

## THE DOG POEMS & THE POETICS OF PRAYER

by

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(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

### ABSTRACT

*The Dog Poems*, a poetry manuscript introduced by an essay titled “The Poetics of Prayer,” gives space and voice to characters (“dogs”) trapped by a sense of incongruity between their bodies and the world around them as well as the culture and history that give rise to that incongruity. These voices murmur, sing, and cackle disjointedly in a language not their own. The dog inspires a sense of familiarity and empathy as it relies desperately on an adopted technology—language—to interact with its environment. The core unit of this relationship is the lyric phrase, the dog’s good-faith compromise between learned syntactic order and instinctual synaptic impulse. “The Poetics of Prayer” presents prayer as a figure by which poetry, especially contemporary American poetry, may be understood. Though it may often be considered a rote, formulaic utterance, prayer may also represent an audacious language act, challenging the boundaries of communicative language. The granting of mystical power to language becomes the concern of poets insisting on the spiritual significance of words in addition to their meaning as symbol and object. This theoretical perspective, along with the techniques associated with it, undergirds not only overtly religious or devotional poetry, but also modern and contemporary secular poetry. In particular, it hybridizes otherwise disparate traditions in American poetry. Julie Carr’s *Equivocal* is explored as an example of this poetics.

INDEX WORDS: Poetics, prayer, dog, language, Julie Carr, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mircea Eliade

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family: living, deceased, near, far, immediate, extended, by law, by marriage, by blood, by choice, by adoption, by providence, by myth, by dedication, and always by love.

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## THE POETICS OF PRAYER

## The Problem

The only problem between one human and another is that one is not another. Or, perhaps, that one *is* another, but cannot recognize it—is fooled, without exception or possibility of rectification, to believe otherwise—to see from eyes, which cannot be shared, instead of a mind, which can, or so we've been told, be laid bare in words.

A sentence, we say, is an idea. This is the promise of language.

That we need not sniff each other like dogs.

Indeed, language is our best technology yet. The wheel, the printing press, the personal computer, these have changed our world and our place in it. But language must have changed our very nature. It must have provided a model, a metaphor, for imagining that a thought, a mental image, an emotion, a dream, a desire could be made physical, codified, etched into stone, and shared. If I can tell my neighbor to keep off my lawn, surely I can tell my wife how deeply I love her. Language must have allowed us to hope for the very thing it cannot offer.

Were language peddled by a swindler, we'd be no worse off having run the huckster out of town. But the goods will arrive, we're told, the shipment is delayed, the potion is missing just the final ingredient, the road is closed to construction but will reopen soon. And meanwhile, much use has been made of every magazine in the waiting room. We've invented delightful guessing games to pass the time. *What color am I thinking of?* And besides all that, we have no other appointments to keep. If our only hope is a liar, we will wait until the liar tells one truth, even if by accident. We will suffer only our very best witch to live. And I am an American, which means I am without a choice philosophically, but must dedicate my hope to Hope, and only more fervently so after Hope wipes out one civilization while enslaving another. Perhaps it's our fault after all. Perhaps the words are less to blame than our mouths.

If language can cure us—that is, if we believe we can talk our way into peace—perhaps we’ve misused the medicine, misread the label, misheard the doctor; perhaps we have not waited long enough or patiently enough. Perhaps we have been too stupid or too cynical. Perhaps the medicine has already worked but a new malady has arisen to take the old one’s place. Perhaps the doctor could offer a cure if only we knew how to explain the symptoms with the right emphasis. *I want, doctor, to tell you how I feel. I want to know, doctor, what you think.*

But, to return to the original problem, I live in one world and you in another. Language, as it is, has failed to bridge the distance. Not a single word in my world lives in your world too, though some words look alike from a distance, in the way strangers in a foreign country look like friends at home. A stranger sometimes bears such a resemblance to a loved one that I wish to embrace him, to pour upon him my feelings for another, to explain why, to confess that I would befriend him too in an instant because someone with his nose was kind and humble and cared about me. My love is perhaps not entirely misplaced—this shadow of my friend has also been kind and humble and might care enough to resist cursing me for making a scene. Surely, he cared for someone like me somewhere at some time.

