REVISITING THE GROTESQUE:

POEMS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the

University of North Texas in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Chad Davidson, B.A.

Denton, Texas

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This thesis consists of a group of poems around a central concept: language as a
physical dwelling place—a place much like what Raphael discovered in the grottoes of
Rome and named “grotesque,” or “grotto-esque.” Using the word, “grotesque,” as an
example, the preface illustrates how poetry can play with the lost histories of words while
still searching for new referents and associations.

Since language is constantly in flux, it fails to preserve entirely what it names.
However, that inability, that imperfect quality in turn creates a separate dwelling of its
own. That is, language becomes a place into which we may descend and explore. In
varying degrees, then, these poems dialogue with the grotesque as it manifests itself
conceptually in theme, metaphorically in language, and poetically in the space it fills on
the page and in our consciousness.
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REVISITING THE GROTESQUE

I'm looking out into Texas and its cryptic weather, through a window, through another apartment. A year ago, I was sweating in a stuffy frame house three blocks from here. Six months before that, I was in California. The last two summers I spent teaching in Mexico; the winter before, Italy. In the wake of moving boxes—shedding all but the necessities every few months, having the chance to burn away the clutter—there is a constant sense of rebirth. And where we all live, it seems to me, is in that gap between our imaginary rooms and our living rooms, in the constant flux of creating a different self for every situation.

Language attempts to bridge a similar gap: the gap between name and thing, the desiring and desired; and it fails. Since the "thing" and the "desired," like ourselves, are in constant flux, we can't rely on any stability in words. Time succeeds in adding new referents and new contexts for the words we use each day. They grow larger each time they leave our mouths.

But even as these words grow, they beg a counter notion: that there is a sense of loss, a falling away from the original connotation. Yes, words take on increasing referents and contexts but must shed some as well. And where language fails, it also succeeds in elegy, acknowledging its own failure to embody completely and thereby preserve what it names. The word becomes a history of itself, eroding.
When much of Rome was reduced to ash in the Great Fire of 64 A.D., what remained for the then young emperor Nero was an opportunity to fashion the city the way he imagined it. Razed of most of its tradition, Rome lay waiting for Nero to rebuild or, more correctly, recreate it in his own image. He seized the opportunity, propelling theories of architecture centuries ahead. His Domus Aurea ("Golden House") was a Xanadu, a pleasure dome. In fact, if he created anything besides licentiousness in those halls, he's in part responsible for our domed interiors—our dwellings today, rich with space (Boorstin 115-8).

But subsequent fires in 80 and 104 buried Nero’s Golden House under the city that had grown to despise him and his gaudy palace. Rome rebuilt. From the lowland of his artificial lake rose Flavian’s Amphitheater; over his personal chambers, Trajan’s Great Baths. Emperors who followed Nero replaced him not only on the throne, but in architecture as well. So much for Nero. Rome forgot this monument to one of its megalomaniacs.

Fifteen hundred years later, when a few of Nero’s buried chambers were discovered, Raphael lowered himself down into them. These "grottoes"—as Raphael and his contemporaries dubbed them for lack of a more precise term—these dwellings with their fantastic murals engrossed Raphael. Pompeian style collages of strange human and animal forms, arabesques—intricate and symmetrical designs—covered the walls of the king’s artful haunt. So taken, so disturbed and moved by the drawings was Raphael that they compelled him, inspired him in his creation of the Vatican loggia, painted
grottesche—in the style of the grottoes. In English, our translation is “grotesque.” And so, as Daniel J. Boorstin writes, “Nero’s bizarre ambitions survive secretly in our everyday language” (118).

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When I came across this section in Boorstin’s The Creators, the long history of “grotesque” scrolled out. I nagged friends and family for the next few days, raving about my new found information, hoping they would drop back at least a millennium or two the next time they heard “grotesque” in the stream of a conversation. I simply knew I had found some infinite depth inside that word and went on blabbering, unaware that what I had also found was a working analogy for my poetry.

The idea of descending down into the grottoes—ropes burning on the hip, catching first a glimpse, a head maybe, a contorted eye; then a snake wrapped around the thick upper arm of a giant; long designs of rapture, dreams of power—that descent and sense of infinite discovery is similar to writing poetry. Rarely do I start with anything other than a glimpse at what I am to uncover in a poem. As I delve further—each line a layer of soil, silt—ultimately what I find seems to have always been there, waiting.

Once in those poems—the words, the dwellings—I am observer much like Raphael in his harness, a common voyeur. Really that word “common” resonates. No, Raphael was no commoner, but we all have access to our own grotesque; and not just that word, but all of language is a dwelling: a physical place with an obscure history. The only way to access those histories is to descend into the words, search out the original connotations that, through centuries of cognates and common usage, have been lost.
The mysterious quality of "grotesque"—the rapture Raphael experienced in the dark grottoes—seems less immediate now. The word has assumed too many referents for us to access its connotation with Raphael's descent. By describing the grottoes, by naming the unnamed, Raphael dissipated some of that mysteriousness. When translating experience into words, we do the same: we lose a part of the experience, the power that resides in the unnamed.

