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GRIZZLY HEAVEN

By

Robert R. Cole

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ART

Graduate Studies Office

2010

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ABSTRACT

GRIZZLY HEAVEN

By

Robert R. Cole

This thesis contains thirty-two poems divided into three sections. The first section represents poems based on the natural world, the second section consists of poems centered around people, and the final section contains poems dealing with religious themes.

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Robert Ransom Cole

2010

To my wife, Rachel.

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INTRODUCTION

In Defense of Humor in Poetry

Humor is an act of defense. We use humor to counter the gravity of a situation or to display that we have a demeanor that reflects levity, that we accept our current circumstances. We use humor to diffuse. Poetry serves this same purpose. Humor is a deflection of the serious that, when employed properly, forces a direct confrontation with the subject. We use poetry both to cope with what we have written and to demonstrate that we, as poets, are comfortable where we stand. We signal to the world that with humor we not only bear the burden we have been given, but also make the most of it.

As a poet who often relies on humor, I have worked around the edges of what it can successfully achieve within a poem. I have dealt with the balance of humor and craft, a necessary component for working a humorous poem into a successful one. In their essay "The Line/The Form/The Music," Baker and Townsend write that "poetry makes more intense use, more self-aware use, of the elements of good writing" (65). This is especially true of a poet who deals with humor—we, as poets, must know that humor is an art that thrives in self-awareness, that the poem depends upon its craft to succeed. For a humorist, the focus of craft must remain at the forefront of the writing process. When attempting to complete a joke, however, it is easy to forget. Many humorous poets will rely too heavily on comedy, and their work will suffer because of this. The joke may work, but the poem fails.

Humor's role in poetry is a natural one. Humor provides a way to get an audience's attention and maintain it. In fact, humor depends on the reaction of the audience to sustain its outcome. It is a way to enter a conversation and broach topics that would otherwise remain heavy and inaccessible. A controlled utilization of humor has more impact than a serious or otherwise straight-forward approach to a topic simply because it allows for distraction by applying another dimension to the conversation. The reader of humor can be either pacified or sidetracked by the speaker's use of comedy. A masterful humorist can manipulate an audience's mood in order to wound more deeply.

However, according to many critics, describing anything as "humorous poetry" is a categorically precarious grounding—it is a broad field with constantly shifting borders. The successful use of humor in contemporary poetry relies on attention to techniques that surround the humor and not so much on humor itself. A poem that stands solely on its humor has little of value to bring to the table. This is, as Mathew Rohrer notes, the reason all humorous poetry is so easily dismissed by critics—"if these poems with jokes in them are dull and unserious, then all poems with other kinds of humor must also be unserious" ("Serious Art"). Rohrer disparages the "guilt by association" stance that many critics take towards the whole corpus of humorous poetry. Just like all other categories of poetry, there is a difference between what works and what fails with humor. The distinguishing trait between unsuccessful and successful humorous poetry is the element of craft that accompanies the humor.

I have often had poems that were originally sparked with a joke or a punchline. In fleshing these pieces out, I have discovered that they, more often than not, fail when I rely too heavily on humor. Comedy can be a great starting point for a poem, but depending upon it too much strips away any dimension the poem can achieve. The same idea is the backbone of any strong poem, regardless of its use of humor or not—the poem cannot be stopped at one dimension, or it will never develop. It will always fall flat. This lesson has been the hardest one for me to learn as a writer. The idea for a poem itself may be a strong one, but if I do nothing to develop this idea or connect it with anything else, then it will be wasted. Humor works within the same boundaries. It may be a hilarious joke or premise, but if the poet does not develop it or prop it up with craft, then it will fall. That does not mean that humor should be ignored in poetry—far from it. Humor provides another method for adding dimensions to a poem and should be viewed as a tool for the writer.

As a poetic approach, humor is a genre of its own, and one that is, as Rohrer points out, often classified as insignificant or overly whimsical. Peter Campion, in reviewing Tony Hoagland's most recent book, praises Hoagland by noting how well he works with argument before he disparages Hoagland for taking a turn into "the simply absurd" (165-6). While he works around the direct statement, Campion wishes Hoagland were more serious. He wants the poet to rely less on his sense of humor and more on his critical reasoning. Campion does not make the connection between the two.

Hoagland, like all poets classified as humorous, is an easy target for such critics. His use of comedy is mistaken, for lack of a better term, for forceful triviality. Any poem that approaches its subject in a straightforward manner has already failed. Because Hoagland can approach the widely discussed topics of love, death, and sex from an arguably unique vantage, however, he does not deserve such castigation. Hoagland's poetry should be judged by the successful use or misuse of humor, not the mere inclusion of it. An effective poetic humorist will craft a poem that not only utilizes strong comedic sensibilities, but also adheres those sensibilities to craft and rhetoric. That is to say, a comedic poem should be judged by the same standards as all other poems and should not be hastily pigeon-holed.

Bob Hicok's strength as a humorist is understatement. He rarely exaggerates or builds a poem around a punchline. There is nothing obvious or overbearing about his humor, and this is why he succeeds, as he does in the following from the poem "Duh."

