PERSONAL ARCHAEOLOGY: POEMS

THESIS

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By

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A collection of poems focused primarily on rural America and the South, the creative writing thesis also includes material concerned with the history of Mexico, particularly Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest. The introduction combines a personal essay with critical material discussing and defining the idea of the Southern writer.
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PERSONAL ARCHAEOLOGY: AN EXCAVATION OF SELF

A PERSONAL ESSAY

Among displaced persons, poetry can serve as a tool for recovering identity. One’s relationship to both contemporary culture and her traditional past can also be pursued through the imagination as well. For the displaced, the means for such discovery are often limited: cultures have been lost, histories have gone unrecorded, lives have been misinterpreted. Writing, therefore, becomes something of a tool—for creating art, for excavating the self, for locating that self in a context of time and place.

My father migrated to the United States from Torreon, Mexico in 1955. He was the youngest of ten and was raised primarily by an older sister. He settled in Albuquerque and seven years later married my mother. She was from rural Oklahoma and had lived in New Mexico only two years. My mother is one-sixteenth Choctaw and had been raised, along with four brothers and sisters, by my grandmother after her husband, my alcoholic grandfather, had deserted the family.

Three years after I was born, my parents divorced, and my mother and I moved to rural Oklahoma, retaining my father’s last name, Castro. From the time I was five, I spent my summers with my dad, who had relocated to Phoenix.
I was raised Anglo, as much by my father as by my mother. The only times I heard my father use Spanish were speaking on the phone to his family. He rarely talked of his childhood in Mexico, and I spent more of my time with my stepmother's Italian family than with my father's Mexican.

My mother's Indian family was kept from me as well. One cousin, Becky Blue-Eyes, had been sent to Choctaw boarding school, a euphemism for Oklahoma's reformatory schools for Native American children. Becky had been my mother's favorite cousin, and the treatment Becky received at the boarding school had hurt my mother deeply, so much so that she believed it best to keep me separated from that past.

Had I wanted to engage either ethnic group, its people would have been hostile to me; I don't look like I belong to either culture. When I was eleven, my mother took me to a Choctaw health clinic because it was evident that I needed orthodontic work we couldn't afford. I was shown to an examination room to wait for the doctor. When the doctor arrived, she took one look at my red hair and freckles, turned to the nurse, and demanded, "What's she doing here?"

I think that moment offers the best explanation as to why I write poetry, and what I seek with poetry--the poems are recoveries of the pasts, those histories, denied me. The poems are efforts to place myself in relation to these cultures, certainly, but also simply to place my self.
When I started college, an English professor introduced me to Afro-American literature, and for the first time I recognized voices as displaced as mine. For the first time, I heard others whose names and faces didn't match. These writers went beyond meager familial histories and found their places within the larger landscapes of history and myth. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and the works of Flannery O'Connor accommodated voices I had heard within, but had not validated. Other writers who reject, are unsatisfied with, or are expelled from their birthrights engage in this reconstruction as well; a great many of these writers are Southern.

The series of my poems treating the myths and legends of Mexico come out of my search for a larger past that I could claim as my own, but also as a reaction to the richness of these myths. The Aztec and other tribes that inhabited Central America left religions, philosophies, literatures, and legends which demand exploration. For many, Aztec history is reducible to a history of human sacrifice. But these were also a people which granted the first three rows of any crop to the poor.

In addition to the *Aztec* poems, several of the poems here are set in and are concerned with New Orleans, perhaps the city in which I am most comfortable. The combination of exotic cultures, lush vegetation, and unique spiritualities produces a landscape that rivals those the imagination can propose. New Orleans
has traditionally housed many displaced identities--Tennessee Williams, Mark Twain, William Faulkner.

Finally, a few of the poems approach the rural landscapes of my childhood. These are perhaps the most troubled and problematic poems of the collection. Perhaps these landscapes are too real, too unyielding to reconstruction. These border on the confessional, a mode inconsistent with the other poems which are for the most part dramatic monologues. For me, the landscape of Oklahoma is hostile, barren; the wind is a perpetual assailant. (We joked that if the wind ever ceased, we would fall over.) Rather than exploring the childhood histories, the future I hope to find is in Native American pasts that I can make my own. For now, though, too many voices there still ask "What's she doing here?"

Perhaps history can be fathomed only as personal mythology. When events and landscapes involve some part of us, only then do they become real. To involve ourselves we must use imagination; in recording these histories, we discover and create ourselves. This is what Octavio Paz seems to be about in poems like "The Revolving House." He takes traditional myth and history out of Mexico, brings it to Oklahoma, and there creates both a self and a new context.

There is a wooden house
on the plains in Oklahoma
Each night the house becomes
an island in the Baltic Sea,
stone fallen from the sky of fables.
Polished by Astrid's glances,
lit by Ivar's voice,  
the stone turns slowly in the shadows:  
it is a sunflower, and it burns.  

