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Indoor/Outdoor: Poems

Jeffrey Greer
Western Michigan University

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INDOOR/OUTDOOR: POEMS

by

Jeffrey Greer

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

Western Michigan University
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INDOOR/OUTDOOR: POEMS

Jeffrey Greer, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 1999

The poems in this manuscript can be sorted into two distinct, but compatible, categories. First, a series of narrative poems attempt to challenge Edgar Allen Poe's dictum that an American poet cannot successfully write a poem longer than 100 lines. These poems approach coherent subjects through disjunctive forms. There is non-linear and linear movement in these poems that meander along in an attempt to capture a witnessed scene along with the action of making sense of that witnessing. There is a process of breaking the familiar and coherent down into something strange, then reconstituting it again into something newer and unfamiliar.

The other direction of my work follows in the tradition of James Wright, Richard Hugo, and Elizabeth Bishop. In these compressed meditative, lyrical poems, I attempt to write a poem of location that illuminates the thoughts of the mind interacting with the world around it. Instead of responding to any sort of exigency, these poems work to capture the mind as it explores the intricacy and malaise of the urban landscape.

In my attempt to create poems as large and rich and complicated as the world around me, I've discovered that the facile distinctions made between differing schools of poetry are a hindrance to my ambitions. My work aspires to move past the easy categories of deep image, realism, surrealism, language, or wit and rejects the false duality of open versus closed form. My poems are written in a variant of Wordsworth's "language of men," but within that language I want to find more room for the alchemy and excitability that exists within the parameters of spoken American speech. The 20th
century American poet who greatly influences these poems is William Carlos Williams.

I want to create a new poetics that is as vibrant and eclectic as Postmodern America. I hope these poems might serve as some kind of document of this moment in history and help some future reader to better understand all its abundances of beauty and abjectness, simplicity and complexity, and joy and sorrow.
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Jeffrey Greer
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INTRODUCTION

"A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image."

—Joan Didion on James Jones

"Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right."

—Wallace Stevens

My earliest memories all revolve around the city. I was the third generation of a family that lived and worked right in the middle of working class 20th century Detroit. But unlike the previous generations of my family who grew up in the city and would seemingly never leave, I was raised in the suburbs—a bucolic, barren neighborhood of identical houses. I knew Detroit as a city on the verge of destruction; it dissolved in front of the eyes of anyone who watched. As a child, I learned about decay and absence as I watched my family and friends gradually, moving van by moving van, abandon the city for the greener and cleaner suburbs, leaving empty streets and abandoned buildings in their wake.

I don’t offer this anecdotal evidence as an attempt to explain my poetry. Instead, by placing Detroit in the forefront of the imagination of the reader of this book of poems, I hope to offer a setting that might elucidate some of the landscapes and places that appear in these poems. If my poetry appears to follow in the tradition of 19th-century “loco-descriptive” poetry, that is a fair and just reading of my work. However,
unlike the Romantics, I wasn't raised in a place of natural beauty and grew up without any appreciation or understanding of Nature. And I still feel like an intruder when I enter out into the natural world. I know more about traffic patterns and highways than about the spawning of salmon or the nesting habits of jays. My poems, unlike those of Wordsworth and Coleridge that find sustenance and comfort in the natural world, exhibit a bareness and absence that I have to fight against as a poet and as a person. For the Romantics, poetry was a form to express the beauty of the world. For me, poetry is a means of discovering beauty within the world.

In the face of our bleak and generic urban landscape that is filled with shopping malls and expressways, the hollowed remains of inner cities, run-down franchise motels, and fast-food joints, it is certainly easy to agree that the imagination has seemingly suffered because of the (sub)urban sprawl that is self-assuredly swallowing up America. From this almost hopeless portrait, I hope to emerge with a new outlook on this world. My ambition is to take the Wordsworthian paradigm of the diseased city and replace it with a new vision of the city, a vision that says that although the city is a desperate and broken down place, imagination might still flourish there. I want to replace Wordsworth's paradigm not because the city's disease has been cured, but because it is too easy to be done in by the city that would swallow one up if given the chance.

So if the subject of this critical introduction to my poetry must offer a common theme in my work, it would be this: an attempt to find some sort of sustenance within a landscape that seems, on the surface, to resist offering its human inhabitants any comfort. Along with being the theme of this book, this is the reason, I think, that I write. I say this only as much as anyone can say they know why they do what they do. Perhaps the best articulation of a reason for why I write has already been said by
Wallace Stevens: “Poetry is a means of redemption” (160). By writing these poems, I hope to take some sliver of this dull and commonplace world of strip malls, overpasses, and alleys that surrounds me and turn it, if only for a moment, into something memorable and maybe even beautiful.

Talking about these poems and explicating why and how I think they work might not elucidate them as much as discussing my influences. In the years that I’ve worked on this manuscript, I’ve read as widely and thoroughly as possible. And any list of my poetic influences will surely neglect important poets whose work has had great effect upon me. Instead, I’d like to briefly mention three writers: William Wordsworth, William Carlos Williams, and Philip Levine. These are three poets that I continuously return to, hoping to absorb some of the many moments of wisdom and delight in their work.

Wordsworth’s terrifying portrait of his residence in an abject London has lingered in the imaginations of poets for nearly two centuries:

O, blank confusion! True epitome
Of what the might City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end—
Oppression, under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.
But though the picture weary out the eye,
By nature an unimaginable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole (265).

To Wordsworth, London offers nothing but blankness and desolation. It is a place of danger and servitude in which one is threatened unless one has “an under-sense of greatest.” But Wordsworth had the good fortune to live in a pre-urban world where
people defined themselves by the meadows in which they relaxed instead of the
boroughs they inhabited and the products they consumed. He lived and wrote in a
world almost ignorant of factories and avenues, of tenements and urban sprawl. To say
that Wordsworth would be appalled by, if not at least suspicious of today’s American
city and its lazily cast out suburbs is an understatement.

Citing Wordsworth, who was utterly phobic of the city, as an influence seems
almost illogical. But what his poetry has taught me is a way of looking at the world that
allows one to find evidence of human imagination there. Wordsworth discovers
imagination in the strange beauty of the natural world. In these poems, I look for
evidence of imagination within the seemingly abject world of the city. And more
particularly, these poems are more comfortable when their speakers wander empty
alleys and deserted streets than prosperous avenues and bustling strip malls. In these
places that have been abandoned, solitude allows me to find more evidence of the
human spirit than in those places that are crowded and busy. These poems come to their
most important realizations when there is a sense of isolation. I am most at home when
confronting, in the words of James Wright, the sea that is “the whole loneliness/ of the
Midwest” (119).

When I talk about writing of and in the Midwest, I see a tension in my work
between writing “regional” and “universal” poetry. While I have great admiration and
respect for poets such as Robert Frost, E.A. Robinson, and Thomas Hardy, who all
made poetry out of their experiences of a specific region, I want my work to be
regarded as more universal. I want these poems to be seen as American, even if the idea
of America remains only a vague and sentimental ideal in the poems. Along with the
uniquely American landscapes of these poems, I hope to represent a uniquely American
voice, a voice that represents the vatic and demotic, the lyrical and narrative, the
meditative and immediate. The model for this voice is William Carlos Williams. I cherish much of the frequently anthologized Williams (i.e. "The Red Wheelbarrow," "This is Just to Say," or "Dance Russe"), but I look to Williams’ longer poems, *Spring and All* and *Paterson*, for how Williams combines a variety of modes of poetic voice into a singular voice. There are fluctuations in tone and variations of dialects along with a willingness to be both concrete and abstract. My reading of Williams challenges the traditional reading of him as an imagist, folksy doctor who wrote poetry. Instead, I see him as a writer who understands the power of poetry to both clarify and complicate at the same time. While certain images and words create a stark clarity in his poems, Williams often complicates this clarity with abrupt shifts in tone or style. This excerpt from *Spring and All* is an example of Williams’ range:

```
Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they grip down and begin to awaken (183)
```

It is this model of American voice that truly celebrates the range of intelligence and feeling that is capable in our variation of the Queen’s English. And it is not the folksy, straightforward Williams that influences these poems; it is the virtuoso Williams whose presence lingers around and behind this book.

The last poet I’d like to mention is Philip Levine. Levine and I share Detroit as a hometown, and it is in his shadow that my poems create a portrait of the city. Levine’s Detroit is a place that has almost literally disappeared. Levine’s Detroit is a place of danger, a dirty, industrial city that threatens the psyche of its people in the same way that its factories threaten their bodies. It is a place that tells them to go. Even though
Levine leaves the city for good in 1957, Levine only leaves the city in body. His imagination cannot escape Detroit; it is the primary obsession of his work throughout his career. He is both familiar with and estranged from Detroit. It is a place he never leaves but a place he will never inhabit again. Levine's city is a place that is gone, and would seemingly be gone forever except for the image of his Detroit that might be preserved through his poetry. I look to Levine to learn how to look into abjectness and find a Keatsian, transient beauty that exists amidst a world of decayed artifice:

No one puts in irises,
    and yet before March passes
the hard green blades push
    their way through
where firm lawns once were.
    The trunks of beech and locust
darken, the light new branches
    take the air. You can
smell the sticky sap rising
    in the maples, smell it
even over the wet stink
    of burned houses (277).