> The moon is up though sometimes
> to the side which is called
> over there. Coffee is better brewed
> than eaten straight from the can.
> When someone is dying
> we should unpack the clever phrase
> *I am sorry.* (2-8)

Hicok catalogs random ideas here, a technique he uses often. The delivery is a straight-forward one, deadpan. Each idea is unrelated to the next, until all three are combined and the reader gets the image of a person up late, contemplating death. Each sentence is a subtle joke, and they all build to the larger image of the passage, which is far from humorous. The line breaks add a sense of urgency, or as David Baker and Ann Townsend point out about this device, it serves "to create anxiety or to suggest the incomplete or the imperfect, the broken" (68). Hicok uses these line breaks to set up his narrator as someone in a fragmented mood—someone who may have had too much coffee and has found himself in a contemplative spirit. Hicok's comedy comes off as almost unintentional, just like the image of the passage. The two effects work together to strengthen the poem by fleshing out the narrator. If Hicok had simply stated "The moon is out/ I've had coffee/ someone has died," there would be less room for the reader to conjure up the image or attitude of the narrator. Hicok takes full control of the reader's attention and slows the reader down with each line break. Each statement halts the reader with its idea before it gives way to the next thought.

Hicok's humor is effective because his poetry does not rely on it. The poem does not work around the humor, the humor gives flesh to the poem. Hicok is able to range his topics from the trivial to the serious and keep the reader engaged. By using humor as a tool, Hicok presents his subject matter from a new angle, and his speakers are more complex creatures. In my poem "Jesus and the Bear," I discuss an encounter with Christ and a bear that takes on human characteristics. The poem works, I think, because it never acknowledges the absurdity of its topic, but it does carry the absurdity until the end of the poem. The delivery of "Jesus and the Bear" is straightforward, almost deadpan. Individual instances of humor are scattered throughout to establish a rhythm to move the poem from line to line. By the end of the poem, the bear has died and the events can no longer be viewed as humorous—they take on a somber, religious meaning. Like Hicok, I do not use the humor as the main aspect of the poem, instead, it is a method of entry into the narrative.

When humor fails in poetry, it is often because the poem is not much of a poem without it. A poet who relies too heavily on humor finds himself at risk of losing the reader's attention. Mark Yakich's "Before Losing Yourself Completely to Love" is one such poem.

> Drop breadcrumbs around your feet.
>
> You will find yourself far away and hungry. (1-2)

Yakich's short poem relies entirely on metaphor and punchline. The three stressed syllables at the beginning of the poem are clumsy. The start of the second line, "you will find yourself," also reads awkwardly due to the proximity of "your, you, and yourself." Because of these cumbersome lines, the ending is not nearly as effective as Yakich is attempting to make it. Even if the syntax where changed, the poem would still not succeed. It reads like a bad fortune cookie. The poem fails.

In "Every Force Deserves a Form," Yakich's humor is more successful:

> Why are young widows mourning so attractive?
>
> A) They almost always wear black, diaphanous underthings.
>
> A) They have pretty luminous noses and eyes like burnished beads.
>
> A) They like to stay up late.

A) They don’t give a damn about joining the choir.

A) The world is most shot through with collateral beauty (1-6).

Here, Yakich is still working with humor, but the poem is not relying on it. Instead, Yakich strengthens his poem with comedy, as Hicok does. The question and answer format betrays what the poem is really about: the morbidity of searching for beauty. The speaker alerts the reader that he is fascinated with women surrounded by death and attempts to answer why. His first four answers, all sexual in nature, attempt to create a stand-alone joke. The final answer, however, is the root of the poem, and it transforms the poem into a recognition of the relationship between death and beauty. The gravity of the subject of death is balanced with the humor of the lines, and Yakich allows himself to approach the topic from a different vantage by utilizing comedy. The result is between gravity and humor. Each answer builds to the conclusion. Unlike “Before Losing Yourself,” Yakich employs better timing as well. The first two answers are lines of physical description that end in ways that halt the reader. “Diaphanous underthings” is a weighty phrase and requires lingered attention to comprehend and accomplishes a slight assonance to extend the connection between the two words. It mirrors the typical male attention to such things when spied. “Burnished beads” relies on both alliteration and consonance to slow the reader. The next two answers are both simple jokes and simple lines.

Here, the humor is not as effective as it is in the previous two lines because it reinforces the same joke, but extends the discussion to what one should find shameful in seeing as sexual. However, in terms of timing, these two lines are effective. Without these two lines, the poem would not be as powerful. He uses them as pacesetters. They read quickly, so the end is, after the same joke is repeated four different times, more effective because it becomes less expected. In the last line, Yakich also alters the syntax of the answers to make his point stand out. The subject, no longer the mourning widows, is the world, and the language, no longer contemporary, becomes archaic. In combining the craft of the line with humor, Yakich has made a successful, funny poem.

With "Facts About the Body of Franklin Roosevelt," I rely on the same technique of timing that Yakich utilizes. I begin the poem with physical attributes about Roosevelt's body described scientifically. As the poem moves from line to line, the ideas become more bizarre. The last image of the poem is of his willpower endlessly pushing a coin with his image printed on it. By the end of the poem, the topic is no longer the physical body of President Roosevelt, it becomes his representation in history. Because the poem develops slowly from the scientific to the fantastic, it establishes its own timing, and as each line moves to the next, the poem becomes stranger. Like Yakich's "Before Losing Yourself," I build the momentum of the poem and work with humor rather than rely on it.