Then  
Ivar and Astrid raise architectures  
—cubes of echoes, weightless forms—  
some they call poems,  
others drawings, others conversations  
with friends from Malaga, Mexico,  
and other planets. . .

By similarly uniting Mexico and Oklahoma, I hope to find my own history  
and my own *ti bon ange*, which in the Haitian voodoo religion means "little good  
angel." According to voodoo theology, humans possess six levels of life at all times;  
the *ti bon ange* is the part of the soul responsible for all willpower, personality,  
and character. The voice that says *I am*, it is the *ti bon ange* which takes flight  
when we dream (Davis 219). When we recover history for ourselves, we create  
and find our own angels.

The voice at work in my poems may find the past a misremembered thing  
but desired nonetheless. The voice comes from a tradition that I generally term  
*Southern*. Although Southern often refers to a locale, I mean it here as more in  
the sense of a tradition—a tradition of writers employing like forms of language  
and perceptions to create histories and lives.
Elizabeth Bishop's "Santarem" incorporates that which is Southern, the first two lines revealing an implied ambivalence and uncertainty concerning the past. In the course of the poem's exotic language, an exotic self is uncovered as well.

Of course I may be remembering it all wrong after, after--how many years?

That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther; more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile in that great conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon, grandly, silently flowing, flowing east. Suddenly there'd been houses, people, and lots of mongrel riverboats skittering back and forth under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds, with everything gilded, burnished along one side, and everything bright, cheerful, casual--or so it looked. I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place. (185)

The speaker of "Santarem" qualifies her vision of the place as a possibly mistaken memory; but she proceeds with the details nonetheless, as if to insist that, however altered by memory, the idea of the place retains its essential character, its central significance.

For the Southern writer, both the place and the idea of the place are archaeological sites where one may uncover oneself, one's identity, both temporally and spatially. The place--the poem's topography--can imply the land, the body, the ti bon ange. How the writer views the landscape, and whether the writer views herself as apart from or a part of the landscape determines her
literary geography. *Southern* is used here to reflect a southward tendency on any continent and, I think, a symbiotic engagement with the land. Many of the writers I call Southern began their lives in the North but migrated to tropical climes—Elizabeth Bishop, Gabriel García Márquez, and Octavio Paz from Central and Latin America, and Ezra Pound, Byron, and Shelley from the Mediterranean.

*The place* may refer to land, the body, the *ti bon ange*. In fact, for the Southern writer, all three are interwoven with one another and any one figure can stand for the others. The land may take on an exotic, almost erotic and bodily lushness that, within the many layers of a work, leads to the conception and participates in the definition of the *ti bon ange*. Similarly, the *ti bon ange* -- always inclusive of the body--may find its reflection in the land.

Therefore, rather than privileging the object, the Southern writer might be said to attend as well to its representation. In this and other areas, Southern and Romantic ideas share common ground. Giving equal status to both the idea and the place in his *Biographia Literaria XIV*, Coleridge extolls "The power of both . . . a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and . . . the modifying colors of the imagination" (517). Through the play of imagination upon outward landscapes, both the Romantic and the Southerner seek to find a more reliable truth.

In addition, both modes aspire, through poetry, to engender an identity, a place of one’s own in the world. Through the activity of the imagination, poets can hope to birth themselves, giving life to a readily identifiable persona.
Furthermore, Shelley's quest for that which links "not only man with man but with everything that exists" (Bloom 6) are central to both ideas. Romantics held that the poet's imagination could create history, nature, or society. Likewise, the Southerner holds that the place, body, and *ti bon ange* can create and be created by the poet's imagination. There is no question that Romanticism continues to shape modern poetics and thought.

The Southern writer holds a unique vision of and relation to the landscapes of her works. Rather than seeking perfect memory in a work, the Southern writer is working for something other, a pressure of memory and other awarenesses acting upon each other. The work, therefore, is a performance of the merger between approximate memory and this other, creative thing which ultimately leads to the making of the *ti bon ange*. One might call this *other* the imagination; it has been called that before. From Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria: XIII*: "The imagination . . . , coexisting with the conscious will, . . . dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (516).

This making of self comes about by the Southerner's understanding of an alliance between land, body, and the *ti bon ange*. The body, in fact, becomes the intersection of landscape and *ti bon ange*. The landscape is the sensual extension of the body. The place becomes the body of the *ti bon ange*--the reshaping of the place is in effect the making of the *ti bon ange*. The sensual and the sexual are enjoyed, relatively unfettered. This merging of the place/body/the *ti bon ange* is commonplace for the Southerner.
Northern writers, on the other hand, might be said to prefer dichotomy, tend to privilege a retreat to the mind. They see the body's needs as functionary, problematic--necessary evils. Both the landscape and the body exist in enmity with the *ti bon ange*, rigidly resisting any mutual cooperation. The Southerner, however, finds a mutual shaping, with each entity--landscape, body, and the *ti bon ange*--emulating and representing the others.