Even though the surfaces of this place show so much evidence of decay, there is a sense of the world rejuvenating as it rots. There is a sense in Levine's work that the individual's perspective can overcome such a landscape and poetry is the art that can create a new perspective for an imagination surrounded and limited by such a tired place.

In “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens states that “the choice of subject-matter is a completely irrational thing, provided the poet leaves himself any freedom of choice” (220). To sketch out my intentions on paper falsely implies that I deliberately set out to write poetry from the beginning, that I took every gaze and walked every step in my world with some kind of knowledge that I would turn this experience into poetry. Before I started writing poems, I wandered around most of the time wondering about nothing in particular. Poetry was a way of opening up the world, of
simultaneously looking at things more concretely and more abstractly. One of Frank
O'Hara's mock manifestos articulates this process well:

It may be that poetry makes life's events tangible to me and restores their detail;
or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which
are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all
the time (112).

O'Hara understands that poets don't go around explaining exactly why they do what
they do. And while I can explain why I've made some of the choices that I've made in
this book, I'd rather not. Because in the end, this poetry is not the result of a rational
plan. I write the poems as they come to me and the choices I make aren't decisions of
my will as much as products of my life. In my life, I'm hoping for an antidote to the
timeless amnesia of our world and these poems are evidence that the mind, the
imagination, can survive such abjectness.
Complications

Earlier today, two days before Thanksgiving, I stopped for coffee. It became complicated when the café ran out of singles. In 1966, The Monks, five draftees stationed in Germany, tonsured and robed G.I.’s fed up with the Army, five American boys fed up with America, fed up with it all, sang about complication. “Complication” emphasized the distress and futility of their situation through repetition. The complicated instructions for this red sauce tell me to fold the basil in at the right time, but don’t tell me when the right time is. That waitress said she was the only one on—I believed—I walked to the market and waited by myself for twenty self-reliant minutes with everyone lined up to buy their bags of meat, cartons of wheat, boxes of cheese and citrus wrapped in cellophane, all for one day—a simple celebration of these things. I waited because the registers were down. Everyone lined up waiting for cashiers who worked off calculators and notepads and I stood in awe. I stood dumbfounded, I stood with patience, I stood alone. I stood surrounded in the interweaving, tangled, commingling lines of my fellow Americans. I looked at them and they looked at me with curiosity and sympathy, with trust and disdain, until this one moment of clarity allowed all of us to feel a love that sounds more like hate. I told a near stranger about the red sauce I planned for dinner: garlic and basil, olives, capers, red peppers, tomatoes. He told me about his mother, how she keeps all the papers he’s collected in bags and orders them by date. He’s introduced me to his believing manner before, he brings happy news daily, hunched over with a full sack of papers, a wool cap rolled up proud on his head all summer long. He knows so much, he believes everything. And when the registers went back up, the lasers flashed into the sky, bells began ringing,
and we contemplated this resumption together
by meditating to ourselves about our places in line.
We moved forward at some predetermined pace,
ushered ourselves through the registers
with the precision of those who know their place.
When I got back to the café, the waitress was gone,
someone had taken my paper and my chair.
I bought another Post, a cup of decaf.
I sat myself down, raised my drink,
folded my paper, and read.

There are complications all over the world:
Ebola causes extensive complications of the organs,
the Serbs stubbornly complicate the former Yugoslavia,
the jet stream repeatedly complicates
winter's low pressure patterns in the Southeast,
city residents complain that the preparation
of recyclables for collection is too complicated,
the caffeine is extracted chemically from
the coffee bean. Thus, a less complicated flavor.
I continually fail to find an analogy for this situation:
the Monks performed in German beer halls
wearing robes and ties of noosed rope.
They shaved bald spots out of their hair
and proclaimed belief in nothing.
They sang themselves back into America
with jittery and repetitious songs.
I'm failing to put these things together:

how does this world get so complicated?
When Theresa's baby died, I had no idea.
I was standing in the bookstore, browsing
through the table of gift books and calendars,
when Michael walked up and told me the news:
at that moment all the intertextuality,
all the disparate things of the world
that I'd woven together with individuated
reliance ceased to make sense

on an otherwise unremarkable fall day:
the transparent clouds become sheets of paper
folding over, white moves over blue
the way spilled coffee washing
with ease over a polished formica table
is not enough. Should I forget, leave, 
give up? Shave my head, wear an old 
brown robe and noosed rope around my neck 
and sing recycled tragedies of the world?
It’s not enough to repeat what I suspect I should say.

I look up unfocused at haphazard clouds. 
There’s nothing I can do to change this:
the clouds unravel into thin strands of silk,
they turn over and over in random machinations,
they pull themselves apart for no apparent reason 
and dissolve into analogies of our own absence, 
right before our unbelieving eyes.

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There’s nothing I can do to change this:
the clouds unravel into thin strands of silk,
they turn over and over in random machinations,
they pull themselves apart for no apparent reason 
and dissolve into analogies of our own absence, 
right before our unbelieving eyes.
Recycling Day

The man wearing sweats hangs off the back of the recycling truck too early on Monday morning. He remembers spidery bolts of lightning that split the sky in half in the middle of the night, in the middle of a terrible dream. He gazes at the sidewalk where shards of bottles reflect brilliant morning light up into a thriving blue sky. It’s large trash pickup-day and all the plaid and sodden davenports of dreams are waiting at the curbs, their crumbled batting flaking away and falling between blades of grass. He’s not drinking early today, and there’s an uneasy clarity to the morning. This is just like memory, he thinks. Every once in a while, when the chocolate stains and cigarette burns are so numerous we can’t remember where they’re from, we pitch the couch and just start over again. We’d rather forget. The first fall leaves are turning red and yellow. They stick in the bottom of the bins.
He tries to be anonymous, he knows people are still sleeping inside these sullen houses. These old couches will be compacted and easily dismantled, carted away, then buried out near the freeway, transformed into earth before the end of the day. If he tosses the bins down quietly, he won't disturb anyone from their difficult dreams.
Rereading Bachelard

So ordered and neat, so square and proper,
wrapped into the clean coherence of my
backyard is a suffocating black walnut.
Where’s the mystery here? Who could
make this space matter? Everything’s happy.
All the trim houses rise up vertical, all the lights
blink on early in the windows, it all
steeps up towards ochre clouds swathed
in the shredded cloths of the nameless
who walk through imagination. It’s 4:37,
the end of the afternoon. Home for the day,
I’m standing in the center of the end of the world
where all the dust gathered in all the corners
of all the rooms of all these lined up houses
and all the layers of dust still sifting through the air
and floating in the open windows
can’t make imagination go away. Something’s not right.
In the dying black walnut a squirrel’s
stuck up near my neighbor’s asphalt roof.
It gestures its own unincorporated language
towards a grackle which bleats itself silly.
I watch hermetic men across the road
muffle all the sound, they throw
sound into the sky and it falls back fire.
Everything’s quiet, everything’s calm,
the gleaming insides of houses are silent,
wind refuses to rush past. Clouds throw shadows
down on my view and something’s not right.
What can I make out of this space? I can admit it:
the grackle’s as foolish as the squirrel,
this place could be any place, I can’t
stand its solitude. The leaves of a sick
black walnut turn yellow from within.
I’m only waiting for fall to pass.
I’m only waiting for the winter.
I’m only waiting for the snow that’ll cover
up the last walnut that sits on the ground
waiting to bum back into earth. I’ll sit here
all through the day, all through the night.
I’ll be inside, I’ll be asleep, I’ll
sleep late every day then wait
at the window to drink all away.
I'll absorb all the silence and light this place can give,  
specks of color will reflect up off new snow,  
all the silence from all the sleeping houses,  
all that's here. Everything here  
is arranged according to silence and color.

