SELECTED POEMS: DOES THIS PEN WRITE?

THESIS

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Abstract

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This thesis is a collection of poetry written between 1970 and 1975. The quality of the poems is admittedly uneven, but the inclusion of earlier, weaker poems may indicate a progression in the areas of flexibility, control of material, and strength of poetic voice.

The poems are arranged into five sections, entitled "Love," "Rabbits," Poetry about Poetry," "Religion and Ancestors," and "Henry."

Poems collected here are intended to demonstrate that experimentation with various forms contributes to an increased ability to control poetic material and technique. By confining a poem to particular forms, one is forced to be more creative, imaginative, and exact. Both control and flexibility are important in contemporary poetry, and my hope is that the following poems demonstrate a balance of those qualities.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a collection of poetry written between 1970 and 1975. The poems are arranged into five sections, entitled "Love," "Rabbits," "Poetry about Poetry," "Religion and Ancestors," and "Henry." The quality of the poems is admittedly uneven, but the inclusion of earlier, weaker poems may indicate a progression in the craft of writing poetry, specifically in the areas of flexibility, control of material, and strength of poetic voice.

Poems in the first section are love poems, in a wide sense. The first poem, "A Cool Parabola" (p. 23), is about the rock singer Janis Joplin, although the poem could easily refer to any artist who died young or unhappily. It is a love poem in that it expresses the kind of love we feel toward those we learn to know through their works of art. "Miriam, Wait . . ." (p. 24) is a monologue in which the speaker is one part of a person trying to communicate with another part of herself. The metaphor of wooden blocks behind the teeth seems strained, because the blocks and the teeth could be viewed as being interchangeable, but the blocks are meant to be not only building blocks but also psychological blocks. The third poem, "I Know Better" (p. 25), is an early attempt to communicate about noncommunication. The stanzas each express a complete idea, with the metaphor of the theater to connect
them. The problem with this poem is that the metaphor does not clearly connect the stanzas, and there is no other unifying element for the poem to fall back on. "I Know Better" illustrates a trap many modern writers have fallen into: that of realizing that, whatever the theme, the writing itself must communicate lucidly. For example, in "A Newly Discovered 'Homeric' Hymn," Charles Olson attempts to express the difficulty of gleaning knowledge from the dead. This knowledge seems to be symbolized by the metaphor of "pot" and "seeds," and while the word play of the poem is interesting, it is also confusing. T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, conquered the problem of describing people's inability to communicate with each other, themselves, and their world in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." One of the major differences between the two poems is that there are several unifying devices in Eliot's, whereas Olson relies solely on metaphor.

"Antiromantipode" (p. 26) is, in my judgment, better than the preceding poems of this collection because the tone is more objective and less sentimental. The title is a pormanteau word which contains "romantic," "antipode," and "ode." "Whirligigs, Carnivals" (p. 27) is a dialogue between two parts of the same person, indicated typographically by parentheses.

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One voice speaks aloud, the other silently. There is a third person to whom the speaker addresses his remarks. "Of Course I Remember" (p. 28) is an example of the kind of abstraction that tempts many beginning writers. Even the cat, one of the few concrete images, appears as an embodiment of abstract ideas and vague feelings. The "hands full of cigarettes / and pens drunk with English" are the only lines that reveal a specific attitude: that of the frustration of having artistic energy without being able to transpose it into a medium. The following poem, "Dry-eyed" (p. 29), is better in my view, partly because the tone is slightly ironic, and the poem has allusions to Emily Dickinson. Literary allusions do not guarantee a good poem, but they do add clarification to the tone of this poem. The bouquet echoes Dickinson's poem number 177:

    Ah, Necromancy Sweet!
    Ah, Wizard erudite!
    Teach me the skill,

    That I instil the pain
    Surgeons assuage in vain,
    Nor Herb of all the plain
    Can heal!  3

The last poem in this section, "Everyone Else Got Out on Stemmons" (p. 32), is an earlier poem that has not been extensively revised. Some of the lines are wordy and some are inexact. Sometimes an uneconomical poem like this can be shortened to a few lines, or some of the lines from the longer

version will appear in other poems. In this poem, as in many others in this section, the love is implicit rather than overt.

Poems in the second section, "Rabbits," were all written in one night, although they were revised over a period of several weeks. However, they were written so recently that I have difficulty being objective about them. None of the poems follow a specific form; most of them are imperfectly imagistic—in that they are meant to capture the essence of a particular image, but imperfect because they offer statements that are sometimes too explicit. A personification, "Accomplishment," begins the third section of poetry, which is entitled "Poetry about Poetry." "Accomplishment" (p. 38) echoes Emerson's "Days":

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.
I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.4

Just as the poet is contemplating all he wants to accomplish, and savoring the beauty of the day, the day departs, leaving him time only to take some apples and herbs. The Day, scorning his lack of action and accomplishment, is hypocritical.

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because she (and "Accomplishment" in my poem) seems so bright and generous.