However, language also captures, even creates some of that mystery as well; we preserve at the very least the tension between the name and its referent. Language fails to translate experience completely and leaves us with an unfinished portrayal of the original mystery. Words become shady apparitions themselves, unable to solidify.

In my poem, "Taxidermy," the wife struggles with what her husband does with the "corpses after bloodletting, / the slow fall of jowls." She attempts throughout the poem to come to terms with the fact that he, although performing a service which seems to her and the hunters as both miraculous and horrid, seems unaware of his job's potency. He is a worker, has grown numb to all the sensationalism, the "grotesqueness"—both false and real—in which the job abounds. To his wife, it is as if her husband has "extracted / the smallest trace of heresy" in his work, lowering it to the common, stripping it of the secretive power she wants to believe lurks in "the force of knowing" about those bodies. "Death," he says to her, "is just a word."

The practice of taxidermy haunts her, and she tries constantly to access a mysterious precedent for her husband, to ally what he does with earlier grotesques:
Rameses and his elaborate burial rites, Saint Francis Xavier’s loss of his arm after
baptizing too many people. The wife wonders about the time her husband “first peeled
back the skin.” She wonders if either of them can ever access the mysteriousness of that
first discovery again. This is the bittersweet point: when exposed to the grotesque—these
mysterious worlds—we will be unable to completely translate it.

But that inability empowers language, giving the words a history; where language
fails in translating experience, it creates a dwelling of its own. The “crude history of [the
speaker’s] voice,” in “Encryption” is what resonates with his projected lover. Words in
my poems are the failures, unable to access their lost history. But their failures can be
dazzling and grotesque. Words are, as I said before, grottoes, misshapen dwellings in and
of themselves. Consequently language becomes a place of exploration and for
renovation, for building the new.

When words fail to recapture lost history, it seems the distance between the word
and the original experience becomes meaningful itself. The question, “How far has this
word (have we) traveled?” resonates then. My poem, “This Is the Cow,” begins with the
inhabitants of Macondo in Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, and how they have
lost their memory. They are so blank-minded that they must resort to labeling everything
in order to survive, to distinguish between all the mucilage of life. A pervasive panic first
sets in on the inhabitants, a panic that stems from our universal fear of what we can’t
name, or for which we have lost a name.

To counter that, though, we can say that we lose the “real” just as we learn to
name it; we lose it “hopelessly in the catacombs / of names for other things,” the graves
of dead words. The "real"—in this case even ordinary possessions—is replaced by a
name. Here, as the inhabitants travel back to that first discovery of what words signify,
there is a sense of wonder, of everything being animate and fresh in its unnamed state.
Just as Raphael in "Descent into the Grotesque" is "sickened . . . to inspiration" by a
previously inaccessible dwelling, so might Macondo’s inhabitants find themselves in the
renaming of their normal lives, relearning "cow from awkward profile, / milk-heavy, its
one eye, reflecting." What we find in that gap between name and thing, here, is our own
reflection.

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So far, "grotesque" has been a physical dwelling place. But it also exists as poetic
space, burying the unfamiliar in the familiar. That sense of play, of the slippage between
the word and thing, is poetry; we invoke those distant histories, yet still forge new
contexts for the word. Simply stated, the word, "grotesque," itself is poetic: a place
where we can "play" with the lost contexts while still stretching the word to embody
newer referents.

"Grotesque"—its look, sound, its common meaning, its historical context, the
space it occupies in our consciousness and on the page—is a dwelling place in which we
may create the new from the old. Thus, my poem, "Descent into the Grotesque," while
alluding to Raphael’s original descent, also works as an ars poetica: it describes a descent
into words themselves, an attempt to find something vibrant and artful in what too often
are mere vehicles of utility. In the words of the poem, "What we don’t know hides in
what we do." When we attempt to find this unknown inside the known, what we
discover—much like what Raphael found—are the possible. Both past and future merge allowing us to descend into language while, at the same time, changing ourselves, almost transcending mundane usage.

When we write poetry, what we accomplish is not a perfecting of the word but a complication, an addition of weight, of meaning. To echo an earlier statement, yes, language fails; and it does so in spectacular ways, making its own failure meaningful. When, in “Meditation at Lagunitas,” Robert Hass declares that “a word is elegy to what it signifies” (11), we are left with the sense that to write poetry, to live in the solitude of the grottoes is to be aware, keenly aware, of a “tragic falling off from a first world / of undivided light” (Hass 7-8). The poetic spaces of words like “grotesque” seem to swell then, resonating in elegiac tendencies, becoming meaningful in their playing with meaninglessness. In order to be resuscitated, the original experience—Raphael’s private sense of the grotesque—first had to die.

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We may also approach “the grotesque” as a conceptual idea, invoking a pervasive sense of extremes. And those extreme qualities manifest themselves in different ways. That is, most of the meaning Raphael had intended still holds true: contorted, exaggerated figures intertwined with flamboyant design, the beauty of the freak show. Conceptually though, “grotesque” also begs more contemporary usages, such as the gaudy, the ornate, even the horrid.

