THE MONSTRANCE: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Bryan D. Dietrich, B.A., M.P.W.
Denton, Texas
May, 1994
THE MONSTRANCE: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Bryan D. Dietrich, B.A., M.P.W.
Denton, Texas
May, 1994

These poems deconstruct Mary Shelley’s monster from a spiritually Chthonian, critically post-structuralist creative stance. But the process here is not simple disruption of the original discourse; this poetry cycle transforms the monster’s traditional body, using what pieces are left from reception/vivisection to reconstruct, through gradual accretion, new authority for each new form, each new appendage.

The wounded wanderings and halting attempts at love of Shelley’s (then Universal Studio’s, then my own) socially-impaired Monster belie, I hope, a neo-romantic refiguring of postmodern angst. Here, I attempt to shift the current critical discourse from a focus on meaninglessness (a monster simply destroying his master’s paradigm) to a sense of joy when confronting ambiguity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROLOGUE: The Monster and the Gypsy</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER'S FIRST LESSON</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: I. Constantinople</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: I. On the Anastasis of Monsters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: I. Jan. 21, 1870</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER NODDING</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER LEARNS ABOUT FIRE, AGAIN</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: II. Budapest</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: II. On My Library</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: II. April 13, 1870</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER AND THE GYPSY JOIN THE CIRCUS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER AND THE GYPSY MOTHS</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: III. Belgrade</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: III. Aug. 7, 1870</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: III. On Absalom</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: IV. Florence</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: IV. Dec. 30, 1870</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: IV. On Reasons for Going to Hell</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER AND THE LITTLE MISS</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER CONSIDERS PROGENY</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: V. Delphi</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: V. On Conception</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: V. Jan. 1, 1871</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER CONTEMPLATES SPACE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER LEARNS TO READ</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: VI. Transylvania</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: VI. Sept. 1, 1871</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: VI. On Darwin, On Wholes</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER ATTENDS MASS</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER'S RETIREMENT</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GYPSY LETTERS: VII. Venice</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MASTER DIARIES: VII. Oct. 7, 1871</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS: VII. On the Evolution of the Human Gait</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MONSTER'S LAST LESSON</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You'll need a corpse, your own or someone else's.

You'll need a certain distance; the less you care
about your corpse the better. Light should be
unforgiving, so as to lend a literal
aspect to your project. Flesh should be putty;
each hair of the brows, each lash, a pencil mark.

—Scott Cairns
"Embalming"
PROLOGUE:

The Monster and the Gypsy

No one, least of all the Monster himself, expected he would fall for her. But night—cast blue and green by the simpler magics she knew so well—drew him into the circle of her flame. She was a Gypsy, mostly, motley and mysterious, cowled in a life her hands had stitched together like her cloak.

And when he stumbled on her wagon, on her, there in that thicket of poplars—so lithe and smooth, dervishing in the dark—he could not separate her body from the play of light on wood. The cloak gave her away though, and when, stiff, bandylegged and frightened, he came to stand before her—hands shaking,

stretched out, cupped, begging he thought for water, for crusts, something from this warmth she half controlled—she traced too carefully the life lines of his wrists, his neck, the blue stitching in his palms, cried. And, as he too let bright
water slip the ridges of each old wound
which bound him tight, she took him under her cloak

and into her wagon and played for him
a song that, like so many others, she
had piecemealed from the pine. He knew then, here
in the shadow of a castle he had once
called his wife, his womb, how masters can be
chosen, how shadows take you in, how songs,
Gypsies, monsters, all, are cobbled from desire.
That body is not dead. It has never lived! I created it!

I made it with my own hands from bodies taken from graves from the gallows—anywhere!

—Henry Frankenstein
1931 Universal Picture
"You haven't got a brain," he said, projecting, it seemed, from that raw space beneath his hump. The night of the fire. The Hunchback was teasing him again. As always just beyond such playground as the chains allowed, hard torch and easy insults at the ready. "Just a lump of shit the Master topped off with bolts."

It wasn't as if the Monster could understand—and neither was foolish enough to really think so—but hatred, bud of the kind of love only ancient siblings know, has little truck with language. This was, mostly, all the Monster knew—this ragged heap shaped like he must have thought most men were shaped.

So when the villagers came and the Master set them free, when he found himself and that other forsaken, there on the stone roof where even the ballustrades were giving in to flame, when men below began to call up for someone to throw the evil down, he gave them what they called for, what they wanted.
I.

He sang, as best he could, among the leaves
whose lives he'd come to know as bed and board.
Atonal, guttering, broad and crude he soared,
nonetheless, on notes he'd borrowed, on sleeves
and coattails, on fragments which the waxwings
he'd found seemed, *themselves*, to clothe themselves in.
There, shivering and forked half-naked between
old limbs, singing as if to say mournings
never end, the Monster—confused, scared—
could find no way to name the silence friend.
The flames—though far away now, though long tiered
and tied to stone they still engulfed—had no end.
Wingless, a wanderer in the earth, disaster less
unreal than nightingales, he feared the fear of the masterless.

II.

Later, looking back, he'd mime to the Gypsy
how he thought the birds were screaming, afraid
of what flight they were capable of. How he—
lonely among those limbs, each yell a cascade
drawn backwards up his throat—poured bellows down
the surface of the bark below his perch,
unaffected, unaffected over the brown,
matted moss, the nearby stands of birch
through which he'd run the night before, shivering
from a fire he'd help begin in hearts
of men he hadn't met—men whose siblings,
dead now, gone, might have been parts of his parts.
The castle in flames, the birds—to his ears—valiantly screaming,
he told her he sat there for days, being born, only dreaming.
Okay, maybe we weren't *made* for each other.
You could be right. And he probably *is*
too tall, a touch tender at the edges.
But then you never wanted me to smother,
did you? Aren't *you* the one who always says
the bigger the man, the lower his hedges?
He doesn't try to keep me or make me
over, doesn't expect so much I want
to scream—you know how bad the others have been.
And really, Mother, he's no more ugly
than I am plain. *See,* he doesn't think that.
Unlike *some,* if you know what I mean.

