflects a strong commitment to the primitive, the mythic, and the natural, along with a deep respect for non-Western ideals (655).

Probably a gross over-simplification, but nicely put. Synder spent a lot of time studying eastern religion, and specifically Zen Buddhism. So, it is easily understandable why *Riprap* might as well be called *Concerto for the Natural Universe in E-flat* (but since *Riprap* is such a magnificent word, we’ll let it stand). Here’s a piece of it:

*from Riprap*

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
   placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
   in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
   riprap of things:
Cobble of milky way,
   straying planets,
These poems, people,
   lost ponies with
Dragging saddles--
   and rocky surefoot trails...

- Gary Snyder

The abundance of natural images is not the only quality I notice in Snyder’s work. His form of free verse seems, to me, somewhat more "free" than the likes of Whitman or
Ginsberg. While their work (and many other free verse poets, myself included) seems to eventually fall into a loose structure of its own creation (not truly free), Snyder seems to stretch free verse just a little bit more. This quality is more noticeable in some poems than in others; it is especially apparent in *Riprap*. This "freer" free verse is perhaps a direct result of his Zen training.

While I know very little about Zen Buddhism, I can still appreciate his close association with the universe and everything in it. His poems touch something very basic and instinctual within me; I am never as happy as when I am immersed in natural surroundings. I'm a shameless treehugger. I feel that we are irrevocably enmeshed with our environment; it affects us as much as we affect it.

I do use natural imagery in my work, but not nearly to the extent that Snyder does. I have no explanation for that. It's just a fact. When I do use natural imagery, it is usually metaphoric or allegoric. Such is true in *the maintenance of seeds* and *There Are No Rocks Big Enough*. Nature does however, represent itself in *Land is Sea*, a poem I wrote when I saw Kansas for the first time.

Perhaps, although I can deeply identify with Snyder's vision, I cannot claim it as part of my own. I can respect it and love it; but it does not really belong to me.
Part II

Comments
The original title of this section was "Conclusions or Not Conclusions." I didn’t want to put any pressure on myself to come up with a Guide to the Poetry of Jeanne Lemen; so, the title was changed to the indifferent "Comments." I don’t think I’m quite ready to be authoritative or definitive with myself. I’m twenty-three, I’ve been practicing the craft of poetry for about ten years now. That just isn’t long enough to be authoritative about much at all!

Throughout this thesis, I have spent a lot of energy reflecting on the works and thoughts of these six poets. Have these individuals affected my work? If so, how? It has been a long road, but one worth taking.

I think it can be beneficial for poets to sit back and take a good, hard look at their own work. Why do I write this way, instead of another way? Why are my line breaks specifically crafted? Why do I try to use the "language of the people." Why free verse and not metered? There are so many "why’s" to be answered, that I doubt I will ever understand my writing completely.

It is as if the mechanical processes of writing are hidden somehow from the writer. Writers can study other writers pretty well and thoroughly, but I have come to believe that it is much more difficult to study yourself. This raises yet another "why."

I simply don’t know. As writers, we are somehow disconnected from the reasons why we do things the way we do. We can speculate, we can guess. We can study, as I have tried to do in this thesis. But even after all of this investigation, I still don’t know from whence comes my voice, my vision, or my technique. The fact that I have been influenced
by many other poets is easily justifiable. But why those poets and not others? Why do I embrace Brooks' vision of the truth, and reject Eliot's *Waste Land* technique of high academic fluffery?

Indeed, where do poets come from?

When I write, I don't think about writing in any style. I don't consciously make the effort to keep my lines short, my meter spontaneous, or my rhymes surprising. I don't take a lot of time thinking at all; most of my work is, more or less, spontaneous. The true crafting comes, for me, after the initial draft has been hurriedly thrown on the computer. But even while I am revising I do not meticulously perform poetic surgery in order to make a poem fit into my "style." It just happens.

In an age when we are constantly seeking information, knowledge, and understanding about everything under and around the sun, that is a hard notion to accept. It certainly is for me.

