Wrinkled Toes: Poems From a Bathtub

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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May, 2005
Abstract

Poetry is my best means of expressing myself, and I wanted to be able to share that with others. By having a poetry reading, I am able to move poetry from a solitary, printed pursuit, to an auditory, group experience. I wrote fifteen poems for this project, and pulled out some old poems of exceptional quality. The reading will be held on Thursday, May 5, 2005 at Muncie Alliance Church at 8:00 p.m. Refreshments will be provided in order to create a coffee house atmosphere. After the reading, attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions about the reading.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Laurie Lindberg, who acted as my advisor on this project. I had her for several classes, and I felt very fortunate to be able to work with her again. She provided much guidance and encouragement.

Eric Clark filmed the reading. I am grateful for his technical assistance and creating DVDs.
Artist’s Statement

I chose to do a poetry reading after a string of aborted thesis attempts. Some criteria I used to eliminate inadequate topics included: Can this project be completed in a reasonable amount of time? Will it cost much money or equipment to complete? Will it challenge me personally and academically? Will it hold my interest long enough? The last criterion is particularly important to me. I have a tendency to lose interest in a topic after a short amount of time, and poetry provided the variety I needed to keep me interested. Each poem could be about a different subject, or written in a different style, or have a different length.

Several short stories or songs may have proven sufficient, but my strengths are not in those areas. Poetry tends to reflect the way I think and feel, in colorful bursts. A short story, for me, is an inadequate means of self-expression. And songs are best avoided for the audience’s sake. However, a reading was a good match for me because I enjoy being in front of an audience, and I like being able to see the reactions as I read.

The Structure of the Reading

The reading is located at Muncie Alliance Church, the church I regularly attend. I chose MAC, as it is known, not because my poems are of a religious nature, but because I wanted to do the reading in a place I felt comfortable (and that had ample, simple parking). Also, the espresso machines and décor help create a coffee house atmosphere, long associated (at least in my mind) with poetry readings. MAC houses a small coffee roasting business, Alliance World Coffees, and trains baristas. Because I wanted to have coffee available for the attendees, MAC seemed a logical choice, given the readily available expertise. The choice to have free coffee is, frankly, a shrewd decision to entice people to come to the reading. It also enhances the coffee house feel.
Originally, I had wanted to be able to offer lattes to the attendees, but the cost was too high for such a small crowd. Lattes cost $100 dollars an hour, whereas air pots of coffee are a mere eight dollars apiece. I decided to have three air pots—regular, decaf, and hot chocolate—bringing the total to twenty-four dollars.

The reading will be conducted Thursday May 5, 2005 at 8:00 p.m. The reading is at this time due to several factors, chief among them being availability. The church building is regularly in use throughout the week, and I wanted to make certain I had a relative degree of peace and quiet. Also, it is later in Ball State’s finals week, so I thought more students would be available to come. Baristas will man the coffee bar at 7:50, so people can grab a latte and find a seat before the reading starts at eight. Dr. Lindberg will introduce me, and then the reading will commence. I’m reading mostly new material written specifically for this project, but I will also read some older poems that I feel are exemplary. After some deliberation, I decided not to pass out copies of the poems I would be reading for several reasons. First, it would increase the cost of the reading (but only slightly). Secondly, it would be limiting and add extra pressure on me. For instance, if I wanted to change a word or rearrange the order of the poems on the fly for some reason, people would no doubt notice and be confused or irritated. Third, I wrote the poems to be heard, not read, and handouts would rather defeat that purpose.

I’m aiming for the reading to be around 50 minutes long, including the question and answer time. I chose 50 minutes because that’s a reasonable length of time for people to sit still and listen. Rarely does reading something you’ve written take as long as you anticipated, and I wanted to be able to take some time to answer people’s questions.
The Poems

I wrote fifteen new poems for this project. I chose to write fifteen because I felt that was a reasonable number to achieve over the course of a semester, and because it would provide an adequate amount of material for the reading. That being said, not all the poems I wrote for this project were chosen for the reading. Some poems just didn’t sound the way I wanted them to when I decided they were indeed finished. Some were chosen because they clearly stood above the rest in terms of quality and content.

At the beginning of the semester, I checked out a couple of decent books I could find on the art of writing poetry from the public library. Two of these, both by Mary Oliver, stand out in my mind and can be listed as formative. The thing that I took from both these books, to paraphrase, is that poetry requires solitude. Solitude was hard to find at times because my wife and I had a son on December 4, 2005. I’m a stay-at-home dad, and that made it more difficult to find time to write. But, thanks to a very supportive community, I was able to find time to write.