The central issue, then, becomes the perception of the body, and ultimately the *ti bon ange*. Many times, these Southern poets seem bodiless, "the sensation of falling off/the round, turning world/into cold, blue-black space" (Bishop, "In the Waiting Room"), but they are tactile, sensuous beings. A geographical and personal understanding of not only sensuality, but also of the *ti bon ange* and its participation with the land is revealed in Southern works.

The beginning lines of Bishop's "Santarem" reveal that unique vision, that concern for something other than perfect memory. "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong/after, after--how many years?" Affecting an off-handed, spontaneous voice, this preference for the other-worldly is carried throughout the poem:

Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female

--such notions would have been resolved, dissolved, straight off

in that watery, dazzling dialectic. (185)

"That watery, dazzling dialectic" is the result of the approximating memory and the poet's imagination working upon one another, ultimately leading to an affirmation of the *ti bon ange* and its new territory. The voice of the poem favors the truth found in the representation, rather than in the object or event itself. "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth: and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*" (Coleridge 522).

While it may be safe to say for all poets that the value of the event and its representation are roughly equal, if one were to look at the value in matters of degree, one would find the Southern writer favoring the imagination, the life of recreative history. The poet makes and shapes the object/event seen, rather than the landscape shaping the poet. The voice enters the landscape, but this is qualified by a distance between poet and landscape, though at times this proves less distant than the voice is from the reader. From Bishop's "Santarem":

In the blue pharmacy the pharmacist had hung an empty wasps' nest from a shelf:
small, exquisite, clean matte white,
and hard as stucco. I admired it
so much he gave it to me.
Then--my ship's whistle blew. I couldn't stay.
Back on board, a fellow-passenger, Mr. Swan,
Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric,
really a very nice old man,
who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,
asked, "What's that ugly thing?" (186-187)

The word landscape insists upon our seeing scape and scope (Ital. scopo, aim,
purpose < Gk. -skopos, target); and finally scop, shaper, poet or bard, revealing
the role of poet as seer, architect, and recreator of the world.

In addition, the Southern writer sees not only the physical landscape, but
also an historical one as well. These writers often explore the spiritual history, the
past of possibilities associated with a place. This spiritual history embodies a
deliberate history of people acting on the land and on selves, as opposed to a
mere chronology of events--accidental, coincidental. Rather, history--the tale--is
formed by deliberate acts performed by individuals aware of their roles, as the
Southern writer is aware of herself as a shaper of that same history. From
Bishop's "At the Fishhouses":

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It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

drawn from the cold hard mouth

of the world, derived from the rocky breasts

forever, flowing and drawn, and since

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (66)

History, therefore, is not so much a constant, immovable event, as a versatile, changeable result of imagination.

Often that imperfect memory is revealed in voices that affect spontaneity in thoughtful, carefully crafted works. Elizabeth Bishop's "Visit to St. Elizabeth's" not only illustrates that casual tone, but also gives utterance to voices previously denied.

This is the house of Bedlam.

This is the house of the man

that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the time

of the tragic man

that lies in the house of Bedlam.
This is the wristwatch
telling the time
of the talkative man
that lies in the house of Bedlam. (133-135)

In fact, many of the voices heard in typically Southern works are voices of
the disenfranchised, the dispossessed—voices of children, of the insane, and of the
tribal. Traditionally, these voices are acknowledged to access the imagination
much more easily and readily than the voices of adults, the reasoned, and the
modern. The voice of Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" is her voice, three days
from seven years old. Even though the physical location of the poem is in a
dentist's waiting room, the actual geographies of the poem are internal, the tribal,
and otherworldly.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.

Why should you be one, too?

I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.

I gave a sidelong glance
—I couldn't look any higher—at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.

I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen. (160)

Usually reserved for Central and South American writers, the phrase

magical realism may be find further usefulness as applied generally to all Southern
writers. The settings are often commonplace and contemporaneous; the voices
are usually informal and engaging, often canny and ironic. The magical comes
about as a result of the poet's search for that which transcends the accident of
event—i.e., mythology, history (as recollected tale), the supernatural. Most
recognizable in works by García Márquez, elements of magical realism can be
found in works by other Southern writers as well. Bishop's "In the Waiting Room"
presents a young girl waiting for her aunt in the waiting room of a doctor's office,
a contemporary, commonplace and rather uneventful setting. Yet the sensations and events that occur within this room are exceptional, terrifying, and wondrous. The young girl experiences the supernatural as surely as the villagers do in García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."

The supernatural juxtaposed with realism, magical realism, embodies the Southerner's approach to both the object and the idea of the object. Both are equally valid, both are domains of the writer, and the two combined lead ultimately to recovery of the *ti bon ange*.

