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"NIGHT SHAPING ITSELF" AND
FORTY OTHER POEMS

THESIS

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MASTER OF ARTS

By

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The forty-one poems comprising this thesis are written in a variety of styles and reflect my general international eclecticism. The most prominent influences on my work are ancient Chinese verse, as exemplified by the poems for N., and Zen tanka and haiku, as exemplified by "Detail from a Cubistic Autobiography." Largely imagistic rather than narrative, the poems were conceived in an effort to record my experiences and to define my reactions to those experiences.

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Foreword

This thesis consists of forty-one poems and includes almost all of those that I have managed to complete to my satisfaction during my time in graduate school here in Denton. Since I regard the writing of poetry mainly as a method by which I can put some meaning onto the rags of my experiences, it is therefore my own experiences and those that I have been fortunate enough to share with others that constitute the matter of these pages.

It goes without saying that we inherit most of our ideas about poetry. And our era is, if anything, an international one. Inexpensive paperback editions of literature from all ages and all countries are readily available, so it is not unusual for one with even only a casual interest in poetry to have at least some familiarity with the poets of, for instance, ancient Greece, or modern Japan, or Mexico, or Russia. I feel bound to no particular tradition to which I am heir, except the tradition of writing poetry. Therefore I have borrowed technical devices indiscriminately from whatever sources seemed to fit my purpose. Overall, I have avoided most traditional English forms: the one sonnet is really anti-sonnet, due to its syllabic rather than stress verse--there is scarcely an iambic line in it.

I have made use of a variety of verse forms, ranging from simple rhymed couplets, as in "Arse Poetica," to syllabic verse, as in "From Texas," and to several kinds of free verse. My free verse is generally governed by the iamb and is free only in the sense that the lines are of irregular lengths, for example "Movietime." The poems for N. owe an obvious debt to the Chinese, not only as regards theme and tone, but perhaps in typography as well, which I have designed to emphasize the melody of word and phrase. End rhyme is generally reserved for the lighter poems.

Most of my poems are imagistic rather than narrative and make use of a symbolic language that I have modeled on Zen tanka and haiku, for example "Detail from a Cubistic Autobiography" and "Night Shaping Itself." Although I have not tried to imitate the syllabic structure of the Japanese forms, terseness of expression has become a concern of mine because of them. Some images recur: the beach is an obvious favorite, a place where two worlds rub and mix. Insects, sky, moon, radio waves, monotone, guitars--each occurs with some frequency. Similar themes, too, crop up again and again: mortality, ennui, enlightenment. I hope such recurrences will not be attributed too hastily to a paucity of ideas. Those themes have a special significance for me, and although they occupy my work, I have tried earnestly not to write simply the same poem over and over again. I consider each poem separate and discrete, but the reader can make whatever out of the connections he sees fit.

Like fatted hams or special fish
Within the space-time recipe,
We're whipped into a tasty dish
To please a cosmic Boy-ar-dee.

Each seasoned treat for this great joker
Is pressed like a patty, and life's begun.
The world is His own pressure-cooker;
When you are dead, you know you're done.

Headlong

oh the clouds like eggs in
the milky sky the sole
umbrellas for the afternoons
when the sun claps like a
cymbal loud in the humid
air and the trees pendulous
rub at the yielding fence
yeah and the drumming down
the highway with the windows
down and the music distorting
the radio cursing the
cars we're passing pissing
at every station every
weekend just to be with you

For Sharon

ah, the music in her life--
she meeting all my questions
with questions
or the honks of her saxophone--

and still I see the men in her life
approaching their pianos
as if they were dragsters

and when the red lights change
to signal the start
they leave only clouds
of odorous smoke

one says:
in this piece I show
color slides and laser beams
all pictures worth a thousand flutes

and then a dance begins
violas clear their throats and spit
the trombone swallows hard
and rubber burns like gasoline

(coda)

once in a golden afternoon

I saw about her a swift ballet

the sun the clouds the fragrant air--

obliterated by a matinee

For Liz

I can still see you
as you were before
the concert--

in your smart brown suit
with the little string
tie--

martini in hand.

Mine is the mind that
tape-recorded all

the whimsy in your
voice

as you stood on the
grey zig-zagging steps

below bright red
Pegasus
vaulting the skyline.