Some modern poems written about the art of writing poetry have been very pretentious, and these may be no exception; but, as Delmore Schwartz put it, the "only life available to the man of culture has been the cultivation of his own sensibility, that is the only subject available to him, if we may assume that a poet can only write about subjects of which he has an absorbing experience in every sense." This absorbing interest is demonstrated in several of the subsequent poems. The short poem "Inspiration" (p. 38) is an attempt to convey the frustration of trying to write poetry. This poem is more succinct than the earlier lines from "Of Course I Remember" (p. 28), possibly because it is intended to be more humorous. "The Place is Covered" (p. 38) continues the theme of frustration with writing. The I Ching mentioned in the fourth line is a book of ancient Chinese wisdom which some people use as a fortune-telling device. "Reviewing Bergman's Latest Film" refers to Ingmar Bergman's Cries and Whispers (1973). Orson Welles is mentioned because of the similarity in themes the two filmmakers use, such as isolation, individual alienation from society, and fragmentation. "Unhooked" (p. 40) is an example of a few lines taken from a longer, more uneconomical

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poem which, through a long process of revision, became a largely different poem. The longer poem was written five years ago, and this revision was written very recently.

The third section ends with an attempt at a sonnet. When one professor suggested that I write a sonnet in order to demonstrate proficiency in a traditional form, it seemed to be a simple challenge. This poem illustrates the difficulty of writing in such a demanding form as the Petrarchan sonnet, a form that rhymes, in this case, \( a \ b \ b \ a \ a \ b \ b \ a \ c \ d \ e \ d \ c \ e \). Some of the rhymes are forced ("tao"-"cow"), while the rhythm is jagged and dominant over the far-from-profound subject matter. The problem many poets find when writing in a standard form is that after they have the rhyme, meter, syllables, and other technical matters correct, the poem has little content. After twelve additional attempts I finally achieved some union of form and content in the sonnet beginning the fourth section, "Religion and Ancestors." The real difference between it and the earlier sonnet was in the actual writing process: the first was intended to be a sonnet, although I had little to say. The second began as an attempt to describe a fierce thunderstorm at my flimsy trailer house, and because I had previous hours of practice at writing sonnets, the storm description fell more naturally into the sonnet pattern. In this second sonnet, the form is less obtrusive, perhaps because the content is not working so stubbornly against the form. In fairness, I also must point out
that the second sonnet does not follow the stringent requirements of the Petrarchan rhyme pattern, but is instead a modified sonnet, rhyming a b b a b b a b a c c d d.

"Religion and Ancestors," the fourth section, includes poems that may seem not to be related to each other. However, these two concepts share the same associations in my mind. They are arranged so that each poem relates to the one before it in some way. The first two poems deal with recent experiences of religion and ancestors, while the third and fourth commemorate an occasion some years past. These two poems, "We Had a Good Year That Day" (p. 44) and "Don't Never Go to Kansas" (p. 45) demonstrate the difference of perspective when one writes immediately after an event and when several years elapse between the event and the recording. "We Had a Good Year That Day" is an attempt to crystallize two years into two representative days, while "Don't Never Go to Kansas" is more immediate and personal.

The next three poems (pp. 46, 48, and 49) are reminiscent of a childhood spent in churches my father pastored. The second of these three, "They Came" (p. 48), refers to an anecdote in Papa Was a Preacher by Aylene Porter. Her father, giving the number for the last hymn, said, "Let us stand on the last stanza," and her brother placed his hymnbook in the aisle and literally stood on the book itself.\(^6\)

"In This Room" (p. 51) is, in part, an experiment with rhyme. The first stanza has no rhyme; the second has false rhyme (the use of rhyming vowels but dissimilar end sounds--"night," "Bible," "quietly"). The third stanza employs slant rhyme (which uses the same end sounds but different vowels--"came," "time"). Such experiments with rhyme have become especially fashionable during this century. The fourth and fifth stanzas use traditional rhyme in different ways: the second and fourth lines rhyme in the fourth stanza and all the lines of the fifth stanza rhyme alternately. The circuit riders in the poem are my ancestors of the great-grand era and before, who served their communities as both preachers and doctors. The hymn number refers to "I Will Sing the Wondrous Story" in the Cokesbury Hymnal, which was written at a time when my nineteenth-century ancestors could have known it.

Poems from this point on leave the realm of ancestral and familial religion to deal with various religions in sundry countries. "Major Links of Disaster" refers to an incident in the history of the conquest of Mexico. Cortez retook Mexico City in 1521, and captured Guatemozin, the Aztec emperor. He was tortured by Cortez' men, who were convinced that Guatemozin was withholding information about the gold in the city. At last, Guatemozin admitted that some gold had been thrown into the lake, but a search proved useless. Two years later, Cortez arrested Guatemozin on false charges and
executed him. The clash of two kinds of religion here is compared to the vibrations of a chord after it has been played. "Dreams on an Incense Stick" (p. 54) is an experiment in recording random thoughts stimulated by one image. Each "dream" springs from a change in a burning incense stick and was intended to have a religious significance, but the poem may fail in that the religious associations are too personal and therefore cannot be communicated even to a careful reader. "The Pink Flamingoes" (p. 55) refers to Provence, France, where the gypsies gather annually to honor their patron, Saint Sara. According to legend, after Christ ascended into heaven, the three Marys (Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary, and Mary, the mother of Simon) went in three different directions. One of them sailed and landed at Provence. With her was a young black serving girl named Sara. She is the gypsies' patron saint because of her color and the fact that she traveled from her homeland. The ceremony involves carrying the statue of Sara from the church to the sea, in order to reenact her arrival. The first part of the poem attempts to describe the brilliant scene. According to the Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths, the colors blue and green have religious connotations—blue being the "symbolic color of the higher mental

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plane" and green representing "astral growth."  