Of course, one of the easiest ways to define is to differentiate. The Southern writer can be determined by what she is not. The Northern *idea of the place* is found in the works of Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, and T.S. Eliot. Rooted in a rigid, fixed history, the Northern writer sees the landscape as interminable, something holding a fixed reality. Therefore, the history of a given landscape too contains truths, apart from the poet's control or influence. From Robert Frost's "The Wood-Pile":

> Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
> 
> The hard snow held me, save where now and then
> One foot went through. The view was all in lines
> Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by

So as to say for certain I was here

Or somewhere else; I was just far from home. (156)

At best, the landscape can mirror the inscape of the mind. At worst, however, the Northern poet finds herself in antipathy with the landscape, succumbing to the landscape and its weathers. Many Northern writers find the upheaval and chaos of the land too much, and their lives sometimes end in suicide. The landscape is perceived as something to go through, something purely other. For the Northern poet, the categories of place/body/ti bon ange are rigid and separate; for the Southerner, however, the borders are permeable.

Here then is a paradox: Northern poets do not participate in the landscape so much as they contend with it; they often succumb to its weathers. The Northern writer favors the object and, as a result of that, often finds her world hostile, alien. On the other hand, Southern poets, whose landscapes are in part imaginative—and who seek the lushness, the tangible tropical weathers—seem to bask, flourish, and savor the consequences of the world more readily. The Southern writer is more likely to survive the disorder and clutter of living; the landscapes that surround her are, after all, the landscapes she has created and shaped. The Southerner claims ownership of the landscapes as she does her own body.

Octavio Paz’s "January First" illustrates how the world must recreated everyday, in order that the poet’s ti bon ange be reborn. That recreation comes about from the mutual forces of place/body/ti bon ange. "January First" is the first
of any month, any year and the promise held must be accepted so that history be continued. The poem's voice is well aware that the world is ours for the taking, making, and reshaping.

The year's doors open
like those of language,
toward the unknown.
Last night you told me:
tomorrow
we shall have to think up signs,
sketch a landscape, fabricate a plan
on the double page
of day and paper.
Tomorrow, we shall have to invent,
once more,
the reality of this world.

I opened my eyes late.
For a second of a second
I felt what the Aztec felt,
on the crest of the promontory,
lying in wait
for time's uncertain return
through cracks in the horizon.

But no, the year had returned.
It filled all the room
and my look almost touched it.
Time, with no help from us,
had placed in exactly the same order as yesterday
houses in the empty street,
snow on the houses,
silence on the snow.

You were beside me,
still asleep.
The day had invented you
but you hadn't yet accepted
being invented by the day.
—Nor possibly my being invented, either.
You were in another day.

You were beside me
and I saw you, like the snow,
asleep among appearances.
Time, with no help from us,
invents houses, streets, trees
and sleeping women.

When you open your eyes
we'll walk, once more,
among the hours and their inventions,
and lingering among appearances,
we'll bear witness to time and its conjugations.
We'll open the doors of the day,
and enter the unknown. (594)
WORKS CITED


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AZTECA
The Mistress of Cortes

Come closer, daughter, this white fire
will not burn your paler flesh, birthed as much
by my mouth as by your mother's vulva. This mouth--
soon to ash and peel as my fingers have--
will finish the treachery of the body.

Driven by serpents, feathered legends
and reborn gods accomplished our shore.
In his eyes I found traces of jade.
In his hair I found messages of sun.
A child of barter, a child of trade,
I trusted salvation sprang from his loins.
I believed our children would redeem us.
I waited for the ocher butterflies,
golden hummingbirds to herald anew
the possibilities of my youth. I dreamt
of the Virgin, wondered at the saviors
I would bear. Again, the fields of cotton
would sing in a confusion of stark hues.
Now my sons cry out and curse me, those would-be
Christs. Born of darkness, they crucify
themselves daily. They beat their innocent wives,
my daughters, exiling my coarser features.
In my daughter's eyes, those sons find treason.
In my daughter's hair, those husbands find
scents of disgrace. Like their father they too would
remake worlds in their own image. Bleeding eyelids, bruised cheeks erase the ancient eyes, the sky face. Child of god, child of man, the ocher butterflies and golden birds, humming the dreams of our Virgin never realized; now a bronze eagle clutches those serpents that carried the past to shore. the fields of cotton, blanched, thin as wafers.
The Suns of Cortes

The sands were not pearl, nor the driftwood
gold, no streams of silver. That shore looked
like any other—that shore kept the land’s
secrets better than any man later would.

As I mapped questions of coastline, I saw my death
in a hundred grains of dust. Son of dreams,
you will learn as I have the way of hope
often leads to such empty beaches.

But you asked how your mother appeared
on that day. Better to ask how we appear to God—
tractable, one presumes. With the dawn of the seventh
day, she appeared with other fleshy gifts.

Copper, light, dark, singular.
I loved her as the sculptor loves another’s stone.
Oh, she was magnificent, daughter of tilled
lands, barter for a brother’s claims.

As she walked into battle, the light of moons
came from her hair, her eyes, for a time,
the pearls I’d hoped to find. In the stars
she saw phantoms and swiftly exorcised them from my path.