Why, when you speak to me of love,
must you linger on her last words
and let me see her lips, but not kiss them?
Or why, when late at night,
with bland moonbeams across the bed
do you remind me of the day just ending?
Impertinent friend, why should you be so rude
to prick my tender spots with memory's pins?
Your whining is too much like a bad poet's,
who counts those times once pregnant with opportunity
among the stillborn past.
You know you waste your time
with endless thumbing through
some sentimental picture-book.
So show some faith.
And get some sleep.

All-Night Television

By now, the actors in this old movie
are either dead or selling something.
Either touting so-called luxury cars
in affected Spanish accents, perhaps
filling full-figured bras for all they're worth
over the keys of a white piano.
Or they're pushing up the daisies.
One way or another, they're still
on the screen: black and white images
on strips of film. But with the volume down,
I hear only some dreary requiem
on the stereo. And only at long intervals
do I look at the picture, in case
the monster ever shows. Still, film
is a kind of immortality, I imagine.
At any rate, it's been raining all day
like Rashomon, and it's still raining.
And the beer I had intended to drink tonight
gave up the ghost sometime this afternoon
in a Pontiac. And at this late hour,
I find myself so sick of all these records
that I don't bother to play another,
or even to listen at all to the water

that's dripping from the spotty ceilings
into the pots I placed in the other rooms.
I don't know why, but I've been waiting all day
for something, and I'm still waiting.

All that weekend of her visit
I dwelled on insignificant things.
The soap I use, she said,
is not the best.
Or had I tried some other cheese?
The tea would be better if I made it thus.
I stood in my shower
and wished that she would leave.
Now, I am alone;
and as the grey water spirals
down the holes in the drain
my mind is filled with insignificant things.

People in Keene perhaps
realize what a laughing matter
their religion is becoming;
at local revivals they dress
their deacons up as clowns;
"what better way to demonstrate
the joy and laughter
in the message of Christ?"
Poor Jesus, once the King of Kings,
depicted as a clown by some yokels in Texas.
The Trinity in three rings.

Aubade

(for Donna as she dresses)

I only want to say I'm glad
those pale blue sleeves cannot conceal
the contours of your slender arms

nor the sheerness of your blouse
the licking tongues tipping
your profiled breasts

when morning sunlight through the glass
illuminates the rare convergence
of your graceful lines

beneath diaphanous mists of blue

Oh, Dogen,

who knows my zen
in Houston?

where my shirts
drip dry

in the shower stall
and

models dressed
as geishas

advertise electric
toaster ovens

on t.v.
and

the air conditioner hawks
asthmatically,

which

the manager won't fix
until tomorrow.

The TV through
the tall window--

what shattering!

The rose-colored walls
in the evening light.

The Japanese print
I hung today,

its blue oruri perched
upon a twig.

Outside, the sounds
of heavy trains

pulling nameless burdens
away from town.

And with me now,
connecting these,

the shadows fading
across the room.

In her dream

Rita was

riding her bike

on the face

of a nickel

where old women

were selling

large baskets

of ballooning fruit;

a sky

of huge blue windows

was breaking

as balls of

bright sunlight

burst magnificently

through.

The moon that never
noticed me before
peers through the
thinning clouds
over the gulf.

Two girls on the beach
with their black guitars
are singing the songs
of their weary pasts;
the shapes of their melodies
are long and rare.

At last the stars
begin to bleed
through the skin of clouds
that has covered the night.

I sleep alone
on the eroding strand.

I'm on the beach again
with Nan and Jane.
They chatter like
two TV sets
as the waves wash over
their small white feet.
They have wet their hair
in the sea's cold dreams.

The setting sun quakes
in a million rolling mirrors.
The waves tip up and
spill their tiny balls
of glassy spray
in the invisible wind.
My thoughts rock back and forth
from suntan lotion
to suicide,
sleepless tonight
under this burden of dream.