Sometimes I think I can almost see
what *you* saw in raising me. The apricot
tree you helped me plant on the bank of the Seine,
the look you took from what *I* must have
trembled with... I can catch myself catching *him,*
just the same. We built birdhouses together
last week. *Yes,* birdhouses! Would you believe
it? White pine castles to hang from trees, for when
we stop the wagon. And when we'd tethered
a few to our first ash, the most fetching laugh
chuckled out of him, and he smiled, and then,
Mother, then he wanted to dance. This Monster
whom I've never called a monster to his face,
this man who seems so awkward, graced with grace
of other men, this fellow with a love of lightning, lace,
graveyard picnics—he wed me to his long mismatched embrace.
THE LAME PRIEST'S EXEGESIS

I. On the Anastasis of Monsters

I've often heard a monster roams the heaths
around these towns, that he was thrown together
out of pieces from the ground. The wreaths

were not yet wilted when, untethered
from his time, he launched another journey through
this wood of Dante's, mine. I gather

he is guiltless for the seasons of his stew—
ingredients his maker must have dashed
in here and there. But what would Dante do

with such a soul, retreaded, dead, rehashed,
and what about those parts—the head, the hide,
a hanged man's heart, the lower left and slightly mashed

intestine of a Jew? A suicide,
a Muslim and a Christian and a slave,
a sinner, saint, pornographer, the pride

of Prussia's war—they gave their all to graves,
but now they give again. They pull, they push,
they grasp and grope and billow at the nave.

And when they die again, a sanguine hush
upon the lips, when monster loses ghost
to phlox, to nodding onion slips, when lush,

false hellebore buddings bind his bones for host,
how will such attrition be regarded
down in hell? Which portion of which lost,

indebted soul will then return, re-sorted,
to save a former owner from his sin,
and where begin? Is one carotid

artery enough to shade the dim,
to add an accolade to he who's damned,
to teach a Stygian wader how to swim?

And what about that saint whose skull was scammed?
I can't imagine Augustine (or some soul
of his ilk) as headless through the grand

parade of centuries up there. His whole
would be diminished, and the Monster racked
up short, if part by part the angels doled
his better pieces out. Yet when their tack
has long returned all morsels, stiff or slack,
what then, when God's own Trump demands his borrowed portions back?
THE MASTER DIARIES

I. Jan. 21, 1870.

Maybe the smell—cut grass, old moss, wet cobbles—that, or seeing the Hunchback, healed, well, returned to dredge the dungeon. Maybe his hunch, what I never could ignore. Whatever it is, as the surrey pulls from the castle—his mooned face in the tower still waving—as reach out the window to let a breeze amputate the long, grey finger my smoke has grown, something in that weakened wind reminds me of the Crab Boy. That wasn't his name of course, just what we used to call him. Church school, at recess.

We're all standing around the nativity, cold, taunting the new kid—an ancient ritual, a jinx of blood—but this time we feel the difference: something tactile to taunt. He's poor, to be sure, but we don't know enough, not yet anyway, to be against that.

Some say children beggar the angels, but when we looked him in the eye then, vagrant wind kicking loose hair into our faces, and somebody said, "Go, on, try some chin-ups, just don't cut Christ's roof in two," and someone else—maybe me, yes, I think, me—asked
him who he got to shake his thing after he pissed,
he cried a bit, raising two half hands to his eyes.
We turned away from this. It's not like we didn't
know—we'd seen him pinch at his food each day—we just
hadn't mulled it over much, not really, or thought,

only taunted: *Doesn't have a way to pray,* to point.
And now, still seeing the Hunchback, how his oval
silhouette recedes, his hand eternally raised, I
realize who I've hated since my monster left. And the wind?
It moves things, sure, but mostly wears them down.
THE MONSTER NODDING

Mostly, he could do no more than watch her dream—this arch, that cheek, the instep of her back turned toward him. And in the fire's timid illumination, he would imagine her naked, the moon's high sheen reflecting from each small, elfish nipple as she moved to a rhythm only she, the pale chinaberry and the long mute know.

But often, when he dreamed of how he knew she would hold him—close, wet, both a bit blue in the weak light—he feared she thought he would break apart, unpiece himself at the seams. His Gypsy would draw back then, hesitant, imagining just whose heart he had inherited from his master's vast puzzling, whose grasp, whose penchant for eggs and broccoli.

And would he—he could see her wondering—would he want to chain her as he himself had been chained, had come to know the language of whip, board and bolt? Or would he count her as he counted his beads, his poppy blossoms, throwing the last away? Would he, innocent,
dumb, heave her into some strange body
of water, that womb from which he did not come?

Would he want to fork her with the lightning
he called friend, break her, stitch her into something
he could better recognize? The Monster,
waking then from these dreams, cold and frightened
in a night too near this burning, would watch
the firm rise of her chest and draw from her
body a surer, more seamless breath.
THE MONSTER LEARNS ABOUT FIRE, AGAIN

Not *all* his scars were make-work of the Master.
It wasn't that he was stupid, the big lug,
and he didn't really *believe* he could pluck
and later press the petals of that flame,
but sometimes those with bigger chests—vast expanses
of bone to hide their hearts behind—harbor ships
there, not stones. Dream galleons, lost ghost schooners
whose maps deny the ocean has an end.

