

THE GOD IS BLUE. NEW AND ORIGINAL POEMS WITH A MANIFESTO

by

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(Under the Direction of Brian Henry)

ABSTRACT

The manifesto briefly traces the idea of lyric energy as it is discussed within the American tradition, from Emerson to Olson, and examines how line, stanza, lyric, typography, language, inquiry, dream, narrative, and closure—elements basic to the poem—can electrify it. The essay argues that modernists, such as Whitman, Stein, Cummings, and Williams, exploded the prescribed forms of traditional versification. This disintegration was necessary because, as they insisted, a rigid metrics stifles individuality and improvisation. Following their innovations, postmodernists (Olson, Coolidge, Bernstein) asserted, in both their prose and poetry, that the world no longer communicates exclusively in complete sentences. The blurb, the sound byte, the pixel are faster and more explosive carriers of information. The traditional line favors a straightforward, logical, linear progression, which is outdated. The irrational impulse, the ejaculation, the abrupt juxtaposition, the non sequitur—techniques gleaned from the modernists—have become the new modes of delivery. Postmodern poetry rediscovered power in the unfettered word or phrase. Sudden shifts, against syntactical sense, have yielded pleasant or instructive disorientation.

the god is blue takes as a given that American culture promotes a discourse that is highly sexualized, violent, masculine, technical, and commercial. Our language is notoriously *graphic*—i.e., vividly described (gory)—as well as *graphic* in the literal sense (*graphos*=written). Graphic speech is our national product, and the poet, who trades in the currency of words, must reckon with its enormous energy. The question is how to explore transcendent meaning amidst the engrossments of *Playboy*, *Game Boy*, *Spiderman*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Seinfeld*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *MTV*, and Madison Avenue. The poems in this collection seek to locate an American spirituality amidst these violences, frauds, amusements, and monstrosities. The book attempts to take seriously the American disaffection with absolutes and absolutions while, at the same time, expose gaps where the imagination is vulnerable to the divine.

INDEX WORDS: lyric, lyric energy, modernism, postmodernism, versification, blue, god, manifesto, Whitman, Stevens, Bernstein, Olson

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DEDICATION

for all the blue fathers, including my own, Marcus Henry Klatt

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MANIFESTO

ENERGY

I take as first principle that explosion is the goal of lyric—an intense utterance that violently concusses the audience. “If I feel as if the top of my head has come off,” said Emily Dickinson, “I know that is poetry” (qtd. by Higginson 208).

Fundamental to Dickinson’s understanding of the poem is the conviction that language conveys physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual energy. The writer fixes on evocative words and puts them into play; the audience experiences brain sensation.¹ Poetry, thus construed, is a charged event. Language is converted into electrical impulse and then expressed as a rhythmic burst in the receiver. As Charles Olson declared in 1950, “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself... all the way over to the reader.... an energy discharge” (16).

The electrified lyric is an American tradition that dates back as far as Emerson’s 1844 essay, “The Poet.”² In this manifesto, Emerson searches “in vain” for a Yankee writer who will select subjects specifically for their conductivity—their ability to transmit the American animus: “our log-rolling, our stumps... our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians... the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing” (281). The New World, for Emerson, is supercharged; the new poet is its dynamo.

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by

¹ By “sensation,” I mean, “Strong stimulation, powerful emotion... intense interest or excitement among a large group of people; the (literary) use of material intended to create such an effect” (OED, “sensation,” 3a).

² A date which coincides with Morse’s invention of the telegraph.

virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity.³

(283)

Emerson, however, could not fulfill his own prophecy, at least not in verse. His poetry tended toward abstraction and was confined by “metre-making arguments.” But what Emerson anticipated, Whitman enacted. Whitman understood that lyric energy required spontaneity and irregularity, qualities he admired in the Greek dithyramb and the Hebrew psalm. By rehabilitating these ancient, ecstatic forms, Whitman was able to generate impulsive, staggering, “free-verse” lines and supersede the metrics of his generation. The task of the poet changed accordingly. The modern poet no longer was required to count syllables and feet, but instead could let the impulse follow its own erratic path. Even conservatives, who persisted in their meters, could not suppress the aberrant versification of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Frank O’Hara, Denise Levertov, Clark Coolidge, Charles Bernstein, Anne Carson, and Jorie Graham, among others. The twentieth century was an epoch of fracture and fissure, open syntax and explosive form.⁴

Not only did Whitman propagate free verse but he also perpetuated Emerson’s insistence on an energetic poetics, an enthusiastic way of thinking about the lyric.⁵ “I sing the

³ Instead of “energy” or “electricity,” Edgar Allan Poe offers the phrase “elevating excitement” to describe this idea of lyric intensity. In a contemporaneous essay “The Poetic Principle” (1850), Poe asserts that the lyric poem must be brief: “A poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. The degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length” (231).

⁴ The breaking of the pentameter line is consonant with two other twentieth-century events, the splitting of the atom and the partition of the human genome—fractures that released unprecedented powers.

⁵ The British produced their own avant-garde poet, William Blake, whose transgressive, free-verse experiments were eventually and largely abandoned. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in *The French Revolution*, Blake summoned a Wordsworthian “overflow of emotion” but, unlike Wordsworth, he rendered his exuberance in irregular, exaggerated line lengths. The poet as enthusiast is a tradition as old as poetry itself; the

body electric” and “I have instant conductors all over me” are typical self-revelations, which indicate that Whitman the poet is as much conduit as craftsman. This discovery—that the writer induces a mental power surge—is reformulated again and again by his literary descendants. William Carlos Williams, for example, proposes that the poet should send out shock waves: “One great thing about ‘the bomb’ is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic... alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art, the arts... We are too cowered to realize it fully. But it is *possible*.” (287). Hart Crane imagined the poem as a “plate of vibrant mercury”—not static, lifeless intellectual verbiage but a quicksilver, highly reactive, not easily manipulated or captured (Perkins 66). T.S. Eliot also described the poetic process as analogous to a chemical reaction. “The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (“Tradition” 41). These and others struggled to articulate a poetics of energy, a verbal potency that would detonate and shock the author just as much as it unsettles the reader. Yet this reciprocation, catalyzed in the imagination, is ultimately generative and not destructive.⁶

the god is blue pursues the energetic lyric. Words are chosen for their vibration, their buzz; forms are not predetermined but intuitive and impulsive. The book attempts to convey an intellectual and emotional intensity by maximizing the powers basic to the poem: line, stanza, lyric, typography, language, philosophical inquiry, dream, narrative, and closure.

Greek word for inspiration θεοπνευστος = god + breath. The idea is that the inspired poet inhales the muse and speaks, as it were, the breath of the gods.

⁶ “What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be,” said Wallace Stevens, “is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (“Noble Rider” 662).

LINE

With modernism, the poetic line was beginning to interrupt itself and disintegrate; postmodern poets further obliterated metric expectations. The early poetry of Clark Coolidge, a precursor to the language poets, prefers word to sentence, associative logic to syntactical sense. Coolidge manifests the postmodernist tendency to cut the traditional line into confetti.⁷ While New Formalists and others refuse to acknowledge the deconstruction and hallow the days of pristine iambs and trochees, the hegemony of conventional lineation has been eroded.⁸ Uniform line lengths and rigid syllabics alone can't satisfy audiences in the new millennium because they don't leave enough room for improvisation and because the postmodern world no longer communicates exclusively in complete sentences. The blurb, the sound byte, the pixel are faster and more explosive carriers of information. The traditional line favors a straightforward, logical, linear progression, which is outdated. The irrational impulse, the ejaculation, the abrupt juxtaposition, the non sequitur—techniques gleaned from the modernists—have become increasingly popular modes of delivery. Postmodern poetry rediscovered power in the unfettered word or phrase.⁹ Sudden shifts, against syntactical sense, have yielded pleasant or instructive disorientation.¹⁰

⁷ Coolidge's *Flag Flutter & U.S. Electric* was first published in 1966. John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* (1964) represent even earlier examples of this phenomenon. All three were influenced by visual artists and musicians who were tampering with similar notions of interruptive sense, specifically John Cage's "chance" compositions, Marcel Duchamp's "stoppages," Hans Arp's collages, the technique of jazz improvisation, and others (Notley *ix-x*).

⁸ New Formalism is a loose term that expresses the renewed interest in traditional versification and includes such contemporary poets as Dana Gioia, J.D. McClatchy, and Henry Taylor.

⁹ In 1950, Charles Olson employed the word "postmodern" to establish a link between his own poetry and the modernist experiments of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. Olson was reacting against the New Critical poetry of his generation, which had slipped back into the confinements of traditional versification. See Olson's essay "Projective Verse" for a manifesto that attempts to redirect the trajectory of poetry toward open verse.

What happens, then, when we shear off the pentameter line? The abbreviated line has the potential to create a vertical drop, drawing the eye downward. This effect can be accelerated by occasional enjambment and by splitting words with a hyphen and forcing the reader to move to the next line in order to complete the sense. These interruptions inject little hitches into the rhythm, suspend the logic, invite surprise, and fracture the song or narrative. Similarly, one-word lines encourage a jumpy, stop-and-go rhythm and isolate (thereby pronouncing) key or unexpected words. Occasionally, lines can end on an article or preposition—traditionally considered a weak choice—but again the goal is to drive the reader down through the poem, as well as to shift the emphasis back and forth between the beginning and the end of the line instead of putting all the weight on the end. Indentations may serve a similar function. The final result is that the reader corkscrews down the poem, as if in a parachute; the thrill is in rapid descent.