In this way, like I stated earlier, we all have access to our own grotesque. “Strongest Man in the World” contests, Scandinavian hulks racing with wheelbarrows
full of nuns; the contortionists who bend their bodies like taffy; regurgitators who
swallow billiard balls; the creatures of Star Wars; Saturday morning cartoons—they all
abound in the grotesque. Inside those extremes, however, exists a beauty—not in the
ordinary sense, but in that same horrible sublime Raphael found in the grottoes. And this
“beauty” lies in the fact that much of the grotesque must go unnamed, unidentified.
Where we deliberately attempt to step outside the boundaries of names, we seem to
encounter the grotesque.

The “freak show” quality of language itself—the oddities, the beautifully
deformed—originally pulled me into poetry. I was twenty-one in 1991, studying poetry
for the first time with B.H. Fairchild when I learned to think of words as having different
shapes. Some are round, some square; some are thick-walled, impenetrable; others,
malleable like soft clay. Early on, I remember a discussion we had about the shapes of
the words “elbow,” “sluice,” “ammonia,” and “fuselage.” I remember the refrigerator
lists that friends and I constructed regarding some of the more oddly shaped English
words: “ointment,” “wharf,” “waffle.” For me, the words themselves were the building
blocks of poetry, in an entirely physical and literal sense.

One of the first serious workshop poems I wrote tried to depict aging music
instructors at a small town store. It begins, “Coffee-drunk and music-stained, they huddle
/ with ceramic mugs.” Later their “cigarettes gliss from cracked lip to lip, / anchored at
end with reed-worn tongues.” Every noun needed the blockbuster adjective. The teachers
couldn’t merely stand and smoke; they had to “huddle” with their cigarettes “glissing.”
Straining for the original, I instead achieved the overly poetic. I developed first that sense
of the "grotesque" as gaudy; so much so that even today, even now, I fight that urge to
descend into there too often, only seeing the images, the words, and not the rope that
holds me and the walls I need.

Similarly, another early poem described Istanbul's main tourist district,
Sultanahmet:

Due East, the crippled kiosks, still
Bazaar-haunted, sprawl Sultanahmet.
A lone Ottoman—a tattered, bunting
Carcass embossed by bruised cigarettes—
Decays quietly amid the rotting watermelons.

Here, that baroque, flamboyant style—that "too-much-of-a-good-thing" syndrome as
Fairchild aptly named it—is prevalent. While in some sense I still enjoy this poem, I
realize now the hazards of getting stuck in there, down there. Although I still fight that
tendency to draw from a overtly lush and, at times, gaudy store, there is, in my later
poetry, hopefully a more refined sense of breathing and pacing. I am realizing the song
behind each of the specific notes—that what I don't write may resonate as powerfully as
what I do—and, therefore, can concentrate more on the composition and less on the
cacophonous trills.

In those earlier poems, I poetically manipulated the "real"—the music instructor,
the city of Istanbul; the descriptions were straining, romanticizing. Conceptually, the
grotesque carries with it always that rivalry of the "real" versus the romantic/gothic.
What we sometimes exaggerate is the line between the two, making it into a gap. The
speaker in "The Kama Sutra's Banished Illustrator," is enamored with his own sketch:
"[h]ow I coveted the way she stared / at my palm while I labored—my subject." He
paints her skin “with reds and ochres saved for Brahman’s eyes,” elevating the sketch to an idol. Ultimately, he is unable to finish the illustration by adding the male lover. He grapples with the demands of his craft while fearing his own grotesque: drawing the male nude after the female image, which he doesn’t consider as wholly two dimensional and imaginary. As the title suggests, he is driven out; he “stole / [his] sketches long before [he] finished.” The illustrator lives on, not only confronted and haunted by a sketch of his perfect female, but by the absent male as well. The illustrator fails to draw the “real” after having drawn the perfect, the imaginary.

Horror also exists in the grotesque. In fact, the most dominant, contemporary usage of the concept seems to be the horrific. Slasher film reviews and trailers love to borrow the grotesque, stuff into its shell the gory, the terrible. Murders and cults, some of the worst possible acts of human volition use as their calling card the grotesque. And in no other place, it seems to me, is that failure of language more conspicuous than in the truly horrid, the grotesque in the worst sense. Again, we see the grotesque conceptually where the names end, where we have no equivalent term in language.

At times there is the sense that these confrontations with the horrid possess us, that what order we originally try to impose on the grotesque falls apart. So it is for the rapist in “An Artist Selects His Subject.” During his seduction of the woman, he sees vibrant colors, flashes, “in a grimy ballet.” The victim is more a possession or experience, and is not usually referred to as a “she” but an “it,” or a “frame”—like a portrait. However, as the rapist becomes more physical, his objectiveness weakens, the colors disappear, “[b]lack enters / with heavy hands,” and his “subject” becomes a “she.”
The rapist, although initially able to mask his “art” in a conceit, ultimately must confront his own grotesque: the sight and sense of a violent rape, and, perhaps, the realization of what he’s doing. There is a point where the conceit, the attempt at ordering or validating the act of rape breaks down.