In "With My Friend's Compound Bow," Matthew Rohrer mixes humor into a serious poem. Like that of Hicok, Rohrer's brand of humor is muted, and, in this poem, Rohrer puts all of his reliance on the subject matter. He uses humor sparingly. The poem begins with the narrator shooting an arrow through a wooden fence in the presence of a friend and continues with a straightforward and somewhat melancholy description of the speaker. There is nothing funny in the poem until the conclusion:

> I cannot say anything with certainty
> about my friend except:
> he had a filthy, open fish pond in his living room:
> a Cockateel's [sic] guano accumulated on his dresser.
> But his thoughts were like icebergs to me.
> The arrow could have killed someone,
> instead it disappeared. (*Satellite* 15-21)

The recollected memory of the friend serves as a turning point for the poem and allows Rohrer to step away from the events of the narrative to pause for insight. The humor appears as a catalog of the strange, and, like Hicok's "Duh," forces the reader to witness the narrator and his circumstances in a new light. Although his humor is not set up to drive the poem, it still attracts the attention of the reader with its placement. There is a setup for a punchline, but the punchline never comes. Rohrer leads the poem into a turn that never arrives. His catalog of the ridiculous works as a distraction for the finish of the poem and never materializes as a complete joke. Rohrer is using his prowess as a poet to draw the reader's attention to it, instead of relying on the humor to move the poem. When the recollection and the humor end, the reader is taken back to events of the story and forced into a somber mood. By doing this, Rohrer creates a turn that adds more impact to the conclusion. I have attempted to mimic this same turn in "Where the Jolly Green Giant is God." The poem begins with the birth and maturity of the Jolly Green Giant, a popular mascot for a canned food company with the same name. The humor of the poem begins with its premise: taking the Jolly Green Giant exactly as he is represented by the company. It continues its humor by filling in the remainder of the Giant's life, but at the end of the poem, the concept becomes less comedic. I conclude the poem with an image of the natural world pitted against the advances of technology. Taken out of a humorous poem, the idea would become more heavy-handed. However, since I place this concept within a comedic setting, it is more approachable to the reader. Like Rohrer, I have used humor as a tool to balance the weight of a poem.

Satiric poetry is another approach to humorous writing, but not all satire is humorous. Often, satire escapes the scrutiny of critics of humor because it is usually judged by the subject it satirizes. Just as *Animal Farm* is not criticized by its inaccurate portrayal of barnyard animals, Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is not judged for its unrealistic interpretation of scarecrows. Jennifer L. Knox is a poet who often utilizes the combination of satire and comedy successfully. Her poem, "One Time the Great Spirit Moved Over North Carolina in the Shape of an Exquisite Ballet," demonstrates this fusion. The poem begins with Andy and Barney, the two main characters of *The Andy Griffith Show*, dancing in an open field. The first eighteen lines are physical descriptions of the field and the two men. The poem concludes with:

> Do you need to know exactly who
> Andy and Barney are?
> No, but I will tell you they are
> policemen, from a town where policemen
> are so full of grace, they take to the air
> like trout from a shimmering lake
> that minds its time as quiet
> as a burnished, bulletless gun. (19-26)

Knox chooses to use Andy and Barney as her protagonists because of the imagery already associated with them through *The Andy Griffith Show*, a successful program from the golden age of television. Andy and Barney are both wholesome, family-friendly characters who live in a town that values justice, good manners, and ethics. By having these two dancing a ballet in a pastoral scene, Knox removes them from their normal setting and actions and forces the reader to look at them through a different lens.

The premise of the poem is based in humor, but the message is not. Knox is criticizing the idea of looking into past societies to measure our own set of values. Even at the time of its original airing, *The Andy Griffith Show* was already a misrepresentation of the small Southern town—the show was filmed during political, racial, and civil unrest in the South, but these issues never made it into an episode of the show. *The Andy Griffith Show* served as an escape from these topics. By adding a level of ridiculous action to the show's protagonists, Knox demonstrates that this escape is even more unrealistic when applied to the show fifty years after its original run. With the final line, a callback to the unloaded gun Barney Fife carries, Knox juxtaposes the innocence of the show with the violence of the time period. The humor of the poem aids the message. She states that there is beauty in how Andy and Barney could be created in an environment that was so volatile. Knox's use of allegory in the poem is similar to my approach in "Grizzly Heaven." In both poems, the actions of the characters are the centerpiece while the reasons for these actions are never considered—we do not need to know why the policeman dance, just that they do. In "Grizzly

Heaven," the poem works because it takes the concept of a heaven for bears seriously. The poem does not examine why such an idea is important, it instead makes the reader suspend disbelief and follow the events of the poem. Because the poem never acknowledges its own humor, it succeeds in being funny.

Sharon Olds moves in and out of humor throughout her poetry, and has done so successfully her entire career. She does not, however, lean entirely on humor. Olds can maneuver a poem in almost any waters, darting from the profoundly serious to the irreverent and back again in a few lines. She has also mastered the necessity of the serious—she knows when to incorporate humor into a poem and when to leave it out. She is comfortable enough to rely on craft and craft alone. Sometimes a humorist poet will falter in satirizing comedy itself, but Olds does not. When she works with humor, she does so proficiently. In "The Pope's Penis," a poem that, by the title alone appears to be nothing but a punchline, Olds reveals that she can take comedy and use it to obscure something much more meaningful.

> It hangs deep in his robes, a delicate
> clapper at the center of a bell.
> It moves when he moves, a ghostly fish in a
> halo of silver seaweed, the hair
> swaying in the dimness and the heat—and at night,

while his eyes sleep, it stands up
in praise of God. (1-7)

She has written a poem entirely about an old man's penis and crafted it into something of beauty. The poem reveals more about the speaker than it does about its subject. "A ghostly fish in a halo of silver seaweed" is such an unexpected trope in a poem about a penis, it becomes both brilliant and absurd. Olds is working with the contradiction between the humor of the concept versus the gravity of the Pope's position as head of the Catholic Church. Here, we have a narrator who is searching for beauty in everything and manages to find it in ridiculous places. To her, even the occurrence of an old man's uncontrolled erection is an act of praise. The comedy of the poem lies within the subject and is only present in the title. If the poem was called "The Man's Penis" or "An Elderly Erection," it might generate a more somber or even ominous nuance. However, since it is about the Pope, the poem becomes more approachable, the narrator becomes an idealist, and the poem becomes humorous. By crafting the body of the poem into a serious and elegant description, Olds demonstrates why she so often succeeds with humor: she is capable of ignoring it.