Members of the All Faith Fellowship in Tyler, Texas, make use of these color connotations and they directed my attention to them. The "Blue Flame" and "Green Light" are also the names of business establishments on the corners of Elm and Eagle in Denton, Texas. That fortuitous juxtaposition of the two symbolic colors was the immediate stimulus to the writing of the poem. "Computer Room" (p. 56) is an earlier poem that demonstrates a high level of abstraction. The title is the only unifying force for the poem. The rhythm is more jagged than that of other poems in this section.

The fifth section is entitled "Henry." Except for the final one, these poems are arranged approximately in the order in which they were written. They stem from a long study and appreciation of John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*. That volume is made up of one long poem containing 385 Songs, most of which are capable of standing independently. Each Song is normally composed of three stanzas of six lines each. *The Dream Songs* first appeared in two volumes, and in a note to the second volume, Berryman felt compelled to explain the central character, Henry:

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The poem . . . is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet--not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof.

In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Berryman further expounded on Henry: "He is a very good friend of mine. I feel entirely sympathetic to him. He's also very simple-minded. He thinks that if something happens to him, it's forever; but I know better." Henry, paradoxically, has a discrete personality and yet is flexible enough to go anywhere and do anything. For example, Henry is at once a buffoon and a hero. Bruce Jackson says, "Certainly the device of having a fool for protagonist, a schlemiel, is not unordinary in American fiction; it is new in American poetry." Conversely, Henry is a hero of sorts: "In Henry Pussycat Berryman has erected a myth out of and for the tortured and suffering, middle-aged, white 'human American man.'" Henry as a character is very interesting in himself, but

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Henry is not the only element of the Dream Songs worth imitating. The tone, syntax, form, rhyme, and rhythm of the Songs combine with the character to form Berryman's long poem. One Song may be used to illustrate all of these elements,

Dream Song 14:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so. After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, we ourselves flash and yearn, and moreover my mother told me as a boy (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored means you have no Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no inner resources, because I am heavy bored. Peoples bore me, literature bores me, especially great literature, Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag and somehow a dog has taken itself & its tail considerably away into mountains or sea or sky, leaving behind: me, wag.

The tone of this particular Song is ironically humorous, self-deprecating, and slightly despairing; however, the tone throughout the Dream Songs varies greatly, as befits Henry's moods, and ranges from restraint to tempestuousness:

It is Berryman's genius that contrives a poetry which blends the twin modes of work and purpose common to all American arts today--measure and balance on the one hand and, on the other, a scarcely controlled explosion of immoderate passion.15

One of the more impressive elements of Berryman's Dream Songs is their complex style:

There are very tenuous or nonexistent lines between parts of speech; words exist as noun and verb, adjective and adverb. Tenses slip wildly, plural and singular merge, daylight syntax goes[;]...but this seeming disorder is...a way of recording complex and ambiguous meaning with extraordinary economy, clarity, and surprise.16

Berryman uses a very wide range of diction. When the syntax becomes overly confusing, sometimes the diction gives a clue to the meaning. In Dream Song 14, for example, the diction is that of an "educated fool" who is no longer fooled, and it helps the reader to understand the last four lines by giving us the clue that we should look for educated language, thus allowing "dog" and "wag" to be noticeable puns. However, Berryman found some problems with diction in The Dream Songs stemming from "limitations in the narrator":

I couldn't let him use fancy language. That was out. It didn't go with the blackface business. The diction is very limited. He doesn't have the language to discuss, for example, Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy, or scholarly questions, or modern painting.17

One of the reasons the diction and syntax in The Dream Songs pose a problem for some readers is that the language stems from the minstrel show. This "blackface business" is explicated in detail by William Wasserstrom. By tracing the

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17Richard Kostelanetz, p. 346.
epigraphs to the first volume, he found many interesting relevancies, but concentrated on the minstrel show art that appears throughout the poem. Minstrel shows are one of the most curious aspects of American culture. Originally, black slaves made songs and dances mocking the festivities in their master's houses. Later, white men, failing to see the mockery, blacked their faces with burnt cork and mimicked these songs and dances in minstrel shows. Still later, black men spread burnt cork on their faces, ironically completing a strange cycle. Wasserstrom discovered that the syntax of *The Dream Songs* is based on the same principle as the syntax of minstrel show songs:

Both Berryman's songs and minstrel songs disdain manifest statement and replace it in the manner of dreams, with a juxtaposition of images. A dream is tough to crack because it replaces a conscious conjunction of ideas with an unconscious disjunction of images which make sheerly irrational sense. A minstrel song is equally troublesome because it exploits both principles, conjunction and disjunction, so that its white (manifest) sense will be one thing and its black (latent) sense another. And black is at odds with white. In minstrelsy, then, Berryman found an exact analogue to dream.18

Much of the rhythm of *The Dream Songs* comes from the juxtaposition of blackface dialect with other types of diction. As Wasserstrom says, "[Berryman] found a music which permitted him to excise, deliberately, any connectives which might pull his work toward merely rational order."19 Some of the Songs

18 Wasserstrom, p. 343-44.
19 Wasserstrom, p. 344.
have the rhythm of blues or primitive jazz. Dream Songs 2 and 40 are good examples. Dream Song 14 employs a more refined jazz, something that could be called Early Ghetto.

Carol Johnson, speaking of Berryman's poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953), compared the rhythm to "the sprung and counterpointed rhythm of Hopkins." The form of each song helps to create rhythm: it "oddly combines release and control in inevitable balance: the aggressively energetic diction and syntax push against the confines of disciplined stanzaics." This kind of rhythm is hard to imitate, partly because Berryman devised several of his own metrical patterns. His line pattern for *The Dream Songs* is 5, 5, 3, 5, 5, 3, although very few Songs follow this pattern exactly.