However, we could also say that this failure to name the grotesque is almost merciful. In fact in its most horrid, perhaps the grotesque is exactly the opposite of gaudy or exaggerated. That is, here, it almost seems a conscious choice not to name the grotesque, as it is too real. The fantastically horrid, at times, closes the gap between the imaginary and real. By doing so, we run the risk of losing the boundary line where language resides.

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In the grottoes, Raphael found the remains of a decayed dynasty, a history that stood, until then, unaccessed. And what exists in all language, it seems to me, is that same sense of decay and failure: the word as elegy. As a concept, grotesque implies gaudiness, the ornate, the exaggerated, the romantic and gothic, the horrific, the unnamable named. As an example of metaphorical language, the word itself is a dwelling place, subject now to the same exploration that Raphael began. It exists as a poetic space, a word haunted by its own history, but also by the shadows of new referents, new concepts. Like all language, it keeps searching for more.

Poetry is self-conscious language, yes; it discovers the words inside the words, breathes life into words by placing them in new contexts. However, to discover new meaning—to push language forward, to create new history—requires that we forget. We
must allow history to die in order to revive, to revisit it. And we all need to revisit history, if only to fortify ourselves for another descent.
WORKS CITED


Taxidermy

When he first peeled back the skin,
I wonder if he too shuddered
with the force of knowing.

As his wife, I want to forget
what happens to the musky ladles
of blood, the folds of brain, eyes

clinging to darkness. I want to feign
my sleep at midnight when he dumps
the sloshing bowls. Last evening,

I watched a show on Rameses,
how they spent seventy-five days
preparing his body. They removed

the organs, filled him with sawdust
and clay, and in my finest dream
my husband holds me that way, covets me.

In the skull, faint fractures. All
so blameless, the way he poses
those bones with his hands

grown lazy from embalming;
the way he plants their plastic eyes:
he reads the last betrayal so precisely.

In a book about Saint Francis Xavier,
his right arm becomes powerless
from hovering so often over the baptized.

My husband has that arm, that ache
of resurrection shooting through
when he raises it above the fallen

animals—whatever guns dismantled—
brings out from somewhere underneath
the perfect beast, built by man, a body

[stanza break]
we can’t tear. Still, to watch him reposition hips—
cartilage that crinkles like parchment—
what’s separating him from those

whose death is an aesthetic?
He taught me how to breathe
while gutting deer, how to disengage

the sense of smell, and I remember trembling,
knife in my hand, his hand
holding mine, negotiating the belly,
careful not to rip the lay of fur.
“Death,” he said to me, “is just a word,”
his voice so deliberate as if the tedium

of scalpel and removal, fill and stitch,
were part of a chant, extracting
the smallest trace of heresy.

There are nights I feel as if I’ll pass
over to temptation, to believing
hunters’ wives—their tales thick

with corpses after bloodletting,
the slow fall of jowls, swelling
eyes on walls behind televisions.

Those nights, he seems more animal himself
the way he fingers down my thighs,
formaldehyde surrounding us.

I part my legs accepting him,
and he is young without the knowledge.
We fall, glazed in sweat, our voices

rough from sex. And somewhere on shores
of lakes, the hunters slough their coats
to free their arms again.
Convergence

I spent too much time drowning
in words, names, amused to death
to think each language equals English.
Consider my early morning swim
near Playa de los Muertos,
a young boy squealing 'tiburón'
flailing his bony arms at me from shore.
I lapsed into my small Spanish memory
and luckily came back with shark.

Thus, the distance becomes the meaningful part.
Though I never saw the fin—the gliding
shadow—I stayed out the rest of the trip
contemplating that sonorous name so far away
from the heavy beasts of Discovery
and childhood death dreams—a theology
of fearing maneaters. Spanish glossed
this predator, took its placoid scales
and filed them down to something more
bloodless than Anglo Saxon's crude steel.

But I wonder when the living jaws
search out their meat, when eyes
roll back the smooth color of ecstasy,
if those serrated teeth close on an abstract,
transcend the native tongue. Or must we
realize that all language, by nature, converges
in the void between the dying and their names.
Two Cemeteries

I watch her curve two times before
she straightens her bicycle to let me pass.

The road through the cemetery is narrow
like her shoulders, and I follow

her spine’s slow arc and fade
and suddenly want to turn,

ask about her college friend in Puebla,
the climate at Palenque—

all that high school Spanish had to offer
when I measured class time by Sofia,

imagining deep into Baja,
contrasting her igneous skin on mine.

But because today is el Dia de los Muertos,
I respect the cycler’s vicious silence

while the ghost lover in me half expected
more: tangents of painted faces,

a glimpse beyond this field
of granite markers, the dead words,

anything more than the mere flesh
of the moment—a gliding into other lives.

But this is the memory of association
boiling down to a hard stone, exoticized.

How else do I explain the loss
of Sofia’s voice? What I kept—the better

or worse of it—is only myself rushing back,
my failure to communicate to the dying

instant what I know now about desire’s circles,
that they’re misshapen

[stanza break]
But the girl keeps pedaling
in concentric waves of heat,

ready to coast through the day's equator
while I revisit these cycles.