No. The stranger is a shadow cast from his world on mine. Even at full eclipse, his place in my world is not one he can know. *Hello, shadow.* The light around you is cast from the sun and your dark figure is cast from a world even more distant. But at least *you* really *are* here.

Language might be like a gun, which can express a bullet, but not the opposite of a bullet. It can be laid down, but its meaning in that case becomes unclear, as it remains a gun even when its user intends no threat. It is perfectly effective for communicating one kind of information, but gets jammed when you put anything other than lead in the chamber.

Or language is like two people searching for each other at night with flashlights—one can only see the other’s face while the other winces and recoils, blinded.

I cannot make this mean anything to you, reader: that I have lived this sentence before in a dream and you were there with a sock in your mouth. And the look in your eyes I couldn't put my finger on.

## **Ruach**

Poetry, like prayer, pretends that language can do what it can't do and proceeds in that folly to the end. The kind of poetry that I'm most interested in uses words as if they lived in three dimensions instead of two: as physical object (its appearance on the page and/or its presence as a sound, a wave), symbol (a word representing a thing), and spirit. By *spirit*, I mean that which exists without physical evidence of its presence. A thought is spiritual—it may correspond with electrical and chemical activity in the brain, but that activity is not itself a thought. Words are not spiritual, though we desire them to be so and have often been fooled into granting them a spiritual significance. Words are not magical; they exist only as ink and as sound and as symbol. And yet I insist without apology on the value of two language acts most dedicated to conferring that power on them, and I do so for that very reason, for the beauty and truth of the error.

*A poetics of prayer* describes a poetry that understands its object to be out of reach, its medium ineffective, but its purpose of the greatest significance. It seeks a transcendent language, that is, a language capable of overcoming the limitations of communicative language, just as prayer seeks to transform language into something greater, something worthy of divine attention, something ultimately *other* than language. Such a language would allow for an expanded understanding of the relationships between people, who even now seem as distant and unfathomable to each other as gods.

Language is understood to be inadequate for the job, but it's the best pea-shooter in the arsenal. The poet's only advantage is her recognition of that weakness, her awareness that the instrument is not a lightning bolt or an earthquake; clearly, we'd better find a new way to use it, as artists after a war make sculptures from the shrapnel. Just as war cannot be, as we had always hoped, a maker of ultimate peace,

language cannot be a maker of ultimate understanding. Technological improvements in war will not change its nature to serve our wishes. Likewise, meticulous maintenance of our pea-shooter, upgraded parts, cutting-edge bullets, laser sighting, years of target practice: these will not suffice. We must give up the illusion without giving up the promise. The illusion will not serve us. *Were we only better artists, we say, and if we only knew how to shape our sentences, choose the right words, we could achieve clarity of expression.* I say we'd achieve only an impressive sentence, beautiful and insightful perhaps, but a statue made of the same cold, bloodless marble as ever.

What's required is to infuse words with spirit, to give them a new life, to change their nature. In Hebrew, *spirit* and *breath* are both *ruach*: invisible, noise at most, meaningless. I shape breath with my mouth into a word and ring it like a bell, but immediately, it falls heavy, dead. Meaningful. But dead. You can't have it both ways. You can't inhale a word after it passes the lips, nor can friends smell meaning on your breath. The tongue hijacks, co-opts, drills for oil, which, in truth, I also need.

And so we continue to follow the war path looking for peace. We're encouraged by the smallest moment of luck—a friendly stranger, a knowing glance, a faulty grenade.

An apparent contradiction in the pea-shooter metaphor: why would I describe our best tool for communication as a weapon? Even when diplomacy is preferred, the guns speak loudest and will have their way. Language is indeed our pea-shooter, which we brandish boastfully one day, fearfully another. We hold it in front of us like a shield or like a divining rod or we're pulled behind it as if holding a bloodhound's lead. When we finally find what we find, it appears as prey just beyond our sights. And the object we sought so fervently sees now a face half-hidden behind the barrel. Language finds its object. It calls out and our desires appear suddenly before us: our family, our friends, our neighbors, our beloved strangers. And we, so ill equipped to greet them, unable to stammer a syllable that might indicate our love but well prepared to do harm, wave our guns: *Helloooo!*

## **Rub a Dub Dub, Thanks for the Grub**

I live in a culture in which words—it's assumed by millions—can connect one instantaneously with divinity; where one in pain, even one who claims no faith whatsoever, calls out, *My God!* Certainly in the West, and certainly elsewhere, now and ever, people have howled at the moon in one way or another. And they meant it. They spoke with tight throats and tight jaws and they meant what they said even if the words alone didn't signify anything concrete. They said what they said over and over. And it was the most important thing to do, even with the winter coming. The passing of religions and mythologies has not ended these cries, nor did they end after humans stood on the moon's dusty surface.