So when he grappled with himself afterward.
one hand lodged firm in a mouth too full of teeth.
when the Gypsy came and bandaged him, attempted
to teach him sense, how even the gorgeous
burns, he pushed her away, knowing already.
Those pained roses—now simmering, now fading
cold—seemed to pretty his joins with buds. Like bracelets.
THE GYPSY LETTERS

II. Budapest

And I wonder why you call me addle-brained. Still, this fiasco wasn't just my fault— I let Monster drive the wagon. Okay, maybe it wasn't smart, but I tend toward credulity where love's involved. I'd strained my back the day before and the camphor salt can make me punchy. The road to Vecsés isn't too bad, so after the last ford—its spring-bulged river behind us—I paused, reined in the horses, and, as we came to a halt, ponied up the driver's seat to Monster. Gay and full of what life his master could afford before the village burned them out, my love took over, hitching those thongs to his chest like new hands, like I'd given him his best, last chance at being. He squealed. We drove some while like this, me sleeping, when I guess the road's rumbling woke me. Climbing from my cove of blankets (some you made, Mother), from my stove-warmed shallow into the light, I saw Budapest. Budapest! Was I pissed! But then, when
I looked in those teared, rare eyes—the blue one
first, then the brown—and saw there the sins
of his father, that old fear; when I'd undone
the reins from each furrow they cut in hands
still tremored, pieceworked, pained, I understood
what furies he'd fought in getting lost, the urge to prove he could
stay the raveling of threads, faults he knew as birthmark bands.
At night, all my books rise up squalling
with the sounds of a thousand pages
tearing from the walls. The plunging Vs
of their covers—opening, closing,
flapping Donne and Darwin against the dark
clustering air for flight—lift them, swirling
like bad ideas of bats, madly,
visciously, and all the more dangerous
for the gilt on some of the pages.
But then, hovering like giant ghost
moths about my naked fixture, above
me, here in my bed, somehow still asleep,
they converge and descend and enter
me—the words, that scandalous ink, bleeding
back out like sweat into the blank sheets
I lie on. And when I am full, each eye
returned from its jog through favorite
passages, when I am packed up brimming
with the clarity of Calvin or the paled
ponderings of Pope, the shunned skin tones
of Sade, even the sea star shades of Verne,
when the shelves have grown silent and empty
and deathly dim, almost translucent,
I, too, grow faint in the absence and rise
and look about, and, finally, seeing
nothing out of place, vaguely hungry
but far too tired still to eat, I descend
again and fill the hollow I have
left with the question each figure makes.
I wondered when I set him free
if he'd escape the fire,
but in the melee that ensued,
between the burning, falling wire,
generator sparks, the ash
which frittered through the fray
like blasted, heat-blacked, lava glass—
the mirror shards that paled Pompeii—
between the cavalcade of stone,
the timber, tendered, cracked,
the rush of crushing, pitchforked men
who charged and cheered, ransacked
my father's dam's ancestral home,
between this, he, and I
there fell as well a curtained
caul, finale, a goodbye.

I have not seen the Monster now,
his lurching, halting ways,
for months that seem like blessed years
where hours blur to daze.

His footsteps have retreated, fled
this smoldering debris
where what I can't undo I did
to life's extremities.

The worst part is the if I cannot
abdicate, erase,
the if that does not recognize
the then I know is base.

I now believe I made him up
of parts of parts of scenes
of books I've read, or dreams I've had
of almosts, likes and seems.
THE MONSTER AND THE GYPSY JOIN THE CIRCUS

I. Daguerreotype

When the carnival came—all hurdy-gurdy
and conch music, all light and limb and breath
like caramel corn, pipe organ, October
bluster—when the wagons came spilling
over the hill near their camp, the Monster
saw them first. And seminal in that seeing
came color: Motley and mahogany,
turquoise and teal, orchid, apricot, shades
of cerulean, of greened and reddish gold.
Banners too, flamed high in fragmented
tatters, portents of wind long gone in the tooth.
Stove in or whole, overrun with little
Turk boys, with the seed of several nations,
game and gimp, well and ill, the wagons caught
craw in his throat and there they seemed to stay,
hover, between heart and head, between one dim
luster—what they had—and another. The Gypsy,
alone enough to light on like dreams, took his
hand and together they approached that wild
din, looking for foremen, for home, for hire.
II. Palimpsest

The Circus, of course, adopted them. Wire needed to be strung, holes dug, tent pegs filed...

And while the Monster attended to this, his lover turned her hand at Tarot. Still, the tip she got from a mark one day—months into this whim they called their working tour of Europe, they called their honeymoon—saying she ought to wander down the midway, came, as revelations go, as something of a shock. Her fiddle in hand—the better, she thought, to field a truth or two—she feigned minstrelsy till, undaunted, she tracked him down at the sledghammer booth. Bold as you please, he was winning stuffed demons, Hades hoppers, for some strange woman. He kissed her, loverly, each time he rang the bell. Long after that seeing, after the Monster had gone and come, had lost her then regained what seemed to him the filling for his life, his Gypsy pie, after they talked—overwhelks and warm vodka—after the storms, stars, his death, after she'd long retired that violin of hers, she

would remember, still, how he had, only then, seemed monstrous. How, there—among ligaments
of lumber, tendons of two by four, muscles
of many men, skin of scavanged canvas—
he seemed unsettling, a sum of sawdust
lost in sawdust, too appropriate for his
host, too much a circus himself, like
the ends of too many means, like the lost
love some clowns sew up in suits, like that
oafish fall so many think a circus will
redeem. And though she'd forgiven him by the second week—
had mostly—it was the first and last time she named him freak.
THE MONSTER AND THE GYPSY MOTHS

She didn't understand at first why he chased them. Why, at night, under the influence of blue wine and moonlight, Welsh tobacco and surprising sex, he crawled from their bed and ran naked to the forest, into the space its thinning bristle began. Sparse and upright—like cold fingers escaping coffins to reclaim some missing limb—the trees would enclose him as he whirled, lurching and skyclad, ponderous and grave, veined strangely with pale branchings of scars.

She could forgive anything, this Gypsy, lover of monsters, even the fact she would probably outlive him, had already, any number of times. She could forgive his massive ways, the constant goofing that set her magic, so often, off balance. She could forgive the looks and speculations their pairing had accumulated. Such were the weights that gathered to them. But sometimes, when he left her, her pallet, her own body barely filling the indentation that remained, there in the candle-lit corners of their lantered wagon, she could not forgive this man, the child she would never bear herself.
She could not forgive him—when he was naked, playful, blundering off on his own after the moon—she could not forgive him his taste of independence.