She saw the god that waits in men. She saw the god in me.
Does God himself grow tired of our verses? Do psalms of love always turn to tirades? They must, even to a jealous god, I think. Marina's love, no, *adulation*, became a burden.
The weight of all my chimeras cumbersome, her smile the coffin that follows in waves, her songs void of that cheap thrill of thunder.
The Aztec Adulteress to Her Lover

Put out the fires, and break all the dishes.
If the gods will, tonight is the end
of all we have been. The sun, if it rises,
is only hours away. Tlazolteotl has eaten well

on the sins of our priests. We too have much
to offer the Filth-Eater, so perhaps we are saved.
Perhaps the crush of stone (no less insistent
than even this need) will never know the streams

of your flesh. Tonight let us dream
of the hummingbird, forgetting the sanguine
flowers and warriors who haunt our skies.
But first, I have some amaranth for you--

I picked it today from the floating gardens
Eat quickly now, then shatter the bowl.
Tonight, I will dance for you, my skin
more pure than Coxcox's daughter's. Let us read

the poems of Nezahualcoyotl's by the moon's light.
Then let us find what the darkness may bring us.
This is our entire world; we are its heirs,
if only briefly.
Aged Jaguar

Look boy, you don’t know
the real war. See these teeth,
these teeth didn’t last as long

as the jaguar who blessed
my tonali. Stupid boy
who thinks he is a warrior.

Very well, I will teach you
the cries, but that is all.
Huitzilopochtli, you must

always thank him for the honor
of spilling your blood. Then bless
your captives as honorable sons.

*tonali – fate (Jennings 286)*
Montezuma’s Lament

He says he is the god
revisited from the ancient ones.
But I am the Uey-Tlatoani,
the Revered Speaker Montezuma,
Master in the Heart of the One World.
I control the Snake Woman,
the Speaking Council. I am Uey-Tlatoani.
But the thunder from his hands,
his fighting beasts, they do not
tolerate the ghosts in a man’s head.
The ghosts brought on by plague,
by famine, by the intolerable
stench of these hateful gods.
Yet . . . like all men, I welcomed
the Savior, yet cursed in my heart
his necessity. I am no longer
enough for my people, my holiness
stripped, like the abandoned temples
in the south.
Carlota’s Song

In the white-hot nights
of winter, the rain slips
elsewhere, falls on a grave
hollowed by priests and revolution.
I’ve never been there,
but I see that grave in faces, walls--
every plate and cup of my days.

He was Maximilian, and that was all,
and that was enough. He is my husband;
he is my friend and now he is dying.
No, no, he is dead. Already dead
for all my life now.

The Pope is a killer; I know his true
name. That’s why they keep me here, you know.
Buried in marble, buried in memory.
All Hail His Holiness, Pope Judas of Roma.

Let me ask you, have you ever, in all your
manic journeys, seen the cast-off filth of living
baking in sidewalk ovens? That was Vera Cruz.
Have you seen children baked by that same sun,
stunt and warped like trees? They swarm the tropical
cities like insects. Well, that was Mexico City,
That was our home, that was our grave.
The palace they gave us was so foul, we had
to sleep on a billiards table for three nights.
The difference between heaven and hell--
just a matter of timing.

Go away now, I am tired. I need to sleep;
the dreams come easier when I am asleep.
I said, go away, leave me alone. Leave
the way you came in.
Mexica Displaced

Ashes from heaven, they fall
like worms, sweeping
the plains with myth.
Northward they crawl; milky
pools reveal their passage.
Within those soapy threads lie memory.

Waiting for a friend the priest eats
sidewalk manna. Himself a sign,
the miracles he seeks pass daily,
calling to the blind. Agnostic
by day, at night the nothingness
of him beckons like a rotten tooth.
The friend arrives, bringing biscuits and wonder.

Soon we will all be ordained,
but for now, only the priest observes.

During our sluggish day, we wait
for the legends, the promises,
the ceremonies of night that mark
our suns with significance.

Come, let us find the road to Cibola.

Tracing the ways of ancient glaciers, the wind
drives the earth down blue paths.
Living our lives in circles, we return as children, every atom once a star.

The languorous winter of my flesh knows no springs. Under this paper white skin, the murmuring blood is silenced. Instead, songs are sung within my bones, stories told within my hair, long winters survived.

The cock’s crow makes the day both familiar and mine. The blood sings to rise, but the parchment skin will not. Between red sky and earth is left to the whims of the wind. Garnering tenacity over the plains, this harmattan insults me, assaults me; I venture too far. Tlaloc is my revered father; I am his son.