What's surprising is not that humans, like many other mammals, express their anguished presence through sound, but that they do so through words. A shout, a trumpet blast, a display of fireworks—these make sense as a release of emotion, a cry for help, a gleeful outburst, a public affirmation of one's claim on existence, or an appeal for recognition. But of what use are syntax and subject-verb agreement for such purposes? Of what use is denotative meaning without an interpreter or a need for interpretation? Surely one's joy or heartbreak owes little to the shape of standard English sentence structure. Yet here's an angry drunk in the street telling his long-dead wife to fuck herself if she thinks she can just leave whenever she pleases. Here's a mother in bed alone, waving her arms frantically, explaining to God what she'll give if He would only save her son once more. Here's a farmer kicking a cloud of dust in his field, then damning the summer drought in a quiet chant.

That's not what words are for. Words communicate, which means, at the least, two or more sentient beings trading information. Language is just math for anything that can't be represented by a numeral, after all. So who do these people think they're talking to? Why use language with no intent to communicate anything to anyone? Meanwhile, at the dinner table, some seem to offer their least thoughtful, most perfunctory words in prayer: "Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub," as Bart Simpson once put it ("There's No Disgrace Like Home"). Or, worse, a litany written by someone else and repeated

more times than God would like to count. Some give their most urgent utterances to the air; others offer to divinity words nearly devoid of meaning.

I won't question their sanity or their sincerity. On the contrary, I'm convinced they're on to something. I suspect, for example, a close reading even of Bart's comic prayer would uncover a redeeming paradox—that his irrational use of language undermines the conventions of communicative language without obliterating meaning, which in fact is amplified here, as it may be in many of the hypothetical prayers mentioned above, even if no one ever hears them. Bart's first line, which has almost no denotative meaning whatsoever, he borrows from a nursery rhyme (which was itself probably born as a lampoon satirizing society's big-shots) in order to announce his own irreverent intentions. Then he demotes the bounty before him to mere "grub" with an end rhyme, while, on the surface, offering thanks for it. The literal meaning, *thank you*, is hardly audible amid the sonic and associative racket. In eight syllables, a great deal is accomplished: he satisfies the requirement placed on him that a prayer be offered, while simultaneously expressing his disinterest in the protocol; he does express thanks, and is in fact thankful, though he uses terms familiar to him, rejecting the standard prayer jargon—he'd prefer grub to bountiful blessings and nourishment any day; and he reveals his personality as well as his immediate emotional state in his silly, impious rhyme delivered with a grin. The brevity of his speech is more utilitarian than ungracious; delaying dinner with a long prayer is what you do when you *don't* care for the food. Furthermore, he ridicules at least two aspects of the dinner-prayer tradition: 1) the senselessness of indoctrinating kids with fun, rhyming songs, whether or not they understand their meaning, and 2) the habit of adults to offer protracted, pretentious, and largely insincere prayers in terms absent from their everyday lives, which are not always so hallowed.

My guess is that most American dinner-table prayers use language properly, that is, poorly. They address divinity as if it were sitting in the room waiting for the bread tray to make it around the table. They offer thanks and perhaps ask a favor or two. And this kind of language—whether in prayer or in poetry—is considered most sincere and genuine, despite the utter lack of care, forethought, or urgency in its execution. Like most communicative speech and perhaps many poems, these prayers are lazy and

understand their object as exactly that—an object. It’s not unusual, after all, for people to talk to their goldfish or their cars; we speak to *things*, even when those things are human or divine. Speaking, then, is almost always *talking down*, as they say—a speaker positions, manipulates, and subjugates his audience. But Bart’s prayer is actually far more unassuming than a more typical prayer: *listen up, do this, please and thank you*, they say. Bart refuses to participate in such hypocritical nonsense, and so replaces it with original nonsense, which makes plenty sense.