But when, at last, she followed him to a hollow tree where the night moths hived, when she confronted him in the dewed half dark as he petted its brilliant bark, the Monster, trying to explain, stroked it once more, watched a final moth return to its busy center, and turned to her. There, he brushed her cheek.
THE GYPSY LETTERS

III. Belgrade

You'd have thought I'd pulled the sky right out from over him, Mother, the way he bolted up, pointing, from my lap, to the horizon. This was yesterday, in an open tomb, picknicking as we waited for the rest of the circus—all but the bears—outside Belgrade. A storm was coming just over the crest of some low hills. It was as if the Monster's god had returned, come back for what life its son had taken. Anyway, that's the way doom seemed to have seized his jaw. The frightened pout I've come to love (though deeper now) molded that over-furrowed brow, and, nuzzling, found my breast as I stood to stare down the storm. The Monster kneeled against me, the flat of his head—dark, damp hair—just under my chin. I felt him sob as he drew me back to the wagon. I thought he was afraid the lightning would taunt him then take him home—his father unhinged at our dallying—but when, at the first sound of approaching thunder,
he leapt from our bed and swept the curtains free
from the door I watched him watch the stars unbraid
their patterns from a sky shuttlecocked to sack
cloth. Seeing his loss now, what he feared he'd miss,
I unpacked my scissors. I fixed it. We kissed.
We've cut paper stars now, on twining string.
Short sheeted skies hung from curtain rod rings.
III. Aug. 7, 1870.

*I had thought I might send this latest muse to my friend the Parish Priest. He doesn’t get out much anymore—his leg and back kept him from seeing the recent meteor shower. Maybe I’ll just read it to him, our next tea.*

—H.F.

They come as fallen offspring of the sky’s mute womb, revealing in the sleeping trees’ horizons midnight’s colloquy of lies.

As green takes on the weight of dusk, fireflies strike spark, collect in clouds on mating sprees, coming as fallen offspring of the skies they did not form. This hub of dead men’s spies, solar center where fires freeze horizons—midnight’s colloquy of lies—

this is where they breed new hope, survivalize the ritual of darkness that they seize.

They come as fallen offspring of the skies that shadows know from shadow-like disguise, but not from dawn’s regret, or, yet, from these horizons, midnight’s colloquy of lies.
As lightning's children, none admit surprise
when showers shape a meteoric frieze.
They come as fallen offspring of the sky's
horizons; midnight's colloquy of lies.
THE LAME PRIEST’S EXEGESIS

III. On Absalom

*Tis said they eat each other.*

—Shakespeare

Head to head they lie, simple, dead,
one composed, the other only
half so, like coffins rubbing skulls
in the grave. I came across them,
two crickets, outside my parish
on stone steps where the sexton
plies his trade with poison, and keeps
the population down. Last night

there were thousands of them, climbing
the smooth-faced sand, the blasted glass
standing between what they could not
know and what they must have perceived
as a kind of heaven. Mostly
blind, but for the urge toward each
other—here they found newer gods
under glass. Here, they put away

their progeny for hope, came to
lay seige to the call of the light,
that vision not nearly so clear
as even one pair of long, barbed
legs playing shadows into song.
And so much less immediate,
this light, so much more delicious
than the rough press of carapace

or the mandible's hinged caress.
These two—probably missed by chance,
by the mass exhaustion brooms know—
they did not dine at the same plate.
One, it seems, managed to find it—
eternity—in the sand, in
that single crumb of sleep strange sandals
left behind; the other, glory

in the hunger of his brother.
THE GYPSY LETTERS

IV. Florence

Did I tell you, Sis, how Monster almost left
once, how he thought I was an easy moon,
replaceable by fire? Okay, I know
how you loathe poetry, so I'll tell it slant:

It happened after the circus happened. Theft
would have been much easier, the heft
of such simpler loss, lighter. The blow
never hurts till it's stopped, till the slow
grind of bone is left to grow maroon
and the knitting skin ceded to a different loom.

It was a minor moment, I suppose—can't
you just see me pining away, me?—but rant

I did, a little raving too, when he came
home some months after we'd joined up, started
packing. He'd met his master's lover at the games,
won her a doll, become, once more, unhearted—
she too, I suppose. They'd been together
before---she, his first sight after the grave
exhumations, the stitches, the storms, bad weather.
Actually, he did go, for a time—saved
me the scene of throwing him out—but when
he came back less broken (though I'd ever
thought I wouldn't) I took him in again.

He'd grown some, beyond the old reins... But, I've never
mentioned our freak show either. Its jarred child, glass-shod.
It'll never grow there—gone to whatever god
freaks go to—but in my dreams I set it free.
No running off to learn to run. It suckles me.
THE MASTER DIARIES

IV. Dec. 30, 1870.

It's been a year, so help me, to the day
since I unleashed that Monster born of flame,
usurped my lord my God, forgot to pray,
and, as a body builder, came up lame.

What I unleashed, my monster, bore the flames
more readily than I, my fiancée.
I nearly bloody killed her with my lame
attempt at voiding her necessity,
her ready womb. I, my fiancée,
resumed our bland, doomed lives when he had passed,
attempting to avoid her old necessity,
that dream for children which our species has

presumed. We blanched then, doomed, living when he had passed
as if this race not born of lightning must
be dreams. And children? That which our species has
leveraged life with? I had made it just

a simple race, a boon of lightning. Must
she, then, have tried to join the circus to repay
that leveraged life I'd made? It just

seemed like his attempt to steal my clay.