In defining the necessity of humor in poetry, M.L. Rosenthal ends his criticism with:

> But my main point, apart from noting the constant presence of humor in our poetry. . . has to do with its function beyond the pleasure principle. . . . Humor at this stage is absolute, keyed-up openness. Hence its special value for our great poetic sequences, which bring conflicting and contradictory states into balance. We are speaking about nothing less than the essence of poetic dynamics. (817)

Rosenthal notes the power humor has to evoke deeper meaning. He also points out the necessity of balancing all aspects of the poem in order for the poem to maintain success. Balancing humor with craft, therefore, is necessary for the poet using comedy. If a poet finds success in humor, then there is a tendency to associate that humor with success and to play to the waiting audience. However, a comedic poet tends to stagnate more quickly than a poet who does not rely on comedy. A sense of humor is hard to alter from one book of poems to the next, whereas technique and style can be more easily developed or altered. Often, a strictly comedic poet will be criticized, and correctly so, for writing the same poem over and over again. A poet who does not rely on comedy is more likely to avoid this trap, since that poet is less dependent on a single, crowd-pleasing technique. A funny poet has to evolve craft like all other successful poets or be pigeon-holed. As David Citino notes “the last thing a poet wants is to be consistent (176).” Like a poet who only writes about one topic or in one style, a humorous poet must branch out. The balance of comedy and craft is necessary for humorous poetry to work. As I work around humor in my poetry, I have learned to ensure substance as well as humor. I use more than just humor in a humorous poem.

I. Bear Lodge

"What we seem to want is a statistically homogenized
picture of a species, when we really need to look
at bears as dynamic, living mechanisms."

Dr. Barrie Gilbert

Bear Lodge

Inside a bear, there are a hundred rooms
carved with iron and gopher wood.
When he chews, the ballrooms
dance. While he shits, the graveyards shuffle
the bear's collected kills.

A bear's stomach is his heart
with its knotted tunnels and milkwort blooms.
The lung's arched roof is its thickest part,
but even it can't block the light of the bear's
savage sun. Every Bearsun is distinct,

unlike any other Bearsun ever burned.
A bear will know another bear by glow:
his every stride and whoop, every molar's mark,
and all the prayer he missed. A bear is not a train
or hurricane. He is not a game of chance.

The ancient bears would keep their gods inside.
They'd build a temple with the bones
of things they'd mauled with their claws.
That's why the oldest bears will moan:
I just don't understand the kids today.

Pond as Simile

Like a silent movie you've seen enough
times to know every turn, rounded face, and
missing frame—a film about the hero
dog, a Lassie years before Lassie, who
saves a family from a frozen death.
The dog, even on black and white reel, still
appears as gold as coins in water while
he hurls across the fields and snows of film.
Now, he comes across the pond where countless
times he leaps and barely clears the skin-thinned
ice. Yet this time he falls. A silent crash
of dog and ice, a mirrored flash—and here
the film has ended fifteen minutes faster
than it ever has. The dog drowns, gurgles
as screen contrasts and fades. The family,
assumed unsaved, will have to wait. But death
doesn't come unexpected like a plum.
Outside the scene, just past the narrow paths
of stone and beaten grass under the snows
where battle after battle natives died
for gods stronger than Greece, the dog ran past.
A catalog of rocks and stones rested
here, passed from hand to hand a thousand times—
their points once as sharp as paper wasps now
rubbed round before the dog could see them spark
below the pond's marbled bottom floorboards.

Hitchhiker

He holds a knife that glows like light on water,
two inches that can cut a mile
against your neck, a breeze
that could open a gap into your throat

and, like the dog your father killed
after it attacked you, you'd try to cry for help,
but your neck would only mouth the words
and gargle air.

The two girls in the front don't notice
as he wraps your wrist into his pants without a word.
His crotch is a dark creek you sink your hand into.
It is, you think, the stinger of a giant wasp curled

between his legs—its wings spread against his thighs
with its head buried in his ass.
Mississippi pines and moons file past his window
and watch you tug his cock. It smells like death.

You know the girls up front, your friends, have seen
by now but cannot act. They sit upright in silence.
He pushes his knife into your neck just enough
to break the skin as he comes into your palm.

They stop the car for gas, he tosses two dollars
in your lap and leaves. You are afraid to turn
around as the car darts away.
You haven't even dried your hand.

So Sorry, they say, and they mean it, *what*
could we do? and they are right. They'll never tell
what happened. But you've told it all a hundred times.
A wasp, you say. A golden wasp. I nearly died.

At the Venice Film Festival, 1932

Two cats walk across the street at night.
It can only be Paris.
Scene changes into man reading paper
over a slice of brie; he thinks about better days.
Man lifts cheese and stares.
Woman enters room, studies man,
begins to sob silent tears.

Fade into a factory where gears
grind with velocity of gas giants.
Men with mustaches slap buttons
and conveyers. If there was a scent
of urgency, we'd have coconuts
and ammonia in between scenes.

A slow pan of overcrowded hospital room
and too few nurses with worried brows and bedpans.
A doctor pulls a sheet over the head
of a man in bed, looks downward as screen
irises with black.

One cat runs across an intersection
between slow paced cars, as the camera
floats upward like it fell slowly in reverse.