The Black Mountain poets first proposed the idea of open syntax, i.e., dispensing with normal grammatical logic and exploring other ways of connecting words—usually by association. I find these experiments compelling but in my poetry I am also interested in the tension created by preserving the simple declarative sentence while prematurely fracturing it by means of shortened lines, a sentence which is pulled *down* instead of merely *across* the page. In *the god is blue*, I ask: what if we skewed our normal reading pattern, shifting our

¹⁰ The interrogation of the metric line began with Whitman and Dickinson, was picked up by modernists such as Gertrude Stein (*Tender Buttons*), Louis Zukofsky (*A*) and William Carlos Williams (*Spring and All*), continued with the “open syntax” of the Black Mountain poets, particularly Charles Olson (“The Kingfishers,” “In Cold Hell, In Thicket,” “Merce of Egypt,” etc.), and culminated in the free-associations of John Ashbery (*The Tennis Court Oath*), Ted Berrigan (*The Sonnets*), Clark Coolidge (*Flag Flutter & U.S. Electric*), Charles Bernstein (*Shade*), Hannah Weiner (*Clairvoyant Journal*), Robert Grenier (*Sentences*), and the Canadian Steve McCaffery (‘Ow’s “*Waij*”). Is the traditional line dead? No. But poets no longer are constrained to speak in complete, regulated sentences, and moreover, are freer to explore other possible linguistic arrangements. What this means for the future of the metric line is unclear—many poets persist in this mode—yet it does seem that traditionalists should at least reckon with (and not merely react to) the fragmentation introduced by modernism and endemic to this postmodern era.

perspective from left-right to up-down? The vertical axis has been a frequently neglected resource for poetry. By writing downward, we exploit a new opportunity to read words out of context—the sentence no longer comes to us whole, line for line, so we must focus on the fragmentation. With more breaks, each abbreviated line is given more value and demands more concentration, and consequently more energy is invested into the lyric. The sentence, descending down the page by means of enjambment, becomes the invisible spine of the poem, the hidden structure. Each line is meaningful, i.e., carefully considered, because the reader does not know where she is going; each line is familiar because the sentence follows a syntactical logic. The net effect is that the poet creates the illusion of freefall or velocity while depending on the sentence to stabilize the descent. This gravitational force produces pleasures of speed and momentum.

STANZA

The poem, as William Carlos Williams configured it, is “a field of action.” This means that the writer must combine the elements of the poem in such a way as to overcome inertia and the dulling effects of end-rhyme and metronome.¹¹ Traditional forms such as the sonnet and the sestina, for the most part, have been played out.¹² Lyrics, because they are emotional outbursts, resist being contained in boxes of standardized dimensions. Yet formlessness is not true to the poetic impulse either. Language tends to bloom in clusters.¹³

¹¹ Williams came to this conviction under the influence of Ezra Pound.

¹² Why then do poets return to them? Ted Berrigan, in his *Sonnets*, successfully sought to reinvigorate the sonnet with the cut and paste technique of collage. This type of experiment is a worthwhile endeavor, and more recent examples of innovative approaches to traditional forms include Karen Volkman’s sonnets and Jonah Winter’s sestinas in *Maine*. While these poets have expanded the forms and made them new, others seem entrenched in the hard and fast parameters of meter and rhyme scheme. I compare this kind of poet to a player of scales; you might derive dexterity from such exercises but they rarely make for a satisfying recital. Be that as it may, my complaint is not against formalists but uninventive craftsmen.

The disintegration that postmodern poetry prizes depends upon the template of traditional versification. The dynamic of entropy implies a primitive order—a solid state—that is coming apart. My idea of the stanza is that it should suggest organization without demanding conformity. It should descend upon the reader like a meteor shower, spontaneous rather than premeditated, a cluster of cosmic particles with no fixed shape, subject to deflection and ricochet. The poet may discover symmetrical patterns but only after several passes through the poem.

Over a career, it is not surprising that the lyric poet gravitates toward customized, signature forms.¹⁴ Yet she is always inventing, her music defining its own boundaries. In my estimation, the stanza is a paragraph where line length varies and is jagged. The number of lines per stanza may or may not be consistent, and the poem can be quite arresting without any paragraphing whatsoever.

Why then write in stanzas? Returning to Williams's figure, the poem is a field of action. The stanza presents an episode of lyric activity where words are *framed* for our observation. This framing technique, if it has flexible boundaries, calls attention to patterns without stifling the intensity or the movement. Stanzas act as tracking devices that become an organic part of the composition—setting off musical phrases, sequestering particular flares of thought, isolating complexes of emotion. Modulating stanzas capture the identifying frequency of the poem. They outline theme and variation.¹⁵

¹³Denise Levertov calls these clusters “constellations” in her essay, “Some Notes Toward Organic Form.”

¹⁴Think of Charles Wright's stylized quintets (i.e., his use of the “low rider”) or Berryman's peculiar sestets in the *Dream Songs*.

¹⁵ In this regard, Alice Fulton's fractal poetics is instructive: “To put it simply, each part of a fractal form replicates the form of the entire structure. Increasing detail is revealed with increasing magnification, and each smaller part looks like the entire structure.... Fractal form... is composed of constant digressions and

LYRIC

A poem is a musical composition. When read aloud, the lyric makes sonic sense first; meaning arrives in retrospect. This is not to disparage the intellectual content of the poem but to keep it within its lyrical context. Music is about the relationship of sounds—harmonious or dissonant—creating a rhythm and a melody. The value of sonic sense is that it operates on a subconscious level, eliciting emotions and memories. This is because the reservoir of language is the signifying part of our collective and private experience. Certain combinations of sounds resonate, i.e., seem familiar, and therefore trigger particular associations, whether it be the phrasing of a nursery rhyme, an advertising jingle, or a fragment of text. Sometimes the recognition is subtle, sometimes a boom.

A poem sets up a sonic expectation and then plays with, works against, or satisfies it. Arrhythmia results when the predictable line is upset. In the same way that the jazz riff scats off a baseline, the lyric must improvise, must skitter along its bumpy path. Without swerves or leaps, there is no explosion, and the audience disengages.¹⁶

the god is blue depends upon sonic ricochet rather than fixed rhyme schemes. Word to word, line to line, there is an intensified collision of sounds that are more serendipitous than preplanned. Energy crisscrosses the poems helter-skelter via the accidents of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and slant rhyme. The hyper-resemblance of sounds generates sudden forces of attraction. Words drawn together, at such high speeds, smash and disintegrate into their phonic parts.

interruptions in rhythm.... In fact, asymmetrical or turbulent composition may be the essence of twentieth-century aesthetics" (55-57).

¹⁶ The thrill of the blues lyric, exemplified in Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and Yusef Komunyakaa's *Neon Vernacular*, demonstrates the effectiveness of the improvisational impulse. The progress of the blues line is instinctively motivated and does not adhere rigidly to the musical score.

TYPOGRAPHY

e e cummings was the most radical typographic poet since William Blake (whose poems are still reprinted inaccurately by editors who, whether intentionally or inadvertently, conventionalize his innovations and censor his punctuation tics). Many dismiss typographical experiments as gimmicky or gratuitous. This is sometimes a legitimate critique but more often a bias against the graphic flourish. What oral-fixated poets fail to recognize is that every poem, if published, is presented via the visual dimension, which far from distracting the reader, contributes to the meaning-making. To ignore this is to pluck out the eyes and forget that since Guttenberg poetry has been mediated by print technology.

I favor a poetry that departs from staid, grammatical conventions, such as capitalizing the first word of every sentence, capitalizing all proper names, and capitalizing each title, because in these conventions, the poet misses opportunities to surprise the reader with timely emphases.¹⁷ Variation ensures that the words arrive afresh.

Typography scores the music, yet there are eccentricities encoded in the written composition that will never make their way into oral performances. But as Charles Bernstein reminds us, the “extralexical strata” of the poem (punctuation, symbols, spaces, etc.) *is* meaningful.¹⁸ The poem, after all, is a graphic art, an exhibition of hieroglyphs. We need not imitate the gaudy pattern poems of George Herbert in order to appreciate the visual layout on the page. And we blindfold ourselves when we ignore the symbols that are the stock and trade of American typeface. For example, the trademark symbol (variously rendered ® and ™) is ubiquitous in commercial propaganda, yet it is routinely excised from poems. Are we

¹⁷ Dickinson’s penchant for capitalizing abstract nouns, such as Truth and Light, calls attention to their function as philosophical categories.

¹⁸ He also suggests that at times these nonverbal elements may even serve to destabilize meaning, i.e., undermine what the words signify. (See Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption” and “The Secret of Syntax.”)

afraid of contaminating our verses? Do we require a poetry sterilized against the infections of advertisement? Why not assume that symbols, wherever they come from, are raw material that the poet can subvert and convert?