She, when she tried to join the circus—repay
herself—deserved better, a word, a goal. I pray
his seams will fail now, tempt time to repeal my clay.
It's been a year. God. Help me make another day.
IV. On Reasons for Going to Hell

i.
How about that first lie? Telling your mother you lost the foreign offering, that it slipped away like everything else. And remember how she smiled, not understanding that she could never buy your way into someone else's mansion? Unless, on Sundays, you chose to rent.

ii.
Or Fr. Tom's peep-box? The one with the sliding door and the naked woman inside. Tuppence a peep. Your first erection was a sideshow at High Mass when you snuck in to free her torn and tacky, sticky, paper breasts. He never knew who took her, only you and your trembling hands.

iii.
Maybe that time you thought Christ had come and gone? Sitting on the porch, young, hungry and waiting for your supper, for your father to return from the fields. No one on the street, no one out
walking with walking sticks. Just you. You, knowing that the man wasn’t coming back, that you’d have to burn.

iv.

Definitely that day you came home to your mother sitting at the table, crying. You went to mix her some camomile, and when she said, "Honey, do you know what a separation is?" you turned to her, set her tea down, and all you could think of to say was, "Oh. We’ll miss you."

v.

It may sound silly, but there was that frog thing too. All the other boys egging you on with names like monkey-walk, mignon, prissy Christian, names you hated. The way you hated the feel of the toad in your hand. It was a stone wall, good for dodge-ball. You dreamed that stain for weeks.

vi.

How about the child you never made, the one you thought you could feel when that Thing camped outside the parish one night? There are reasons you don’t talk about it. Most of them have to do with God and waste. Not death, you never thought it was that, but monstrousness. You felt it filling you.
vii.

Or the time you watched that body floating by?
It wasn't even blue yet, only bouyant.
Some girl had decided corpses come back
from voyages out to sea. An eddy, towing
her dark and draggled to the shore, moved slowly.
You didn't call the constable. Or close your eyes.

viii.

So what do you call all this then? Is there no
redemption in interpretation, in crafting
metaphors from death, or suffering, or pain?
Your father called the landlord once, to complain
of sounds inside your walls. Some workmen came. They
sealed the holes. Those birds seemed to live forever.
THE MONSTER AND THE LITTLE MISS

No father but the lightning, that which licked him into life.
No mother but the castle with its womb of polished stone.
Who then to blame for the death of a little girl? Who
to finger as the framer of his ways? Master of his own fate? Or collector of deceits, dissimulation? Who
formed his formless brain? There has been some talk about the rightness of his rain, about the notion that his noggin needed tending, that the Hunchback mucked him up with matter murkier than the usual grey. His brain was pickled, they say.

But not kosher. So what about the Master? Or Lame Priest who taught him penance? Who? Which Oedipus steps forward as the founder and the forger of his crime? Men need mothers—they, unlike the sun, shine always steady, true, sweating clean the harsher burns—but fathers too? Is he that much like loss, like oblivion, or do patterns grow from puzzles put together long ago? Here, view him now, the Monster, one leg up on mortality, one bolt shy of a barn.

He stands on the bank of the river, a daisy stem in hand, its petals picked clean. He's been plucking them with a new friend, a girl, with daisies in her hair. There is water, some lillies, not a cloud in the sky. The water is deep, black, fast.
He is tall, dark, as handsome as the should-be-dead can be,
but not as fast, nor deep as any river, not here.
not now, not when the petals have run dry. There are pieces
he has never pieced together on his own. Questions
he will never come to answer. Death. Is it in him?

Does he know it like a song? Are the lyrics those of the Lame
Priest? Of the Gypsy? Of the Master as he laboured
over roentgens, foot-pounds, ergs? Or, in this moment, glorying
in the sudden knowledge of this and like this, this and not this,
basking in the cranial flash of first associations,
with the Girl on his left, the river on his right, the stem
in his hand, the petals petering out on a more
and more distant tug of water drawing them out to sea,

with something new on his mind and a lighter bounce of learning
in his all-too-regular plod, in this moment when he steps
forward to trade ignorance for light, does the music he hears
turn on those fading cries, on the final suck of pigtails
waving the eddies down? Does he owe this choice to his body,
to the histories he's led? Or, in the sum of his parts,
in a heart he mostly calls his own, has he merely mis-
placed a piece of mortal understanding?
The Gypsy had stopped the wagon to shake her head, to mourn the landscape France had placed before them. Here, the Franco-Prussian war had been and gone, had left its palette drying in the sun, and there... and there...here, and again there, had left the tell-tale signatures of masters: Doré, Goya, Bosch. This had less to do with impressions than with bones that cracked like blackened, once-green wood beneath their wheels. Not much is more immediate. So she didn't take it in, but pushed the sights, the smells away. Monster, though, seemed just as much at home as in a crypt. For him, the niceties of burial were moot at best. So when he climbed down and out, onto that battle field, the plain truth of what remains were left reminded him only of home. As he bent to touch each fragment of what might have been him, as he collected this moment, that thigh or rib for future remembering, as he connected these dry men with not his last thought of the young Girl he'd tossed in the river, as he began to recognize that there was such a thing as death that didn't always deliver its components back to a solid state, as he considered the options one has for faith in at least some sort
of continuity, as he reconsidered
the Gypsy, their love, these dead, hers, and all of his,
as he felt the unexpected rise below his belt
and grew—if only for a moment—ashamed
of all this death, he banished thoughts of little girls
to that sea where he knew at least one would end
up, and turned his mind back—as he turned back—to boats.
He had a thing for maps and ships, a bit of passion
for treasure, for the idea of it. He collected
them these days. Pictures, he could read. Wars, this one,
said Hyer ther bye monstrys at the edges, in blood.
I've been thinking about that fairy tale,
Mother. The one you told, with the maiden
who lost her hands. Some sorcerer wanted
her, bartered her from her father for a sum
of gold. You told me she escaped him, won
her freedom the first two times, flaunted
this awful commerce by being clean as Eden,
by washing then crying clean her hands. Still,
I remember the man's return, his third,
how you said her father, sorry for his deed,
axed her free from fingers, palms, wrists—those places
where her worry went to breed. This, he did
to break up any contract, any word
which might have promised off his seed.
Later, after leaving hands and home—spaces
filled with nothing now—behind, she hid
herself in a wood, married a king who made
her silver hands, bore a child, and then,
just when she thought she'd put the pieces back
together, the sorcerer came again
to name her son a changeling, claim him sin.
And you want to know (you can be so black
and white, Mother) if the Monster and I... When
you might expect... Are we going to wade
on in, plan for the future? Your tale didn't teach
this, though, to trade our grasp for another's reach.