Though I crave them, they add more stones
to the weight, a dark abscissa spanning

from those I no longer know
to those I never did.
This Is the Cow

The sign that he hung on the neck of the cow was an exemplary proof of the way in which the inhabitants of Macondo were prepared to fight against the loss of memory: This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk.

—Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude

Imagine the years being sucked out of you, the losses so numerous you counted gains instead: the shiver

of holy water, your quinceañera, burnt cedar, the faith in the cross-town taxi in México, not knowing derecha from izquierda. Think of all the shattered glasses, cursing the sky, women you keep yearning for; you taste the slow arrival of the moment only to watch it fade anxiously. Now think of absence, staring at some beast in a field and saying “never have I seen this thing in front of me.”

Then the cow moos, and you understand the simple lexicon of the green

in its mouth, the dynamics of the jaw like nothing you can’t recall, have never seen. And what impossible eyes—unlike yours—swelling with your losses and successes; they too are losses, ready to escape your skin like the sweets of a piñata,

the dull thud of the instant still there, when you realize that to know this beast by name is to lose this beast, lose it hopelessly in the catacombs of names for other things: the coffee bean, your blood, the ripe guava, penitence,
the left bank of *the river*, crumbling,
where you learned *cow* from awkard profile,
milk-heavy, its one eye, reflecting.
Paradise Beach

_Tabasco, Mexico_

Mexico makes me crave disaster:
hurricanes rising on the ocean’s rim,
mouth of the “tempestad”—a Spanish word
I learned here as a charm against the static
days that lie in front of me. Nights, I roll
the syllables off my tongue: _tempestad_.
The mere sound seems to fall away—
a chance to lose myself in words, and why not?

This is exoticism. Storms don’t change.
Only names make them different.
Still, catastrophes have their own language,
which is why we always yearn for words
to remember each immeasurable loss:
the black sky, tourists scattered like flies
from the sea, mudslides, the slow descent
of mountains back into where they came.

Geology and Taoists teach us erosion
and all the different names we have for it.
Loss, they say, seeks the straightest path and will
always be there, falling through holes in our words.
Sin

When storms conjured up water's other side, our parents and local channels froze in the tearing down of bridge and shelter, houses melted down by lakes gorging on downfall, rivers risen to allegory. In the television, a hurricane watch peers out. The city crews' rough scaffolding shipwrecked on streetcorners before the water washed itself away from what we feared, what we imagined happened to the girl swept under the brown Chevy van, her yellow raincoat riding the flood drains, up-ended, drowning in a centered headline. Rides home from Sunday school, a mother's face two inches from the glass, frantic in the slow drip of streets through rain, incessant pounding on the rooftop, the sudden rise in hydroplane.

And just as suddenly, the sky unraveled its thick cloth. The streets steamed in the pulling away, even glistened in their seven day forecasts. Heavy branch and stones lay waiting for the next parade through our lives. All the filth washed away, leaving us one child less, down a house or two, clean enough to hope for rain again.
Astronomy

Milleniums away from their own names,
The *Pleiades* emerge, revealing
the quiet of sisters buried in the day.

I was fifteen when Sandy Schatz betrayed
the better part of nights instructing me
on how we impose order on the stars.

"*Betelgeuse*—rounding out *Orion*—
means, in fact, 'the shoulder of the giant'
in Arabic," she said, and I imagined

desert calm the night they discovered
a pinpoint burning inside the hunter's deltoid.
Or in her staunchly Catholic parents' closet,

away from the prosaic light of day,
we listened to her little sisters rumble
up the stairs, thrilled at last to catch

a glimpse of our naked bodies. We prayed the feel
of flesh on flesh grew from the speaking of it.
When I talk about her now, long vanished,

I am told I do so with strained nostalgia,
that her name burns clean in my voice.
I see her this way: in the aftermath

of sex, guilty for not feeling guilty,
the instant before we unlock, embarrassed
for no reason. The universe is expanding:

all the names we had for it, the old
misgivings and the new ones to be christened.
And we in wanting finally to notice

the unspeakable change in our blood and planets,
did. Still we suffer under separate skies
with those who have already grown beyond us.
The *Kama Sutra*’s Banished Illustrator

I only drew the woman. Raised cheekbones curving impossibly in my hand, the slender neck, hair pulled back like rope: all female after brushing the vagina’s conch in agni. I shaded with my stained finger around the breasts, gave her arms, karma.

Her pupils swelled, anticipating the loss. (How I coveted the way she stared at my palm while I labored—my subject.)

Any artist will tell you they’re not easy, the eyes; I grinded them into reflection. She never saw past the image I gave her,

just as I could not stop scorching her skin with reds and ochres saved for Brahman’s eyes. A flame of curry stains her mouth’s rim.

Here, a hand rises for wine a lover brings after they had lost their fire in sex. His name would well up in her parched throat.