LANGUAGE

I take as a given that American culture promotes a discourse that is highly sexualized, violent, masculine, technical, and commercial. Our language is notoriously *graphic*—i.e., vividly described (gory)—as well as *graphic* in the literal sense (*graphos*=written). Graphic speech is our national product, and the poet, who trades in the currency of words, must reckon with its enormous energy. The question is how to explore transcendent meaning amidst the engrossments of *Playboy*, *Game Boy*, *Spiderman*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Seinfeld*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *MTV*, and Madison Avenue.

The American poet's task is further complicated because he competes with mass media for parlance, for the same cache of energetic lingo. Once an advertiser, for example, zeroes in on a particular word, the corporate association is seared into our consciousness, and hence the word is burdened with commercial freight.¹⁹ The creative brains of New York, Nashville, and Hollywood are copyrighting acronyms and monopolizing language at a frenetic pace. Poets have always competed with politicians for metaphors,²⁰ but now they must outmuscle marketing executives, songwriters, and movie producers for the rights to words.²¹

¹⁹ For example, a writer today cannot use “zoom” in a poem without also recognizing that an American audience will correlate this verb to the Mazda commercial where it is featured. Likewise, the word “brown” is now indelibly associated with United Parcel Service, not only because brown is the color of their uniforms and trucks but because a million-dollar advertising budget has broadcasted *ad nauseam* the correspondence.

²⁰ See Plato's *Republic* and Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* for examples.

Nonetheless, the poet cannot disown mass media speech. Our personal histories are littered with American slogans, products, machines, television titles, technical jargon. We are a mass-produced nation, and our poetry, if it is to be relevant, must dip into the pile and reconfigure these artifacts.²²

the god is blue not only engages these relics but also the material world, its entities and its elements. The book resonates with the sensual—words that trigger the five senses. Recent preoccupation with the discursive poem has directed attention away from the concrete. The poetry of Jorie Graham, for example, has progressed from the earthy particularity of *Erosion* to the broad, conceptual fields of *Never*. This movement may have its merits, but the farther a poet pushes into the abstract the more the poetry feels detached. While Graham's own work seems to recognize the significance of the material world as a jumping-off-point for digression, others have been mesmerized by the notion that all language is metaphorical. In their minds, to write poems with a narrow definition of metaphor—i.e., only sensual imagery—perpetrates a kind of deception, a fraud imposed on the reader. Why not open the poem up to the theoretical?²³ I would contend, however, that intellectual excitement, if it is to be transferred to an audience other than philosophers, must be grounded in the

²¹ Songwriters are included in this list for several reasons: 1) poets and musicians may be one and the same in antiquity but this is often not the case anymore; despite some notable exceptions (Bob Dylan, David Berman, etc.), for many songwriters, the words are secondary to the music; 2) poets have distinguished themselves from songwriters by accentuating the “music” of language, unaccompanied by any instrumentation other than the speaking voice; 3) the music industry has been subsumed by market capitalism; while song lyrics can sometimes be artful, they are frequently motivated and shaped with commercial goals in mind; the perception that poetry doesn't sell liberates the poet from the spreadsheet, though this is not to deny that poetry has a commercial dimension as well.

²² Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* trilogy does this well. His books are energized by the interplay between the slang of popular culture and a more grandiose philosophical vocabulary.

²³ I agree with Ron Silliman, who believes that “the poem without theory exists solely as a concealment” (“Canons and Institutions” 167). But while it may have been necessary for a time for poets to foreground the theoretical dimension of language and acknowledge that every word exists because of certain philosophical assumptions, I think that theory-driven poems are too self-conscious and reductive. The audience is engaged first by the sensual superficiality of the words; they return to a poem when a certain mystery and complexity reverberates beneath the surface. The concealment is a critical part of the appeal.

substantial; the netherworld must touch the here and now. Poetry, according to my aesthetic, depends upon a sensory experience. We do well to return to the mantra of William Carlos Williams, “No ideas but in things.”²⁴

Galway Kinnell has suggested that the English “language has more physical verbs and more physical adjectives in it than most others, and so has a peculiar capacity to bring into presence the creatures and things that the world is made up of. . . . so that they enter us, so that they are transformed within us, and so that our own inner life finds expression through them. . . . In the purest poem the inner and outer meet” (52). Jorie Graham’s early poem, “Reading Plato,” serves as an example. In the poem, Graham extracts Plato’s idea of the “true lie” and splices it into the tactile world of fly-fishing. Unlike the philosophizing riffs characteristic of her later work, “Reading Plato” conjures a Poundian ideogram—an extended word-picture, a tableaux. The results are neither simplistic nor didactic, and the complications are subsumed in the metaphors.

Historically, human institutions have been threatened by the image’s supremacy over the proposition. Socrates argued in *The Republic* that if poets were permitted to capture imaginations then individuals might be ruled by ideas outside the official propaganda of the state—or worse, they might think for themselves. Metaphorical language seduces and incites, insinuating possibilities while appealing directly to the senses.²⁵ Image-borne ideas are delivered with more vitality and electricity than abstractions that are detached from the world of things. It is precisely the task of poetry to sand language all the way down to its

²⁴ Williams’s formulation is epitomized in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, William Stafford, Louise Gluck, Galway Kinnell, Amy Clampitt, and Heather McHugh, where philosophical concerns are grounded in the concrete without the sacrifice of any intellectual intensity.

²⁵ Hence the motto of Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

metal. Without a connection to the bare elements, ideas lose their capacity to transfer energy.²⁶

PHILOSOPHICAL LYRIC²⁷

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to establish the necessity of concretion. But this is not to deny that language is the carrier of thought. Unusually arranged poems make ideas appear out of context, and it is precisely such configurations that elicit our curiosity. The poet, by means of the poem, produces an arena where ideas, submerged in images, collide. Wallace Stevens was particularly adept at the philosophical lyric. In “Anecdote of the Jar,” to take one example, Stevens dramatized the unnatural effect of placing a glass container into the Tennessee landscape. Here is a lyric that makes a man-made object the centerpiece—it is the story of the “jar,” as if the jar is the protagonist. Within this poem, the tension between inside and outside, artificial and natural, vacuum and fecundity, civilization and wilderness—reinforced by the doubling devices (repetition of key words and the use of double letters in such words as Tennessee)—creates a duality that the poem never resolves, only intensifies. The figuring of the poem itself as artifact—just as artificial in relation to the nonhuman world as the jar—enacts the dilemma of consciousness in the universe.²⁸

²⁶Those involved in the currency of words—writers and readers—reveal what Charles Bernstein calls “multi-vectors.” The typical word produces multiple directions of meaning—denotations, connotations, and resemblances. These comprise the circuitry, which the energy of the poem travels. Crisscrossing the wires can create a certain amount of spark, but there is also the danger of prematurely shorting out comprehension and blowing the fuses. The most effective poems gauge the intended audience’s ability to manage the complex network of signification.

²⁷ The philosophic lyric is as old as the fragments of Heraclitus, and in English, the metaphysical verses of John Donne. American participation in the tradition flowered in the works of Edward Taylor and Emily Dickinson.

²⁸ See “The Snow Man,” “Earthy Anecdote,” “Of the Surface of Things,” and “Anecdote of Canna” for similar Stevensian musings packed in brief, dense, image-rich poems.

the god is blue is attracted to this kind of figurative inquiry. Maintaining a bias toward earthy, sensation-producing diction, the book nevertheless pursues abstract themes. Specifically, the poems in this collection are interested in American spirituality—how the consumer struggles to come clean amidst violences, frauds, and amusements, how genius seeks to survive its own monstrosities. The book attempts to take seriously the American disaffection with absolutes and absolutions while, at the same time, expose gaps where the imagination is vulnerable to the divine.

the god is blue identifies divinity with a particular color for several reasons: 1) blue is the color of sorrow and anguish (OED a.2b)—hence, *blues* are associated with lament, Negro Spiritual, and jazz; the music that inspires these poems is soulful and bluesy; 2) blue represents constancy (OED a.2a), a quality that contrasts with human activity, which is erratic, interrupted, and temporary; 3) *blue streak* refers to a rapid stream of words—the book assumes that language is godlike in its quickness to create and destroy; 4) etymologically, blue is related to *blew* or *blow*, and the book trades on this relationship—blow as in breath (inspiration), wind (spirit), whirlwind (the inscrutable god); 5) blue, as in *not breathing*—not that god is dead but that American culture (sexualized + brutalized + commercialized + technologized = materialistic) is strangling the spiritual; 6) blue in relation to red and white as colors of the American flag; the book is interested in American forms of divination; 7) the biblical notion that god is light; blue, as a specific band of light, suggests the possibility of all the colors of the spectrum—blue blends into the adjacent green and violet, and it also stands out against its opposite, red; the poems are divine-light-intensive but also enter the Technicolor prism of television/media; 8) in Judaism, blue is the color of certain priestly garments and symbolic of holiness; 9) blue as an elemental color—sky and sea, air and water, even fire (as in blue flame)—divinity (particularly male divinity) has long been associated

with sky & ocean; 10) blue light, as in the television screen and “Attention, Kmart shoppers”; 11) American poets have long been preoccupied with the color blue (see epigraphs); the book acknowledges and seeks to amplify this tradition.