The failure (or refusal) of Bart’s prayer to use words to communicate information allows new possibilities of meaning. The ridiculous rhyme seems, at first, simply puerile, destructive, undermining language, abandoning the desire to make words meaningful. That’s not an entirely inaccurate assessment of Bart’s intention, yet a paragraph of my own analysis was required to summarize the meaning(s) of Bart’s eight syllables (I can’t count the words since I’m not sure how many are in “rub a dub dub”). By undermining—but not ignoring—both language and convention, he achieved meaning. And his is the simplest example. It’s not hard to imagine an accretion of meaning as the Hail Mary or the Shema is recited once again, though the denotative meaning of the words remains stagnant at best or, more likely, vanishes altogether. But, even if that’s all true, we’ve not answered the question: why words? Aren’t I just arguing for the value of melody or rhythm or scat singing as bearers of meaning?

Words matter even when they don’t, or especially when they don’t, because they remind us of the distance we must overcome. They humble themselves and their speakers. They embarrass us. They must be broken down and built up again. Undermine to overcome. If I sing a melody to the sky, there’s no conflict, no tension, no reason the sky can’t understand. A piano cannot say what I must say. If it could, poetry would be abhorrent, contemptuous, gaudy, reckless, not worth our patience.



## Prayer and Poetry

Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous declaration in "Self-Reliance" that "prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view" makes clear that a prayer may be understood in secular terms whether its intent is a religious one or not (165). Emerson, whose perspective was more pluralistic than even his own Unitarian faith could tolerate, defined prayer not by the prescriptions of one religious tradition or another but, more broadly, as "a study of truth,—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite," as he writes in *Nature* (54-55). As such, prayer is in part a scientific inquiry, "resolute to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought" (54-55). In that case, "the highest perspective" seems to be an objective one, tempered by thought and, ultimately, "kindl[ing] science with the fire of the holiest affections" (55). His suggestion is that objective observation of the physical world should aid our exploration of the spiritual universe, much as Poe's C. Auguste Dupin combined the qualities of perspicacious sleuth and imaginative poet. For Emerson, prayer is more than a method of investigation or a laboratory instrument. It's also a creative act: in seeking communion with or understanding of the spiritual reality of another, one creates a relationship, or the beginnings of a relationship—the first cobblestones laid down on a road toward an unknown other. These spiritual relationships exist, as Emerson explains in a sermon titled "Pray Without Ceasing," because "thoughts and passions, even those to which no language is ever given, are not fugitive undefined shadows . . . but are so many parts of the imperishable universe of morals" (60). Prayer validates those otherwise "undefined shadows" as meaningful, or potentially so, however inchoate their form in the mind.

It is perhaps this sense of being always unfinished that makes prayer such a hopeful figure for thought, inquiry, and the creative process. In his acceptance speech upon receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, Paul Celan suggests that "poems are *en route*: they are headed toward" (35). Poetry, for Celan, is an "encounter," and a mysterious one, he explains in his "Meridian" speech: "it intends another, needs this other. . . . It goes toward it, bespeaks it" (49). This is the experience that prayer insists upon and that poetry can enact in language.

The possibility of prayer—the figure it offers us of a human making words divinely meaningful, making a silent plea audible in the heavens, transforming language from a technology for communicating information to a technology for bridging the physical and spiritual—remains salient, even if only as a myth. The mission of the poet has always been to expand language, to make it say today what it couldn't say yesterday, to reveal new possibilities in both the outskirts of language and the overlooked crevices of our daily chatter; and to make an art of it, something meaningful in more dimensions than the dictionary can account for. Prayer suggests a model for how and why this is done in practice. In prayer, one is faced with the tragedy of language's failure exactly when it's most important that language succeed. A poet must, like the supplicant, address the problem, even if it can't be solved. One must not avoid it, but write or speak directly into it.