What am I doing at the end of the day,  
what am I doing at the end of history,  
what am I doing in the middle of this all?
Everything will be just fine.  
Fall might end when the sweet fruit  
of the black walnut rises up  
into the air with the memory  
of all imagination here. It'll all get  
covered up by snow that'll forge out  
of the sky and fill the air like dust.  
I'll get up early every morning  
and stand and watch and imagine  
like a man stunned and forlorn,  
one who'll believe that it's possible  
for the mind to fill up with some small space.  
I might be sadder. Sad might be wiser.  
I will get up early every morning.
Landscape With Suburban Renewal, Saturday Morning

This season’s built on faulty knowledge—
out beyond the supermarkets and filling stations,
out beyond the rows of neatly clustered condos
made up of clapboard, vinyl, and polished recycled brass,

out past the end of the suburban bus line near the freeway
and underneath a Tylenol billboard, they’re busy tilling over
a field of Northern Monkshood that absorbed
every aluminum ray the sun threw down

all summer long. A cloud of noisy earth
rises from the deathly machine and holds its shape
floating out over the unlit bakelite quickmart sign
only to dissipate somewhere over Toledo

and thin out over Ohio’s rusty sky, a conceptual act
that leaves a message that we’ve been here.
But not everything here’s so grim.
My neighbor spends his Saturday morning

blaring some early-generation folk rock
and waxing up the surface of a little aqua dinghy
he’ll stow away in the backyard for winter,
flipped over on six cinder blocks with his kids’

plastic wading pool shoved in underneath. I’d say
he’s like a monk who stows bottles of cognac
under his hard bed to get ready for the towers of snow
that blanket the blank canvas of the midwest

who, when the moon-dyed snow starts
to crust up the edges of his perception,
looks out his window at the changes he sees
when absence covers up what’s left of fall’s burn

and learns from the knowledge of that change.
But that’s too easy. He’s just out in the yard
away from the wife and screaming kids
who’ll follow him around until May and

if he looked at the surface of the hull to see
his own reflection looking back, he’d see through himself
right up into a splitting headache of beauty, 
the late autumn sky overflowing with light.
Variations on a Theme From Williams

A blue jay hops
like an idiot boy
when it lands
upon the hot black tar roof.
The irritable queedle of its call
is the noise of boiling lead.
It is the noise of a busy mind
talking out loud to itself
in an elevator. The bird
is stuck. I sigh and pass
on my bike, huff
up another hill
and say I'm no wiser
for seeing this.
What the jay does
and how it sounds
will mean what
I want them
to mean.

Meanwhile, the bum
who picks empties
out of the dumpster
turns from his work
and throws
his beaten plastic sack
on to the cement.
He doesn't look my way
and reaches up
and pulls the bird
from the tar as gently
as a seamstress pulls
the stitches closed
on a quilt made of scraps of cloth
from her children's clothes.
He doesn't need theories
of narrative distance or irony
or an outline of Barthes
or the Bible.
He's too busy reattaching
meaning to words.
Indoor/Outdoor

Pushing my cart with a six-pack and two boxes of wild rice through the supermarket today,

I felt the world around me getting older. When I passed the display of waxed

Granny Smiths stacked up in crates to resemble a pyramid that reaches up towards

the heavens, I gazed out a window that opened upon a fluorescent sky

where layers of smog rolled over and made a minimalist blue-brown
dance out of a late fall afternoon. It looked like a ritual of closure.

Now a slight dusting of lake effect curls around the shining lampposts

and I imagine the plow drivers who'll come in December and sit in their churning

snowplows on the edge of the parking lot, who'll sit there and wait for the change of season.

The mothers in the parking lot line up in sedans and let their children scream into the stars.

The fathers talk to themselves and dart through all the aging lines of traffic.

And here, inside the store, is where all the shoppers circle around while the sky

that spins around in colors is ignored. All winter this sky will pour down snow

and our machines will just push it out of the way and we'll go on ignorant of our shortened days.
Hoisted up over the center-aisle cooler of plump, luscious bags of frozen broccoli,

the indoor/outdoor furniture is marked for clearance and greatly reduced for sale today.

It suggests there’s something impermanent about all this, something that resists closure.

All of today’s markdowns will be dragged out from the utility shed onto the patio

next year, when they’ll get hosed off and polished up, all ready for another spring.
PART II
Nocturne With Light on the Surface of the Neighborhood

1.

I look up from my book and everything
Outside quivers with an abject knowledge.
And the stillness of the deserted macadam,
All the empty houses sitting there ignored.
And the solo flickering streetlamp
Always pouring up into the sky.

2.

The window gleams with grit,
The thump-thump-thump of droplets
On the rusty eavestroughs
Makes a metronome
Of the moon passing through clouds.

3.

The black walnut is blue.
The pigeons are cooing in the eaves.
Anonymous stars are passing over me.
The trees stand still for one moment.
This night is vanishing into stillness.

4.

These notes scribbled on looseleaf—
Laments for a kind of closure that
Might send the fuzzy-eyed, slightly drunken
Reader of this poem away from her book
To wander through her emptying house
Sighing a quivering sigh that smells of Kessler’s
& saltines topped with cheese and capers
To catalogue all that she imagines she once saw
From the armchair perched in front of her window—

This night is vanishing into artifice.
A Brief History of Yesterday Afternoon

1.

There was no depth in the neighborhood’s scene of fences and houses and lampposts that floated past, a two-dimensional surface casting about searching for clarity. Waking then walking at noon, I saw no particular things that day, everything identified by a general name—oleander became tree, sparrow became bird—no attachment to yesterday, nothing individuated, no things localized.

2.

A fresh coat of snow fell down sideways and everything, the tidy bungalows, the Pinto stacked up on blocks, the uncurtained windows gleaming and steamed on the inside, and the light from the lampposts seemed on the verge of disappearing. Light illuminated all the words filling up a sheet of newsprint that glided along the street at dusk. The wind couldn’t make it rise up and just pushed it along down the street gathering vision as it skimmed along.

3.

Vision is made up of these particulars: now the snow begins to ice over, the squirrels abandon the walnut trees, the lamplight begins to throw down a small yellowish beam of light upon the grade school turned warehouse and some sense of history, the sense that says someone’s felt these thoughts before,
ignites upon an almost illegible word
scraped into a painted over
dormer window—the particulars
of a song waking
upon a bed of sound.
Nocturne With Neon

The world is nothing but a jumble of brushstrokes pasted upon linen when the clouds set down upon the streetlights and the exhaust that rose up all day long hangs in the lamps and dithers around in a flickering, syncopated rhythm.

The world is a cascade of points of light falling across the empty air, crossing the glimmering asphalt and landing on the paths of stragglers who wander back and forth dragging hollow bottles and howling their self-awareness out to the ears of the moon.

The world is nothing but an explosion of color against the abject surface that confronts us all: a splash of white flies through the sky, a blot of green turns brown and dies, a blaze of orange sits on a windowsill mewing at the shuttered cafe’s neon sign, which it thinks is the moon.

The world is nothing more than a skittering neon light, welcoming us inside from our meanderings with a promise of shelter against the confetti of snow and the winds that turn randomly through all the buildings—all the buildings locked up tight—all the people gone.
The Dissonance of Mid-Afternoon

After the rain, the rest of the city sighs and sleeps while we're here considering

the sunlight pushing through a layer of fog, and how on this particular unnotable afternoon,

the trees seem to know of a specific type of human absence, their bare branches

an insufficient metaphor for the abject solitude of this place. And we know we should watch

those things that don't symbolize anything, that've exhausted meaning.

On the peak of our neighbor's mossy bloated garage, a starling cries to itself.

And if there is sorrow in the parked, rusting Dodge bathed in beads of tears,

it is unnoticed. There's a clarity revealed at this time of day, when light almost falls

through the surfaces of ice in an oleander and when birds stop their singing

and traffic stops its purring and we watch all motion stop,

we realize the stillness in the landscape is subtle and shifting, moving around us,

melting, as if instructed by our gaze.
Variations on a Theme From Kees

After driving all night, I came here
where the bridge angles up against the city
to watch the sunrise. I drove through Moline,
I drove through Jackson, I drove
through all the clapboard and Hand-Me-Down places
and listened to the static chatter that constantly
blurts out of all the tiny dashboard speakers
in the cars that circle the midwest.
I was looking for the kind of loneliness
that one might find in the early morning
when the bruised sky has not yet turned over,
when the French stations from Quebec
tune in with the clarity of ocean wind,
when the breeze off the river is sullen and smooth.
I park my car next to an abandoned cannery
and walk up to some gravel pits to watch
the sunrise over the bridge and
all its cartels of traffic scurrying
between memory and tomorrow.
What has happened to me?
I drove all night to this place to find
something I had before I left.
Shifting Landscape With the Surface of Solitude

When I catch their outline out of the corner of my eye, their still figures shift and appear almost animated by a gust of wind that blows through a grove of sycamores that barely holds itself up perched over on the side of the four-lane highway, rooted in scattering chalky soil dried up around it. Lovers watching the measurement and dissolution of the stars in a sky of pockmarked enamel paint, a surface of sorrow and texture that reminds them how this decay can’t be stopped by their woeful gaze. The world crystallizes as they watch. When the sky arrived at night, it rolled down over all the trees and left them coated with flecks of metallic ice.

The monoxide air is yellow and the mute black sparrows hover in the crooked branches of the sycamores.

When I’m standing at my window watching them watching sky and landscape, we all become a study in perspective and meditative solitude. The surfaces of the neighborhood are alive with a kind of hopeful sorrow. The collapsing sky and the wind are giving way to a kind of knowledge, giving way to some variation of clarity that arises from stillness.

The lovers look up at the parting clouds, trying to see the same abstractions. The sky slows its movement and the wind dies down to a breeze that floats over us all. And if this world brings us any knowledge, we’ll only find it in the wearily dissolving surfaces of the ice that glitters in the moon.
Insomnia

1.

I couldn’t take it inside anymore:
the ceiling’s fractured lines
of meandering demarcation,
the reassuring sounds
of my sleeping wife.