DREAM

A lyric, if it is to escape the mundane, must participate in dreams. As Eliot observed, “It is not necessary, in order to enjoy the poem, to know what the dream means; but humans have an unshakeable belief that dreams mean something. . . . If we are moved by a poem, it has meant. . . . something important to us” (“Music of Poetry” 110-11). The ineffable cannot be quantified and mass-marketed. No poetic formula can suggest for us the unconscious. But a forsaking of this world for others is the activity of the dreamer. Intuition tells the poet to leap over the rational and into the unknown until somewhere the sense catches up. A dream may take a lifetime to understand; it may take several generations. Yet the poet guided by dreams will have the confidence to stray from overt agendas.²⁹

It has often been observed that artists make strange the familiar and make familiar the strange. Better to say here that poets make us aware of how our normal linguistic habits have desensitized us. A thoughtful poem reexamines the way we organize and codify our experience and makes possible alternatives. The line between the rational and the irrational is a fine one; perhaps if we are willing to pursue nonsense we will find our way to new sense.³⁰ Clark Coolidge, following Gertrude Stein, has demonstrated that the world comes to us in

²⁹ John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and Hayden Carruth’s *Sleeping Beauty* are books where the dream instinct seems to take over, with extraordinary results.

³⁰ “Those who seek for the freshness and strangeness of poetry in fresh and strange places do so because of an intense need. The need of the poet for poetry is a dynamic cause of the poetry that he writes. By the aid of the irrational he finds joy in the irrational. When we speak of fluctuations of taste, we are speaking of evidences of the operation of the irrational. Such changes are irrational. They reflect the effects of poetic energy; for where there are no fluctuations, poetic energy is absent” (Stevens, “The Irrational Element” 791-92).

pieces—largely incoherent—which our brains struggle to narrate, negotiate, and integrate. Our universe is fragmented, and this only piques the desire for wholeness.

The artist's mind gathers together the particles of experience. Words accumulate by invisible powers of attraction and the poet himself is entranced. The dreamer traverses the surface of these words. Where will they take him? Language is extremely plastic, and it gives. If the poet tests its stability, he disappears into pockets of air—subterranean levels of meaning—a hiker up to his armpits in a snowfield. The way out is to wiggle back up to the surface. The poet navigates the superficial. He commits himself to a tenuous wordscape and he wonders whether anyone—himself or others—will be able to walk over it. Yet the poem dazzles the dreamer with its veneer, drawing him onto the surface, at times with the illusion of safety, at times with the prospect of danger. What lies beneath these words—a terrifying abyss, a hard and fast reality, a vital memory, a benevolent emotion, a pernicious motive—is uncertain. He proceeds only with an acute awareness of an electric feeling as he touches this particular skin of words.

NARRATIVE

The chief complaints against narrative today are that it follows a predictable trajectory and that it elevates story over emotional utterance. Yet by dismissing narrative too quickly, the poet denies the lyric its origins. Aristotle conceived of the poem as tragedy or comedy; lyric was only one element of a larger drama. As poetry evolved and differentiated, the lyric has periodically disconnected from its dramatic context. What is lost is the opportunity to exploit narrative elements such as character, plot, and catharsis.

Aristotle discussed narrative in terms of the epic poem, yet lyric poems also have produced magnificent, albeit minute, dramas. These “miniatures,” with just a few strokes,

draw upon the tradition of poet as storyteller. The last fifty years are rife with examples. William Stafford, in “Traveling Through the Dark” and “At the Bomb-Testing Site,” and Charles Simic, in “Landscape with Crutches,” display the narrative instinct typical of many American lyrics. These poets create complex psychological episodes in small, concentrated verses. Such stories would be easy to miss if embedded in larger epics. By evoking emotion indirectly, these micro-narratives are able to outmaneuver the resistance sometimes levied against the sentimentality of the lyric.

Narrative logic also can center the poem and give it the illusion of accessibility. Even if the story being told is dreamy, the reader feels there is a way into the poem and a plot to follow—a beginning, middle, and end. This can be reassuring and satisfying, especially when the rhythm is erratic, the language is shocking, and the meaning is enigmatic. Postmodern stories are fragments—necessarily incomplete—but they tantalize with the suggestion of a larger, more coherent story.³¹

CLOSURE

All poems are closed, i.e., they terminate. They are therefore publishable and portable. The open-ended lyric favored by contemporary poets is just as much a gimmick as the definitive ending they reject. Some poems come to a complete stop, some appear open-ended, others circle back on themselves. Regardless, when all is said and done, a poem is only a line segment on a continuous line. Perhaps, as Lyn Hejinian maintains, it was necessary for a time to “reject closure.” But it is false to say that poems never conclude, that language never stops—of course they do! Hejinian’s own work is fraught with climax,

³¹The technique of narrative-collage has been employed successfully by poets as diverse as Muriel Rukeyser, John Ashbery, Hayden Carruth, and Ed Dorn. A narrative-collage attempts to tell several stories at once or one story from several, fragmented points of view.

epilogue, and summation. Is the end of the poem its final destination? No, but it is a stopping point.³²

Why not, then, try the pinpoint ending—landing, as it were, on a dime? The one-word conclusion has much to commend it. It is abbreviated, punctuated, and precise. Yet sudden closure is not meant to preclude subsequent revisions or musings. Nor is it intended as programmatic.

ANATOMY

Most books of poetry, if partitioned at all, are divided into two or three sections. I've intentionally increased this number in order to make each segment more concentrated as well as to intensify the effect of the book as an atomized collection of lyrics. Each poem is singular and constructed to stand on its own, but poems in aggregate can deliver a bigger payload. The volume is divided into seven sections, eleven poems each, recalling John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, a major influence on my poetics. The arrangement is symmetrical and is meant to suggest equivalence; the sections are of equal weight and interchangeable.

There is always a risk of saying too much when explaining the reasons for particular choices in a book's construction. Yet the opposite risk is obscurity, keeping the reader outside the artist's design. The following gives a sense of my rationale for assigning the chapter headings of *the god is blue*. It is not meant, however, as a strict blueprint for interpretation.

³² Galway Kinnell remarks, "A short poem can come to rest on the last note of the music box, so to speak, and exist timelessly there." Think of the endings to Robert Frost's "Desert Places," Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," and Sylvia Plath's "Poppies in October."

electric—the caption suggests two possibilities: electric blue as a color and electricity as energy. I begin with the recognition that humans are conductors of the divine spark but also the technological spark and the biological impulse. The poems prize electricity for its ability to generate light and to set machinery in motion, marvel at the unpredictable path it often takes, and respect its dangerous—often invisible—force.

ultraviolet—blue is at the violet end of the spectrum—ultraviolet takes us into the realm of the invisible. These poems highlight what we can't see or what we frequently refuse to see—the spirit world, the imagination, the media, the invisible hand of capitalism, etc. White is featured because it is the opposite of black (ultraviolet) light—its contrast. White also demonstrates invisibility—it is a color so basic as to be hardly seen at all (except in the case of race, where it has been co-opted for a destructive ideological agenda). *Ultra* means extreme, and these poems attempt to push into the extremities of perception. *Violet* is very close in sound to violent, and this association prepares the way for the next section.

cobalt—a deep, rich blue color but also an element recognized in the periodic table. This section emphasizes the elemental forces at work outside and within us. In these poems, I'm most obsessed with violence and the way it interrupts and dismembers the human (body as well as community). Violence, of course, can issue from various sources—nature, desire, hatred, poverty, neglect, language—even divine judgment. I don't try to exhaust these as much as search the wreckage.

Å—the symbol for angstrom, the unit used to measure wavelengths of light. In these poems, I'm drawn to the smallest bits of understanding, I'm trying to touch language in its finest emanations. Angstrom calls attention to the physical nature of light, that light waves can be captured and examined by frequency. The slightest increase or decrease in the frequency of these waves allows us to differentiate colors. This is one of our greatest

faculties and is emblematic of our ability to make microscopic distinctions in many other realms, including art and spirituality. I also have selected it for its sonic resemblance to anguish.

kodachromes—Kodak was instrumental in the production and mass distribution of color film. Kodachromes are one instance of product nostalgia that I employ throughout the book; brand names are pieces of Americana that occupy my imagination. The narrative poems in this section function somewhat as an album of snapshots—they are personal as well as communal. The gods summoned—fame, eros, the Christian god—remain largely in the background, poised to intervene. Chrome=color, but also is the abbreviated word for chromium, a blue-white metallic element.

opal—opals are crystalline, multi-faceted gemstones, predominantly blue-green in color. The poems collected in this section refract earlier themes of the book, and the characters featured are particularly bent, twisted, and distorted. Opals contain water and therefore are fragile and subject to cracking. Metaphorically, this suggests that illumination (a goal of poetry) is momentary, unstable, fractured, and prismatic.

maroon—a varying color that runs purplish to dark red—I use it to imply the instability of color and to suggest that pigments bleed into each other. Red opposes the divine blue on the spectrum, and the redness of blood is particularly appropriate for the figuring of humans. Maroon also is a verb, meaning to abandon in isolation without hope of escape.

the god is blue

Then he took his theatre-paint and painted [his] face and hands
and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue.