Selections of Decapitation

I. Bryukhonenko's Machine

For twenty-two minutes, they fed her cheese,
the same brie over and over until,
at last, it slid in and never came out.
No surprise: a severed dog's
head works only for so long.

When dogs dream of heaven, they smell
spoiled oranges and dry rivers, touch
the grass with paws that stretch for days,
and the air tastes like symphonies.
The soul stays attached by an umbilical leash
like moons dancing for painless phantom planets.

The crack of life poured into her eyes
as they drummed the *autojektor* where
her neck once was. It burned like a nose full
of hornets. Her head, cold on a silver
platter, beat with the whips of Russian steel.
She remembered all a dog can remember:
the lump of her own body pirouetting
on the floor.

II. On Decapitation

When she was guillotined, Marie
Antoinette’s eyes flitted for four minutes—
silenced the French mobs for an hour.

Who picked up her head after that? What
nerve to grasp the royal hair with jittery
hands, afraid—but to leave her there looking

would have been worse. To have the dead
queen’s last thoughts be of you,
a lonely man only there to gawk.

Louis XVI went out like a king should,
to his credit. It was quick and he was quiet.
Afraid the two’d team up again, his head

was jerked away from the body at once,
so if he still moved, history doesn’t say.
Walt Disney isn’t really frozen, but

his head is still in statues all across the world
float free of the rocks that bore them—
a hundred roaming Mouse Rushmores.

Jayne Mansfield’s last breathes
spit blonde on the backseat of her car,
almost twelve inches, the coroner says.

The Fall of Communism in Southern Idaho

Two granite legs prop up the roof of a red barn
painted blue, while the tools rust in the stable
alongside the polished sickle.

The kitchen door is now
screened by red cloth ripped
from the windvane; a lone
bronze rooster looms above
the pastures.

A proletarian greases the axels of John Deere;
her eyes never looking toward the west.

Marx's *Manifesto* rests in the back
pocket of denim overalls,
draped over a ticking generator.

Today, A Massacre

The worst part about losing a battle
is the cleanup when it’s done.

The winners will watch you with mock scorn
as every drop of blood, stray bullet,
and spent match is gone.

Soon, the field will turn into a park
so no one forgets you failed.

Washington never touched a corpse,
never faltered on the battlefield.
He never bothered to watch after, either.
So the redcoats cut corners all across
the East Coast. They bundled bodies
around trees, under bushes, and in the cold,
shallow waters of fountains.

That’s why today we still find soldier bones
and bodies balled away—out of sight
off the shores of the Potomac.

Sex Ed.

The first tits I saw flashed before me in the gym
on a deck of playing cards when I was nine. Whispy

women, older than I—dead by the time I was born.
Not having to confront them head on, alive, made it easy

to admire their bare bodies. The cards, yellowed
with age, creased by oily fingers and awkward hands,

looked nothing like the girls in my class.

Sex Ed.

Fonzie gave a know-it-all smile and grabbed Pinkie
by the leg; so I asked my older brother about sex.
I was eight and he laughed,

said I wasn't ready to know what Fonzie did.
Two weeks later, as his friends guarded my door,
my brother told me it was time. Whiskey breath

and pot clouded, twice my size, they lifted me down
to the basement. A projector flashed a woman
screaming, a man forced her naked body into motions

as fluid as Gumby's. The backdrop of the show,
the Mickey Mouse sheets
on the first bed I ever had.

An Afternoon of Murder

When the Confederates attacked,
we were caught off guard.
It was my party, after all.
They flanked us from the east
across our neighbor's lawn
where they'd been camped all summer long.
The cannon volley came
just as drinks were handed out.
We thought if we ignored them,
they'd all just go away.
Jillian was the first to go—
cannonball through her heart.
Romantic, really, we all thought.
Then the cavalry charged through.
Terri and Daniel danced
and crumbled under their hooves
in an eerie and gorgeous cloud of red.
Cybil bounced coyly as her date took a bayonet
through his back. I stood alone
as the army rode away.

The City That Never Sleeps

In an effort to stay heard, my town claimed
the world's unused radio stations and paved
all our streets with their towers.
Then our roads broadcasted everywhere,
and music swelled from our tires and windows
and trees. Drivers didn't need radios—
people had time to slow down.
Soon everyone re-realized how beautiful
our town was again.

But the streets didn't turn off at night
so no one could sleep, and those who did
dreamed of silence.
One by one, they all left.
I look at the statues and fountains
and listen—just listen.

II. Teddy Roosevelt on Leeches

“There is no sweeter sound than
the crumbling of your fellow man.”

Groucho Marx

Teddy Roosevelt on Leeches

I.
Remember to pray when you pull them off,
my father told me. I'd always do as he said;
or think to myself what he would do
if he were me. Still, every time I ever pulled
off a leech, there would be more blood than a bullet.

The one time I saw him pull a leech,
it split from his skin like a card from a deck—
no blood at all, just a light purple bruise.

II.
An old Indian legend:
Leeches were the first creature to learn to talk.
They were so good at it, they whittled
their language down to one word.
Now, if you pick up a leech and watch
his mouth, he'll whisper the oldest
secret of the world: blood.

III.
By my wife's bed, near the end,
there was a jar stuffed with them,
the doctors wanted to bleed her bad blood away.
They swam behind glass
like one creature slowly breathing.

I pictured her pale skin pierced with a hundred
wet fingers and it was too much.
If she died, I thought, I didn't want part
of her alive inside those leeches.

Facts About the Body of Franklin Roosevelt

His head had twenty-two bones and a brain.