These streets should be deserted.

Penumbras of all the sleepless scatter
worried back and forth in lit windows,
silhouettes plunge down onto pavement,
some lit windows are filled
with the numb and awake who sit
listening to the traffic’s dull shudderings.

One night lost leads to the next.
I grew up loving a country I hate.
A poem cannot stop its misery.

The nameless are scattered around me.

2.

How many of us awake can really imagine
the exploding unprimed sky
over Baghdad as some canvas
of an inexplicable dawn,
our machines of mechanical artifice
that spackle heavy trails of smoke
into the blankness
of this once anonymous night?

3.

A nameless man whose face I know
warms himself in McDonald’s doorway
and no one passes him by.
He looks at me as if we shared a secret. 
I don’t want to meet anyone new. 

I’ve got all the friends I need. 

4. 

The disarmed smile on another face 
who never moves from his crate 
whose teeth are collapsing towers, 

whose name is veiled like the secrecy of generals, 
whose eyes are a bloodshot whiteness 
that is an uncertain promise of daybreak, 

whose loneliness will not be cured by this poem, 

looks inside at the drunks lined up 
along the bar of Poor Robert’s Tavern 
who are in love with themselves. 

Every day is as lovely as the last. 

5. 

The stars we never see 
burn our retinas and 
the fear keeps us awake at night. 

The wide-screen stereo TV 
surrounds us up on the wall 
and abstracts all our feeling, 
all our fears are broken down 

into millions of indistinct 
and random pixels of primal light. 

My fear is larger than this. 
It’s larger than this light. 

6. 

Below war reports, the screen
ticks off the statistics of battle
along with all the ball game scores.

Sooner or later, all our suffering gets quantified.
Nothing comforts.

The barkeep bellows some bark of victory
and the drunks don’t want the place to close.

This poem will not prevent their misery.

7.

So much depends upon one incandescent police truck
that lumbers towards downtown

where a mass of bodies
interpenetrates into
an integral sheet of shadows.

Their sounds of protest rise apparitional above me.

Ten thousand, thousand stars are in the sky.
I imagine all those stars splitting in half.

The sky might soon fill up with the possibility of light.
PART III
Still Life at the End of the Afternoon

If we’re walking out through snowmelt and fog and I show you the early lamplight

that brings on fourteen hours of night falling off a half-broken bottle
tossed out in the middle of the street, a barn swallow stretching its wings
out over the horizon and looping around the ghost of a ghostly tree

whose limp branches just hang there in the sky slumped over from winter

and how the world of the neighborhood turns itself over in the last spring

of the last year of the world, would I lose your interest?

If you wait right here, you can watch the end of history arrive, it’s already

swallowing this place into its absence. The evidence is here:
nobody moves down the street at the end of the afternoon,

no figures are casting shadows behind all the drawn shades

in the windows illuminated with dim light. Absence is too easy, you’d say.

You’d point out some self assured, dried out poppies stuck in thick pop bottles,

a brand from that bottler who sold out and left town almost fifteen years ago last month,
whose empty factory sits fading away
at the edge of the freeway into town.

Lined up along this almost anonymous
windowsill, those poppies were put there

methodically and without despair,
their seeds waiting for their time to turn over.
Early Morning Snowstorm With Sunrise

But Spring shall come and flowers will bloom
and man must chatter of his doom
— William Carlos Williams

The first sun in weeks
dances on the walls
with a joy I'd rather ignore.

I could slouch in bed until four today.

The view from this fifth floor
window looks upon
a winter scene of buildings collapsed into dust,

abstracted shapes and colors
that take our memories with them
and fade into this thick early light.

This morning is a door I must go through.

* * *

Salt pours from the sky and dusts
everything here. It all signifies something—
this pool is made of my mother's tears,
here my father broke a walnut with one stroke,

my uncle, the crazy one, stood once naked
and obscene on the roof
of this hollow building
in a raging April icestorm.

What can awareness add to any of this?

He threw all his clothes
and self-awareness
down to the mangy street.

* * *
Thirteen blackbirds sit clattering
joyous on a power line
shagged translucent with hoary ice.

If it didn't matter
that you noticed.
I will go to hell.

* * *

I was awake all night.

More than the snow
filling up
all the Midwestern loneliness
of Detroit,

it is morning
and the snow floating through light
falls on the ice.

It's almost spring.

* * *

Spring is nothing more
than a beautiful green dark door
that leads us back into winter.

Walk through every door
of all the places here

into one place where the trees stand
almost transformed with early ice.

Watch them, they might soon bust out.
Aubade With New Moon

Yesterday's dim sun flittered and fractured
down through the windowpane then fell flatly,
merely subjunctive upon these gray walls.

It's gone. Now light fills the room.
It's not raining or foggy and I can clear my mind.
The cluttered furniture stacked up
against the gray walls is gone. The cooker is gone.
The eccentric Scottish landlords, gone.
The forlorn French boy and his slow,
sad love songs have emptied the flat down the hall.
The old full moon, like some knowing symbol
dithered around up there in the ordinary, terrible
and beautiful stories of a pathetic world.
It's a late dawn. We can barely sleep,
it's as if some transformation
of the sun took place last night. All night we turned
in bed, each shade of the moon's grayness
individuated upon us gazers,
specks of color filtered down, obscuring
the distance we travelled between cities,
rearranging the artifacts of our world
when you walked me through some secret door
right back into my body. We laid down
in a city stupefied with stillness and calm
and now awake to a sunny, beautiful, ordinary day.
When we walk out for coffee and bread,
the moon still permeates a gelatinous sky.

When we turn our gaze around,
all the sound filters upwards apparitional,
all locomotion halts,
all color washing over the city interfuses into clarity:
that slice of opaque disc,
that slant and mellow radiance in the sky.
Early Light and Lonely Women

They drag themselves out into the lot because the lazy bastard perched behind plexiglass must’ve told them to take it outside. This place won’t even afford a cheap neon sign. If it would, at times like this, when they’re out there wrestling around on the asphalt before daybreak, their faces might shine against some kind of glowing light. Their faces are obliterated. Their voices don’t even rise into the night. They echo around the neighborhood, bouncing off the tin coated houses until they finally dull into silence. It wakes me up just the same. It’s all routine, an episodic exercise in openness, abandonment, and accumulation. They’ll fight until they weep, gather themselves up and go back inside.

I watch them from the safety of my front stoop when dawn pushes up some new abstract light over the gas station marquee, when the concrete starts to smugly hum with commuter traffic. I think the whole world should witness the two of them curled up in each other’s arms, asleep underneath the parking lot’s elm, but the world is turning away. Two sparrows coast above them, they carry gathered shards of plastic for a nest. Morning’s light is pressing down on all of us.
Taxicabs

Taxicabs are everywhere on any day like today.
But on one Sunday in New York City,
one early summer afternoon in June of nineteen-
hundred ninety-four, on this one specific day
there were yellow and black, yellow and red, white and blue,
blue and grey, orange, green, and even black taxicabs.
Checker, Diamond, All-State Taxis,
Ray’s EZ-Ride Cabs, Inter City Shuttles.

It must’ve been chance that led us into that cab.
It was so much like all the others.
How at the corner of 106th and Broadway
it was waiting by the curb, it waited
near the automatic teller machine. I couldn’t
wait. I climbed in first, I announced a destination.
The orange sun on the hottest day of the year.
We almost missed it. We almost didn’t cross the street.

I was a stranger, I’d been there three or four
times before. Tourist, poseur, weekend visitor,
I didn’t know where we were going. We were
going to walk around the corner. I thought I knew
about the taxicabs all over the world, but
no sooner did I see this bright orange, billboarded,
bondoed cab than I was inside. The sun
became rows of yellow lamps, the streets just sat there
covered in a film of gray, the voices in the cab
filtered around—signals perceived but still ignored.
I sat large in that small cab. Pedestrians shrank
as I drove by, I could’ve towered above them all,
I thought I could’ve towered above anything.
On that day in New York City, a day
like any other, hundreds of passengers rode
in hundreds of cabs and I had no idea.