Mark Twain

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –

Emily Dickinson

In the weird regattas of this afterworld,
cheer for the foe. He set himself to time
the blue father.

John Berryman

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

Sylvia Plath

electric

Arrhythmia

Grace, the aphrodisiac
riddles the bloodstream electric
me sick—no
blessed is the jumpy heart
says Dr. Harvey
heartbeat enthusiast
the man with the lidocaine
defibrillator
and the cold silver
stethoscope pressed to the flesh
hears the skipping chest nut
irregular
the siss-boom skitter beat
my adamant
love
palpitating immaculate
the dirty rush to judgment

O Muse

I love your mouth
a xylophone
of static-
electricity tunes
let me play
two hands in the
jelly jar
yours striking the keys
of your laptop
like the clip of a semi-
automatic
doorjamb
lemme in
brain-lock
buzzer
tuning fork
be true be true
vagina

crocker

wax paper
cut-rite
manufactured
c. 1962
the semi-sweet
nipples
refrigerated
eggs
deviled & halved
in rows with yellow
cockscombs
farm-accident pie crust
flattened limp
paralytic
lifted into tins
as if by
a 1/2 dozen friends

Evangel

If I could fuse the 20th century
 I'd be the Light Keeper
 or a Surfman
 fists full of red sparkler flares
 run along Sandy Hook beaches

And winter in
 Twin Lights two turrets
 and telegraph the heading-for-Hudson ships
 Come see the Jersey
Coast dot-dash-dot-dash-

And manhandle the round beacon
 the candlepower
 of the Bivalve Fresnel Lens
 9+ feet
 in diameter

 All ye brass fixtures and glass
 compass in the binnacle
 hurricane lamps new with Edison
 voltage
 magnify O the Lifesaver with me

body : rhapsody

The husk of his car
crumpled like a Coca-Cola
can You stick your head in
the left rear (passenger) door
& pick through Ovid
& Aristotle covered with
pulverized glass
like sapphires
like sugar
The library is open
& how you remember
your father at a time like this
is excruciating is fire
& smite The world
is aluminum & how you know
is because
 you are the car
& no one (no one else is)
driving

christOgraphic

The clergyman
 alarmed by beeper
 was led down the auburn hillside
 a convict
 handcuffed to a prayer book & a
 chain gang in orange coveralls

Ghoulish business
 his virgin wool suit
 wrapped in dry-cleaner plastic
 he had to work
 to keep his black
 leather shoes from
 squishing too rudely
 in the mud
 and yes he swallowed
 hissing sobs
 as they sang in the charred wood

Like an altar boy
 daydreaming through the sermon
 he recognized
 a woman's hand
 clenching a cell phone
 in the crotch
 of the sassafras
 & wrinkle-free slacks
 hanging from a Douglas fir
 And lo—be quiet!—the trace
 of a voice:
 Where's that black box?
 said the DC-9
 as it skipped & shivered
 in the snap-crackle-pop forest

He knelt down
 in the brush-burn
 until at last his collared throat
 called out to the incongruous bones
 The Host (right vest pocket)
 could barely contain Himself
 so eager He was
 to digest the scene
 & create the future

Toymaker®

the remote (control)
 is an ejaculator
 syncopate eye orgasm
 of light – dot dot dot
 light-bearing image
 where's i at
 @ Magnavox
 (eye) socket
 scrambled signal Oracle
 66
 in a box
 jerking off
 the rat-a-tat-tat
 years
 glass vac-
 uum tube
 pleasure's mine
 ma'am
 mother me
 cronkite, walter
 solid-gold dancer
 flintstone
 spark
 lumina
 lens
 Oedipus lamebrain
 saved
 on screen

Schism

The confidence pox
 rains down
 rains down
an-fech-tung
 red boils on the
 forehead of earth-
 y Luther

bull nostrils
 sweat outside the castle
 this is his body thunder
 condensed in drops
 reeking Novum
 Testamentum: is grace

(german)
 the lightning spike through
 pitch-black
 mouth-
 y effort?

the CH[amp]ion

such a lamb kneels down
in mint & fennel
behold his black muzzle
& feet
see here imprimatur
chaste fleece

then the holocaust blows in
with shears
we are not shep-
herds; grifters
we gift
ergonomic handfuls
(grandeur
& porn)
the Harvest

pica

shrink-wrapped
my crustacean without hands
or tongue supplicates

feldspar chicken breast
ablaze in the freezer
a legionnaire

your machine sorts
necks & gizzards

undoubtedly
there is a box (no. 2) for language

G-Force

When the 70 foot silver maple
swung down on a church van
all that bloom

destroying the lily-thin bodies of
3rd grade girls (and Solomon
and his temple)

and the tourists
huffing and puffing in their
permanent press, high

in the sculpted ladylike throat
of Liberty

it was as if Ethiopia
wandered into Queens and squatted
exactng shalom from our giant limbs

ultraviolet

Logo

Snow fell sideways
in the Yucatan
orange & aqua
Alka-Seltzer™ flakes
ingested
iguanas roasted
on the spit
innards
psychedelic
a Mexican®
in a superman suit
parasailed over condo
& the playas Cancun
daily raked
lay down
& lipped a Corona
all lime
all fizz

ionosphere

ions, the crystals crestfallen
gravity cannot stop

my child, all the flakes
he tries to catch melt

Anomie has no friends only paratroopers
merry or sick, frostbitten

the frantic can thus be impressed in drifts

who senseless savors my child?

what settles the dirty stars
that dance into his tongue abode?

which plutonium fell into cibachrome?

black & white beauties bathe
& it stings

assume a positive figment
as good as bombardment

what fellowship have light & dark—
they grenade-tingle

o Spacemen, the snow leopard captures sleet

as night nudes smelt his vanishing

Dusk, Presbyters, Bluegrass

fieldstone marks the grave
& the stone is stolen
blackberries

field mice
the horses loosed
mesh masks to defend against horse-
flies

finally the cage that crash-landed
a tree grows through machine

& the exhumed
the phosphorescent fire adorns

windshield, lightning bugs, slaves,

horseplay, detritus blue
& the blades push up the eyes

On The Excision Of White

No more
blank pages stamped with typeface No more
pearls signifying the words Christ actually said
Wonder Bread on the tongue no more
Jonahs no more Leviathans
leukocytes defending the body
White-Out™ to correct what must be

The light comes to us LIVE from a maximized prism
this is the day that the Peacock has made
let us rejoice and be glad

Mrs. White is scarlet red
Professor Plum in a snowstorm with Mercurochrome™

Snowshoe

Cloud enveloped the mountain
 and the thing sought
 in the dismantled pre-
 fabrication was resort
 found vacated
 like West Virginia remote
 at least in off-season
 the off-putting of the leaves
 red-iron hot
 chlorophyll ceased
 and sugars far into the frozen
 branches
 pushed off brilliance

we were cold
 wet in altitude
 hiking the road
 God
 there's nothing to see up here
 white mist
 nothing to burn
 no wood delivered
 until the skiers arrive
 in Rovers®
 pay the fees

The odd humans
 that remain in time-shares
 seek
 let the I in we
 be described on snow
 and let the foot-
 print left
 be seen
 seven stories up
 in the electric-stoked
 condominium

Zealand

Labrador lies prone on the kitchen floor
crosses her paws, whimpers
prays to the tomcat that
pisses in the crawl space

it's a simple prayer and persistent
please be my play-
thing please be my play-
thing Her tongue, long and lickety-

split, scours the knotty pine planks
for a crack for a peephole Nose
picks up a whiff
woof bestiary

ichthyosaur

Under your influence
the Salamander sings

song of my skin
song of my temperature changes

blue devil lizard
electrolyte me

your musical rules for apocalypse
are brilliant

I have conferred
with medulla with ultramarine

you cannot pray
& you weep

only when corrupt

if Christ is a cottonmouth
what color are your gills

where are your teeth?

kenosis

blue heronSelf
 (sky empty)
 what hinges
 these gaunt wings
 that they divide the day

how do legs bend
 titanium
 slip into the creek
 and the vein is troubled
 Angel

who claims your mild
 eyes—the Manitou
 blinks
 spears the spurious
 flesh

where goes the Crook
 in your neck
 dim road of the gullet
 the webbed feet
 of frogs
 still kicking

what makes you Statue
 king among reeds
 oar-less boat on stilts
 sculling
 with invisible

slate blue slight
 inkling of thunder
 can you live long
 confounding
 heron Great?

whitmanic

lily that on the starcast o
 tiger orange avalanche
 fast-forward tongue
 galaxy crevasse

* *

mitochondria
 adobe shasta
 mother lode fawn
 nozzle hummingbird
 hovercraft flute

* * * lonely

wartberry fairybell
 sphinx moth suck
 aurora * * chaparral
 chocolate cobra
 chamise on the alpine
 amber * nebula spurt
 hooker's onion