Berryman's rhymes can be strange, traditional, punning, seemingly simple, or intensely strained. The fact that Berryman has no single consistent rhyming pattern lends an air of freedom to his extremely controlled use of words. At first, imitating Berryman's rhyme was difficult, but with practice, it became almost a matter of finding rhymes after the poem was essentially complete.

Like the repeated references to minstrelsy, recurring images give *The Dream Songs* unity. One critic has mentioned

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that the images of Henry singing at the tops of trees can be interpreted from Berryman's earlier work as a "symbol of adultery." Gary Arpin notes the recurring imagery of a "golden heroine" Henry must rescue from a "frigid 'wilderness of bears.'" This imagery has a cumulative effect. One or two lines in one Song may be repeated or suggested in another Song, and as the reader progresses through the 385 Songs, the repeated phrases gather meaning by association with the different Songs in which the phrase, or part of the phrase, is used.

The first of my imitation Dream Songs (five of which have now been published in the journal John Berryman Studies was written after John Berryman's suicide in January, 1972. After being in a car wreck, I had a vivid dream and while in the process of recording it, noticed that it could be written in Dream Song form. This form proved to be a good device for recording a number of experiences. Noting the qualities of these imitations may give a clearer indication of the influence Berryman has had on my poetry.

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23 Gary Arpin, "'I am their Musick': Lamentations and The Dream Songs," John Berryman Studies, 1 (January 1975), 5.

24 John Berryman Studies, ed. Ernest Stefanik. Four of the poems appeared in the July 1975 issue, and one is scheduled to appear in the October 1975 issue. Two poems in the "Religion" section have been accepted for publication in the January 1976 issue.
In the first imitation, several Berryman-like details occur, as well as his overall Dream Song form, except for variations on the metrical pattern. The first line contains images from the car wreck that initiated the poem. These images are personal and somewhat obscure, as many of Berryman's images are. Certain inversions and typographical spacings are also patterned after Berryman, such as "highway wet" and "pain real and un." "Toss'd" is a typical Berryman contraction, and it is used here to make the word appear slightly archaic, and more indicative of forceful, immediate action than the fully spelled-out version. In the second stanza, the "women / jewelled in broken loves" imitates one of Henry's attitudes toward women. In Dream Song 15, for example, Berryman writes about a woman who, although low in station and manners, has dignity:

... she was heard at last, haughty & greasy, to bawl in that low bar:
'You can biff me, you can bang me, get it you'll never.
I may be only a Polack broad but I don't lay easy.

... Women is better, braver. In a foehn of loss entire, which they too hotter understand, having had it, we struggle....

Another Berryman-like technique in the imitation is the accent on "so." This technique, perhaps learned from G. M. Hopkins, has been widely criticized. Most of those who deplore Berryman's use of accent marks say that it is condescending, and therefore irritating, to mark a poem as though giving directions for its
oral interpretation. It may be said in Berryman's defense that such accents provide for those of us who are slower readers a quick way to establish meaning. The Song is open-ended rather than conclusive, which is also a Berryman characteristic. However, Berryman's purpose was to lead into the next Song, and this technique may be invalid for imitation Dream Songs, because the imitations are not conceived of as an integral whole.

The second imitation Dream Song is about John Berryman's suicide. When this poem was written, the details of the suicide were not available, since the newspaper account stated only that he jumped from Washington Bridge in Minneapolis. The ambiguity of the second line is meant to reinforce the dream imagery. "Schopenhauer" is representative of those philosophers who speak often of suicide as the only viable alternative to an impossible existence, and yet go on living. The "cocktail on-the-rocks" may appear to some readers as a pun in bad taste, but the precedent is Berryman's, who used outrageous puns in his poetry at times. The use of "deserts-desserts" is a further example of his kind of word play.

The third imitation, "Henry Unhinged," describes Henry in two of his most basic predicaments--in trouble with a woman and trying to exorcise his father's ghost. John Berryman's father committed suicide outside his son's window when John was eleven years old. Berryman never recovered from that trauma, and many of the Dream Songs reflect this psychological
wound. The shotgun, however, comes from the association Berryman made with Hemingway, who committed suicide with that weapon. Ironically, Hemingway's father, like Berryman's had also killed himself. The shotgun and the mother in the poem echo Berryman's Dream Song 34: "My mother has your shotgun."

"Not Much Sense" (p. 61), a fourth Dream Song imitation, uses one of Berryman's recurring images, the "cold & golden" heroine. By accumulating meanings in the imagery, Berryman shows a progression of Henry as a character from inactivity to capability, but this imitation leaves him in the throes of anxious decision. This Song echoes another of Henry's attitudes toward women. "Onstage" (p. 62) contains several Dream Song motifs: Henry is on stage, singing his pain while other people do horrible things to him. The last two lines include more of the punning word play Berryman uses so often. This Song also makes use of the blackface dialect, the speech of minstrel shows. "Henry Howled" takes place in several countries and situations, which follows Berryman's plans for Henry: "The point in Henry was to investigate a man with many opportunities . . . many chances to observe and see what people of various nations are like, and what they do and are, and so on." The false rhyme in the last stanza "Shelley"-"Henry" is also Berrymanesque.