It rattled through each gear. I remember
blue smoke, the precision of the cabby
eating roti with coco bread, scooping potato
he’d make a left, sopping up gravy he’d slide to stop.
Roti and coco bread with his right hand
out of white styrofoam balanced in his lap, steering
with his right knee and left hand, looking up only
to slow down. I’ll never know if the reason
we got there was beauty or chance, and on
that day I was reduced to unusual, non-linear,
stupid wonder at such an impossible feat.
Was it fate or divine intervention?
We’d almost missed that cab. He almost pulled away.
I’d thought I was large above everyone
but there are so many taxicabs. It was as if
involuntary power brought me
to this small repetitious spot, wrong
to think of it as anything but what it was—
it happens every day in almost every
city in the world. In New York alone,
there must’ve been thirty, forty cabbies
eating and driving. (And that’s not counting Newark
or any suburbs or anywhere else.) What about the cabs
in São Paulo, Fresno, or Lima, Beijing or Bangkok,
Manchester or Minneapolis? On a day like that Sunday,
which was really no different from the previous day,
taxicabs streamed through the streets of cities
everywhere in the world. I wasn’t alone. I acted alone.
I acted as if alone. No place is without taxicabs.
When the movements of the cab stopped, we were there.
My step was awkward, my vision skewed,
the curb rose up to meet the apartment houses,
buildings stretched over the horizon in a line that
circled around the world. Darkness hadn’t fallen
but the light had dimmed. It was a day when three passengers
from the upper west side were taken to the Whitney
Museum of American Art while the cabby was eating
his lunch, as cab drivers are known to do; it was a day
when millions of people went to millions of places,
one commonplace day when everything changed.
I shrank in the world’s immensity. My legs
wanted out from under me, my head filled
and emptied with possibility. I moved inside with help
and great care. We almost missed it. All I saw
were images from that ride. The upper west side
to the Whitney broke down again and again into
brushstrokes of color, one immense composition
of irradiant, elemental shapes that happen all the time.
Estate Sale

Two pigeons outside the window
make random noises towards a cardinal
perched in a ginkgo tree. The cardinal
doesn’t give a shit. I don’t
know whose apartment this is. It’s
Saturday morning. My wife and I
have come to look for just the right
chiffonnier, formica dinette
with chairs, maybe even a cedar chest, or
maybe something that’s just cheap
and functional: a cocktail shaker,
a dictionary, an electric kettle.

We teach ourselves not to think about
the people who lived here, they might be dead,
they might be waking up now at the newly
re-landscaped Methodist home up near
Davenport St., waking to its proud evergreens,
they might still be avoiding winter
in a trailer park outside of Orlando looking out
the window right now, still lighthearted
and wooly from some newfound security
and they get worried about something,

they’re worried about the space between
the aloof young neighbor girl and themselves.

*

A shoe box full of postcards—
Evelyn describes how luminous the food
in Tucson was one fall. Charlie brags
about some craps table at The Sands.
A roadside diner in Tennessee with a 
brand new pool, diving board too,
right outside of Chattanooga. A museum 
of clocks, grandfather clocks, alarm clocks, 
wristswatches. Watches on chains, wall clocks,
buddha clocks. Coo-coo clocks, a clock 
of Christ on the cross, clocks made of gold, 
electric clocks, steam clocks, wind-up clocks.

Someone’s secret key lime pie recipe.
Chicago weather so beautiful in the spring of ‘58.
Cards they must’ve meant to send:

Four Esso gas pumps, dusk at the Grand 
Canyon. Union Square Hotel, S.F. Calif.
Seashells at sunset, Holiday Inn, Key West.

*I

I don’t feel guilty looking through 
this stuff. My wife’s measuring a mirror.

They’re dead, or worse, they’re sick 
or in Florida and what do they need.

It’s not here to remind a bunch of strangers 
about the lives of these absent tenants.

It’s here so that on this drizzly March 
Saturday, we might have the honor of digging 

through the estate of John and Eleanor 
Shoemaker, I mean Dr. John H. and Mrs.

Eleanor R. Shoemaker, and finding something 
that’s affordable and functional, or cheap 

and entertaining, something to buy, or 
a story to tell to friends or ourselves later.

*
We love the things we love for what they are. But we always want our lives to be some way they won’t. The cardinal doesn’t care,

it goes on with life without caring about the smell of the ginkgo fruit or the cackle of the pigeons. And while a pigeon

might be gullible enough to believe us if we said we cared, or be enough of a sucker to smell the toxic ginkgo fruit,

even if he’ll let us swindle him at cards, the pigeon only reminds us how the cardinal doesn’t care for us at all.

* Everyone’s got something here. The couch reads SOLD and the dishes are getting all wrapped up. People from the neighborhood,

the daily people I see on the street, riding the subway, waiting in line at our Giant Market, they carry bags full of things they’ll take

and they’re not smiling at anyone. They’re not rude, everyone here is just a little shy about the whole thing.

* The cardinal in the ginkgo tree sits there and doesn’t care. The cardinal in the ginkgo tree sits on a branch that will bear

a fruit that smells of loss and doesn’t care. The cardinal in the ginkgo tree sits on a naked branch, that later in the year will bear a fruit that smells of loss, and doesn’t care about the noises the pigeons on the windowsill make.

The cardinal in the ginkgo tree sits on
a naked branch that will, later in the year, 
bear a fruit that smells of loss and 

doesn't care about the noises the 
pigeons on the windowsill make, 
it might never turn its eye your way. 

It might never turn its eye your way. 
The cardinal in the ginkgo tree 
will live a long, happy life perching 

alternate days on ginkgo, then evergreen, 
flying up occasionally, rising perpendicular 
to a point in the horizon, arcing into wind 

and mimicking the shape of an open shell. 

*

Dr. and Mrs. Shoemaker, if you are alive, 
I can only doubt that you will read this. 

I doubt you cared enough to take any time 
to look through the artifacts you decided 
to leave behind; ballet slippers, unpublished 
detective novels, The New York Times 

Desk Reference Encyclopedia. If I ever walked 
past on Connecticut Avenue, forgive me, 

I was probably in a hurry. But even now, 
I wouldn't say hello. It's so rare for anyone 
to speak to strangers. And if I did, odds are 
you'd still look away. I can't blame you, 

I'm intruding into the tagged remains of your life here, 
this catalogued sincerity will comfort only me. 

Line by line this sorrow will proceed: 
When you left here that last day, I hope you 

weren't too rushed to look at these things 
one final time, to look out at the fragrant ginkgo
and remember all the stories of your life—
now an incoherent narrative scattered over the floor—
PART IV
Free Day at the Museum

Alighting from the parking garage's
darkened ceramic corridors that are
an antidote to weather, you wonder
where the musky smells have gone,

those nameless faces that you’ve attached
to their particular spaces on the sidewalk
that spend every day gazing into the sky,
the woolen blankets wrapped

around a lamppost for cushioning.
The drunk with hair that’s always on fire
turning this way and that
who stands in the bus shelter

whose words echo out over the traffic
like the songs of thrushes
haggling over a grassy suburban field
being bulldozed for a proposed subdivision

named Stormy Meadows is not here.
No one’s here and you walk
your regular path to your cubic
air conditioned office and when sunlight falls

on you it is slightly off hue
and the lecture of traffic
in your head and it’s impossible
that they’ve all gone anywhere

or died or been taken in and you remember
it’s Tuesday and you imagine them
in front of one of Vermeer’s girls with one
of those broken, historic smiles

huddled up together watching the people pass,
watching the guards who watch them sitting there,
and how the sun that beats down on them every other day
now falls lightly through the window.
Nocturne With Mutt Hound

And the squirrels are sleeping
in their trees and the birds
are sleeping in their trees
and the oleander outside our window

offers no protection from
the flatulent frat boys across the street.
Their cries of “free beer” rising
into all of Davis Street’s opened windows

are the stammering cadences of an inarticulate
language that rise up and shatter the solitude
of this unloved landscape and its
bickering sparrows and houses of tin.

And the darkened coat of the sky
drifts in through the blinds and sifts
upon your back. And the lovely,
lovely sound of your breath

stills all the outside world to silence.
And we lie together, awake, watching
the moon make patterns on the wall
above the sleeping dog who knows

of none of this. Bored with watching us,
she’d fallen asleep long ago. Eyes rolled back,
paws in frantic motion, she’s barking
a calming, chirping music in her sleep.
Moonlight and Infidelity

Before UVA and UVB rays, there was only light.
And before light, a beam of moonlight sifted downward.
And in the clarity of this moon, anyone can see
there are no right angles in the neighborhood tonight.
All linear forward locomotion has stopped:
the sky reaches down to the clotheslines that are still,
empty chairs clutter all the cluttered porches
and cling to the shapes of those who sat in them,
the houses are still and sighing with sleep,
the pile of lumber scrap at the curb waits
for the men who roam about gathering every morning,
dust settles upon all the sleeping dogs
who spend days digging petunias out of clapboard
flowerbeds and chasing their tails.
Dust floats through a beam of moonlight
that stretches across a phone line
and around a maple branch that leans into
a world of boyish sleep: a window splattered
with stickers and handmade fan signs.
I can almost look into that window
and see one of the last nights of my own innocence —
a scene that reruns like a televised family diorama
in the black and white of some nostalgic dream —
a boy turns in the sheets listening to the tick of the fan,
waiting for his father's puttering V-8 to make
it around the corner and up the driveway,
he imagines his mother waiting in the unlit kitchen.
The trails of her cigarette smoke are illuminated
when moonlight turns them into shadows
right before they dissolve into dust.
And just before daylight, when the outline
of the maple branch is barely visible
against the solemn walls of the boy's bedroom,
the creak of the front door wakes the boy
who then hears his father and his mother downstairs.
Pale light is just beginning to sift through the window
when silence gives way to screaming
and turns to a faint sobbing before the front door slams.
The father leaves and the father will return.
The mother cries and the mother will laugh again.
The boy falls asleep and the boy will wake up.
At the end of all this, the sun continues to rise,
green maple leaves and a greenish, broken light
on the wall beside the wiser, sleeping boy.
August 17, 1984

1.