My hands weren't given me by design.

Only now am I learning to use them, to climb.
V. On Conceptions

—for H.F.

I remember the summer when we were pagans together. The time we drove past a tent revival, him screaming, "Satan lives!" just to get their goat. Oddly, it was a full moon, then as well as now, and some place in the time between, I found Jesus. Strange how we wind up embracing corpses, the ones we've tried so poorly to embalm.

And I'm driving home tonight, through this fog that has risen up, unbidden, from red, unfamiliar clay and yellow witchgrass, watching it come alive like the fingers of these withered trees it draws its shadows from, watching streamers of darkness, of this celebration for the birth of a man he says was dumb to die, become pregnant, shiver, and taper their umbilicals back to earth in half-wrapped coils. Still, the night
seems to know the animals will never
really learn to speak. Though I believed it.

And I'm trying to understand. Is it
a love of antiquity, or simply
a crutch carved from rotting scrolls, from bones
no carpenter left behind? I've never

had much of a sex life. Is it worship
of the state I've sealed myself into? Hope?
A rationalization of the doomed
virgin I've become? Or, like Lazarus,

should I dream the hand which will pluck me
from my narrow bed? He told me tonight
how his sister's child was determined dead,
still walled in her womb, how they left it there
to grow black before robbing it at last
from that salt-heavy grave three days later.
He said they made her hold it, all shriveled,
bloody, silent in her arms before they
took it, cleaned it, and buried it again.
He watched me shudder at the thought, afraid
she might have needed that last clutch at
immortality, one final grasp for

the darkness that had been inside. I left
him with a promise to visit once more,
worried how Christmas would find him next
year, if the fog would be as thick, if quite

so many would die again on this road,
alone, on the way home from where fathers—
like his, like mine—might or might not have been
waiting for them, us, patiently, all along.
V. Jan. 1, 1871.

Come. I'd like to ask you about fear, about the nature of obsession. Look, see that kid, scalpel in hand, the bright, corpse and kite-crazed, pre-frocked teen you thought you were before you woke up here, in the middle of everything you might have dreamed of? Is he really you, and is this what you thought of, then, when you rode those Gentuan roads rain had claimed for river beds of tar?

Late summer, nights, driving back from some town, when you crafted playful monsters from each pale swell exploding along horizons, from each touch of greatness lightning teased from air, when each brief glimpse down that black road only frightened you more for the shadow that fell between clarities, when you watched white birch bark, limbs, flash in parceled-out rhythm past the wagon---well, is what you have now what he saw in those moments of light?
Or have you, as you pushed on toward
some home beyond the next slow rise, been
obsessed with blindness, with that long walk
in swaying timber where what you fear
is not behind you in a corner
of the fog, but there, ahead of you,
in a clearing like a tree aflame—
the directive of the ozone’s arced
finger? Don’t be frightened. Go ahead,
tell yourself this. Then live as best you can
between onslaughts of the divine.
Of course he liked things big. It's why he loved
the sky. And when, under the penumbra
of some tree he felt the accumulation
of years, the slow build of stone upon stone,
this edifice of scars he called a body
storing up seasons—the memories of the sun
on this toe, rain on an elbow, balm
on yet another forehead; when he began
to account for the counting up of days
so recently spent out of context,
in other forms, other skins; when he felt vast—
as if he were more than the sum of his parts,
as if he were large himself, larger
than mere fortress of shoulder, tower
of shadow; when he lay there beneath
the separate leaves, experiencing
their pleasure, his pleasure at the patterns
their pieces made, diffusing but still
harvesting the light, he knew that he was
elm-old and that, like the planets the Gypsy
told him circled the sun, he was more
than just a collection of limbate rings.
Eyes closed, he could almost picture himself, toes firmly planted in a field, his arms outstretched to that space his father gave the Master his push from, and he could believe, if only briefly, the wish to hold it all was enough, that juggling those suns in burnt hands—if only in his mind’s eye—was almost just enough to make the pressure ease, make his largeness seem, well, rational, let him beat against the dark between the dark and life’s larger shackles, a ribcage rife with God.
THE MONSTER LEARNS TO READ

Byron, that pouting beast, he could take or leave.
Wordsworth? He could only pronounce him worried.
Too often the last part came out warts. And Keats, well, who survives Keats? Now Coleridge on the other hand—and though neither quite matched, he did have another—Coleridge was chewy. At least as long as the poems had demons, something likely, in them. Still, Shelley seemed dead on—he had an eye for it, death, for knowing what chains meant, and fairies, and fire. And the skylark, so high, cold and far away—though he’d never seen one—the skylark he knew he would know when he ate one, slowly, sucking the soft parts clean from the spine.
THE GYPSY LETTERS

VI. Transylvania

_Even a Gypsy whose heart is full,_

_who shares a prayer’s delight, can learn to turn_

_wolf when the wolfsbane blooms..._ The moon grows pregnant

tonight, Mother, and I'm remembering

Uncle, how they stormed the house that once, dragging

him into the river; how we dreamed him revenant,

someday returning for his Gypsy stick, his stein...

Is it always this way with our people?

When the torches smoke the street—the scythes' lull

echoing like soft water over cobbled,

stone cracks—feet meet feet to hobble

our love of night, to empty our eyes of the moon's full

cup, to drown us, stone us, fancify our ways

into the ways of monsters. We are a motley

bunch, yes, a gaggle that breeds and spreads,

changes, like lyrics to old Bavarian

drinking songs, but we are not—though this pogrom

often claims it—beastly. We are displays.