26 Berryman, as quoted in Kostelanetz, pp. 345-46.
The next two poems are not imitation Dream Songs, but they are included in this section because they are about people Berryman wrote about and they use some of the Dream Song techniques. "Slightly Embarrassed" (p. 64) employs a repeated refrain, while "Two More Men" (p. 66) has some word play in the first two lines. The next five Dream Song imitations were written rather recently, which makes it difficult for me to be objective about them.

Poems collected here are intended to demonstrate that experimentation with various forms, such as the sonnet and the Dream Song form, contributes to an increased ability to control poetic material and technique. By confining a poem to particular forms, one is forced to be more creative, imaginative, and exact. The strict requirements of the sonnet pattern, for example, force a poet to find new words and new arrangements of words which will both follow the form and at the same time effectively express the content. Berryman's Dream Song form is looser than a sonnet pattern, yet it too demands that a poet not only express his ideas and emotions but also that he do so within certain restrictions of form and style. The reasons I chose to imitate John Berryman are many, but one of them is his masterful balance between control and flexibility. Like many contemporary poets, he began his poetic career writing very carefully structured poetry that exhibited precise meter, literary allusions, conscious imagery, and traditional metaphor. With The Dream Songs he began to experiment with
new ways to use these poetic devices, in a looser and more flexible manner. Both control and flexibility are important in contemporary poetry, and my hope is that the following poems demonstrate a balance of those qualities.
LOVE
A Cool Parabola

Her life flashes like a cool parabola
   of light across the green sea.
And somehow I know that she is part of me.
Remembering what will happen, she plunges on,
Knowing her fate, and remembering the glow of the sun.
Lying on the cool sand, surrounded by sea and night
I pay a brief tribute to her life
   and her brief, cool light.
Miriam, Wait

Miriam, wait.
Wait.
The boys in black satin and leather
Are at the door.
We've been through all this before.
Miriam . . .
But my tongue is surrounded by wooden blocks
(blocks we collected from a demolished house)
Their hair is shorn, I say miserably.
They've no beards, I roll in agony.
Time! I manage to suffocate in scream
But they are here.
Miriam, fair, answers the knock.
I change clothes, and mocking myself with a smile,
Return, dressed in silk and lace.
The blonde, immaculate, embraces me.
Stop! If you touch one iota of her soul . . .
But the blocks are still behind my white teeth
And it comes out as
"Scotch, anyone?"
I Know Better

I know better.
Since when did
Walking down this street
Do me any good?

When two people speak
Different languages
They tend to speak too loudly.
My loudness obscures your meaning.

Twenty-one trucks rolled by tonight.
Four thousand honky-tonks blared
And one more opening show failed
As I stepped on the wrong boards.

It's always the middle
Of my scenario
That breaks down into muddle--
I've memorized beginning and end.

Far into Ethiopia
A rotting jeep reeks.
Your gestures show only
My futility.
Antiromantipode

In the subterranean labyrinths of his brain
He weaves tapestries of castles and birds
With exotic plumage and grandiose sunsets.
The stars above him are not
Bright enough
To describe his lady's eyes.
In the poetry of his soul there are no depths
Or heights
Which he will not reach
With his sensuous, exploring hands.
His eyes are filled with the world
He has created; it far surpasses
Anything he's done before.
Fingers linked,
They walk the streets
That are filled with carnivals for him.
Every movement she makes
Creates starbursts and wild thunder.
She wonders if she should stop smoking.
Whirligigs. Carnivals

Whirligigs. Carnivals.
(It's time to go to the fair)
I can't answer your questions
Any more than you can.
(You want to try the Roller Coaster?)
But I know why Mona Lisa
Smiled.
Cotton Candy licked her in the face.
(Shall you win me a teddy bear?)
Leo & Margie
Understood
About this untrue love.
(No, I never have seen the baby in formaldehyde.)
Practicality is of the essence.
Unfortunately, part of your
Penance
Is actually telling me. In words.
(The car show is more interesting than electricity.)
Vanity, of course--yours and mine--
Is the whole crux of the situation
Provided there really is a situation.
(I want a balloon.)
Mona Lisa is still smiling.
Rhett Butler is still kissing Scarlett.
With a precedent like that
How can we lose?
Of course I remember . . .
But what of that?
My cat slept through it all
And is asleep again.
My hands are full of cigarettes
And pens drunk with English
And you of course have no life
Except the one you live.
He (the cat, that is) wakes up, stretches,
And wants affection.
No different from us,
Except that he can give or take
Without feeling too bad
If he doesn't.
That momentous purr
Is something I'll probably never manage.
I'd start it--but remember . . .
Dry-eyed

Dry-eyed, I watched him leave
Then set about to weep and moan
And tear my hair & gnash my teeth
In unheroic way.

Emily's soul so gentle
So private in her way
Would understand the bouquet
I sent to him that day.
Sacrifice

of creative life force
to same

Fertility Rite

of mine and yours and God's
Slloop
up the vacuum cleaner
From the void into the Void
the child
I cannot have
One lifetime
Passed over.
No Oranges Here

as charlie read the book I loaned him
the pages fell out one by one
and over jelly & tea
he'd throw them away
or wipe up the breadjelly crumbs
with newsprinted hands.

as charlie read the book I loaned him
he'd discourse and digest
each leaf one by one
till at last, over coffeed jelly
we'd arrive at a conclusion
and eat our pulpy crusts.
Everyone Else Got Out on Stemmons

Everyone else got out on Stemmons.
Only the buffoons were left
To ride and ride an endless road
To scream an old dream
And disappear in a cloud of exhaust.