I am thinking about you and last night when the mother of one of my friends, a scholar of still photography and cinema, wakes me, telephoning in the early afternoon to tell me to turn on my television. In our houses three and one-half blocks away, we both watch, on Channel 8, an image of a group of punk rockers being led onto a Dallas Police Bus. They went into the First Texas Bank and fell to the floor. After wading in the pond in front of city hall, they are now being led into a darkened and barred prison bus. Rumors say a flag was burnt. It is true, an announcer is talking about taking the teenagers to the downtown police facility at this very moment and I notice her son, my friend, the guitar player from my band, I recognize his yellow-striped shirt, and a cop leads him onto the bus. "I don't know what to make of this." she says "I can't believe what I'm seeing."

2.

Snipes circle above rows of identical houses singing a song, their song is the noise of stultified beauty, they do not fight against the windless heat of summer. A light that burgeons over everything articulates a clarity normally reserved for visions of the truly religious or mad but today's heat is so oppressive, it falls flat upon everything: asphalt, automobile, lawn, window, birdbath, newspaper. The snipe never migrates, the snipe never changes its song.

The newspapers scattered like seed over lawns have already begun to yellow, they diminish into basic elements of color.

The headline: Punks disrupt Prez's party, 27 Arrested is no more important than the call of the elusive snipe.

Ink radiates from the moisture of afternoon
Black blurs into white, each word runs into the next until nothing exists

in this season without end, without wind, absorbed in a sound that is the absence of sound, nothing exists except the circuitous cry of the snipe.

3.

_The actual oneness of the thing_,

I stood outside your house this morning,

_though, is a mystery, an experience_,

everyone was asleep: you, your parents, your sister.

_and trying to break it down is like_

I must’ve waited for hours. I sat and watched a man

_trying to separate a lyric moment_

deliver the morning paper and I looked in

_from a dramatic one_

all of the windows for a sign of morning.

..._what keeps our attention from_

For a sign of anything. The houses on your street

_poem to poem, from part to part_

all kept so clean and dark. The man’s headlights

_is the accumulating strength and complexity_

rose up into the ink of the night sky and each

_and interest and full character of the speaking_

house got a paper that morning. Like every morning.

_voice...the moral authority of any art_

I sat on your porch and tried to read your paper

_begins with our sense of being_

and didn’t understand any of the words. Nothing

_in the presence of oneness._

made sense. I would like to explain my actions,
Who speaks becomes more important
explain my words of the other night,

than what is said.
if I could only make you believe.

4.

Two Facts:

The New York Times states that the average 30 minute newscast contains an amount of words equal to two and one-half pages of the average daily newspaper.

Aristotle said that if something can come to be good and beautiful, it can also come to be in general, for it is more difficult for a house to be beautiful than for a house to exist.

5.

I stood in line at the drugstore, I waited
to buy a six-pack of Coke and a can of peanuts
and there was nothing but silence.
Nothing was spoken to me. Nothing swirled

around in the atmosphere, hovering over me,
waiting for the appropriate moment
to shatter the solitude of one. I heard nothing
spoken to anyone else. And if I wanted

to say that something beautiful happened
that day when I stood in line silent and paid
and took my sack full of things back home,
I’d be surprised if I could prove the truth

to you about that day or any other. If I
couldn’t prove to you that on Friday, the
seventeenth day of August in the year nineteen hundred and eighty-four, I got home from working

all night at the grocery store around five
in the morning, slept until noon, went to
the drugstore to buy Cokes and peanuts and
went back to sleep for a while, I mean,
if it didn't surprise you that it was okay
eating peanuts, drinking Cokes for breakfast,
that I didn't mind stocking grocery
shelves and I didn't mind living at my

parent’s house, why would you believe me?

6.

It is August, 1984 in Dallas, Texas.
There is nothing to do. I am here,
or I was there, and it is/was
a time of anxious malaise,
a time of excitable irreality and
a time when the end was near.
We were punk rockers practicing apolitical
protest songs. We debated chord changes
and harmonies, the virtues of catharsis
over thrash, tuning versus feedback.
The lovesong was a form not particularly
suited to our personality or skill.
Nothing of note occurred to my friends
that afternoon in the prison. We debated
the efficacious ways to produce a buzz
for less than three dollars. The world
only needed the right catchy song. Forgive us,
we were bored. So sweet, so far away
the end of anything seems now
from that day, and so delicious.

7.

Friday, August 17, 1984 has been erased
from calendars and day planners,
the newspapers shredded and landfilled,
the tapes of newscasts bulked, relabeled,
and reloaded for a happier day.
Why can’t I believe this: there was
no police bus, no one arrested
in a protest rally against the President.
I have no friends, I’ve never had a job,
I’d never want to tell you anything but truth.
There is no such thing as real time.
The television news delivers fact.
I don't know how I taught myself
to lie. I'm only trying to reattach
sign to signifier. There is a difference
between the time it takes to see an image
of something happening and the time
it takes that event to happen as truth.
Real beauty happens in real time.
Everything is O.K. I am fine,
The end might be approaching soon.
I don't mind working all night or living
with my parents. I don't mind anything.
I don't mind stocking the shelves of loneliness,
I don't mind awake afternoons circling
your house, I don't mind it when ink
blackens my fingers. Everything is O.K.
You are fine. I wish I could believe it all like you.
You have a beautiful life and you have friends,
you have a job, and the truth is, I'd trade
my life with yours for a song.
Arrhythmia

I shouldn’t have agreed to this, I feel foolish,
I feel uncomfortable, I feel I’m being watched,
evaluated by standards I can’t comprehend.
My torso’s wired and taped from chest to groin,
front and back. Every fourth beat arrives slightly late,
a syncopation that may or may not require concern,
the ventricle beats slightly faster than the aorta.
It’ll be 102° today. A sprightly half-empty train arrives
at 9:31. That’s good, I’ll be at work by 9:55,
10:05 at the latest. A ticking box the size of a hand
hangs off of my belt and records every beat
of my heart. My whole day’ll be recorded in a series
of beeps and transcribed into graphed coherence.
This will be like no other day, it’ll be the hottest
day of the year, one day for the triumph of objectivity
and medicine, one day transcribed into a series

of charts and graphs, the vagaries of heart
and measure all righted and explained.
The day unfolds. The day unfolds like water
and I wish I knew what good the heart is for.
I wish it weren’t summer. I wish it were
any time of the year but summer. I wish for a day
that would unfold like horizon, that’d sprawl out
into the empty spaces and remind me of the

absence it filled up. Heat rises off all the cement,
all the sidewalks and buildings, all these sullen
things, so early in the morning and my head spins
with the possibilities of lateness. The day unfolds
like night. I wish I could go to sleep. It’s so simple,
writing down these activities at the precise time
they occur. I wish I were in Paris instead of Washington,
I wish I were in London instead of New York,

I wish I were anywhere. I even wish that I will arrive
at work today and imagine I’ve never been
there. The space of my desk will fill
with an analogy of my absence. This train moves
with such regularity. I wish I could start over.
I’ve forgotten to write everything down.
The arrhythmic heart lacks the force of regular measure. The recorder hangs its weight upon me.

I haven't written everything down. The day unfolds with surprise and all those things that sat sullen so long rise up and spin my head. I wish every day could be just like this. Each exacting word comes in advance of another movement, a feeble attempt to catalog all motion. The measured sound of tape unfurling and reeling back up in the machine offers my day a soundtrack background music.

This day unfurls like celluloid. From darkened silence, it moves toward revelation so patiently, each detail recorded and logged. The landscape sprawls out in front of me, I'll never make it to work. Waves of air rise into the sky, familiar buildings blur into whiteness and my head turns in circles—it all soars up above me—the light of day flashes and pigeons spin around my faster spinning head.
The Clarity of Morning at Assateague

In the heat of August at Assateague,
the macadam sky of night’s almost gone
to a sun that begins to hang in purple

and orange, each hue of the sun, each ray
of light refracts away from everything
like those long-held secrets between

lovers, something held back for some reason
forgotten so long ago that the determination
to withhold becomes an act of dramatic

affection. Or is it an action that is both
swift and direct, one that mimics the path
of the starling wafting toward the dune?

* * *

In the heat of August
at Assateague, open shells scatter
all over bone white sand.
These outstretched palms,
are they asking for some
sort of welcoming? Are they asking
for forgiveness? Why do we love
the things we love for what they lack?
These less than perfect, broken
calcareous husks that swirl up
in currents become a sort of invasion,
clustered together in a perfect, almost
fluorescent whiteness of sand.
Why romanticize? They’re nothing
but cast-off scrap, errant refuse
tossed off from some mollusk. They’ll
be taken to decorate someone’s home,
eventually everything gets gathered.