The supplicant and the poet share, in some cases, a similar approach to language and meaning-making. For me, the area of overlap is where they're each most interesting. Reading poetry, especially contemporary American poetry, as a kind of prayer may offer some modest insights into its nature. I've listed here some characteristics of prayer-like poetry that link the two and that shed light on our poetic conventions:

1. The exploration of distance between self and other, whether that other be human, divine, or, as is perhaps always the case, completely unknown; and the desire to close that distance.
2. The understanding of language as a model for closing the distance between self and other, though it is in reality also an obstacle against overcoming such distance.
3. The attempt to use every possible dimension of meaning native to language and yet to infuse at least one more for which it was never well suited—a spiritual dimension. Which is perhaps to say, the attempt to transcend language through language—to alter its nature.
4. An emphasis on irrational, intuitive processes of thought.
5. A paradoxical movement: the inward is the outward. To understand the other, understand yourself. To transcend language, use language.
6. A perpetually (and necessarily) experimental approach to making meaning.

The intention is ultimately monistic, bent on destroying distance and the illusion of otherness. To create a line of communication so vast and open that words could be precluded. As clear and quick as the communication between brain and leg (if I needed a sentence to tell my legs how to walk I'd never get across a room), yet not limited in complexity to a binary on-off code.

The first three characteristics define what a poetics of prayer desires to accomplish, as I've discussed here, while the latter three outline some of the more conspicuous practices employed in the pursuit of those goals.

### **Irrational and Intuitive**

We know that prayer, even more than poetry in general, does not ultimately depend on reason. Language is a technology, a tool for communication, but the purposes for which prayer uses language are less clear. Its workings are irrational, or worse—instinctual, emotional. Intuitive. Though we might not say that prayer is anti-rational or opposed to reason any more than is music, neither can we claim prayer to offer any more logic than does a melody. When prayer does use the rhetoric of logic, it does so to engage in paradox or contradiction, to point out the limits of logic's capacity for answering our questions—to confound and nullify logic. Ultimately, whatever knowledge, whatever meaning-making, arises from this act does so in distinction from rational activity.

Henri Bremond, in *Poetry & Prayer*, holds that the knowledge of poetry does not offer less than that of reason, that it is not anti-intellectual, but “super-intellectual” through something akin to Keats's “negative capability.” Whereas reason offers science, the imagination of poetry offers a “hyper-science” and “seizes relations too fine and delicate to be otherwise perceived” (Bremond 61). Where science must end in describing two things and their measurable effects on each other, the imagination perceives the relationship itself (that is, not just the visible effect of the relationship). The imagination is the microscope and telescope of human relationships. But to “scope”—to see in this “super-intellectual” way—means *not*

seeing in a more typical way, blinding oneself to other ways of seeing. Just as a telescope makes the sky as a whole disappear in favor of the sky in part, or the image under the microscope illuminates a part as if it were a new form altogether, the poetic imagination distorts vision, allowing a new understanding while temporarily erasing another. Bremond borrows Paul Claudel's descriptions of *Animus* and *Anima* as a model, *Animus* representing reason, *Anima* poetry: "*Animus* is silent in order to let *Anima* sing" (52), but "when *Anima* wants to talk, she can only borrow the dictionary of *Animus*" (77). One remains incomplete without the other acting in tandem.

Thus, the poetics of prayer might well be called the poetics of relationship, that invisible and immeasurable entity that charges the air between lovers. Relationship can be, in this sense, a spiritual concept. The language of prayer, as it founds and develops relationships between the subject, the reader, and the object, is essentially a monist endeavor, its intent always to unify, to form a co-dependence or, I should say, to make manifest the co-dependence that already exists between one and the other—whether that other be a neighbor, a god, or mysterious regions of the self. The ecstatic nature of prayer lends the possibility of relationship between dimensions otherwise cut off from each other, and the possibility of relationship is the possibility of change or even transcendence.

### **Paradoxical and Perpetual Motion**

All of the above makes it almost inconceivable to reconcile the observation that in much poetry intent on this kind of ecstatic, transcendent motion, the direction of movement or attention is, paradoxically, inward, further toward the self—not outward or upward as might be expected of language hoping to dissolve the self in favor of wholeness. Because in so many religious traditions the individual's soul remains always connected to the divine in one way or another (created in the divine's image, in Judeo-Christian terms), recognizing God means knowing one's inner-most self. Mircea Eliade informs us that a

shaman is “stuffed with solidified light,” which “makes him akin to sky”<sup>1</sup> and the soul is often imagined as a bird—in which case, the inward *is* the upward (138, 479). Emerson’s monistic tendencies may not be very different in *Nature* when he describes himself becoming “a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God” (18). To reach that state, Emerson explains in “The Poet,” “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 virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity” (223).