The answer to all the "why's?" *Because.*

Threws you for a loop, doesn't it? To me, that is the most attractive thing about poetry. *Because.*

* * *

I have seen my work improve radically over the last couple of years. I have seen it mature, and gain a strength and uniqueness that I never thought I was capable of. I must sound very proud of myself; in truth, I am. But I do not harbor any illusions about it; I am nowhere near my full poetic potential. I haven't reached any peak. I still have a long, long road to travel--a road which has a tendency to change directions at any given moment.
I believe that the greatest impact on my poetry has been the study and reading of other poets, both great and small, dead and alive, famous and not-so-famous. I also believe that gathering with other poets has helped my writing mature. While completing my undergraduate studies, I have taken part in two semester-long poetry workshops. These were of immense value to me—to see what other poets in my age group were doing and accomplishing. I also completely appreciated and religiously attended the monthly poetry readings on campus. I highly recommend that all local poets and other artists to attend these functions regularly. They are not only entertaining, but it can also provide you with a network of other poets with which to share your work—an invaluable resource.

* * *

Where do I see myself and my work in the future? These days I am not putting any pressure on myself to publish, or to become "famous" or even "good." Right now I am just writing as the mood strikes. It is fun for me. I would call it more than a hobby, however. To me, it is more like a second occupation, or perhaps like volunteer work. I do it because it feels good and it makes me happy.

Down the road, maybe I will come out with a chapbook. I think a chapbook is a given. I'm a poet; poets do chapbooks. When I go on to graduate school, I don't really see myself focusing on creative writing, and I have no real explanation for that. I guess I don't feel qualified. I would rather focus on other aspects of the language, like literature or composition. Maybe literary theory.

In the future, I might branch out into fiction. I've been itching to write a short story. I have a great amount of respect for those that can do that. I think it would be fun to try.
Part III

Window Over The Ridge
Stage Right
Mud Grins

It was in his nature
to hold the season in his chest
and stand on the mud and
grin.

It was in his nature
to lie on the dying grass
as the chill windman made it dance
like so many gypsies
and the calm, when they quieted
made secret tears, rare tears
fall;
the nature of one
who holds his innocence
like a worn-out blanket;
who warms to the red leaves floating
and imagines that each one,
every one,
has a name.

This is the season for such as he.
A season for time olding,
for time colding,
and for a man who loves mud
to live.
I Will Give Her Daisies

I send a letter to my friend
to ask about her headaches;
to announce that Lisa is in the family way;
to tell her my hair is now short;
to give updates on gossip
and lifestyles.

I send a letter to my friend
who had photos of Elvis,
and bible-beating kinfolk,
and a boa constrictor for a father:

I send a letter to my friend
whom I drove to the clinic and
waited,
waited amid stares of anger-fresh mothers and
daughters, and women and girls and those who were both
women and girls;
one grimface doctor,
a nurse bearing tranquilizers and smiles.
And I sat with her and knew
I would write of it.
because we were friends then;
She believed
I could write of it.

I send a letter to my friend
to say I love her
to say I love her
I send a letter to my friend,
who has a new name like I do
I send a letter to my friend
who is a woman like I am

I send a letter to my friend:
I will give her daisies.
"It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,  
The dark threw its patches upon me also,  
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious..."  
- Walt Whitman

The night you were born I got drunk  
with my buddy on his porch.

I was born in November  
I was born at Cherry Point  
I was born during a conflict  
and under that star  
it was under a conflict star  
I was born.

Can I forgive them that? Is there forgiving?  
Is there? ’Cause under a conflict star  
she was born.  
I wore the boots of my dead friend.

Forgive? What? Forget forgiving forget the boots  
forget drunk flashbacks  
I was never there;  
I was born to it.

Do I carry myself like a conflict star?  
What did my father see:  
bashing through dadhood like a sniper,  
ducking green bullets, jumping barbed  
did they shoot the radio on your back, daddy? did they?

A conflict star.  
Echoes cannot be forgiven:  
were there kids my age there, daddy? were there?
Echoes of my father's pain sleep
still scream through him
they abuse him and tear at his face

Do I carry myself like that?
   On Cherry Point beaches
   I played with broken bottles
   dead fish beer can tabs empty shells

Only now is he coming back.
Only now has he begun even to come back.
Twenty three years he spent like he ought
but never really back here,
never back. He was still there. He
existed there.

Do I forgive him that? Is there forgiving?