* * *

In the heat of August at Assateague,
there are so many people here. The boardwalk’s
not far to our north, the night over it, 
a curtain still pulled shut. The coarseness
of the blanket over our legs. The deceptive
cold of the humid morning air. A tanker
far off in the horizon where it's surely
light by now, leaves clouds of black smoke
that can affirm almost anything.
* * *
The tide pulls away so deliberately
with a skein of foam that's neither
pure water nor pure salt, it's pure motion
and imagination smoothing all the sand
when it pulls back. The man who passes with
a metal detector lives such a good life,
he takes whatever the shore rejects.
With so much love he smoothes the sand
with his hand after unearthing any object.
What must this man, one commonplace
figure who looks like he could be anyone's
grandfather or uncle or accountant or barber,
what must this man who comes upon
a single sheet of paper wrapped
in strands of green silk, what must
this man who seems to pass over even us
think when he finds his secret bounty:
broken watches, bottle caps, fake gold chains?
Why does he keep it? What is the
difference between object and artifact?
* * *
The starlings flutter and chuckle around us
and obscure themselves from our sight.
By daybreak, we're the only ones here.
One red-winged blackbird surprises us,
it circles over a patch of downy grass.
I’ve seen them as east as Blackwater or Easton,

they’re probably common here, but I’ve never
seen one so close to the ocean. You say it’s
almost sad to see one alone. This solitary

red-winged blackbird could live out its happy moments
by itself on this island, but will probably
return to its flock before next year’s nesting.

You’re reminded of the solitary life you gave up.
The world passes time by passing over our heads,
we’re busy remaking each other into an image

of the other we think we’re seeing. I could
walk back into the old solitary night, but
I’d rather busy myself imagining your imaginings.

The sun that rises is a glittery globe and
more than a promise of morning, the tide
retreats into an impossible solitude filled up

with the chatter of starlings. If there were any secrets
between us, for now they’ve been obscured,
clusters of broken night broken up by the new sun.
Shifting Landscapes: Late Midwestern Summer

Late August, late summer season
of dank air and mosquito bite

and I’m sitting comfortable on
my screened-in front porch

when the irradiant odor of an early
rotting cedar rises up.

And a few leaves already
fold over in the trees

and the black walnut’s fruit
falls to the ground.

Imagination can’t hold this scene still.
The exhaust of speeding cars

blooms up into a purple sky,
children run incoherent circles

around dogs that mutter to themselves
in the shifting, dulling shade

and the goldfinches just sit there
twittering like gossips

gathered on a chain link fence
contemplating all the inevitable

changes in the things they see.
It’s August and the world

is looking forward to winter.

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PART V
Siding

My father sold aluminum siding. He'd sell it to anyone, usually the people who wanted it the most could afford it the least. Some of the people he sold it to might not've needed it at all. At first, they didn’t want it. Just a coat of Sears Brand every few years. He'd sell it anyway. He'd show them why they needed it, he’d show them how the failings of the exterior surfaces represent the failings of the inhabitants. He'd urge them to sign. Siding, vinyl replacement windows, seamless aluminum gutters. Matching aluminum trim, storm windows, storm doors. Whatever they'd buy, my father would sell. Mornings as they walked down the driveway, I'd hear him and his partner joke about how badly they needed it before they’d drive off to work, the upholstered sedan leaving a trail of smoke signals dissolving into the air.

*

I live in a wood frame house on Second Avenue in Takoma Park, Maryland. My room is a converted uninsulated attic. I usually wake up when the light begins to fall from the leaves of the still oak outside my window. My neighbor is in his yard and he woke me up this morning when he repeatedly shot his dog in the ass with a BB gun. I don’t know if I imagined it or not. All I remember is the blank lack of light falling on my face, the hideous squeal of the dog, my inability to understand it all. I noticed the first breeze in days coming through the window. For Williams, the task is to take simple things and detach them from ordinary experience and place them into the imagination. The poem becomes a new form, a reality itself. How unrecognizable experience is. I wanted to transform the crude pop of the BB gun into something beautiful. Something that would say:

On Saturday, June 16 1990, Jeff Greer, of 6505 Second Avenue, woke up and looked out his window and saw a man in his early thirties repeatedly shooting a dog in the ass with a BB gun, and learned something from that experience.

I couldn’t. I move around detached from all this detail. All this experience seems to have already happened.

*

Jurassic, Cretaceous. Whatever you want.

*

Remodeling brochures, magazine offers, loan statements. Credit card applications, postcards, the occasional letter are all the mail I get. A letter from my father welcomed me back to the States, he asked when I’d go to work with him selling siding.

*

The uncanvassed world of Saturday morning.
A figure blending into the air is heavy with some inevitable knowledge
that summer leads to fall. The only things
I recognize are clues: the number
of the bus, the address on my neighbor’s house,

the sunlight that falls and fractures
over almost ordered lines
of splintered and stained roofs,

roofs that I should recognize.
I’m familiar with none of this.
These commonplace colors

and shapes I manipulate
into tropes of memory and pathos
are merely what I want to see.

It’s so difficult, this burden
of memory, so difficult,
so early in the morning.

*

Aluminum was first used as an exterior wall covering in the 1950’s. Aluminum is synonymous with low maintenance and long life. By itself, aluminum, however, unless anodized, is subject to pitting and scarring and other forms of unattractive oxidation. Aluminum siding is protected by a factory applied finish. Years of research and development has gone into perfecting this durable finish: you want to pay more for a better product. You need a better product.

*
I know all sorts of things. I know the age of the museum buildings, I know the building materials, I know where the bathroom is and I know the museum closes at 5:30. I don't know shit about dinosaurs. Two children, a boy and a girl, clean and well-mannered, brother and sister, spent $8.45 on dinosaur bubble gum yesterday. The boy pulled a damp ten-dollar bill out of his sock.

*

After we moved to the suburbs, we'd Sunday drive past our old house and my parents would comment on its upkeep, the texture of the lawn, the immensity of the pink hydrangeas monstrous in bloom, the deterioration of the pastel wood frame. My father always muttered that it needed some siding. I asked once why we didn't have aluminum siding on our house, my father only laughed.

*

The standard thickness of aluminum siding is 0.024 gauge for flat sections over 5 inches and without backing. Narrower widths and sidings with attached factory backing are commonly 0.019 gauge. Backing gives the siding its insulative properties. Aluminum siding with no backing will do little to increase the R-value of your home.

*

The unmarketable sorrow of Washington's streets on Saturday morning. No one speaks to nobody else on the 13th Street bus. The ads all say: Buy, Sell or Buy. No one talks to strangers. At Harvard Street, someone sells a sparkling foil packet of something to an old man whose teeth chatter in the heat like fragments of light flickering through a tree. Light reflects into the bus off the aluminum window pane and becomes almost luminous to those of us witnessing. Even though the bus stops, neither of the men gets on the bus.

*

My neighbor's house reminds me of Hopper's "Cape Cod Evening." Yesterday during my lunchbreak from the dinosaur shop, I walked past the t-shirt salesmen, past the pretzel vendors, past all the tourists and their lovely glittering coins and crisp twenties, right into the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, where it's all marble and glass. I sat in the cold museum air and stared at the painting just as I stand staring out my window to watch my neighbors on their porch: the reverent man watches his reflection on a portable TV, the woman talks to her daughter, who also talks on a cordless phone, the antenna waves in the air, a signal of all our glorious distress. I can hear them speak but can't make out words. The sun sets behind them. It throws a final sheet of pink light down onto the asphalt in front of them, and I'm the only one that cares.
* 

Some aluminum siding is flat finished, as were the first types back in the 1950’s. However, simulated patterns of natural wood are now often available. Many different colors are also available, though most homeowners prefer light pastel colors such as white, yellow, blue, or pink.

* 

The National Gallery of Art is constructed from Tennessee Rose Pink Marble. This marble, unique to an area of Eastern Tennessee, originates from seven different quarries. Each three inch thick panel measures five feet across and two feet high. Approximately 310,000 cubic feet of Tennessee Rose Pink Marble was used in the construction of the East Building. An undisclosed amount of this marble is warehoused in a facility in Landover, Maryland, just in case one of the buildings should need to be reconstructed. There is not enough marble warehoused to reconstruct both buildings.

* 

Out in our suburb, all the trees got cut down. After moving in, my parents planted a small maple and soon after they pitched in with all the neighbors to put up wire fencing around all the yards.

* 

Permanence is what it offers,
it never rusts, it never rots,
it never needs paint or stain,

throw your kid’s ball up against it
throw the bat, throw the dog’s dish.
Hell, why you’re at it, why not

just throw the dog. It’ll still
be here long after we’ve all
turned to dust. Just think of this:

think of your grandchildren growing
old in this house and they’ll
have you and this siding to thank.

All you need to do is sign.
Sign right here, sign your name
and you’ll never regret.
This will be a good day at work. The bus is nearly empty, I’ve got a seat. These people I see every Saturday on this bus look less and less familiar as the ride continues. The sun already warms the aluminum frame of the bus window and we all watch light falling across the aisle breaking down into random patterns of color and turning into a sample wheel of pastel color chips.