Tired, unable to run, they rode
Foxed out of the world
By their own cleverness,
The rabbits ran their autos
Into every ditch & bar

Carrying oak branches & wearing
Talismans of some forgotten truth
Wonder how long this mess will last?
Haze of alcohol, pills, smoke obscures
The old-young men riding & riding.

And then they all got married,
Settled with practical wives.
One rode longer, but even he
Finally got out of the Buffoonmobile
Got job, married, & semblance of religion.

"People never really change," David told me.
I wonder if their wives know that.
RABBITS
RickRabbit

I'm in love with a RabbitnamedRick
Who puts his hands up for ears & hunches over,
hopping thru the trailer like an inflatable Easter bunny
with its plug out.

Muck

Muck from the Texas sky in April
Leaves us feeling like The last Easter bunny
When Monday comes:
Crumpled ribbons,
One plastic roll-around eye gone,
Nose pushed to one side,
Wire protruding from one plush ear,
The other flopped coyly over one eye.
rabbits for sale
and hire's root beer

the maze of small-town
underworld activities
hums
rabbits squeal, cry
hire's root beer sizzles
old men yes nod,
gingham checks flap on
post strung wire
transaction made,
all turn to see the amazing
boy & girl, hiding
sixty in all, kicking & shivering
under their clothes
smuggling rabbits to freedom
In Favor of Idleness

Critics will softly wonder
Harshly scrape
My rabbit obsession.
Biographers will relate
My childhood & adolescent
Rabbit experiences,
And a former student will remember
A lecture partly rabbity.
I'm tempted to shove the whole mess
To the very back of the drawer.
POETRY ABOUT POETRY
Accomplishment

I looked wistfully
At Accomplishment
As it skipped merrily out my door.

Inspiration

Inspiration
All too often
Gives way to cramps.

The Place is Covered

The place is covered with
dreams, books, poetry
& illusions.
i ching simply tells me to
straighten up & fly right.
& so i clean, shuffling debris
of books, poetry & illusions
from one place to another;
my final resistance
being total immersion
in the cold, rainy winter.
Reviewing Bergman's Latest Film

A borrowed desk of school-room pine
is currently being assassinated
by procrastination.
The plastic beads that held my hair,
the blue and white package of peppermints
contrasts vaguely thru smoke with
a green and white package of Kools
and a black cigarette lighter--
and somehow all these things are
straining, and being strained
as I hover thru the fog of Bergman and Orson.
The tin ashtray receives my rejections.
The air-conditioning is sufficiently depressing.
How could the theme be any but isolation?
Unhooked

Unhooked, unread, undissolved,
I remain in blissful obstinacy
The one tiny undigested particle
That sticks in the teeth of the world.

They Say They Want

They say they want a sonnet from me now
With careful, conscious breeding of bon mot.
But when I try the words stick in my throat.
Sometimes I have to end lines with "red cow."
How can I make the rhymes conjunct with tao?
Will not that duel get me by the goat
And tear my words from me mot by mote?
The meaning is the thing I have to plow.
0, is this stuff to banish all my fun?
The beer is gone, the moment comes unglued.
It's nine, my stomach speaks aloud of cheeses.
Methinks this sonnet is becoming lewd:
For saying five, we only find the one
And hope that someone in the group believes us.
RELIGION & ANCESTORS
I Live in a Box of Tin

I live in a box of tin near Cooper Creek
I squat on the wrought-iron porch that's in the rear
And watch the brown clouds gather very near
That just two hours ago were soft and meek;
Now frogged up in a meditative leer
As if confronted with a human fear.
Inside my box I hear the thunder speak
As through the walls it echoes to my ear
The subterranean wisdom of the seer
Who cannot die, though he be old and weak.
Now not so sure that prophecy is good
He wanders through this world in thunder hood
Bouncing angry pellets in the din
To splat themselves upon my box of tin.
For Richard

Your guitar sits in the corner,
in its coffin from the last century.
Your grandfather played it
and I wonder what he played.
He gave you a guitar
a cap and a shirt
then left for an unknown.

I wear your grandmother's diamond ring.
Two generations of wedded life
Haven't dulled its sparkle.

My ancestors didn't have anything to give
except endurance for hard times
and a wildfire of untamed chaos.
We had a Good Year That Day

We had a good year that day.
It was marked all over with pencil
And it had stains of cheetos and tomatoes.
Yes, all in all, we had a good year that day.
I notice the grape vine hasn't grown
Into a vineyard; in fact, it's withered.
The pine tree doesn't look any taller
And one of the chickens
Has decided it's a rooster
And crows every morning at three.
You now draw on the walls with colored pencils
Where once you splotched black paint
Now from your room
Come hyphenated screams
Where once reckless laughter surged.
Don't Never Go to Kansas

"Don't never go to Kansas," said my father
But my brother did, & damn near froze
Crouching in a bathroom stall
To stall the wind--
They threw him in jail to keep from having
The expense of a frozen body in their county
& called his big-eyed, tight-faced parents,
whose jaws only lately relaxed, years later.
"Didn't I tell you," finally my father said
as Ronnie wondered where he'd gone wrong,
"Don't never go to Kansas!"
The Glass Panes