I was born under a conflict star
and
my father lived there.
Land is Sea

On the porch in sun
I drink the air from the sea
to become again what once I was:
and the unmediated experience,
the it-ness through my eyes
is partly the sky:
expanse without limitations.
is partly the land:
horizon in surroundsound,
open to the sea.
Stage Left
What It Is

(upon listening to trombone)

They are dark and have more than somewhat a red wine melancholy about them. A hippopotamus on codeine: a lawrence welkian timbre with a mashed potato twist. A train whistle or merely a train; traveling women in tall dresses drinking daiquiris. A cement block: just part of a crowd. They smile to walk slug-like when walking fast. They are not fancy shoes, not Dom Perignon; but old men with love for Cuban cigars. Brown dogs asleep by chain-link fences; and mostly, hippopotami with colds: melancholy, and red wine.
**Consumed: to the eyes of you**

I have softly sung what
you have not written,

unaware, you
you have held me stricken:
strapped by eyes of sea-smiles

I hold your words thusly:
(for I must leave you intact)

Your name
carrier of banners
crier of battles

Your *ka:*
*a color-guard for words*

Your (beard and mouth:
do you know you belong to me?)

you, I
words

they are priest, and nuptials, and
consummation.
There Are No Rocks Big Enough

standing on cliff or rock or beach

may not remember as they
were, every droplet in exact position on feet
and face,
all fishes in different places
rocks shifted: snakes sunning have rolled
and moved on
bottom mud shoved
  by feet,
  by crawdads,
  by dark things

walking out of lake
it too will move
walking out of
lake
it will move

watching on cliff or rock or beach
  you have dried my hair:
  you grab my wet fingers
Wind of Sihaya
a dream in two parts

The near-morning grey
covers you and I
we are motionless:
consuming each other carefully

You whisper of people, of love, of poetry
I close my eyes, shift toward your chest:
waves of you wrap me tightly,
and utterly destroy
betrayal-built walls.

I want to say
You and I
have known each other before
You and I

You are everything I do not have.

Even in dreams, I do not say this.

We lie motionless,
consumed,
before I wake.
Sans Feathers

Under the willow tree
two doves cry

Through cities men eat
guts and glamour.

Doves cry,
clinging to branch.

Rulers revise
responsibility.

One dove remains crying;
the other plucks its feathers.

Beneath bridges
girls perform for food.

In hospitals
no hope
In churches
no dream space
In fathers and mothers
nothing

Weeping, one dove watches.
It does not fly.
It does not eat.

The plucked bird,
bared to skin
is swallowed in.

There is none. They
are accustomed to
brass wires and
plastic rings.
Katie
Katie Runs the Vacuum

Katie is cleaning.
Katie nearly breaks her back washing windows.
She finds feathers from the parakeet,
fur from the cat.
She steps where the floor is sticky from Pepsi.
There are little paper pieces from coupon cutting,
and cellophane from a pack of Virginia Slims.

She moves the couch: a discarded condom wrapper.
She blushes.
She thinks about throwing him out, too.

Katie gets a big green trash bag.
She dumps in fuzzballs found beneath her bed.
Katie gets a moist cloth and wipes the china.
She fills holes in the walls with Colgate.

Katie runs the vacuum, and dirt from a year ago
is sucked into a sanitary container.

Katie now looks for Godliness.
She assumes salvation.
Breakfast at Katie’s

Katie has boxes beneath the bed:
they hold items for sale,
they hold things she has sold.

Katie will wake to
the white morning:
to the sounds of him
shattering his own face.
She will hear the flail slicing air.
She will close her eyes.
She will hold her hands out,
they will stay empty.

Katie will
open one box
take a piece,
admire it
hold it close
show it to the sun.
Her cat will sniff it.
Katie will kiss the piece:
it will self-destruct in flames.

Katie will make breakfast
and look over glazed eyes
and yeast donuts.
One flail over easy
one wrist-scar to go.
She will offer toast,
he will take the bread knife.

she will pack up more pieces.
she will pack them up,
she will wrap them in silk.
In boxes are pieces for sale.

The boxes hold things that are sold.
Katie's Vowel Problem

There was no hope for Katie today; as she typed, the letter "e" stuck, and where she wanted to say "bled," she kept typing "bleed," When she typed "Mr. Terheide," the e's unionized, and demanded hazard pay

Katie took a break: her coffee was thick, the parakeet was acting suspicious, and the cat: the cat was curled, sulking on the furnace duct, contemplating riddles.

Katie lit the last of her Virginia Slims, and it disintegrated in her hand;

she looked at the screen-- the e's had commenced a coup and the o's and the a's and the u's had joined the rebellion. There were banners, and messengers and battle fatigue support clinics.