For N.

even as

the early light

glides through the

spaces in

the bamboo shade,

the fragrance

where you lay

late yesterday

still lingers

like the

dream inside

my waking

ragged

head

For N.

over the west horizon
the stars

are
falling like

helpless children,
while

through this thickening
night

I speed
and

dream alone
of you

For N.

from the grim steeple
of an old church

a carillon clanging
out of tune

in a bone white
sky--

bare oaks
and sycamores

now
skeletal fingers

in an
arthritic clutch--

the chill wind
whipping

as I clench
my teeth--

I walk
and witness

the death
of a season

For N.

on the day you left
the sun drew all the moisture
into thick, white clouds
and spaced them evenly on a layer of air
so they could reach beyond the horizon
no wind disturbed them
by midnight it was still so hot
I couldn't sleep

a few white egrets
abandoning one
field for another

sparkle
against clouds of
blue, white, and dark grey

descending now
over solemn cattle
silent on the

banks of my pond

the smell of
rain in the air
enlivens me

like drops into
a still pool

The wind is dead. The stars
are clutched and fixed in blackness,
mapping disconnection.

Tall pines drape the hills
with shadows. Tonight
the moon reflects the stumps
of trees reaching out
of the still lake
like a hundred broken arms.

Night Shaping Itself

Scorpio has risen in the south,
stretching in the deep field.
Cicadas whistle and click
their furious castanets.
Crickets reel like sirens.
And everywhere, the unseen
shapes of silent radios.
Like glass breaking
night angles and shifts;
lines break and fragment.
Meteors blaze through the heat.
I shiver at the rattle of bones.

Movietime

It's Christmas.

The world has wheeled itself around again,

rewinding like a reel of film

about to show the same old movie.

And here we are again, the actors,

home for the holiday

and our yearly coming together,

standing as if before the box office,

waiting to watch ourselves

in our familiar roles.

And this is something we have done

year after year

in our old neighborhood:

with a winter night and a cast of stars

we bring to life a childhood script.

And on some summer night in my old age,

when June bugs claw the window screens,

and on my back I lie and stare,

I will recall these youthful times,

these icy nights,

your long brown hair

and parting lips.

And then, with a standard fade-out
from sentimental Hollywood,
I'll close my eyes
to this re-run,
leaving the cinema for an old man's sleep.

This is something we have done before.

We have lain across this hot bed on afternoons,
without compulsion to move or love.

And we have heard the ineffectual fan
hum its monotone and watched it push
the dust further into the corners,
covering the spider webs.

And we have felt the heat's loveless arms
around our waists, sinking deeper
into the mattress.

There is the colorless moon, rising already.

So early in our day together.

The news of death,
like a sorcerer's abracadabra,
banishes my connections to a room.

The objects surrounding me,
books and magazines,
the chair and table,
an electric fan spinning wretchedly--
I react to them
as if they were the blunt statements
of an idiot.

On the table,
little knick-knacks sleep
under a shroud of dust.

I stare, seeing nothing.

And as I consider
the uselessness of religion,
I begin to wonder also
if detachment is really such a good thing.

All day I am unable to read.
But like a senseless cricket
the refrigerator drones on and on.

My wine-eyed mirror stares occasionally.

At last I can forget myself
in a butterfly on the window screen,
whose wings,
like days,
are softly opening and closing.

"Suppose you found an apple
or an ashTray

On the moon."

a man Connecting the unconnectable--
the electricity of sKin, wood, stars, and mind
through a process of micropHones--

spAce made

aUdible--

like a mobile Stretched out

on a linE of wire

inside a Necklace of radios

A Man Is Walking

The wind is up.

Discarded papers blow like tumbleweed
through empty streets

where bald streetlights spray the air
with nervous yellow.

Insects occupy the dark
like a ringing in his ears.

To him, their shrill
uncertain sounds confirm
the true detail of sorrow--
like chisled stone--

in subtle, screeching monotone.

My Greatest Mistake So Far

I think I must have tried too hard
to westernize
a girl I knew from Thailand.
But she seemed so afraid of Communists there.
And I imagined all the worst, of course:
babies impaled on bayonets,
the middle class completely wiped out,
all the photos of Viet Nam in magazines.
To my surprise,
she later married her English teacher,
having me believe that she'd gone home.
Perhaps I tried too hard.

One night we watched The Day the Earth Stood Still.
And afterwards she stretched across the bed
and watched the moiré patterns in the window screens.
The shadows lingered on her olive skin.
I kissed her with uncomprehending lips.
How she reacted to the Texas snow!

Listless

these hours
are the in-between
these hours
linger like
an evening fog
over empty roads
and saturate
with a thick silence
these hours
cloud the times
when I forget
I'm lying on
my back
when I no longer hold
the vague impressions
buzzing in my head
like flies
when I no longer
form a question
with my lips
when all I do
is clench my fists
and try to sleep

A Sort of Prayer

Oh God, please tell me why
the girl I want to love
must be a Christian girl,
why all our ups and downs
can't be confined
to some large bed.