The glass panes
quietly stain
the broken pew on the end.
The child treads softly
the unbroken silence
in the cold.
In the beginning
there was fire and God
and broken Christians
and strong ancestors.
Now--red and gold stained silence.
She pauses softly
with one small hand on each pew back,
caressing the shining worn dark wood,
gazing with blue eyes
at the pulpit jutting from the podium
in stern majesty
where her father worked magic
every Sunday at least twice.
Here is where they stood,
the crying women,
the abashed men,
confessing their sins,
depending on Our Father
to save them from whatever
they were so scared of.
Awe, not fear,
fills the child
as she slowly approaches the podium
and sits down quickly
before anyone can see.
She strikes her chords
faint at first, then crashing,
condoling, smooth, climbing
chords, sound coiling upward
through all the departed souls
and stale flowers.
The child has reached home.
They Came

They came
crying, proud,
or sometimes indifferent
or embarrassed
into my father and Our Father's
open arms.
Hands extended,
solemnity on his brow,
he wrote the credo
for East Texas farmers
and their educated wives.
I watched from the organ bench
wondering, skeptical,
enchanted and dis--
for the cue to stand on the last stanza
remembering the kid who carefully stood
on his hymnbook,
and the thousands who crowded
the altar rails
answering the call
the only way they knew,
smudging their careful Sunday get-up
with tears from their long-past iniquities.
They probably never understood their crimes.
They really never understood their penance
as they asked forgiveness from the war-crazed preacher.
Did they remember, over Sunday chicken?
Yes, from God knows where, they come yet crying, as children afraid of the dark, to a man who can comfort, not because he has light but because he knows dark.
In the Pew in Front

White stripes
criss-cross
red, flaking skin
moving in kaleidoscope
as he nods & bows
in time
to hymns and prayers.
In This Room

In this room filled with ancestors,
Dead relatives and such
I grind my pen with the poets
And the frontier comes to a halt.

Memorabilia of prairie homes
And circuit riders of the night,
Their horses clip-clop quietly
To leave me medicine books and Bibles.

What spirit sent them? Whence came?
I cannot answer now.
Locked doors trap the memories
With unanswered questions from their time
To mine. Some have tried to answer
With portraits stern and dim
That contrast with delicate vases
And dried flowers on Hymn 91.

I sit at the top of a tall family tree
In earrings and bracelet of jade
The whole of their years culminates in me--
I am the cause or effect of their fate.
Saved at 80 m.p.h.

"And Jay-sus says, Come Now!"
The sacred unhliest
of revival preachers
Insanely raves over the AM dial
 Conjuring cows, black and numerous
To enter the kingdom of heaven.
Inviting birds
Whose presence is written on your windshield
To rest their heads on the radio
And pray, with conviction, for conviction.
And the fat green lands of Texas
Jitter with his voice of feeling
As he asks for just one dollar
To insure a good place with the Lord.
The cotton bolls gleam white in the sun
As the choir sings the final gospel hymn.
The used-car dealership
Twinkles in surprise
As Jesus says, "Come now."
Major Links of Disasters

Major links of disasters
Have left traces of chords
Hanging above pianos
In white rooms.

Cortez must have known.
He left a cadenza hanging above a lake
Where his spirit now must lie
In perpetual thirst.
Dreams on an Incense Stick

The ash on the incense stick
curls before it drops.
My own insensitivity snarls
before the poem drops.
Stretching from a snow-covered mountain
from my toes
I watch in horror
as headlights swing into the snowasteland
and a man in horn-rimmed glasses
steps from a car, selling Bibles.
I awaken in a sweat
and the curl on the incense stick drops
but does not fall,
hanging by a thread of flower fiber
and I lean over a precipice
holding an oversized billfold
that isn't mine,
wondering indeed if this poem's mine.
Another curl of ash
starts where the other hangs.
I don't have a dream about rebirth
or even an opinion.
The Pink Flamingoes

The pink flamingoes
Still ride white horses
In the land where St. Sara
Goes to sea once a year
On gypsies' shoulders;
Barnacles clinging to
Bones white as diamonds,
Sapphires ringing in
Sea-shell earrings
As we cross the corner
From Blue Flame
To Green Light,
Guide us, o Stop Light
To our destinies.
Computer Room

Points of light
Make points of infinity
Measuring distances
By spinning wheels
And dialing knobs
That vibrate and hum,
Making faces at all
The Cosmic Energy
They neatly dispose of.
Glass, Pecans, and Fender

glass, pecans, and fender
all over the highway wet
shook Henry's dreams
already punctured
with pain real and un
He Toss'd
dreamt of pink convertibles
and red cheeks duffled
in profusion of black-dress'd women
jewelled in broken loves
so much prouder
than Henry ever before seen.

Life, in general, passed by
cracked up Henry,
but not the Artificial Telephone Co.
breathing hot warnings
over trembling wires,
like some half-cocked devil bird.
Died Henry

died Henry
on some cold day or other
--jumped, he did,
figuring, with quick
professorial logic
it not worth it.

and so they did, all of them
as he had
only more like Schopenhauer,
and made small talk
about their academia's
cocktail on-the-rocks.

o henry never forgave
no, brought down so low by fools
and fame it ne'er deserts
but only gives just desserts--

ice & Minnesota

notwithstanding.
Henry Hedged

Henry hedged, unhinged
for the moment
by her and her and him
And Henry, he couldn't take it
Anymore
and so he took it all.

I love you said Henry
and he meant it.
But she just stared.
No. Don't believe it.
You lied, and your mother before you
and your father with his shotgun
Lied, but did truth.