His left lung was smaller than his right. It gave way
to his heart, a lump roughly the size of his fist.

His frame was folded over with wheelchairs and canes.

His heart pumped his blood three
billion times during his life.

His bones were not white, but beige,
like sand or a pine’s skin without bark.

His ears were shaped to spin sound waves
more perfectly than anything ever engineered.
They could catch an echo of a bullfrog trapped inside
a hollow tree.

The bones of his legs when sliced like a tree trunk
would show a lifetime’s worth of steps.
Each stride would be known,
every inch of ground he covered could be mapped.

His nerve endings, if collected, could fill a large jug,
could create a maze of neuron jolts, could push
a dime across a marble floor forever.

John Wayne Gacy Jr.

Along with bones, tendons tighten fast,
an instinct, muscle's memory. The flesh
will dart in places, flit as hummingbirds

or pigeons dive, reflexive even in sleep.
Our minds will dig around another field
as ice will sheet in ponds, unsettled slogs.

Here, you and I are dental charts and glass,
the days un-walked on roads, the negatives
of gods, persimmons and pineapple cones.

We speak in absolutes, always. The pond
will break, its water never cascades here.
Before the algae forms, the phylum's known.

Along the gaps in trees and yards we find
our brush stroked clowns and chapels buried long
beside the seeds of TV's stale signals.

A rising, more a broken hill than earth,
where metals tear apart under the dirt.
Here, badgers are not romance, just rodents.

Outside, the vines are dry as skins and stark,
the rhododendron frames our office walls
where files and catalogs once toiled. Before

the roof collapsed, before the neighbors fled
for better slums, these pillows of the field
were plaster homes that grew like Eden's spine.

Homeless Man in Mayberry

Because there is a blur, more like a wisp
of hive, almost alive with black and white
long-needle wasps, the picture breathes but lacks
a life. He streaks across the screen as cold
as morning fire, has switched the hues inside
the film as arms would flick a wiry wrist.
The camera doesn’t mean to capture him,
all sinewed skin and grime and knuckle-blood.
Here, there’s always an Indian sun, always
a garden bloomed with oleander breeze.
Grapevines dry over soda fountain heads,
wiped with home-made quilts. Every grainy frame
like someone’s last known photograph.

About the Cop

Across the trainyards, Sergeant Daniels bobs
around the satellites of freight. He holds
his flashlight like a kitten's head and pokes
the beam into a hundred cars. A girl
has run away from home. As Daniels walks
across the tracks, he remembers the time
when he was ten and saw a train collide
into a cow: a bomb of meat and steel.
He looks for parts of cow
every time he crosses pairs of tracks.
He comes across another car and steers
the light to look inside: no girl.
You're already dead, he says.
you're already dead.

Zombie Nixon

"Don't eat that," I gently warn him,
but when I look again, half the clump of sod
is gone, and there's dirt around his lips.
I crook two fingers in his mouth
and fish out mud.
We explore today, through the forest
behind our house, and I try to keep
him close. The oaks are bare,
like shirtless stretching men in mid-sprawl,
their arms knock the sky in and out
of view. "Look," I say, "the clouds
will run with you." He doesn't look
for long. He doesn't understand their flares
and plumes. To him, they'll only crawl
across a blue or orange floor he'll never touch
while on his back. He grabs at acorns now,
and throws them at a tree and laughs.
I'll find some in his pockets later,
when it's time to shave. For now, I let him play.

It's time to go home, and I hold him
on my back. He falls asleep so fast
sometimes, I find myself surprised. But it doesn't
last for long this time. He softly swats my hair
and coos "a cloud, a cloud."

While pulling the Invisible Man from a wreck

He can still move his leg, he says, but he's pretty
sure it's broken. Gretchen thinks it might be phantom

pain. She's gone through lifeguard training before.
I accidentally touched his face when I meant to pat

his shoulder; his lips were twisted muscles. He's
always been too stoic for his own good

and now what? The bandage we wrapped his head in looks
dry, but *feels* soaked. Wait, when we put that on, it didn't

disappear. Does that mean he's naked? He's rambling on
about math equations, I think, and dark playground corners

in autumn. It's worse than what we first thought. Gretchen
just said that aloud and in front of him. I'm afraid he's dying.

Dad

I. Dad

I thought he was an explorer
or an astronaut or judge.
He'd fly in at night
or yell down the street
as he came home
(a shout for every neighbor,
a wave for every child)
or maybe he was just
always there.

I remember a crack in my spine
and a beige car with the blackest
shadow. I wish I could remember more.
When did it ever rain,
to make me smell fresh water
everywhere I go?

II. Birds

We kept losing kites
every time we’d try to fly.
Dad would get them up
and I’d hold on just long enough
to see them rise away,
and he’d laugh.

I still find them now—
in streets and windows,

and some fall into my lap
with a rustle of air
and sparrow.

III. Droughts and Bones Left After

Fists are not like hammers,
like they say,
but glass as clear as water.
They shine at dusk
like worthless stones
on riverbeds long before
the river was there. They rise
and fall as weather; they drink
in everything around them
and spit it out in one
brilliant, awkward kiss.

IV. Locked myself in a fallout shelter

I prayed my mother would want
my dad dead in September, the time
to talk to gods, before winter froze
the air and broke all I said.

My neighborhood was my nation,
a box of Corn Flakes with Jesus
glued to the front.

If I burned them all, I could
breathe in gods. I could cut my dad
out of me like bloated tonsils
and stale wind.

A box called Christ held every relic I had
of childhood: two arrowheads,
some comics, and the GI Joe I named *Dad*.