Will all our nights be spent
in the separate seats
of her little car,
simply cutting the blackness
on an empty highway?

All day I read some lines
of Su Tung P'o,
and wondered,
what aspect of the Void is this?
Late evening--
the hours have stacked
themselves like
soiled towels
in a steamy room.
I'm soaking in the tub
and drinking beer
from Mexico,
staring at my
outstretched legs.
And when I pull the plug,
I vacantly watch the water
spiral through the drain.
The drain becomes a mandala:
tiny circles
enclosing circles,
each sucking
from a greater force.
Water, hair,
and things unseen
parade with
laudable indifference

beyond this porcelain cradle
into mysterious networks
on the other side.

I hope my passing
will be
as easy
and as
calm.

She is no lady, Ajax.
Even with your animal rage
you can't defend yourself from her,
who knows and watches you--ah!
So goddesses would have us think.
But, Ajax, as I see you blind
and mad, the hopeless cloud around
your head, and hear your futile scream,
I shudder, too, Odysseus-like,
that I am traumatized so much
by goddesses who come and go . . .
Cosi fan tutti: they ask
for madness, as if already crazed.
What? Confuse Athene with another?
Here, then you deserve the blade.

From Texas

I always send her postcards. Always Texas postcards. Pictures of longhorns standing in the Fort Worth stockyard. Lots of blue sky and awful brown dirt. Cows as grim and resilient as southern religion.

On one the Texas flag. And blue sky, naturally.

I wrote on back: I'm still in Texas; the sky is very blue. For instance, the Alamo.

The Astrodome. Or oil derricks near Kilgore. One that

read, "A Lonely Texas Coyote," in which the sky was dark, but still quite blue--a very good job from the postcard bunch. Texas grasshoppers doing the plowing. For instance, Texas rattlesnake rodeos.

Or the J. F. K. assassination site with a little map showing the path of the bullets.

World's largest watermelon. Giant jackrabbits.

Buffalo looking like lost souls. Cowboys and cowgirls. Cotton fields. Coastline. Blue sky. And the desert.

She's crazy about me. I always send her postcards.

Anti-Sonnet

Bats asleep, desperately clinging to
some moist cavern wall where nothing except
mould can survive, never dream of lovers,
who do dream anxiously. Hidden from light,
one thousand young bats will die before night,
suffocating against sleeping mothers.

Bats feel no envy for insane lovers.
They find no comfort in love, no delight,
no food, no relief from solitude's bite.
Asleep, the bats in black-velvet covers
maintain cold silence; in tiny hearts kept,
passionless blood beats efficiently through.

Love, as we caress in our evening rite,
desperate bats take wing to seek the night.

Preferring Questions

Preferably, Orion.

To the field, now frozen in
a single sheet of ice, stretching
past the horizon.

And to the wind like a blade
against my face.

Preferably, at the zenith
in his endless search.

His sword is always raised.

And preferably the questions,
crashing always anyway inside my skull
like atoms in a cloud chamber.

I prefer that.

Like Orion.

The concentration of the search,
the bow taut,
to the beast dying,
the hunt ended.

On the various canvas
of the electric sky
questions are my brush strokes.

Filling in.

Detailing with
some untried color.

Now,

I'm painting Orion.

Another Poem about Beaches

We thought only to take
our excesses further,
that would be
the success of it.
So we spent the night
on the empty beach
where we scattered the stars
like flashing buckshot,
shining with the
intensity of L. S. D.
She laughed for hours
at the sea's black comedy
and said that she missed
her electric guitar.
And I remembered
parking near a gas station
where she bought apples
from a shrimp-backed lady;
we ate them
laughing east to the beach.
In the night
a cloud spread over the water
as we slept in the ash

of a smouldering dream;
but the fauve who rides
my skeleton boat
stayed awake all night--
putting his finger
where the black waves
licked like flames,
beating madness
on his delirious drum.

Not knowing that I'd spend
such nights as this
remembering,

I watched it all
and played guitar
amidst the purple lights

while someone burned
incense upon the stage
and outside others smoked

their cigarettes.
Not knowing that I'd think
again of it,

I watched as people
danced and moved, half hidden
in the smoky dark.