He fails to recognize me, sending me into battle alone. My blood is coppery with shame. On the bathroom wall, the handprint fades, neglected by unbelievers.
Artifact

The guidebook says "The Olmecs believed the afflicted had a special relationship with the supernatural, or perhaps they simply had a macabre interest in the unusual or grotesque."
Oh, but it is ugly, awful this vase, no, *Lidded Vessel* — 
(Hunchback), provenance unknown. Nine centuries of that deformed and curious figure.
Look, even the ears are misshapen.
Did the housewife flinch and shudder, did she grimace each time she touched this lid? Surely she must have, or else put the vessel on some high, forgotten shelf. No, no, it is too finely made—probably the pride of the household, some cherished wedding gift, perhaps.
Maybe he was some great warrior, surely well-enough disguised.
The vessel could’ve been an honorary, a thing of ennoblement. His mouth open not in scowl, but in battle cry. No, he does not wear the garb, nor the distinction of a warrior.
The Olmecs girded their legs
heavily, more so than that.

The guidebook gives ready excuses, 
letting us say "Ah, that's it,"
letting us go on. But the artist
knew, knew to celebrate
the disfigured, too, himself
very likely a hunchback.
Chacmool

At first, what one notices is the ease, the comfort of the chacmool. Mediator between god and man should look more threatening, not like some pre-Columbian sunbather. But then, one sees the cold plate that joins chest and knees; the pose begins to look awkward, like the hinds of dogs. Then there's the stone crown, weighing down the head until the neck bends so slightly. One thousand years of supplication and requisition bow and stiffen the arms like some doomed fowl. The chipped face impassive but susceptible to change, mediating being what it is.
Shallow Architecture

Tenochtitlan, watery totem,
in another season,
a brown and silver god.
Cape made from mountains,
shoes among the weeds,
home for a people without
tokens. Winged serpent,
slithered and drifted,
until believers forgot the reason
for the feathered tail.
It’s just as well;
things with legs soon
trample the earth,
leaving the legless
licking new wounds.
City for treason,
ready for plunder,
soon to be under
another god’s rule.
Should’ve been smarter
than to plant in water
the seeds of your husbands,
the fronds of your wives.

What a wishful people
to live in a lake.
"To take the dead from the water"; the ritual whereby the *ti bon ange* is reclaimed by the living and given a new form" (Davis 338).
November Plum

I
Indehiscent, the skin is taut,
invoking promises of flesh,
sapid waters flowing
with the prick of an eyetooth.
Do not bite; just trace
lips and tongue
over shiny blue-blackness,
feel the urge growing louder
in languages of essence and pulp.
The skin grows warmer with breath
but quickly cools with rains innate.
The mysteries that lie
between skin and flesh
are without canon.

Then return, slowly,
to basket or bin.
Anything more might be too much,
the promise being enough.

II
But that’s a lie.
The promise is never enough,
the promise is always illusion.
Bite the fruit, devour the flower.
Take all that is offered
without hesitation, until
only dry pits remain.

Then consider the promises
the fruit has fed you.
Recall potent waters.
Now reborn, do not discount
this smaller death.
Off Center Ring

I
I have always suspected clowns,
mummers of the light who offer
to Thalia hats filled with filthy pennies.
They whore themselves for anxious children,
and are led awry by obscenely-dressed
dogs who burlesque and waltz without partners.

II
His oversized shoes distracted me,
and as I stared at his improbable nose, he began
to eat the words. Finishing the page,
he lit a cigar. I was assaulted by smoke and ash,
but the explosion never came.

III
So again, I scrape the greasepaint from my face,
the skin beneath corpse-white, rigid.
It will take more than this scourge of ashes
to lift those charnel smells from my body.

IV
Fool’s-capped and shrouded, she laments the buffoon.
Bells sing out last rites under medieval moons.
Later, a green sun finds her humming death-songs
as she rehearses a new routine.
His costumes need little alteration.
Kassandra with Wrinkles

These soapy eyes meet the plains
of days and remember.
Once I diagnosed miracles,
gave the prophets a run
for their money.
Now I avoid Delphian tarts:
their covenants, like all speech,
favor the illusion of sight, believable.
My mind has worked itself
into a shroud, anyway.
My words are broken,
or still on loan,
too mismatched for company.
The visions, never registered.
The Book of Ruth

Naomi's days, like so many boxtops posted
after years of hoard in rusting coffee cans,
will arrive too late. Sanguine tenets boast
nothing that resemble the orange and plastic
premiums, anyway. Spiritual ailments worsen,
conclude themselves in small naked rooms.
In the mid of some intractable night,
shall I rise to find her scraped body
bleeding itself upon a fatigued and ready floor?
Will she beg for alms of bitter aloes?
Will she curse the heresy of my psalms?

I will sit with blackened figures,
fresh from the fires of baptism.
They will wonder at the blasphemous tears.
The brisance of grief will alarm,
vacant passions unsuspected.
I have no coupons to redeem,
my psalms promise no resurrection.

*Whither thou goest, I will go;*
*and where thou lodgest, I will lodge.*
The Fifth Character

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-lifesize photograph over the mantel.

I fell in love with long distances
or, rather, grew to suspect
person-to-person and collect calls.
So I followed telegraph wires,
stopped only long enough to say
"Hello--Goodbye."
The thrill in the going--No place
to arrive, the departure
eternal, traveling sublime.
Still, southern voices hum, rails sing
of approaching trains, the past remains
a telephone ringing in a motel's vacancies.