Numerous other books (I read several a week) have helped shape my worldview. The topics that my poetry covers range from urban planning to agriculture to ecology.

As useful as these books may have been, I had to admit to myself I was probably using them to avoid the inevitable: actually sitting down and writing some poetry. By chance, I was wasting time organizing my hard drive and came across something I myself had written about poetry that proved very inspirational. “Poetry is, or should be, pure thought. Total disregard of form, punctuation, and syntax are the order of the day; these things will come through naturally. Write without thinking, in order to let others to know what you are thinking.” And there was my block. I was wasting all this energy trying to write poems I thought the book wanted, or the people in charge wanted, when what I needed to be writing were poems that I wanted.
So I wrote a poem about a robot that plays whiffle ball. Not exactly earth-shaking material. I put it away for a while, and when I took it out a few weeks later, I realized this isn’t a poem about a robot, this is a poem about me and my brother, playing whiffle ball in the street. So I changed it; I made it even more my own.

And so it goes with all the poems. They are all a piece of me, even if they aren’t literally about me. The poems illustrate a variety of moods and interests, a very real and conflicted person. I wrote the new poems and selected old poems with one thing in mind. How do they sound when read aloud, when performed?
Bibliography


A Short Whiny One

I’m tired
of being alone
always attempting,
ever succeeding,
living in a world where
everyone’s leaving
They say:
   Why buy the cow when
   you can get milk for free?

My reply:
   Stealing milk is
   too much work.
   Buy a cow,
   drink milk everyday.
This comma will be subjected to intense scrutiny, he being the bearer of my innermost intent. Grad students will argue fiercely over the meaning it imbues, how he colors the page.

Why did he choose to live there?
Cult of the Whiffle Bot

Whiffle, whuffle, I do see
holy whiffle mystery.

Short red fat bat
Long yellow skinny bat
Broken balls mended with duct tape,
Well placed line drives broke windows
(and then we were relegated to the street).
Exiles from our own yard.

We worshipped daily with scabbed knees.
"With Apologies to My Wife"

I'll write no more poems for women.

They've done nothing but get me into trouble
with words more dashing
than I could ever be
making promises I could—never in a million years—keep.
But it sounded so good on paper, see.

And, my motives:
questionable, given that
I can edit myself extensively—
on paper I'm very nice,
the kind of guy you'd want to hang around.

Not to mention—
all the praises I've sung,
the adulations I've penned,
they haunt me.

"I said that about her?"
My own foolishness,
thrown in my face.
Every time I come across
a cache of old poems
I can feel the bile
rise in my throat.

Stupid silly fool.

So, I'm putting down
my pen, the textured fancy paper,
the twine, the bits that say you're special.
Love Song for a Bathtub

I remember when we first met.
I was terrified and confused
by the lead in your belly
and unfamiliar methods of cleansing.

But I grew to love you
bath by bath, until
I was soaking in you,
my iron cocoon,
and I, a modern day Diogenes.

I’ve decided
if I were an evil genius,
my trademark eccentricity would be
to never leave my bath.
I’d be surrounded by
screens and controls,
high tech stuff,
and underlings would bring
me my food.

From my bath
I rule the world.
Arboreal Love Song: Winter
Gravity, lust, 
and ice the aphrodisiac 
for broken boughs and 
frozen earth to mate, 
to mate with ghastly crash

I'm standing on my front porch 
eavesdropping in the dark 
to the moans and shrieks of 
trees who can longer contain 
their passion

And, in my own backyard, 
angry love takes place  
massive branches fling themselves earthward  
—my house, power lines, gutters,  
victims of this torrid affair.
A Poem is Not for Everything

A poem cannot record the hard steel facts of our situation—
the weight of the ice on sagging limbs,
the velocity of the tree as it fell,
the decibels produced as it smashed the car.

It will not warm the homes,
80,000 people without power.
It cannot illuminate a path for faltering footsteps (in the literal sense).

At the grocery store—
a market researchers wet dream
only the most unwanted products remain on shelf:
low-carb wheat hot dog buns.
I must question the diets of my fellow citizens:
For the salty snacks aisle is empty,
and the pop has all been bought,
but shelf upon shelf of pristine water stands untouched.