The i's were holding out, pending more favorable conditions.

(Shall we even speak of the y's? they were the true outcasts, unloved by vowels and consonants alike. They were selling automatics to k's and grenades to adolescent j's and information to everyone.)

Katie watched the proceedings, and rubbed her temples. There could be no settlement; tension had risen to unprecedented levels.

Katie looked over her shoulder. She switched the monitor off.

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Katie at Sunset

Katie is on a hill, facing west. 
Katie holds her hands out 
and presents her palms to 
blue overhead 

Her mouth is warm. 
Katie’s hair blows around her face. 

Katie dreams as the sun 
changes mood, 
and moves from yellow 
to orange 
to red. 

It becomes a shadow 
calling dreamers home. 

Katie thinks 
the sun is hers. 
She claims no other possession.
A Man, A Carpet, and The Dog Who Sniffed

A destroyed man, his bloody
eyes diluted
fell,
    steaming, into her parlor.

He collapsed on the carpet.
The dog sniffed him.

A casual dresser, he
had a silk shirt;
tailored jeans,
one of a pair of leather sneakers:

one foot missing, one earlobe
(blond hair brown with blood),
a broadsword, circa 1200,
clutched in
his one good hand.

He breathed in slowly, and:
    I have to say this
    You must listen

He coughed a little,
and his left shoulder started twitching
    Women and Men
    God and Satan
    War, Peace, Famine, Harmony
    Life, Hope
    Dreams, Death

He sputtered, and
dark blood trickled out of his nose
    strawberries

He tried to take one more breath;
the woman leaned a little closer
    light

The man on the rug was quiet--
the dog left, disinterested.
Katie sighed.
She could have given him the strawberries.
Excuse me,
Have You Seen My Letter X?
Of Tribal Spirit and the Fire that burned

A tribal spirit called 
to middle aged men: 
leave your past in the fire 
follow childlike desires 
leave your life in the fire 
find childlike desires 
come beat on drum 
dance naked in the sun 
your life has been a lie 
you must change before you die

Being middle aged men, 
they did as they were told. 
the left wives first. 
children next; 
jobs, then homes. 
They bought books and learned to love Robert Bly. They wore moccasins, and bought Genuine Native American art

the men grouped around the fire: 
they named themselves 
wounded men with scared inner children 
co-dependent men with no sense of self 
overworked men with no time to play 
military men who grew up too soon

so as the tribal spirit called, they came. 
they should bond 'round the fire 
follow childlike desires 
leave their lives in the fire 
follow childlike desires 
they beat on the drum 
danced naked 'neath the sun 
they stayed that way through night 
and chanted with their might 
they bonded brother to brother 
and worshipped their Earth Mother 
and cried their stifled tears 
and cursed their wasted years
morning came,
and where the fire had burned their secrets,
a low mound of blackened wood
lay:
a glutton with a low grin,
it burped one last puff of black smoke
and that was all.
The maintenance of seeds

On the brink of a small thing,
a thing growing much bigger;
even slowly out of proportion to
the seed she planted, there,
over the ridge

she stood and gazed
at the thing which grew.
It was larger than yesterday, yes.
Another branch had grown—she could see it plainly.

When the ridge was in washed in night
it was not afraid of the dark; it
grew in spite of it.
It grew to prove a point.
She lay in wait of it, on the couch,
under a lamp: it was really irrepressible now.
it had no regard of its size and
the effect of its causes.
it merely was, it merely grew
and knew that it must keep expanding

daylight met her open gaze.
she gathered an afghan round
her:
she walked to the glass door.
and pulled open the curtain
the sun recognized her, and she
sung to it in a whisper

Over the ridge,
the thing was there. it had
grown over the night and
was bent in a reluctant
salute to her.
an acknowledgment only.
Now fully birthed, it uprooted
itself before her eyes;
in sight of the infant sun.
and took its first step on the path before it.

She was lost for a moment
in the morning;
It came as it always had and always would,
and nothing could alter that star's routine.
Not birth or death or dreams.
When she looked once more upon the ridge
the thing was gone;

and as she turned from the door
the sun burned off what was left behind.
(untitled)

Within blue shadows
he walks and watches
violet grey eyes
wait and reflect
the moonlit menagerie
light and motion
He waits and watches
He walks and reflects
Works Cited