V. As They Do Unto You

The birds have nested inside
my father’s chest: a bird
for the mornings, one for his heart,

with two dark larks lumped
where his blood should be.
Warblers soar throughout

his lungs, their chirps and thumps
rise through his throat.
They hold his tongue inside

his jaw. Dogs piled on a velvet couch.
He spits some blood into a jar:

magpie, crow, blackbird, finch,
magpie, crow, blackbird, finch.

Classic Poetry Rewritten as Vice-Presidential Political Commentary

In a Station of the Metro

Spiro Agnew waving to a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

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Agnew's Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

agnew's new wheel
barrow

pushed by friends
up

and down the hill
again.

Questions for the man who raped my wife

Q *What did you see the day before it happened?*

Pigeons didn’t scatter, homeless tipped
hats, a dog barked at the sun
for hours.

Q *I saw an angel tattooed on your back.*

She is my sister, sees through my chest
and feels all I touch. If I could,
I would dig her out of me and stretch
her over the moon. She would out-
shine the sun and it would
never be dark.

You can tell the photographer prefers the past

All the images that showed up in the first pictures
ever collected are here: willow dripping with grey,
a white column blooming in the background,
black roses spread throughout. The girl made
pale by thick clothes.

Only, this time, when you look
into her face, you know she is alive somewhere;
on a beach where she shaves her legs
or at a bar in Georgia. Her face looks nothing
at all like our ancestors in the old photographs,
whose bones are now the dust covering the new
camera lenses.

III. Grizzly Heaven

“But who prays for Satan? Who, in eighteen
centuries, has had the common humanity
to pray for the one sinner that needed it most?”

Mark Twain

Jesus and the Bear

In the forest, Jesus found a grizzly bear
praying at His stone. Dressed in robes
just like Christ's, the bear's lips
kissed the center of the rock
where Jesus would rest his knees.
The bear's paws were folded wet with blood,
and on the rock were two rabbits
and a crow.

At first He thought it was a demon
sent to tempt Him to a fight, but Jesus
knew the signs of faith and heeled—
He listened to the bear.

It was a prayer in the old way
before the time of man, and Jesus knew
it well. He kneeled across the bear
and joined him, growled in the bear's
same tongue.

For three days they prayed and neither
missed a breath. The pines around them rose
and fell with every line, weighed down
with holy snarls. The dead rabbits walked
away, the crow turned white with song.
Both Christ and bear
soaked themselves in spit and tears,
another sign of faith.

On the third day, Jesus clapped His hands
and woke the bear. The bear tore off his robes
and gave them to the Christ.

Where the Jolly Green Giant is God

The fauna comes alive,
drags a pod from dirt, pops and splits
the way two breezes pass at mid-day.
A pair of dust-burned fingers push apart
a leafy placenta, frees roots curved
firm into the earth. A green child,
sticky with sap, inhales his first breath of carbon and cries.
The slaves of forests and gardens finally have a savior.

Sweat and sap both spread in twisted palms
of priests. Smoke plumes from small gardens
all around. Seeds are spread as rosaries—count
off harvests, rain, and deaths.

He rises like a pine one morning,
strolls into the city and cracks the pavement
with his large green fist
to plant a seed. The next day,
the streets pour out a river of grass and fern.
His laugh still echoes around the blocks.

His grace is strong leaves and long falls
where grain and fruit drop by the pound.
His anger swells with pollen, chokes. His sap drips
and burns as prairie fires spreads.

All power is measured in wasp stings and science
is strung with forecasts and wheat.
Over the years, all our cities sink
into the fields. We go to live with farmers
only to find they've all been ground into the earth.
No new farmers grow from their graves.

Vines clasp the barns and houses—
they hiss whenever we can hear:
Trample becomes *tired, dust* becomes *soil,*
breast turns *bust*.

Death is Not a Garden

He flits from branch to branch in your backyard,
watches you in the kitchen. Death is a bird
whose red feathers yellow in the fall. His eyes
as sinister as open mouths will bloom so damp
with clouds he sees the winter through scratched glass.

His head bobs like sticks in ponds. Owls
and snakes, who could crack his chest
without a whim, become afraid.
Through your window, you see his wings.
He spreads them like a map.

A yellow bird is not a stunted pine,
and death is not a garden. She won't pluck
on wings or tendons slowly, but will swell
as marish waters stir—a pull of vines,
a few roots and a stone—a pile of bones
and with them, every death a feather.

Embalming Salt

She held a soft *s* too long,
as God's *s*nake in the garden,
a dead cliché for the dead. She
fell down, the way all ancient people do,
but it was ugly. Nothing like a god
or hero, but spit and shit when I was twelve.

I tried to hold her up. Did I think
it would save her from dying? Like
all the other dead laid out
in church, of course I knew she
wouldn't last longer. Christ
was dead and on every wall,

his blood in clean long
lines, not spread out, not splattered
like her shit on my hands and legs
when I tried to catch her. Did Jesus
look like this: dead with stretched
face in a cheap coffin? If so, then

he must have looked nothing
like he did alive. On the crosses,
he is already dead— more corpses to glare
at, a hard violent *t* to drown out the *s*.