I didn't care.
I drank and played
the loudest songs

and said outrageous things
to those who tried

to talk to me.

Not knowing that I'd spend
a night like this
remembering,

I watched you as you danced,
but never saw
your face again.

Punk-Rock Metaphysics

I think the radio waves are just noises
that endlessly bounce against the stars and our faces
in frantic reverberation.

Maximum volume through variable media must mean God--

Like electric guitars made in Japan
whose notes collide on gymnasium walls
while daughters are dancing--

the waves won't stop their noisy spherical musings,
their stupid frenzy.

I think the stars have ceaseless glory and powerful rage.
They send those sounds--radios receive and children dream--
a tender motion and we are born--
earthly music.

The universe is a hot fourteen-year-old whirling dervish,
and when she tires,
and damp forms sleep,
death dreams,
music stops.

Detail from
A Cubistic Autobiography

I

an afternoon through 3-D glasses
like a sci-fi movie from '51
spelled out in the moiré patterns
in the bamboo shades:
an oscilloscope in the uneven breeze

II

the wind over
the spring field:
amber lines
and low oboes

III

under Orion again;
with a simple blade
I lift the skin
on the skull of night;
the stars throb like
exposed nerves

IV

my autistic daydream
is a Brownian motion
inside my skull:
sunless faces roaming
in an absence of shadows

V

the Doppler effect
of a siren
in the distance:
a shakuhachi
over graves at night

VI

I this. I that.
If only to forget
the me who's sailing
like Sindbad in an egg cup
or peering over a soft bran flake
when a finger spreads
over the breakfast table
grains of sugar
like systems of stars.

VII

I tried too hard
to westernize her

VIII

a cloud of starlings
swells from a tree
into a sky of blue
cellophane stretched tight--
time is spreading
like a painted fan

IX

left and right,
my eyes connect and disconnect,
discover and lose;
it all rings true
on the same bells clanging
in a boat of bone
on the black water

X

she split the image
in my glass eyes
like a bird of stone
through a wide window

XI

every door is at once an entrance and exit
egg shells crack both ways, you know
the same line marks both start and finish

XII

once all roads led to Rome;
I ride on the American highway;
ninety miles per hour
in a Chevrolet,
with the top down
all the stars crash over my head;
there is no limit
to the speed of man

XIII

the setting sun
illuminates the leaves with gold
in the top of the hackberry tree;
a single grackle twists his neck
while stopping on a television antenna;
I love the afternoons
and the gin I'm sipping
is surely the best I've ever tasted

Strung out across the black sky
is a low Draco,
reaching for an anodyne.

And in the west hangs Venus,
not so vibrant now,
dim behind some vague clouds.

The thought of you in another's arms,
and now,
the stars' performing the weary night.

Arse Poetica

The universe and its creations
are born of complex transformations.

The things we label elements
haven't any permanence:

They're flung about and recombined
with whole new worlds thereby defined.

It's nature's way to recreate,
to change, reshape, and liberate:

Like hydrogen fused into suns,
becoming heat that burns our buns

As we sprawl in our cut-off britches
on the gulf coast's crowded beaches.

Everything by something is absorbed and changed,
and here on earth we're thus arranged:

The organs in our bellies make
a profound use of what we take,

Our stomachs perform the stupendous feat
of distilling our fuel from the food we eat.

And those who drink may give a shiver
to think of life without a liver.

So everything we bite to taste
is first absorbed, then dropped as waste.

(Though waste may be a biased term;
man's waste is life to fly and worm.)

It's nature's decree, it's evident,
to synthesize the environment.

And the mind is like a digestive tract,
converting senses to thought and act.

So man's creation's digestion, too,
arranging the old to form the new.

Feces and poems, I therefore claim,
have things in common, though aren't the same.

For one seems foul, squeezed out the anus;
while the other, with luck, could make one famous.

This all depends on point of view;
I think that most will see that's true:

For we would never revel in shit.
And rhyme? What use have flies for it?

This earth, this life, is just one blending
of things unknown and change unending.

It's nature's way to recreate:
to change, reshape, and liberate.

for Isan

I'm sick of chasing after
Christs and Buddhas as though
they were long-legged women.
From this day on
I'm poking my sword
only where it counts.