They see monsters in nothing but heads

too flat, skin too tan, say we're their rot, we

influence, steal... The clothes they make us wear
seem busier every year, each new piece
a ragged graft to hide this hide they've added
to before. But I carry on. We've seen Nice
now, and Brussels. Wiesbaden was as near
to home as I've been in a while. I still get addled
at the strangest things though, Mother. Like how
much lover's skin you breathe in a year. Should it taste like snow?
VI. Sept. 1, 1871.

*My priest friend and I have been discussing what books one should take (if one knew of it, of course, beforehand) to a shipwreck on a desert isle, or arctic waste...*

---H.F.

The first should be heavy,
like a corpse, like foreskin
packed with riotous dreams.
It should make your brain hard
when erecting even
the most grotesque structures.

The second you should save
for Thursday afternoons
when the others in your
library have grown stale.
Read one sentence a week,
to keep what's absent holy.

If there is such a thing,
the third one, a fairy
tale, should be a touch more
bitter than the rest, should
remind you of crowds, crows,
disease, kingdoms left behind.
For variety, leave
the fourth to chance. Draw lots
from a list of your friends'
favorites. Or, to make
things more surprising yet,
borrow one from one you hate.

Number five can be fun.
It's okay. Your prison
will be dreary enough.
Unless the trees provide
the kind of pulp you'd need
for leaves to rewrite heaven.

The last should be slim, no
heavier than a flame.
should help you learn to lust
for sky again. Sanskrit
maybe, something ancient,
a field-guide to forbidden gods.
VI. On Darwin, on Wholes

We come in naked and go out dead.

Seems simple. Almost true. But really,

we're never the same people, no, not
even the same skin. And the organs
too—I hear the body replaces

those as well, cell by cell, every so

many years. Everything I guess, but

the brain—old minds on refurbished frames.

It should be a bigger mystery

than it is, should shake us to the core
to think we've traded off, by coffin
time, all that stuff we thought was us, but

then that's it, isn't it? Our thinking
doesn't change. These gray, alien sacks

of non-refundable ideas,

winding library corridors

seated so close to smells we almost

*just* recall, each arbitrary scheme,

fragile fretwork geared to keep us from

stumping our stupid toes, these brains built
on dreams’ decay, on the several
shades of lost, burnt out races, prevent
our knowing what even stars must understand.
There’s so much more behind us, so few

singular doors to memories we
can never comprehend, to smells we
barely even remember, and to
species we’ve known from the inside out—
so many holes, black or blind or worm
or no, to fall back into now, that
ev’en this morning, slipping in my
shower, not watching what must have been

my skin slip down the drain, I only
saw the water, stuff I belched at birth,
only the slow rise of porcelain
toward a skull I have yet to get
to know. I couldn’t see—at least not
then, when seeing more than me was all
that mattered—how we’re never truly
naked and we’re never less than dead.
THE MONSTER ATTENDS MASS

The glass people pictured there, pieced of fragment,
drew him that Candlemass to a low flame
not one of the windows truly contained—
rather, they only filtered the holy
light he found inside. There, in a filigree
of smoky amber, a priest’s movements stained
the haze with dark trails of absence, laid claim
to each space his hands had been. Strange oddments
which the Monster could not name lay strewn about
the altar, called him further, past the door
and into rows of straight-backed pews the faithful
had abandoned as night drew down.

The Priest, lame but beloved by his town,
took the stranger who had come so late—papal
oddity that he was—in hand and lured
him to a small room where the Monster’s doubt
was comforted by a hole in the thin,
curtained wall. Here, just short of speech, tongued only
with motions, able grunts, with the blunt, lonely
mainstays of the mute, the Monster named his sin.

Though they had found her, shaken, wet, a bit worse
for the river’s wear, the Girl the town had thought
drowned, that reluctant flower the Monster taught
to swim, was safe now, sound. No lasting curse
would hang about his flattish head, no hail
Marys need be said, no rosaries counted,
no incense burned. The Monster rose, departed
his room, turned one last time at the altar rail
and balked at a stick there with a ball, a bell
at its end where it rested against the stones.
Inside it, the Priest said, were holy bones,
then laid it in his hand, a silver frail.
THE MONSTER'S RETIREMENT

He started, the Gypsy recalls, with scribbles.
Worked his way up to painting dead flowers.

roses taped to a wall upside down, each
petal grown crisp and cracked and black. She can

still see them, every purpled stem, like tintypes,
lifecasts cast from a green that sapped away.

And the frescos he painted them on—God,
hundreds of pounds. Layer after layer

of base coat, eggwhite, linseed oil, stuff
she made baklava with. Sometimes, she says,

it took months to lay a neutral surface,
a place he could finally, properly

re-inter the dead. His late period
dwelled on corpses, women for the most part

whose cold arms embraced nothing, whose slack breasts
lay sunken as only the breathless can sink.
Open mouths, open eyes, stale blood gathered
in odd hollows and straggling—a stiff
afterthought—in jagged twigs of hair.
This shift, she says, took years. From bones
of flowers to voluptuousness. Blue nudes.
THE GYPSY LETTERS

VII. Venice

You've been dying to know, love, what it's like.
Well, Sis, dying doesn't do it justice.
Every night when Monster shambles in, comes
to me, stripped, his master's fine needlepoint stretched
tight, trembling to contain a love that's made him
large, I stare at him, hold him, clutch his length
of hair and claw him to me. It's my strength,
I think, the way I hold him down sometimes
that keeps him satisfied. And me? I've touched
every whole of him, made love to thumb,
toe, that buckled knee, tongued his bolts once or twice.
I've even taken him, invaded, piked

him, cradled and stroked his cloven head
as he does mine—goading, guiding it free
from hood and shade, this wood of creeping vine.
Do you remember when we were girls
together, massaging trees to ease their knots,
conjuring mud pies—a whole man once,
remember?—from the clay of the occasional
crypt behind the occasional church
we were told to steer clear of? And how arch
those games began? How messy the miracle
of shaping became? And then the chance
brushing of breast on breast, the tease, the hot
growth of those tough, tube-riddled, bloody pearls
building in our chests. Do you remember when
game turned earnest and we tumbled finally
to earth? How we wrestled, always, with the dead?
So there's been some talk about the cutting
off of limbs, about the soul's reluctance
to amputate itself for the greater
good, but unless you've had an uncle with
sky where a hand should be, who scratched at that
blank space for years, at ghosts, the vestigal
kind, who know nothing of sleep, stumps or graves—
well, this past month won't mean much to you. Still,
seems everything, even my family
is falling apart these days. No, really.