Aphasia & SONS

Tree surgeons
 jacked up
 swaying on tiptoe
 in the top of the birch
 yoked to the mast
 nylon cord cinched
 lifeline floating

chainsaws slung at their sides
 gasoline exhausted
 crescent-moon blades
 have glossed the text
 (push in the choke)
 the curly parchment
 in shreds
 dwindles to earth
 Astronauts
 they reach for the

 trunk (old silo)
 & glove parenthesis
 evacuated Apollo
 the cargo within the hold
 a rusty pulp
 moist
 compost
 heartwood dis-
 eased as far down as
 ocean, that is, the sunken roots
 y-pressured seams
 where welders once
 planted rubber soles
 in dune grass
 groped for rods
 & concrete to fuse
 the split/ting bole
 the Logos

After a smoke break
 fingers freed from the
parched hull
they motion for the cherry
 picker
& step off into the blue
 absence
 the high seas

oracle 66

coin-operated
diviner
how easy
to trip
transistors

fuse box
off/on
atrium (ventricle)
& electrocute
jerusalem

spectrometer
made nervous
if not incan-
descent
zaps the life-

line:
time & times
& half a time
blew it
the god is blue

cobalt

Centrifuge

Tornadoes touched down
in the blue ash
southwest grove Ohio
tore the roof off
luxury homes
my old high school
Seven dead

detached
swing sets a Volvo
trash cans sucked up
into choke-black diesel
fumes
Funnel

clouds
every ten years or so
waltz through this corridor

touch down
outside Albania
As I sleep

two American sisters
on video
speak into the view-
finder
blood on the lens
gauze curtains

swollen mouths
maunder for their
captors

UPI dream photo:
the naked leg-
less human stalks
mowed over
decapitated together
hold hands
in a root cellar

the V starts up
in torment
high spirits

V

Last night
my buddy
Wilson called
said he saw
Venus de Milo
in Rome
my old lover
she still wants
to be friends

Our eighteen
indiscreet months
shorn off by 250-
mile-an-hour winds
(& me now engaged!)
my neighborhood
demolished
No insurance

Terra cotta
birdfeeder
a gift from her mom
& stockpiled with seed
hangs from the flower-
ing dogwood

Forget the rhododendrons
the ivy Us
winds tight around
mower blades

Whirl

O Whirl
identity is in you
my life
hidden in mael-
strom

That couple
(across from Withrow
High School)
cycloned out from their
bedroom
how long were they conscious
a second?
did they wake up
or were they translated
in their sleep
Mr. & Mrs. Enoch?

How will I
die
Yesterday
the anniversary of
FDR's exit
cerebral hemorrhage
while vacation-ing
Warm Springs Georgia

this U.S. President
on his own rampage—
adulterer—a great man
(he saw us through De-
pression)
faced his invincible Toy-
maker

our Twister
could have hit later
when kids rolled in
for school
but You flipped buses at
5:15 a.m.

alarm clock for some
THE END for the man-
ager driving to work
Jimmy Dean's Family
Restaurant

a chain which is also R-
andom
& meticulously laid out
like the road where
the trees bowed down
having shouted
hosanna

blight

j. jesus c. lay your felonious hands on me
leprosy loves a white-walled skin
tread's worn, so am I, so's the factory stud
lift high thou vulcanized rubber tree in the
jungle Limp snake grip the rim
O pressure

chrissake robber neighbor
I got nothing but bread in the sack
see?
seventy-seven enriched slices
hold me up with your
pistol piece

kiss my lips wino
sing me a milk song (sub-urban sub-sistent)

save your mustard for me

The Ocular Mrs. Lex

Witness to the Accident
she holds you (victim)
to her breast
& reassures you
you will make it
hold on
your ribs may be bent
at the U-joint
but what is bone except
cartilage that grows?

She sleeps with the un-
husband who drinks
hemoglobin
(no surprise)
Mercy is burning
in the toaster
but like I said
no sense of smell

Psalm of the Amputees

Pittsburgh, city of
 multi-corporations
 we homeless sleep in your parks
 praise us
 our golden years—hands
 cut down from the trees
 released for a season
 amber waves of *gloria*
 in excelsis deo
 swept into drifts
 the sweet gum leaves

Unreachable as the ocher starfish
 anchorites we once held fast
 to west and east coast
 but one by one we picked our way
 face down eating up the miles
 traveled on tube feet
 (suckers thrown ahead)
 attachment
 the rest to follow
 and whenever a useless arm
 had to be severed
 Heart would make up for the lost
 limb

Now you are curious
 —what's in the garbage bags?
 See for yourself
 the arm sometimes grows back
 slowly (starry)

My Angina

Dead-ends of romance
shoved down under soil
black
like percolated coffee beans
tendrils dangle
fresh-sunk in dreams

and the ten husbands of mud
massage and man-
age the transplants
in a glass bowl
to be examined
or exhumed

portulaca / roseola
erupts from the loam
Hummingbird
who will lick the blooms
in domestic
wildness?

Dickinsonic

Brother saw it first—
Hose—a Trespass in the drive-
Way—mother yelled Black snake!
The shovel's behind the mower

Chevy stayed put—
Clutch laid low
Neutral in transmission—the Truth
Decided who was who
The Subtle chopped & Headless

Sunoco®

grease monkey there's pep
in the groovy hole
where all the poisonous
solvents dwell
coolants trans-
mission fluid

the crepe myrtles
massacred in green space
purgatory—pruned
how the stumps approximate
pent Repent

Siege

Zopyrus cut off nose & ears
to spite his
shame shame
lift up your skirts Babel
city of many waters, whores

where are the self-mutilators
(today) butchers & no one
takes the cleaver
to his own

The Voice of the President

is Connecticut
is a guillotine
of clean copy
White House

press release
slightly chilled
chiding

ingenious as a
Swiss army knife
with a spoon

gimme my rolled oats
my peas porridge hot

Joe
Blow Joe

Å

exodus, inc.

red heifer skips
 in the head-
 waters of the Jackson River
 paper mill whiskey fumes
 & more fluke
 the Hercules
 Chemical Plant burns down
 Railroad switches
 coal to diesel

&

the timber stutters
 off flatbed trailers
 like skeletons
 bleached converted
 half-ton spools
 the crews catch stacks
 of product
 flip-top boxes
 cigarette cartons
 conveyor belts rub their hips

&

the unemployed
 lie still
 on the face of Lick Mountain
 & conserve
 even wild turkeys grouse
 & doves hole up
 in the brown
 swath of the Gypsy

&

automated
 the acids inks
 circulate
 out come ashes & water
 consummated in the city
 sewage
 & yea the war
 of spirits

carcass dance

They shake & bake in their booties
black & tan deerskins
raccoon pelts

like clowns the skunks
lip-synch to cruise music
rubies at the corners of their mouths
more than one way to skin

More than one way to Memphis
blown tires
sheared aluminum confetti airbrakes

the coal truck and the cattle truck tipsy
play possum at Exit 17
upside-down naked ladies on mud flaps

mastodon said !

sensation the now
 harpoon
 U-through spine iron
 niversal
 n!ght Arctic

ice
 water on the floe
 hello brain
 gelid Ångel

lassitude
 frozen the salmon
 run
 Trinitron

blastoma said I

is this the hypo
 Rod
 cones in the eye
 snow &
 ice black

 -dermic
 [insert here]
 for the alimentary
 canal cap it
 Polar

 pinch
 shadow the
 sarcophagus Agnate

sapien O

graphomania

her heart valve
 a mushroom stem
 on the cutting board
 basil & cilantro (graffiti)
 pasted on the jugular
 the empty wine bottle
 ooze
 the IV
 balsamic vinegar
 olive oil
 her skin
 a fish wrapper

the commotion
 (above her) is
 paprika
 a salt cellar
 a plastic lime
 the label says squeeze
 this vein
 Italian seasoning soy
 sauce in the cut
 a blood gas honey
 red pepper pulp seeds
 such cries
 onion peel

bOsch

Hieronymous
master of the grotesque
today we ask
fourth graders
 to charcoal a nude
& the parents
(still life)
want to know
which figures
will grOw beaks
& who
will generate insect
legs
 Foul pencil point!
slaughter the eyes
with groins
metamorphic

sonogram

the end of Delta
terminal
the poet
circling in a T-storm
come down calm
there's a lot of walrus fat
on this flight
Brownian spot
plaid shirt
get in the crate
comedian
under glass X
-ray
profile
Tiparillo burn
ideo tattoo

hemo-

paper towels soaked
calico cat
an interest in the savior
skedaddle on my crimson

squirrel haste
female totes her litter
firefighter humps his hose
Hear ye

scarabs

The emerald carcass upset
in the parking lot

an enzyme scrubbing
the asphalt clean

it might have been me
who flipped

the Bug & squelched
it Estranged

the other Beetles strategize
as if nothing

could be further from their
tailpipes

their casual-
ty decomposes in foreign

parts Freewheelers
the hubcaps spin

unregimented & hyped
no omen

nor deer nor dazzle
in the chassis

The radio stays with calypso
Slaphappy feet

step over
pomegranate mirror

Deaf

god = quiver
 & quiet
 a fist then digits
 the intonation of the south-
 paw preacher
 hidden in the crouch
 catcher
 The visitors
 pick up flash
 vibe
 the pause
 & pitch—Jehoshaphat
 blowin smoke
 eyes
 speed-readin
 the seams
 slider
 swerve
 batter-batter
 torque
 & truth
 The loudmouth
 swingers
 lean out of
 pews
 crazy for crack
 sweet spot
 hummer
 there go the runners
 head-first
 gunned down &
 safe
 at the same
 Time

happy ecclesiastes

vanity saith slow slow

vanity saith fast
& fast food forward

vanity dwelleth in a lux-
ury box
vanity dwelleth in a
metronome 3:4

vanity smoketh a rope-
-a-dope
vanity smoketh
 $\sqrt{\Pi}$
vanity smoketh old 100th
8 ball side pocket

vanity suffereth vert-
igo
vanity suffereth para-
llax
vanity suffereth my-
opia
hypoxia: ballyhoo

pink

the starlet folded her ears & slipped them
into a case then into her pocket

& sat, sow-like, as Diet Coke™ tendered her name
there was no way into that sow's trove
except the jet stream of a trademark repeated

a smack on the cheekbone

the sea-stacks disfigured
give up she figured

already the salt-surge had purloined the ears

kodachromes

spittle

In the town of Siloam
you hit the skids
no smokestack
you got no Sears sky-
scraper
Your beater bike
bumps
 along the road
called Licktheskillet
satellite dishes
atop the 18
mobile homes
Locked
the sheds consume
expired cans of hash
in case of flood
 You brake
at the Uni-Mart
& yield
(magnetized)
to the epi-
glottis