Before the night, she would accept him again, whom I refused to draw. It was a trick to make her ecstasy—the floating legs,

head tossed back, the half-eaten plum—contrary to her leisure. In fact, I stole my sketches long before I finished,

withholding what was never mine to give. Now, I scarcely trace another’s outline before she bleeds back into my hands.
Encryption

Language does not leave fossils, at least not until it has been written.
—Morston Bates

This morning is imprinted with blood oranges, the piñon smoke tangling in the fan.

I show you living juices and odors with my tongue, my sharp teeth.

You smell words before the embers, the oranges cool and dying.

Winter ash fades to carbon. But how many times I catch myself, encrypted, tasting each bitter syllable. No space for every word I’ve learned.

Still, they leave impressions, crystallize. The absence of the speaker, shells of those no longer known: true impostors. And you’ll begin to notice when I use them. When I talk, when I lie to you come evenings, in bed, or in the snow and scrub oak south of memory. I’ll echo a forgotten person, reverberating off you there. You’re calm not from the cold but the crude history of my voice in white fields, above the timberline.
Ventriloquism

As if we knew early on, our mothers attest
to hearing their unborns cry.

A sound before birth, they say, is the mark
of a ventriloquist throwing language

from the womb: the best of possible words.
But I suspect mothers already believed

we would never escape their native tongues.
Feeding on their speech, we were liquid seeds:

knowing the progress of the disease
inherited, drowning in uterine life.

Crying felt animal, a needle of tonic.
Like blood that eats when it escapes

aching for oxygen, we had just heartbeats
to recall the zero of words, of our lives

before them, and then entered, blind,
fluid, through the membranes of our host.
Ascension

The water is still wise there
but has a newer color.

Birds are an intricate language
made light by your voice.
Their wings are letters.

Each flower proclaims itself,
spills its oaths in pollen,
thick from yesterday’s bees.

Paths appear only where needed,
lost vistas discovered, then forgotten.
No one finds the same horizon twice.

Everything is as if it were
a painting in creation.

Dark places still exist.
Fear is optional.
Rain, never problematic.
There is personal weather.

There is a sense of improvement
like war which never starts but ends each day.

And there is still loss,
though no larger than yesterday.
You watch it fade to a word,
watch it come to rest on your dying shoulder.
Descent into the Grotesque

Here are the wells we no longer drink from. We take what little fire we can. What survives in the grottoes are only flashes glistening on cracked Arabesques. Sconces, flame-haunted, burn in hindsight.

We know why we have come beyond the fear of something greater than ourselves. Down here, we trace the past reliefs; we glimpse our failures, our attempts to translate the world into words. The words, here, are all we have.

What we don't know hides in what we do, in our speech under centuries of cognates: \textit{grottesche}— a word in the style of Nero's golden house, of portraits that sickened Raphael to inspiration. Raphael inventing Nero. Nero, in turn, inventing Raphael.

What we pull from the wreckage and murder of a king we lay into the mortar of a word: \textit{grotesque}. As close as we come in English to Nero's rapture.

Today our houses tremble in the gravity and cold promise of memory: tomorrow is a fire. It will strangle itself.

So, we prepare ourselves, discover each word and lower it back into books, into the dry wells of our throats.
The Insect Collector’s Wife

I

When she heard about the plane crash, she didn’t mourn
the human way but went on dusting the cases of his dead:
the beetles with their reconfigured helmets, the June bugs
and cicada perched on pin tops like brooches.

She checked the electrical connections in the small museum.
Bleak light played against the old black boxes, against
the insects, the inscriptions of what they are—*Phasmidae
(stick bug)*—what they were, where they were caught.

II

Latin—the watery dialect, the slips of paper
longer than their bodies—it guided Charles.

Every species is prey to it. Latin put the needed words
in his mouth, the same mouth that kissed hers forty years ago.

She didn’t remember their wedding day for the new family
photographing, for the feel of her own silkless shoulders,

but for one small bug. It was a katydid, not large enough
to merit a scene by clamping down, machine-like,

with the inhuman end of his tweezers,
but not small enough to go unnoticed.

The insect lay inverted in champagne, still writhing
after the first dance, the cake, after the hint of sex
to come when she steered her tiptoe up his ankle.
Years later—in the cricketless dark before dawn—

she navigated down the hallway to find Charles negotiating the retracted wings and pulpy larva

with his tweezers, monogrammed with love. He was detached and steady in his execution,

and she observed him a minute before speaking from the crack of light that divides life

from science. It took two or three times—her saying his name—to break him from the specimens.

His finger bones uncramped themselves as he turned to face her. “They’re not going anywhere, dear,”

she attempted, her hand feeling for the light switch, poised to blind the shattered, uncountable eyes.
On the Death of a Friend’s Mother

_Death, when it comes, will have your own two eyes._
—Brodsky, “Nature Morie”

A few of us get together Mondays to stumble through _The Real Book._
I opt for up-tempo pieces but seem to be alone.
The guitarist likes ballads, and the way he ascends
a dirgy scale is reason enough.

The bassist isn’t much for jazz
but plays like he is; says he does it for the experience of walking,
waits for the vamps at the end when he thumps the strings,
reminds us all he’s there.