Aluminum siding is commonly attached horizontally on the exterior wall, but a few companies offer a line of siding that can be attached vertically. Matching soffit coverings, inside and outside corners, window and door trim, and vents are often available. The standard panel length is 12 to 13 feet.

All the pink-bricked houses put into a construction of wire fences as if someone intended to preserve this as artifice, as if anyone cared.

Except for modest claims of memory, the occasional fluxes and refluxes of our troubled minds as we sit out on our front porches watching power lines expand out into the skies where suburbia’s fathers look down forlorn with the dumb pride of those who create by accident.

Nothing will be saved from this place where a house, where memory, oxidates into dust.
Nothing will remain.

*

His office was a remodeled Texaco station with oxidating empty tanks underneath the parking lot. When I'd go on a lead with him, I'd only sit and watch. I begged him to let me sell the siding. I could radiate the almost kaleidoscopic color wheel, I could hit the piece of wall in the sample case with the miniature bat if he'd just give me a chance.

*

Dinosaurs, tour buses, security guards. T-shirt vendors, pretzel wagons, the thick pathos of summer air. Every statement becomes new again with repetition: I work for the Smithsonian Institution, all those buildings made of marble, the profits go towards educational programs, the kids just love it, don't they, I'm selling what nobody needs but everybody wants. There must be a reason for all this excess.

*

The oak outside my window, its leaves fluorescent against the clear morning sky.

Oak, the light falling through your leaves might be the symbolic light of imagination.
The way a painting on the wall radiates through a darkened room with light that turns each speck of color infinitely as if everything were made up only of parts of light, each ray falls from beauty onto a dull stone wall.

*

A teenage boy sits in front of me on the bus. I recognize him. He works in the food court at the Old Post Office Pavilion but I don't say hello. I think he works at the gyro stand's deep fryer. Or maybe he microwaves the baked potatoes before someone else
smears them with butter, I can't remember. He's watching a handheld TV with an earplug speaker turned up so high I can hear Daffy Duck. Something about consequences.

*

Across the street, the neighbors have a clean little frame house with vinyl siding, a boat, a camper truck. Next-door is a large decaying house with asphalt shingle siding where, by my count this morning, there are seven and one-half cars in the driveway and yard. The one-half is the abandoned rear end of a pickup Dodge. Everyone in this neighborhood gets along. Everyone visits everyone else. But that time I parked too close to his boat was the only time I talked to the neighbor across the street.

*

Hopper never intended to paint people posturing, looking sad, grimacing. He wasn't concerned with portraiture, he wanted to paint sunlight falling on the side of a house.

*

Vinyl siding has colors that are more appealing than aluminum, perhaps because color runs throughout the panel rather than being factory applied to the surface. One shortcoming about vinyl siding is the way vinyl becomes brittle in cold temperatures. Thus, cracks can develop when struck. Before you decide upon one or the other, investigate the market and manufacturers. You can get a clearer picture of maintenance, durability, and the ease of installation. Then you can make your final purchase decision.

*

My father took me into the office on Saturdays, paid me five bucks to sweep up. He'd order White Castles for lunch, and then we'd watch the game. When I was old enough, he sent me out canvassing. On a cool April Saturday, I circled all the well-trimmed lonely sidewalks of Hazel Park, Michigan until I got a lead. When he made the sale that same day, light shot out of his eyes.

*

This bus stops at every block. I'll never make it to work on time. All that's left on 13th St. are wig shops, drive-thrus, those places where you can cash your check, buy some money orders, some lottery tickets, some cigarettes. Everything's closed this early in the day.
Surface preparation is essential. The condition of your home will determine the extent of surface preparation. Your professional siding installer will go over the entire house and nail down any loose panels. Any unevenness must be corrected as much as possible. Depressions will be filled and boards that are bulging will be cut in the center and nailed back to a level position.

* 

At 13th and Euclid, sidewalk turns to steam.
No one wakes
on a day like this
unless they can't.
A man drags his son
to the bus. He calls
him lazy, he reminds us
of the consequences,
his son doesn't hear him.
He's pretending not to hear.
A brushstroke rises
from the vent pipe above
Fast Charlie's BBQ & Chinese.

* 

Begin by attaching undersill trim to the top of the facia board all around the house. This undersill trim should be attached at the uppermost edge of the facia and nailed into place. Later, the facia cover will be pushed up and locked into place. First, cut the panel at this site to fit over the soffit. After all of the soffit has been covered, the facia is installed.

* 

Two boys wait with their mother out on the porch as the bus passes U St. The mother holds two bags of groceries and tries to find her keys. It's a nice old row house with a steeple roof and painted brick. The paint is peeling and the boys pull flecks of paint off the brick, they flick the chips into the air and the chips rise up and swirl into the sky. These boys are filling the sky with color. The house next door has windows covered up with cinder blocks. She can't find her keys.

* 

An old man catalogs
patterns worn into
cement sidewalk,
his hands work on a blank tablet,
he whistles and makes
a list of things that he sees,
of things that are gone,
reminders of a place
that's fallen apart fleck by fleck
and rises back towards an
anonymous source of light.

*

The first panel's bottom edge is interlocked with the bottom strip and the top of the first panel is nailed into place. Nails should be driven through the slots along the top edge of the panel, but should not be driven so the top edge of the panel is damaged. The top edge of the first panel is where the second panel's bottom edge interlocks. Some contractors like to complete one wall of the house at a time, and this makes sense when all the materials are so close at hand.

*

An old man without a name sings at the bus stop near K St. He plays paddle-ball. A light mist falls but won't continue. The air turns to steam and all the things of the city: the signs, the rooftops, the windows, the monuments, the traffic, the streetlights, and the specks of people traveling about, all the things are beginning to shine. This man sings the city back into innocence. He knows it all exists in the present tense. He sings and looks away from the bus.

*

The edge of the siding will interlock with the J channel around the bottom and sides of the windows. Don't force it into place. Seasonal changes in temperatures will cause contraction and expansion. As the courses of siding rise up to the level of the rake you will have to make diagonal cuts. A sliding “T” bevel should be used to help you obtain the exact angle. The blade of the sliding “T” bevel is laid against the angle and the handle is positioned so that the angle is duplicated. The blade and the handle are then locked in this position with a set screw and the angle is transferred to the sliding strip.

*

In his 200 page
wide ruled #09910
Mead Marble Composition Notebook,
the man who lists all
the detail of this place,
its angular skyline that's
so often been reproduced into the neighborly artifice of postcard, collectible spoon, t-shirt, and commemorative plate, does not worry how his words might upset the balance between imagination and reality. He gave that up years ago. In his mind, this place will exist in nothing but the tense of present perfect: *I am seeing, you are seeing.* The city, it is living forever.

*  

When you get to the peak of the house, the last panel is attached in the same manner as the “J” channels under windows. The job progresses until all sides of the house have been covered with the siding. Then corner caps are slid into place at all outside corners. Working quickly, a crew of two men can finish an average-sized house in no more than two days.

*  

My father’s siding business finally went bankrupt and we moved. He wanted out of town. I watched him clean out his office on a Sunday afternoon when I was too young to understand the significance. He said we’d find something we could do as a team. He took everything, all the Alcoa sample cases, the commemorative hockey pucks, the complimentary Instamatic cameras, the diminutive wood bats, the gleaming vinyl windows, the sample seamless gutters. All the business cards. All the magazines scattered over the floor. All the boxes filled up. He took it all. He wanted out of this life. The remodeling business wasn’t for him. All the papers out of the desk. When we loaded the borrowed van, he didn’t know if he’d ever need that stuff again.

*  

I walk up to the museum and show my badge to the security guard who is spending his morning making a list of places he’s lived. It is a detailed list with addresses, zip codes, phone numbers, the current residents or, the date the house was demolished. I say *good morning* and we talk about how hot it will be today because we both felt no breeze on the way in and I then head down an escalator that drops me off in front of a display of dinosaur bones. It will be a good day for dinosaur sales. Already there are five, maybe six, tour buses parked in front of the museum. Some of the tourists wander around taking photographs of nothing in particular: street signs, flagpoles,
trash bins, passing vans filled with scouts, t-shirt vendors. Nothing can be done to reconcile all of this. I get some cafeteria coffee, I notice the new variety of dinosaur-shaped candies at the checkout, I sit down with my warm foam cup in the warmth of the flickering cafeteria lamps.

* 

My father and I drive that van loaded up with all we need to remodel the future. Arm in arm, we sell ourselves into tomorrow street by dead-end street, house by forlorn house, door to anonymous door. We're looking for a place where there is no pity for the past tense. I reserve my pity for the present. I pity the ignorant gulls that swarm over the grassy mall too stupid to laugh at themselves. I pity the self-reliant lummox in the Buick who sits out in front of the neighbor’s house, honking and waiting for someone to come out. I pity my neighbor and his hapless, yelping dog. I pity the reader. My father and I move on in silence, the city unrolls in the windshield, the trees are filled up with the light that tries to fall through the green leaves—filled up with a knowledge that the leaves will eventually turn to rust and fall back into the earth.
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