The media has named our storm
January Ice “Oh” Five
A timid name that conjures images of thin-lipped librarians with spectacles perched on sallow faces.

A night too black for metaphor:
I turn to Jeremy at a dead stoplight and I say, “I’m so glad there are no zombies here.”
“Me too. Me too.”
A Father's Advice on Choosing One's Companions

And stay away from those kind o' people, the ones I warned you about—with the heavy lidded eyes and sloping criminal foreheads, cavemen in polo shirts.

And stay away from the ones in ties—for it is an article of clothing with no purpose but to make others feel inferior, and distant cousin to ascots and powdered wigs.
You would do well to eat no more
the food of man,
packaged prickly tight and full of filler.
You would do well to wash the food
that may be washed,
to scrub dirt from the food,
to cut and peel,
to relish the consumption of time in preparation.
A Love Song in Two Parts

He loves her when there is sex and money.
She loves him when there is money and sex.
Who am I? I’m a patch of green in desert scenes,
I’m that lone shrubbery,
Shun snobbery and foppery,
Do it sort of sloppily
with barbs cast from afar;
Battle cat tactics,
Release the mastiffs.

I turn phrases like hookers turn tricks,
A literary blitz in apoplectic fits.
I’ve been so scared all I could do was tremble,
Cut up, breaking through brambles,
Eyes bent back to the stars looking for answers;
My soul is just a mass of scars
From massacres mental and emotional
Elocution derisive, paths chosen decisive;
I burnt my bridges with fiery missives
Penned just like this.

That Infinite Spiral just went viral
Infected me when I was on the verge of suicidal
I’m madder than hell; I got the wrath of heaven,
Threw out the whole batch of dough
Just to get rid of the leaven.
Directions for A Poem

Find a pen.
Clean the drain trap of your
inner sanctum clogged
with hair and residue.
Latex gloves recommended, and,
try not to gag.

Filthy.

Deny yourself sleep to
scour the pipes, remove obstructions.
(Honesty is a euphemism for stupor.)

Draw yourself full of
clean, clear words
to an appropriate level and temperature.

Pull the stopper, rinse, repeat.
The Bathroom Cupboard

Upon opening the cabinet door,
I realize this distinct smell is not mine.
It will belong to my son,
for him this smell defines:
Medicine Cabinet.

The history of my house
peeks through a worn spot
where the door rubs its frame.
Green, pink, blue, white, cream.
Eras defined by colors.

I will form your memories for you,
until you can form them on your own.
I’ll write them all on slips of paper,
and tend it till you’re old.
Cry of a Reformed Nimby

I thought I liked nature,
I really did.
Magazines enticed me with
glossy pictures of bright birds,
convinced me, goaded me,
to give fifteen dollars to
“the cause.”

And so I did.
I felt good about myself,
very
eco-sensitive.

But last week, after spending an hour
washing, sorting, and bagging
my recyclables,
I wanted to mow the lawn,
to bask in the glory of our own
bright star.

But, I couldn’t.
On the way to get my non-fume
producing, quiet, planet preserving
push mower,
I was assaulted.

The fat black bees crashed into
me from every side—
spray did not kill them, and
my broom broke against their furry bodies.
I was forced to retreat.

The grass grows tall now, and
the bees are having a time, cross-pollinating.
All I can do is peek through the blinds
lest they see me.

I implore you,
build a strip mall,
a nuclear power plant,
a slaughterhouse even.
Just get rid of these bees!
And while you’re at it,
displace the spiders, mosquitoes, and ticks.

I guess I really don’t like nature,
not in my back yard.
An Ode to Ben Franklin

Thank you, Benjamin Franklin.
For inventing public libraries,
in which I squandered so much of my youth, and,
on which I can conveniently blame my mild social retardation
and awkward ways with people.
for useless knowledge, which,
as it turns out,
 isn’t so useless at all.

Thank you, Benjamin Franklin.
For creating the self-help genre with your autobiography,
for making me feel inferior,
measured by your witty aphorisms and
models of living—
days divided into compartments neatly labeled.
And every time I see a train’s wheels rusted on the sides,
but smooth and shiny where the metal meets the track,
I am reminded,
The used key is always bright.