That same year, I went hunting
with my granddad, whose wife
I had seen die. Hours, I sat in a tree,
and shot a deer. It was on its side, like it
had been pushed with the bullet

somewhere inside. Hit above the joint
where front leg met body, a small
clean line of blood curled down
its stomach. There was
no shit. I sat and waited over the body,
waited for my grandfather. He would

have heard the report of rifle, maybe
even smelled iron in the air. I stared at
the deer, glassy eyes that everyone
knows, but they're right, they do look
like mirrors. I didn't imagine staring
into the deer's soul or embracing nature

like a psychiatrist ten years later
would say, but shoved the rifle
into the deer's neck and shot again. When
my granddad came, I told him
it wasn't dead so I fired twice. Benevolent
like Jesus. I like to think a pound

of deer was buried in the field with my shot,
not a mercy shot. I was twelve
and had discovered death on my own, the painful
feeling—guilt-filled from the start.
Mimicking her, I thought I was growing older.

I forgot what I was going to ask
when I saw her fall over
hanging up clothes and covered in sweat.

Around The Bones of Saints

And here you are, young monk, before a thousand bones
of long forgotten saints strewn across the basement of the Vatican.

Crates of skulls, of vertebrae, some older than the written Word.
Saint Michael with a hundred knees

and the true cross higher than all the spires of Rome.
You have bled yourself a hundred times on Christ thorns,

jabbed the Holy Spirit with seven deathday spears,
each one as sharp as that evening on Gethsemane.

Here rest the bones of Saint Basilides, except for his smallest rib.
The once patron of prophets and hymns, who fasted for thirty-three years,

is now a pile of hand-passed bones.
You have measured every rib from every room, like all men

before you, and none will fit. Basilides could be any other man,
you think, but even incomplete, he is more than you.

Reincarnations

Six months, you’ve tried to die.
You’ve been dying for six months. Your liver,
a nod of tissue swarms, withstood sixty years of red
meat and white wines until it swirled into salts.

All that’s left is to say goodbyes, the hardest part—
you’ve accepted death. Everyone is here now, around
your bed and it’s embarrassing. They all are strangers.

After the last *I love yous, I’ll miss yous, I careds* are said, you
deliver your last words, rehearsed like all of us lucky
enough to know we’re dying, and they silence the room,

not because they had power, but because here people
respect the dying. You close your eyes and listen
to the life-support whirl down to a tick, then stop.

You remember after your first time with a girl, the car
was too dark when you rolled the window down
to see where her breasts ended and her shadows began.

And when you were six and fell fifteen feet from a tree
with your back towards the ground, both shoulders punched
the earth and you walked away not even sore.

You still dream of falling away from the sky forever.
Is he dead yet? a voice asks as you open your eyes.
No, not yet another answers. You want to assure them you’ll die

soon, but your last words have been spoken— it’d be out
of turn. So you lean back and try to remember
the time you first opened your eyes to the moments

you thought you’d die and the in-betweens. If a memory
isn’t there, just slide over it. When you’re done, start
over again until there is nothing there.
In here there will be death.

Morning in Capernaum

“Good afternoon, Judas,” Jesus of Nazareth bellowed down the hall as He was knotting His holy sandals. Judas Iscariot paused for a second before answering. “Morning Savior,” Judas replied, “how about making it rain today?” Jesus laughed cautiously at the joke, then turned his head the other way. What is up with that guy, Jesus thought. Down the hall, Thomas and Simon were attempting to cast demons out of each other, but knew none were inside.

Off in the distance, Satan was nervously pacing the desert, practicing his lines.

I want to die if I become a vegetable

I want to die if I become a vegetable,
my wife tells me at night.
And I picture her plugged in,
breasts beneath a white sheet rising
with each shot of sterile air—
falling with a wet hiss.

Her hands: branches wrapped in velvet,
bruised from holding when I could not
let go, a grip that would shoot
pain like a backwash of brain sparks
drowned in a puddle
of brackish sinew and blood.

I think how long muscle holds
before it morphs into dead leaves
and fruit, how she'd age
by never ageing. The blue wasp sting
of an IV she couldn't feel
would always make me wince.

Okay, I tell her, but I have to know
her scent of bread in the morning
has evolved to burnt sweet corn,
and the hiccups of the life support
are only drips of static shaking
around a room cooling off.

Seven Steps to Exorcise Your Demon

Have you thought of naming him?

> Or if that fails, let him name you.
> He rises and sings out to the people
> you know. No one believes he is there.

Draw a line into the sand and stare.

> There must be some symbolism
> in what we do every day.
> It has been years since you've found
> any, but your demon sees it
> everywhere you two go.

Visit a place new to you and him.

> At least you'll do a new thing—
> life doesn't end with possession
> as people like to claim;
> it could really be a new beginning
> for the both of you.
> Get to know him while you still can;
> demons are sometimes fleeting
> like a perfect thought.

If he does leave, it may not be permanent. Plan ahead.

> Return his letters,
> he has feelings too.
> The smell of abandoned
> never goes away.

Get him to tell you about himself.

He has whole kingdoms
inside of himself;
a hundred lifetimes bloom
inside his head—each one
as new as a song. Learn them.

Fix his insecurities.

Not too hard to do
in such a vain creature:
his sense of time,
the triangle curve
of his calf,
the smolder
of his eye.

Mask your fears.

Learn the mind of God
through math, join alligators
talking to the moon,
become a man derivative
of all other men.
Only then will you be free.

Grizzly Heaven

Bears don’t know they die.
Things just change from life to afterlife.
They see the face of God but don’t recognize him,
so they forget it right away. Maybe they do know him,
they just pretend they don’t. It happens so quick,
it’s hard to say. A bear’s heaven is forest paths.
They run forever and never tire. Forests never end.
My cousin says he has the soul of a bear.
He hates being himself, so he wears a bear suit
most of the day. He told me about bear heaven
and how his life is a bearhell.
When he dies, he worries what will happen.
My cousin has the bones of a bear’s hand by his bed.
You can’t tell they aren’t human.

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