I dream of houses I haven't seen
in years. I wake and seek deliverance
under the cold, unselfconscious stare
of a naked bulb. The dire pastoral
of a painting congeals into a requiem
for the transitory. Once I lowered
and peered too far into that land,
saw my face in the turn of a wheel.
Woman with the Purple Hat

The wind is gunmetal
cold, losing all us
black saints
in that wilderness.
Crazy quilts, rambling gardens,
somewhere a whipporwill
sings of my death. At least
he's having a good time.
The fraying yarn of my mind
has unraveled, with no one
there to knit me up again.
I saw a way to right the world,
a meaning in the flurry,
but I wanted only to weed the garden,
maybe set out a few azaleas.
Roadkill
--New Orleans, 1991

Like forgotten promise, a dog lies
stiff, splayed at road's edge. The white
beacon of legs is fleeting; another car
passes, disturbing the fur with its growl and breath.

Under this highway, concrete levees
bank tar currents; the roar of dying
clutches and shakes the overpassed.
Seasoned to the noise, the woman roams,
hers red slippers the cheap, stuffed
prizes of chance. Rain begins to bleed
the fur, mats the felt into accusing rags.
Her bids for help sink as mist on other
sinners who, recognizing the moment,
cast their stony words. She shuffles along
muddy streets, the wet pavement pulling
rusty leaves from unlikely air. Passing

a balding shack, she turns away, the rain
leaving nothing washed, nothing new.
Outside the shack, potluck children sweat
like dogs under a gray sun. Their stick
figures belong to the sameness of dead limbs
hanging from dead trees. I'd never noticed
them, missed them, freckles familiar in the
fading mirror. Conceived in chrome, birthed
in asphalt, they are remnants of lost gods.
One dark child keeps scraps of hair and shell,
mementos of guilt drawn from black shoulders.
Storyville Descendants

Obscene and solitary, the purple day 
gone, the city yellows, fades, worn 
wallpaper stripping itself, the aged 
pages of musty, bruised novels. Hedges 
of cemeteries bind the District; red 
and blue lights hide the dust that comes 
unremittingly from us all.

The streets of the Quarter 
are marked with fear and sex, the violence 
of lives misremembered. In those lights, 
skin grows lucid, sweating green skeletons 
grimace, and dreams of falling Lethean teeth.

Still . . . birds appear like clean, bright 
strips of linoleum, and the masks 
are feathered, after all. Vieux Carré 
pathways are acts of bawdy commentary. 
An aged, charming whore--her companions, 
young boys, artless and decadent-- 
descends an iron stairway into the rue.
Voodoo Wedding

Ignore the streetcars' clatter;
attend instead the candles that will open
the good red road. The winds
from the River carry incense,
the blessings of Erzulie and the loa,
the deities of vodoun faith, mystères.

Like the mother of your dreams,
the goddess of love, beauty,
and of wealth will come to you.
Pregnant with pauses, the spirits
birth oracles like thunderstones.
The wrought iron streets hide
their presence, but the yellowed eyes
tending bar downstairs can find them.
The thrumming cortex behind the eyes remembers.
Theatrical Performances

I
I send messages in fire;
they are read, but not received.
Absolution, spoken in foreign tongues,
brings dark solace for the cold body.
Hieroglyphics of somber calculation
require prophets for their consummation.
Solitude emerges in the white silence
between utterances. I do not wish this barrenness,
but I cannot deny its call.
My messages have burned themselves out.

II
In dark Moslem dress, she waits
for schoolchildren. The brick building
trembles with alarm and, shimmering,
spews them forth. She gathers up the mess,
tasting the heavy air as an afterthought.
III

The false hope of the saint’s life is known best by the drunk. The assurances of their salvation grow moist in clammy hands. Alone, they worship. To the spiritual or drunken, the world appears hazy. Once public, rituals become burlesques. Before the mirror, both genuflect and flinch, approaching gods. Prophets who wish the mysteries would end.

IV

When I was eight, I saw my first porn magazine. Now at twenty-five, I see the pages of my death.
Burning Bush

I was ripe for resurrection. Brown feathers consumed, death left me red plumes. I rose from ashes of antiquity and refuse into my lover’s green arms. Where the breeze was cool for a while.

I began to suspect a return to smoke, sense holocaust in that air, thought it only twice shy. But one summer morning I found the ends of my hair blackened, and when fingers of flame touched me there, I knew.