Soothsayers

The sun hot
 I had brothers in the field
 at Kitty Hawk
 running to catch mantis
 in a Kraft
 mayonnaise jar

chartreuse blades scissored back
 the winged
 wizard
 about to set lucky
 charms in motion
 and we jigged tennis-shoed feet
 through the fuchsia
 clover
 hop hop-hop
 we hopped toward
 capture
 lid twisted off glass
 container Was it mere hocus

the stick figure
 green
 with a Seussian smile
 folded up its sepals
 into our speci-
 men bottle
 the mouth wide open
 stained with custard
 ooze? inSide
 the sweaty ether of
 failed experiments
 our kiddie
 hands had strangled
 the rapid flight of in-
 sects This prey we

thought we held
smarts back at us older
the boy
runs off embankment
 as if airborne
he believes he rights
the erratic spelled-out progress
of his sensibly engin-
eered wings

St. Flaw

This table is a miracle
the collected works of a home-
less man
pallets & plywood
stolen from the dumpster
Black & Decker jigsaw
sweet-talked out of a widow
her basement

there were places where
the 2 X 4's had been bludgeoned
by a forklift
the pallets themselves
he yanked apart
with a crowbar

the grainy mountains he flattened
the poison rivers of stain
he rubbed in with the corner
of a sweatshirt

He was on cocaine
& ripping off his bunkmates
had earned the trust of
The Shepherd's Heart
& used their credit card
for cash advances

But first he perspired
& defined a table
& this is where his Lord
eats

Her Father's Business

In the days before the Sony Walkman
a twelve-year-old strapped her tran-
sistor radio onto a cowboy hat
listened to screechy Christian broad-
casts turning this way and that to catch
the best reception

As she baled hay
the golden needles of straw would
slip into her gloves and
bite her under the fingernails
but it smelled good
and the steers (on tiptoe) knew enough to lean
their weight against her when she brushed them

She dreamed
of becoming a pastor
until inch by inch the open-air radio preachers
swayed her: women have no
dominion over men—just
animals and children

And so began a So-
ciologist

Husbandry

At the University Swine Center
the razorbacks have pristine rumps
they fight to be hosed

The horseflies too are clean
& green glorious
as if the shit here
is full of fruit and fiber

Thus I will have to steal it
secrete it
tell it my sad unctuous story

Starlings

Under the shroud of starlings
 we maneuvered slowly
 not wishing to disrupt the crowd
 the mood
 Thanksgiving
 our reason for visiting
 Cincinnati

The draw of the Goodyear tires
 along the road
 centered our truck
 hurricane
 1,001 beaks
 chirruping the way to go
 birds so thick we couldn't shut them out
 rolled instead the windows down
 Enthused

& idling
 the pickup (smeared with feathers)
 started to sing
 serotonin seraphim
 escalated upon us
 let it be good-
 ness

let it be goodness Not
 foreboding

You and I in Hoboken New

You and I in Hoboken New
 the brownstones and sandstones
 a riverbank steep on Garden Street
 Sidewalks soon to be poured
 (the grid like an iron maiden)
 wait for us
 You are close
 to divorce

little steps meander among forgotten
 piers steel rails embedded
 run straight to the Hudson
 and point to Empire
 State Building—New
 york New york where your wife
 is acting

but here the rusty tanker floats
 docked more or less forever
 in a port that courts a Gourmet
 Grocery and a Starbuck's and the Shipyard
 Fitness Center
 relentless wasn't she about joining?

absence you can't help
 but mark the red construction cones
 the stonecutter (sunglasses earplugs) at a loss
 his circular blade stuck in a crack
 pavement

behind the chain-link fence
 laughing—
 squat Italian boys
 playing hoops—
 no only an echo

Ligonier

the Pity fish are sluggish
or so they seem
in the green pond
the stocked one
behind the clear one
where you used to row as family
aluminum lacquered oars
pines

we lay down
and examined a caterpillar
unbutterflied
among the lean stalks
antennae flopped misplaced
in isthmus
the between
of all you are

reminds me
of other things watched
Canada geese
shifty
the stagger of their head-surge
the queer fidelity to lines
whether at walk
swim or flight

and see
divinities below
listing in the murk
how quick the row-less
school (inertia)
becomes need
needs notice

Ovation

RUpping barefoot over the dunes
it helps to be aware that
the nun has an ISBN
on the spine of her dust
jacket Sand is the color of se-
men, who can save her corpse from
texture? Praise all good deeds
& the instability of following
tumor the collapse of a star
neither cancerous nor benign
Handspring

cruisers

the wave runners are tired
adrift in kelp
men slumped
over handlebars
gunslingers
peering into quiet
derelict as the Portuguese
man-of-war
under their toes
orphanic
The friends have scuttled
their tone
& go with tears
sunburnt
 forlornographic
the sailboats have quit
the sun is almandine
& sincere
only the wedge
of cormorants
rounding the island
only the hyssop
of their wings

opal

She Makes Me Lie Down

The female christ swims into lagoon
a sting ray, fanning. Gargantuan, she blossoms
skims the sandy bottom, and diamond eyes
roar through the aqua-
naut's valley of coral

Consider the urchins, how they do not toil
And the ray, absolving the current, spreads
her rhombic shadow over the contour of the sea
So feed on frankincense and the diver's sphinx-
like body
laid-to-rest in a million plankton specks

The Contortionist

50 degrees & sunset:
 we crave what the violent
 winds can do to our hands
 his face / the coral in Florida
 The man says he lives for the strait-
 jacket bows his head
 three huffs (blowfish)
 & hops into the swaddle of a U.S.
 Postal sack
 The chains crisscross &
 strangle him neck to toe
 we might rescue him from agony
 we might

imagine what he does when he is not
 purple
 sitting at ease with his jet ski
 dry-docked
 & his cheeks shoved into a Burger
 King wrapper No the mangrove
 is not exotic
 just a watercourse
 where Mr. Kink can zip to the liquor
 store & tender his ailments
 & go home a combustion engine
 happiness his
 without end
 & with

Emerald Isle

Tidal pool
 lapping uterus
 umbilical cord twists
 for the bay the sea

here comes the school
 zebra fish
 that jag in the dark
 green provenance
 and feed
 while laughing gulls
 consider advantage
 the penumbra
 and the hard wet ridges of sand
 under foot
 a puzzle besought
 solution

here come the laggards
 the children craning
 so much to see
 so much presentiment
 when the tall sea oats
 recess before you
 and the jangle of worried shells
 copper gypsum ivory
 bone
 rush at your ankles

Suffer these tyros
 so piqued
 to persist

there's blood
 in the saline sack
 delicious strand of
 retro-
 grade motion
 bodies at work
 dejected (in commerce)
 the milky way
 absorbed into for-
 tune

Bob White, Scoutmaster

hunting cabin
 Tranquility, Ohio
 the tenderfeet go camping
 limburger cheese
 bourbon & coke
 poker
 ask them dirty questions
 the next day preach
 blow torch & corrosion
 —Zacchaeus
 behind those syc-
 amore leaves

a pouch under the sinkhole
 intestines
 tried to get out
 pistols on hips
 merit badges (knife & axe)
 how to cook on a bed of coals
 camper's stew
 yards of foil

rope swing (tie the knots)
 flies thirty feet over corn-
 field
 in the morning
 Spam & griddle cakes
 Karo syrup
 Bob White plumber
 bachelor Home
 with grout
 & the pipes weep

G

The genius collector wraps his five
 taped fingers round a flashlight
 lets it shine
 the slush of his soggy footfall
 slides as he skulks down faintly visible
 a professor (incognito)
 tube sock toes clawing out the seams
 of his blue Nike shoes

He steps Nicodemously into a stone archway
 the undercroft of a bridge
 ice stalactites drip in rusty drizzles
 In the catacombs he catches his self
 age 43 rolling his cigarettes the cheap way
 sawdust pile of tobacco pinched
 on a see-through sheet of paper