The morning after our last session, he found out his mother died
three states and a high phone bill away, her voice already too obscure
behind the flicker of a cigarette’s cherry.

So, instead of listening to my Miles
collection, I find Brodsky—a cassette of his poems my mother gave me
years ago. She thought of me, she said, at seeing Brodsky’s face, the way
his eyes looked into her, past her. A queer violation, I think. Knowledge
of something she’d never consider:

that her son at times calls her simple-minded,
wishes she were an abstract painter or cellist instead of a ticket agent
who collects Santas. And suddenly my friend’s mother is my mother,
and I am my friend, mourning someone who isn’t really dead
or who never existed.

But she called me just today wanting to know
if I could come to dinner, while somewhere, someone is still
worried impossibly about the cut
of wood for a coffin,
the lay of turf on the looming rampart.

I wanted to tell her she wasn’t going to die,
that she couldn’t. But how smart is that? I kept imagining the last time
I’d speak with her, the last time I had to tell her
sorry again for forgetting birthdays.

[stanza break]
And Brodsky mutters in my ear
something about the veins in his marble white thighs, like my mother’s:
the scoring of overlooked years
and the weight of those years.

His Slavic vowels gurgle under the stress
of our language, and I imagine he drowned in some lake
outside Leningrad, far away from Texas and my mother,
though he didn’t.

I want to tell my mother how I feel Brodsky’s voice fill out
the empty words, how Miles makes a standard with four notes
we crave like nicotine. I want to tell my friend
the only way I know is to exact
his mourning on myself.

If all talk is a barren trade,
as Brodsky wrote, what can my mother look forward to?
She carried my weight to the breaking point,
and what have I learned?

My friend’s mother is dead; and because of that, two notions:
that I’ve begun to mourn my own mother still living
as testament to my failures; and that I have failed here
if I cannot keep to a friend who is grieving.
Advice from an Older Poet

*for B.H. Fairchild*

Had I escaped the midwest drone
of cicada,
kept on playing my saxophone—
a dying mantra
over Coltrane’s slower tunes—
I wouldn’t write
these dustbowl elegies, the croons
of Peterbuilt
recluses, baseball junkies: hopeless
hazards caught
in headlights on a strangely Kansas
road in Claremont,
California, where machine shops
look like prisons,
and they are.

I wouldn’t hope
that words sustain
those days I was the greasy shadow
of my father,
the sunlight wrecked in the welder’s glow
and the bitter
dust of seven men now past
the need of praise,
past the wanting of it.

The last
pages of May
turn relentlessly like lathes.
My words turn brittle,
they’re gulls drifting over the page,
intangible
as God and Oklahoma’s sky;
they’re the things
I’ve lost too well—towns that died
without grieving,
a father who cursed his way to winter;
his buddies broke
from beer and wrenches; fingers that stirred
the midday drinks.

[continue stanza]
Can you picture me at twenty,
holding down
a job in Snyder—half way
between the frown
of Texas afternoons and nothing—
blowing grit,
and iron from my nose? The grunting
of the misfit
who seemed always at the torqued
bolt—its edges
like unambitious poems: rounded—
ever budged
me from the window during lunch.

I came close
to thinking then—the kind that bunch
said made losers
out of perfect pairs of hands.
My father wore
the proof on his—the palms caked hard,
knuckles torn
from metals, an escaped fragment,
a misplaced hammer.

He kept his shop scars like payment
stubs, and lingered
into drinking spells in August.
The biggest bruise,
the stiffest drink would cut the rust
of mundane news:
“You hear Frank’s boy done gone away
to fuckin’ college?”
And so on. They’d piss and burp and lay
a profane collage
of words in the shop air. “Jack
ass couldn’t tell
a hard day’s work if it kicked
him in the tail.
Only faggots read them books.”
I had to hide
my own for fear they would mistake
me for a turd
who loved to read like Frank’s kid.
I took my leisure
hours into dusty folds...
of pages. I burned
them clean in solitude, not bold
enough to shine
them in my father’s face, scald
his eyes with mine

I chose frustration over guilt.
My lathe—though tough
to see without metal silt
pickling the trough—
runs like father’s did. And now
my wife is calling
me to eat while you want to know
how deep the sting
of this art will travel. Remember
Eurydice:
can you withstand the game, the lures
of poetry?
Can you ration out your gloom,
keep all your ghosts
quiet, live and eat with poems
before they’re lost?
If so, then your longing will contain
the cleansing burn
you feel in fine completed lines.
That lathe you earn.
Cockroaches: Ars Poetica

They know that death is merely of the body
not the species, know their putrid function
is always memorable. We think they're ugly
with their blackened exoskeletons,
or the final scream and speed when they burn.
“Extreme adaptability” we say,
and where there’s one there’s probably a million
more who lie and laugh in cracks close by.
At first, they seem so useless: they take up space
and feed on what we’ve left behind. They trick
us to believe there is no higher purpose.
They know their procreation keeps them constant,
believe they’ll live to read our requiem
with the fearful eyes we used to look at them.
Quarters

I grope by twos for scattered quarters
glazed with thirty-weight. They’re cold
and fishlike on the garage floor and slip
in my smallish hands. Father is watching,
and I wonder what he thinks, if
he’s sorry and will, at any moment,
scoop me out of the muck and hold me,
or kneel down next to me, like mother
when I floundered in the tub,
unwilling, afraid the water lost
its power to clean, that my mother
couldn’t separate me from his stains.
The oil is seeping through my dress,
and I feel it on my knees and pray
my mother won’t kill me when I see her.