A phoenix can only burn once, right?
STRAWBERRY ROAN
My Red-Headed Grandmother

When Mom was single,
she was my Saturday night date.
We'd fill glasses with buttermilk
and cornbread, eat it with a spoon.
We'd watch the Porter Waggoner
show, and dance until her swollen
legs would tremble, until her arms shook.
She'd sneak cigarettes, hiding the smoke,
afraid I might think her unlady-like.
Then, only her name, Eddie Inez,
(some midwife's mistake for Edie),
seemed harsh. But she covered that,
like the paler strands, with Red.
World-known as the checker down at
the Piggly Wiggly, she was all I had.
God, she was enough.
Parturition
--for Carrie

In that purple garden, doctors gather,
surround the red desert of my bed.
Feeding on memory, they dictate
punishment for my daily infractions.
Well-meaning dogs, they draw
closer to the open wound, though the full
ripening has yet to occur. The life
recently expelled in salt waters only
lends urgency to their cries. I was not
prepared for ballads of demise,
effecting spirituals that comfort.

They sent me home with my newborn
son and instructions for care.
With best intentions, they left us alone.
Rather, they left us together. Now two selves,
where before there was one and a possibility.
The first night each wondered at the other,
at ourselves. His blue-birth eyes
held none of the sorrow, none of the promised sacrifices.

I have long since discarded roadmaps.
Tracing the outlines of your way, I do not
intend to map out yours, sister. My pencils’
colors are of their own hue. What I meant
to say is in that domain of simple
journeys, where each must walk anew.
The Monster Poem

I tell my son,

"There are no monsters--
There is only thunder, telling us rain
is on the way."

But I lie.

The world is full of monsters.

The world is brilliant with monster-smiles,
Flashing in the glint of the knife.

The world is choked with monster-smells,
Rising from the fresh-mounded earth.

The world is scored by monster-feet,
scraping across littered floors.

I see hints of monsterness in the mirror.

I lie to my son.
I tell him there are no monsters.

Hoping they will not find him.
Hoping he will not hunt them.
Oklahoma Interstate

I
Jesus juicin’ through the radio,
waves wet and static over dusty
red cornfields. Barefoot preachers
wager, wild-eyed for the coming roll.
Gumbo dirt, black and thick, clings
to the old stones, to my bed.
The scratching needle of a dial
buries itself between blood dreams
and cracked dashboard dust.

II
Driving the black car down red roads,
I’d meant to exit, but the road proved
introduction to yet another highway. No matter—
the other life lies between clouds and wind.
On Oklahoma highways between city and country,
in red sunglasses and worn dirty boots, I drive
through prairies, shouting rock-and-roll poetry
at gray skies. Every strand of my red hair
a denial of the Indian past that made me,
I am lost. My daddy works the oil fields,
my momma in the office; Grandma’s still on the farm.
The country boy who first touched me works
on the 27th floor. I flew away to school.
I forgot the country. But Grandma’s calls
brings me back--she missed her baby girl.
Daddy's found me a good ol' boy;
Momma knows this engineer.
Their talk can't seduce me though, not like
the whispers of Grandma's linen sheets.

But I know the bars, and I know the urge.
The country won't, can't do anymore.
I drive along the Interstate, looking for home.

III
Again the town deceives, lures me
with a promise, the promise of not
being known. Unable to discern the limits,
my gaze becomes distorted,
vision myopic. Aroused by new lights,
I want to peek through bedroom windows,
see my brothers of the town. They have
already seen through mine. The pedestrian
amenities, the sidewalk-smiles, cover
daylight curiosities, until the drawn
shades seduce us. The old men curse the city,
but too, they are held by the town.
The Driver's Meditation
(on Randall Jarrell)

Hell, I never saw him.
never knew he was there;
I thought I'd hit a deer.

These are some hard times,
to be sure; everyone looks to the air.
I know the hands of fear

that gather a man's courage
into ballads of hard, brittle twine,
hoard them in stale boxes of the mind.

But to jump before a car
with a pocketful of change?
Ed, who works down at the bar

on the corner, he says "Deranged,
that's what he was." I say 'Luck,
and none of it good.' But if I'd known

(Edna says How?), I'd have swerved,
maybe missed him, let him find
some other sonofabitches' route.
No One Died in a Dusty Cowtown
--after E. E. Cummings, dead poet

No one died in a dusty cowtown,
with down so trodden hillbilly clowns.
Sow birth harvest plow
They lost their ain’t; they did their ought.

Rustler and rancher (neither pansy and dud)
roped for no one, everyone’s bud.
They brushed their damns, they curried their hells,
Medicine shows, elixir sells.

Biscuits rose (all and none
and open they flaked as closed they crumb).
Harvest plow sow birth
So anyone ate them, and none were gone.

Hen by day and wolf by night
He rose at dark; he slept in light.
Steer in heat no cow in cold
No one’s nothing could save her soul.

Cowboys hitched their quicksilver teams,
stilted their leggings, and crotched their jeans.
Stretch tuck zip and again
They prayed their curses, baptized their guns.

Anyday no one lived we know,
and everyone rose to milk the cow.
Lazy dogs dug them bone by bone.
Snip by snip and ain't by ain't

None by none and high by high,
and less by less they set their sights.
Everyone and no one light by moon
Demand by body and sure by no

Rustler and rancher (neither dee nor dum)
Harvest plow birth sum
Burned their musing and ate their thought.
Medicine shows, elixir sells.