Thank you, Benjamin Franklin.
On Seeing the Brighter Side of Things

I arrive at the mall with a short list and my baby,
The wind tears at the blanket barely covering his stroller, and him within
(such an adult-sized cocoon would be a big seller)

In the bookstore I’m browsing the magazine section and a large woman staggers next to me
she’s got wild hair mounted on a tattered coat,
I am certain that is vomit down the front
She’s coughing, hacking, each salvo wracks her body,

and my first thought is this:
   “Oh no, oh no, this woman has tuberculosis
   I have to leave now, protect the baby.”
and simultaneously:
   “Why would a homeless person need magazines?”
I force my way down the narrow aisle
   “Excuse me, sir”
the stroller grabs at low books, impeding my process,
and a third thought occurs to me:
   “Maybe this is a pilot program to get rid of sluggish shoppers;
   She comes charging back attempting to liberate a lung to scare off those slow to purchase.”

A man lurks at the end of the row,
he is wearing a belt and suspenders, at the same time.
His melted eyes wander behind thick glasses, distortion begets distortion.
   “Surely,”
I think
   “this man must be her companion.”
I cut a wide swath around him, too.
He’s not coughing, but he could be a carrier.

Old men post themselves on benches,
watching, waiting for the school bell to ring for the halls of learning to empty, and the halls of commerce to fill.
   “I know, oh, I know.
   I was an old man once, too.”
I Am a Professional

A wet blast announced the time to change
the baby’s diaper
had come.
The leaky diaper smelled earth sweet,
ripe with promise.

I can handle this.
I am a professional.

He’s all clean and I get a new diaper
under his tiny bottom;
he decides to celebrate the cold air and
new found freedom by urinating, but,

I am a professional.

I clap the diaper down to catch the stream,
avert disaster.
As I’m blotting him dry,
he poops again.

Okay, fine.
That diaper was already ruined.

Dirty diaper set aside, I’m wiping
him clean and, there’s another wet blast.
In my hand, a mustard pool is filling.

(Professionals must, from time to time,
make sacrifices for the greater good,
to save the clothes, the changing table.)

I clean my hands best I can,
and he pees. Again.
My hands are still filthy, I can’t avert disaster!
So, helpless, I watch a perfect arc travel
little penis to his eye.
He startles slightly, aware of the moisture on his face,
but does not find it disagreeable, does not cry.

I am a professional,
but I had not trained for this,
nor had I expected this level of precision.

I cannot decide which is cleaner:
baby urine or our city’s water.
I figure it’s a toss up.
I grab him and fill a glass,
pouring water over his eyes.

My boy, you have
earned yourself a bath.
He Japeth Me

He japeth me.
Indeed, he did.
Now they call me
The One Who Hath Been Japed
(They also call me dead.)

Coffin-boxed, I’ve time to think
About the manner and form
Of that japing which did me in.

Twas Slen who japeth me.
Thrice as smart as the
piper at the gates of dawn
who led away the children.
Hop o’ My Thumb’s brother (in spirit, at least)
and the protégé of the long dead Puss in Boots,
who ate the ogre for a snack.
Slen, you earthy smelling compatriot of wolves,
how you vex me!
Swarthy brawn oozes from your every pore,
I am lost.
Rue the day I conquered your homeland,
smiting your mother.
Oh, to see light again, were it not for Slen.

Seeing his mother smited, Slen vowed revenge.
He came a’ calling one winter day,
Whispy hair frosted.
Sir, said he, I ne’er had smelled a safety so fresh as that;
The wind that a cow doth break smells of dew when compared.
Doorknob, anon!

Alack, show me a doorknob and I’ll show you and honest woman,
tis a latch that stays my door.
Are you to pummel my pate henceforth?

I shall, said wily Slen,
Unless you sever from your arms your hands, and affix them to door.

I, placing my hands in the guillotine,
Did bid my fair brothers farewell as the blade fell.
Trusty manservant Smagnum lashed palm and digit to yon door
and poulticed my bloody stumps.

In came servants, one by one, asking for daily wages.
I have no hand with which to give you coin.
Then we shall tarry here no more.
I reached to scabbard in order to slash the puckish brutes,
rounded end met rounded end,
I have lost my grip.

Alone in my estates gazing at well stocked larder
and brothers rotting on the heavy oaken barrier.
I am Hunger's servant, I will kneel when she wishes.
Spoon and knyfe to hold,
food to devour,
but the ways and means are not mine.

He japeth me.
Indeed, he did.
Now they call me
The One Who Hath Been Japed
(They also call me dead.)

Coffin-boxed, I've time to think
About the manner and form
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