He looks again
 and there he is blowing smoke behind a tepee
 (Tuesday's Wall Street Journal)
 strident about the middle class tax shelters
 and the latest interest rate hike-slash-hike
 by Greenspan
 The trash bag to his left he shakes
 58 cents of alu-
 minum can Dow Jones music

Snug in the sack
 he thinks about the next
 boneless chuck roast (double coupons)
 he'll grill with an onion and some cuts
 of green pepper on the steam grid
 Stretched out like a welterweight
 he fights the Dream with his brain
 and trains himself to live
 on the trimmings of words
roaches and money

nocturne

rabbit fur
under the car
bruising the fender

the quick murrey heart runs rich
in the meadow
happy is the wheel well

& the chassis
leaps for joy™
at the mammal

whippoorwill in the culvert
sips a Pepsi

Bender

He drinks with so much
latitude
the libertine
aswoon in icy pool
having transgressed
McGovern's garden
having plunged his way into
blue heaven

clawed feet propelled him
corner to corner
head upright
periscoping for brim
his tortoise shell boat
embarked

for meridian
every oar out
and straining for Slake

the box turtle
egregious-
ly surrounded

and nowhere to take
his diamondback out of
the boozy watery
mosaic

.45

Police boat trolls in the Charles for a revolver
as snow falls foiled on the burial chamber
grappling hook (100% chrome) grazes a box of hearts
a bullet and toy reasons

See this valentine madness coming down on our prizes
the blizzard of unarticulated lights
the white blanks of no meaning
frosted on the Tobin Bridge girders discharged

The wife in furs "carjacked" on a slate road thick with
chalk dust stumbles out on all fours
sits down and draws with her fingers
the sleeve drips blood into a snowy river

Husband (killer) inexplicably MISSING
a cormorant dives into the current (ice prison) Authorities
go round and round on black suspicions
Matchbox[®] Mercedes idles secure in the motor pool

On the Excision of Absolute Zero

into the mangrove the propeller stalled

& its petered-out momentum
carved
as if it followed a hyphenated line

magic-marked on a capsized manatee
spiral blade gutting until the contents
under pressure
escaped like a can of Alphabet

Soup & the skin shredded felt-like
a flannelgraph

you could repeat this Act / trap door into histrionics

inasmuch to say that the water was evermore emerald
(the whirl ubiquitous)

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Nigerian elephants
 stampede off the satin-
 finished desk top
 the warp—white pine floor
 draws them stuttering forward
 gouged at knife-point
 hollow eyes
 (why the long faces?)
 Fist has tunneled through
 black block bodies

Crafty bastards
 the way they go careening
 in the 1890's refurbished
 shanty
 you'd think they spend their lives
 ejecting
 shotgun shells
 gunpowder-smoky
 ivory tusks chipped
 pileup the tokens

To put them back
 madness
 past is present
 the African
 pachyderms—
 trunks stiff and shoving—
 nosedive again

volition?
 And looking up at their
 former places
 the bachelor bulls in the herd
 converse
 in voices so low
 No captor can hear

US 12

E.Z. was woozy
 in the Cape Hatteras
 Lighthouse
 a sunburnt sight
 T-shirt sopped w/
 100
 °heat
 up
 up
 the metal spiral
 staircase
 he twisted slow-
 motion
 like a whirlybird

Blown out the top
 (in his mind
 a spin-
 ning top)
 he looked
 down
 the cape—
vertigo
 Winds full-force
 slapped the cotton
 threads
 & the ob-
 servation deck shook
landmark
will be pushed
1/2 mile from the coast
Summer 19--
 he could see

surfers
 shooting the pipeline as far as
 they could ride
 Action figures
 (Captains
 America)

in their poly-
 propylene
 Day-Glo[®] suits
 & he almost en-
 gulfed them with his
 double-zeros

but they
 rooster-tailed
 out of sight

no more red flags
 riptide

Afternoon he watched them
 materialize again
 & fish-tail
 onto High-
 way 12

Scrabble[™] pieces
 vamoosed out of
 the ghost

crude oil
 in his
 crankshaft
 hiccup (!)
 windpipe, i.e., whelk

maroon

Provincetown

the takeoff seemed orchid purpureal
we fly this glider over slope
crucifer pilots

what happened to rubber cement
it glued our chrome
cloudbank *f*-stop

I harry you as only a heliograph can
as hellion
as hedonist

bedfellow what merman tattoo
what eyes what argosy

as if we travel well
as if potentate

the hinge of the engine-less rudder

solarized
it sing-songs

On the Excision of C from AD

The comedian upstaged us
We laughed when she told the truth
How she triangulated across the tiles
like a chess piece
queen had lost King
there is a controversy about magi
in these parts—
first of all, wisdom
wisecracker
wizened

then she put her hand to our hearts
& we dwarfed
(deep in salt cellars)
which is why we applauded

when the salvor sat down
to drink from her saucer of tears

June utopia

At stake a pine
a terrific pine with tinsel
sugar cones

drizzle their light—drunk
in my Texas Instrument[®]
& calculated
by cardinal numbers

squirrels
camouflaged toys
that drop

from a helicopter

on a zip line
the joy of combatants
cooked

& their hilarity
caramelized in the sunbeam

monks with brown habits
kinks & one-eyed jacks

Miracle Grow[™]
the sizzling needles

Green Apple Aphid, Seraph, at Night

I am aware

my green antenna
the prospect of fuselage on sash
hi-fi light
fighting through French doors

open the door
release the insect eraser
daddy longlegs will fail, fall prostrate

I travel on film, thin-layer adherence
transparency & sex appeal
the wingéd type

lie still
let me knock the chloroplasts
from your cockpit

american : bluesy

in the Blue that defines
 the moon resumes round
 round comes romeo
 cameo
 kennedy half-
 dollar
 flipped through space

two-faced
 celebrity
 which side moons for girl?
 oval eye
 agape at the tawny doe
 feeding on a hillside
 in the Blue that is drama-
 tized

slender white
 undersides of legs
 the female stripe up-
 ended
 each floating step
 every breath marooned
 recovered in the Blue

blood horizon
 the white-tail jack-
 knifes away O

star-spangled Life
 in convertible
 o man in the sun-moon
 momentum

Afield

Something old to fondle, Osage
fruits, the stooping

transplants—my brother & I threw 'em
I-275
eastbound oranges, sky chopper traffic

Semis kicked hedge-apples interstate
into fences where the sycamores

slough their skins, the retro-
grade bluegrass
stored in Mason

& the milky planets
Bisquick & *Kellogg's* variety packs

such green children
sweet blister corn, reentry

meters, 1977

parsimonious =	gas paramount	odometer of	kilowatt hours
elbow, ten-year-old pacemaker		the rotor, at that age—nice teeth	
battleship freckles	gray burns clean	240 v ☐ Electric Co. Inc.	60 HZ
glass face as long as I've known it		◆ we fought like -ions	
BTUs	inasmuch	R. 13 $\frac{8}{9}$ single	Kh 7.2 stator
pipeline of tear/laughing gases & jets		a year of meat boycott pump rations	
made in induced	Chattanooga	Lafayette 4 dials	◆ & TYPE MS
the firefly in sister hothouse		the amt. of blood in the posthole digger	

Seattle Madrigal

Fiber-optic cable in Sound
 the slightest seize between micro-waves
 Pilot in roll-bar & cage, his coneflower
 crosier bent to the sunfish

Assessment: ½-hooked the gills
 Elbow pivots above said wharf
 Jet engine, chained, begets acetylene sorrows
 & how does the Pilot feel?

When he's dealing w/ Crane
 the see-saw action of the grapple he re-
 members Life-Size his physic
 & spans

W/out a phylactery
 or digits, there seems to be no getting around
 when encryption hits upon
 & turns aside its Boeing
 Drifter, cold spirit cockpit

saturnine

paradise I felt o brother in the scraper

his wing clipped mine
we embraced without torsos

heavens: fowler bites machine glass

mercury clouds my judgment
I can't find trillions

neon jettison berserk chest of warbles
more violet more golden

sunflower etcetera seeds fortify jehovahs

spangle in panorama

A. is down with Polaris
collapse the stars what's the point
half-lives half-truths
heave ho the compass

the triune angle had its heyday it's over
the quadrilateral wearies
of similar sidedness

the pentagon peaked as Satan
octagon impersonated a traffic cop

dispensing with sides altogether
& forms

Night spread-eagles on the flagpole

Liberty∞

This is the Last tree in our nursery
 the shaggy-bark hickory
 smithereens
 peace pipes / croquet mallets strewn
 the village green
 In the whisper-chipper™
 gobbledegook
 dead patriots conspiracies

Hail! witness tree
 glorious saint—hewn
 limb from limb
 but don't discount
 the vigor of american in-
 genuity
 we can fabricate
 the original
 true-blue©

let's fix a brass plaque
 to say we were
 indivisible in the trunk
 but serpentine in air
 & if branches
 kiss the ground
 & are pitchforked away
 the roots remain
 tender &

deep in
 st. peter's (upside-
 down) mouth
 st. joan's illuminated tongue
 pyre

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