I'm scared to even answer my letters now,
afraid it might be catching, might be caught
already—this, the latest in a long
series of strange dissolutions. My first
cousin? Both feet are gone, half a leg. My late
grandfather too—just one joint less to fret
over when the rains finally came. Aunt M.?
Doctor says her bones just dissolved. That foot
will never know her weight again, or falter.
And me—well, what with my queer blood problem, the disconcerting way my arms go numb when I've slept too long—I'm thinking about black orchids, about gardeners splicing shaved stems to breed a truer strain. And sometimes when I find my head turning, lips half-formed to ask her what to do, I remember how I've lost my other too, those memories outside myself kept safe in pageless books, the ones she packed with half of what I once called us—now, just me. When she left, I knew it would be colder for a while, that the bed would seem less hollow—more, from the weight she did not think to leave behind. But I guess October knows more about leaving than any one man with two good legs, with hands that still remember much—to shield the eyes from wind, or chaff. Or smooth the sheets of those who shared depressions, once, between weak springs.
VII. On the Evolution of the Human Gait

So I guess like that of most upright oafs
my spine will be the death of me. These hacks
can't name it yet, but my osteopath,
my Science Age angel, calls it a secret
hate of walking right. Whatever. It feels

like skipping on stubs, like my ribs have struck
a bargain with my lungs. "Let's squeeze each
other free," they say. "Let the arms hang loose
from the brain for a while. Those devil hands,
they've been Judases for too many years now."

Not that I came here to bellyache—Lord
knows how I hate preaching. Still, it seems these
generations of walking a way
we weren't destined for have finally snagged us—
me at least—by the heels, maybe the crown.

And isn't the crown where most bleeding ends
up? Christ knows the thorny ones, real or not,
are hell on the disposition. But where was I?
Oh yes, this back pain. Sometimes I think
it's really history piling heaven

on rough columns of bone, that when we fall—
the past and I—gravity will laugh us
down, sniggering at the way we're always
reaching for grapes or God or some god's gun
powder. Aeon after acon it always

comes back to bones, to rebellion. Luther
knew a bit about insurrection too,
about the body's rising up against
itself. And though his corpse couldn't admit
it now, he must have also known how all

we do, is done in passing, how you don't
appreciate power—the simple rush
of book reading for instance, or of asking
dangerous questions, or of prying this
foot-happy race from tar—till you've tried it

on your knuckles. Or here, flat on your back.
THE MONSTER'S LAST LESSON

This is the word the Gypsy heard.

This is the Monster
who made the word the Gypsy heard.

This the Master
who made the Monster
who said the last word the Gypsy heard.

This is the madness
that made the Master
who built a monster
who’d say his last word to a Gypsy.

This is the dirge
that urges madness,
eggs on masters
who build their monsters
to say last words to Gypsies.

A sixteenth sunshine, eighty-fourth shade.
Nature's dirge.
The potion of madness
concocted by masters
who build each monster  
believing in last words, in Gypsies.

This is the man a madman made,  
a sixteenth sunshine, eighty-fourth shade,  
the bar of a dirge,  
a pinch of madness,  
dash of Master,  
every bit the dashing Monster,  
one who'd say his final words to a mourning Gypsy.

This is the pie-bald crazy quilt,  
the raggedy man a madman made,  
sixteen in sunshine, eighty-four in shade.  
the heat of the urge  
where light found madness  
and gave it the Master  
to fill his monster  
with fragments, words, at last to give the Gypsy.

This is the Monster the Master built,  
pied and bald like a crazy quilt,  
a raggedy man a madman made  
from that six tenths of sunshine found in the shade  
of funerals, dirges,  
the hanging madness
that plagued this Master

and passed to his monster

and on to the words he'd finally leave the Gypsy.

These are the stakes one snakes from death,

betting on monsters the Master built,

pied and bald like the crazy quilt

wrapping this man the madman made

of a sixteenth of sunshine, a bit more shade,

out of a dirge

and out of madness,

his own, the Master's.

And now the Monster

has learned a word at last to leave a melancholy Gypsy.

This is what journeymen build from breath.

snag from the stakes they've bluffed from death.

shape into monsters a Master built

of pie-bald patches of crazy quilt

that wrap this ragged, madman-made,

one sixteenth sunshine, eighty-fourth shade,

funeral-urged

piece of madness

of some Master

whose losing his monster

to a word. The one he's telling the Gypsy.
This is the death he knows to die,
learned from a journeyman trained in breath,
from pulling out stops from breaking death,
from being a monster the Master built
from a pie-bald life like a crazy quilt,
from being both ragged and madman-made
from that sixteenth of sunshine, eighty-fourth shade,
from out out of dirges,
and out of madness,
from the Master,
and now the Monster
knows what to say, a word to share with the Gypsy.

Here, on the bed where dead men lie,
dying a death he knows how to die,
lies a lone journeyman bartered from breath,
snagged off the scaffold, cheated of death.
Here lies the Monster the Master built,
a pie-bald, ribald, crazy quilt,
a raggedy man a madman made
in six days of sunshine, four eighths shade.
He urges a dirge,
free from the madness,
at last from his Master.
No more the Monster.

This is the word the Gypsy heard. Her first, his last, just Gypsy.