Henry laid back his ears and growled.
The lady omitted.
You can't do this
After all: . . .
Mr. Bones: can you?
The lady cried. Henry flew.
Not Much Sense

Not much sense, all this:
Cold & golden lay the heroine
in a wilderness of bears.
Armed with a tape deck,
Henry proceeded.
Got as far as the trees, but
That stopped him.
I'm scared, said Henry
and that scared him more.
O Henry couldn't reach, didn't find
any treasure that day
Only destruction and women
the two being bound
inextricably
and the heroine, she mixed a drink
and phoned and phoned with
Rings and Pregnancies
getting, of course, no answer.
Onstage

Nerves
leaking into his pants,
Henry blinded in footlight glare
knows they'll increase wattage
shortly, doesn't matter, time'll come.
Mr. Bones: but does you know why
Henry couldn't care less,
frolics about, shaking his skin
so wisely, didn't see the crack there
Thass doom & a gasp from the crowd:
Once upon a time they dragged Henry offstage,
tying his wild limbs with long moans.
Now tho . . . quiet. Offstage he sing.
Sing! One low piercing note of pain
whilst they bang at his liver and
screw his kidney--he mumble obscenities
as harmony--feint a faint
--Henry doubled up in a bow.
Henry Howled

Henry howled
and balleled over Russia,
catapulted by flying machines.
Stage/screen stars begged his favor
Lenient, Henry dreamed
but became o so confused
choosing somehow the blacklisted.
Snobbish Henry lost it all,
became unknown
chasing after Aryan gurus and Sik wives
Was told to purge himself
of diarrhea, physical and literarily.
O! to live in a romantic age
he cried, but shucked Shelley.
A new romance! declaiming Henry
treated his pot belly to old port
and pranced to the museum
to find a pale young artist, female.
Slightly Embarrassed

Slightly embarrassed
Hiding rhymes
In the White Horse Tavern
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone

Slightly insane
Harrassed by isolation
Returning to same in NYC
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone

What did Berryman feel
Off the bridge?
Did he see his friend?
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone.

Who doesn't die alone?
Suicides time it, but
The last moment is unknown--
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone.

Sexton, Berryman, Plath
Got there on purpose.
Do they know what scares so much?
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone.
And poets hover
over mutilated poetic corpses
Puzzled, fascinated, but
Delmore Schwartz
Died alone.
Two More Men

Two more men came in tonight to haunt

towho? Why me?

Berryman wasn't enough, no,

But Delmore and live Lowell too

all shades thinking here's a resting place

in someone's brain she too drinks

and has them miserable headaches

that come neither from drink nor smoke

but rise, inexorable, from them shades

we too often see.

Give us, o great nebulous somebody, our minds.

We want them back!

Too long have we fumbled for them.

Too long has midnight struck at 6 or 7.
Ragged

ragged by student unrest
& undoubtedly other poems
Henry sats in de long green sky
pounding head and type
writer dribbling words like
long green willow leaves
the jigsawed landscape
swifts by so suddenly
in a word like the poet never sawed
thunderclouds gather, sick and
yellow, undermining Henry
from his post--Ouch?
slobbered Henry rueful curses
upon the heads of them ungrateful slobs.
The sky rained mantras
Henry's teeth clattered,
found a new set of Bones
and lied.
Turning his Back

Turning his back on all them other cats,
Henry melted his clothes, set fire to the kitchen,
Lost his job, & paid bills
All in the same day. Disgustin.
That day, growled he, was bad to me.
Grim tales forbid his nights
Orange tigers chasing green pens
All over the table, black
Couldn't get worse--ah, Bones,
you is total wrong: They told us,
Cheer up, things could get worse, so
we all cheered up & sure 'nuf, they
Did, or does.--Henry wallowed,
made more mistakes than ever, &
floated down among opinions
dodging reeks along the way
Marjo-rine souls flapped loose
Henry stuffed his with loans.
Henry at Church

Henry
Shaken down to even his liver
thoroughly amazed at
exterior Henry--
can't understand why
him so calm.
doesn't fit
except the aftermath
is hysteria
coming up from deep inside
forming Dante's Inferno
on the inside of his eyelids
All the lust, passion, desire
that can't be pain-killed away--
Henry got religious once
And then committed suicide
Or fell
Back again, at war this time
with angels and devils.
Pool Game

Henry played a pool game with the Most Almighty God. God disguised as a bartender, thought Henry wild & gone, made no pretence of His discontent with creature Henry in his image. Henry played on, disrespectful, down to 11 & 8. He must sink 11, but must not touch the forbidden apple 8. Black & cool, it tempted him, & Henry black with hot anger shot it into its womb, while God looked on, laft and left.

Henry rolled into the pocket, down labyrinthine passages, crying aloud in pain. Bones: this strange, how you plan to end? Rolling, roiling, no way but down, Henry twists to see what be behind him ... lone, white, odd ball, name Scratch.
Goodbye

Working hard to finish one more thesis just
Henry pouts and eats prunes.
Will it all come out at once, shesis & thit?
All together, like Cullum & Boren
Or
Burned at the stake for constipation
And lack of finished thesis, it fits, brother.
Presley's ultracool, don't want to learn
To read & write, better'n Bojangles
O strut, you white m. f.
Initials only for that shining apostle
of Hos & Hums.
Belches now o how is Henry sick
Dreams at night of opening skulls, poring in
& then tries it at day. Bones:
Thinks you mebbe day & right
don't alter with wrong & night?
No. I set my red pen down.