These hands, unclean, like father’s habits;
his change, my small allowance, worth slightly
less in her eyes, dirtier than before.
An Artist Selects His Subject

It's the flash that first attracts me, makes me create. I let my eyes numb until I see only colors. They grind against each other in a grimy ballet.

Then I calculate. I frame the scene before striking the empty space and the movements it will take. My style is groomed.

And she likes me. I know how to make the colors bleed, know all the tender corners.

But it never lasts. It turns on me. Black enters with heavy hands.

But I don't stop to listen to the shrill white, to me and her and God damn this scene and God damn her.

I take art too seriously. Maybe what I do isn't art, I think, but spun poison.
That is, until I see
the finished piece:
the strangling blue,
the used-up delicacy.
It has to be art.

I stand up,
smear the remnants
on my clothes,
my face,
and tiptoe
back into my head.
Absinthe Humor

Some people don’t know when to quit. Some others plain forget and spite the grainy roux and residues from a hundred floods on the bayou.

Call this joint *The Big Easy?* Hell, ain’t that big. I watched a black fella mow those old graves fast as a plate of crawfish cools on a July night.

That bastard, he forgot. I scanned this bulging cemetery and damned if he didn’t dust the lapels of Lafayette. Too clean for me; but men like that, they don’t know when to quit. I’m told the Jackson Tomb—the one that’s old like *Pearl’s* jambalaya—doesn’t kneel in bluegrass no more. But you sure can feel the black, delta silt that cakes the slate like awful coffee. Just take a spell before that’s gone too, I thought. So I propped myself outside the wrought bones of that postcard gate and watched him like a watchman, like there should’ve been, guarding what he wants out. (You don’t toss crawfish heads before sucking the juice.)

But them people don’t know to quit. Damn, the sidewalk under my feet is buckling: Sycamores bursting out of Creole cells. Probably got fed up with the smell off the urine pool, or the clumps of steaming dog stool that guy stamped with sneakers too new for dead brass, jaundiced marble and freshly cut grass.
Probably best that way. Orleans’ lore
doesn’t take too well to keeping store-
fronts looking clean. If my back were true,
I’d take them tree roots, get them through

that man who forgot the story.
History down here, I like to say,
history has a crooked “y” that slants
toward the gulf. Bastard’s got one chance
to feed these graves, these huge dead—
their white jaws cracking through deep-fried
ground to rise from Absinthe and erosion—
before they take hold like roots, like tradition,

and down he goes, like the Poydras queen
does crawfish, fried in the west wing
saying, “It’s ready folks, time’s aright.”
(You forget about floods during a drought.)

He doesn’t remember that there’ll be a flood
again. Another after that. A hundred
and two should put everything in place.
Until then, I’ll chew at a slower pace.
Phonecall from an Old Neighbor

I tend to our spices in the yard, water
the grass when I get sick of oatmeal and George.
But George isn’t all scalawag. Always Walter,
that brother of yours. Hear he’s in beauty college?

A little queer, I think. Told you that last week?
Damn memory’s a dog: mighty slow-going,
just pees and eats. And sleeps. Sometimes, I think
dogs live pretty fat. No mind. Stay indoors, grow

old. Sis says she hardly works for thinking
of her dog. Food and water? Did she leave
enough that he won’t cry? I hear you’re getting
paid to think nowadays. Sis says she can’t believe

how little brain she uses anymore. Dispenser
of pills, prescription filler’s about all it takes.
She and her school are like George and the war:
good nightmares. She says they used to make

the pills from scratch. No gadgets. Where’s scratch
come from anyway? About all I know
is that dog scratched a lot. Fleas in the crotch.
Had heartworms, right? I think that last snow

she almost lost him. Thank God for pills: slip them
down in old hamburger. But Dad’s still teaching,
Mom’s still teaching Dad that Mediterranean
food. Says she’ll have to keep on trying

until they’re dead. You should go visit sis
and the dog before winter. She misses
your wit and watercolors. Tells me to quit
bugging you; but that snow—it’s so quiet.

She’s so alone what with her dog near gone.
Some mornings, poor guy can hardly strain
to get out and pee. Sis keeps a special one—
a little pill for him in case the pain
gets too bad. She asks why we can kill old dogs, not old people. Damned immoral, I tell her. And did you know I’m going to tea at your mother’s? Winter gets her lonely

what with your dad still teaching late. So very lonely. Did I tell you little Walter’s a pharmacist? He calls near every night, asking if I need more pills. Sweeter

than sleep he is, but I still like to order. You ought to visit your sis. She misses you like summer. Lake’s near frozen over blue, but you could make water so lovely for her.