So the poetics of prayer is the poetics of paradox. The ecstatic nature of prayer forces it to the extreme edges of every spectrum or model. Prayer represents a person’s most vital message to no one, to Nothing, and at once, to Being itself. It is both the highest and lowest form of speech, from song to grunt. Indeed, this poetry is as often associated with music as with silence. It revels in the language while it despairs the confines of words (or, on the other hand, the resignation to words at all, their false, if not idolatrous, representation).

Just as the sun is too bright to see in any detail, prayer aspires to an inaudible pitch, a silence just louder than the human ear can detect. Lower limit speech, upper limit music, says Louis Zukofsky,<sup>2</sup> who considers poetry “an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit” (*Prepositions* 19). At its best, that is, at its most meaningful, language loses its denotative and representational power, thus resembling, paradoxically, our least meaningful utterances (from baby talk to small talk). But at the upper limit, it has gained a musical dimension—denotatively silent but, we suspect, so rich in meaning that we find our interpretive powers inadequate to conceive of it all at once. The trouble: this mathematical limit is an asymptote, approached but never reached by its sequence.

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<sup>1</sup> Stars may have been seen as “holes” for light and wind to enter from the spiritual world above the tent of sky (Eliade 260).

<sup>2</sup> Zukofsky would make an interesting example because his concept of language is the opposite of Emerson’s, yet his goals through language are not entirely dissimilar, as if two opposing scientific theories yielded the same conclusion.

The task then is to use language to transcend language, to speak straight through it and arrive on the other side. To do so requires, again, more power than the individual can muster. Consider the assumptions underlying this predicament, the vitality of the God-given “Word” in Judeo-Christian tradition, not to mention “the Name.” At Babel, the power of human language rivaled that of God. Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, describes himself as the first letter of the alphabet<sup>3</sup> and “the discourse of speakers.” Kabir and Namdeva, poets of the Adi Granth, chant his many names, which ultimately are only endless epithets (like the endless incarnations and concepts of the deity in Hinduism as a whole) dancing around the word, the name, that can never be represented in a word, a name. For them, and for readers of the Bhagavad Gita, praise is a yoga, a path—not an end. Jayadeva intones, “O my heart, / sing the praises / of God the primal— / thus you shall lessen / the difference / between you and Him” (*Songs of the Saints* 134). The words don’t mean—they act, and in acting, promote change.

Emerson, in *Nature*, explains that words symbolize natural objects and those objects symbolize “spiritual facts” in a “radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts” (28, 29). He understood, even before William Carlos Williams and Zukofsky, that exploring even the most trivial of objects can facilitate a new understanding of the world. To access “spiritual facts,” Emerson thinks, one needn’t expect language to behave like something it’s not. If our best hope of spiritual connection is an earth-bound system of symbols, we’ll take what we can get. But Emerson leaves us still with a great distance between our desires and our words, bridged only by metaphor. For him, the solution requires the return to a primordial, “picturesque” language “when it is all poetry,” a feat accomplished by “fasten[ing] words again to visible things” (29, 30). Language must be not more spiritual, but rather more strictly bound to the earth, to physical objects and images, in order to access the spiritual. Under the scrutiny of our modern understanding of the poem as an object, an event on the page, Emerson’s perspective is not undermined, but given a new relevance and capacity for meaning-making. Emerson himself would have considered it a perversion for wandering too far from nature, but it’s his own understanding of an object’s

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<sup>3</sup> Christ uses the same metaphor when referring to himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

relationship to “spiritual facts” that allows the poem’s physical nature—its shape, sound, and appearance—to bear spiritual significance, as it does in Herbert, Blake, and modern poets like A. R. Ammons, G. C. Waldrep, Nathaniel Mackey, and Julie Carr. Perhaps I can’t *say* love, after all, but, as the adage goes, actions speak louder—and language can, because of its physicality, act.

To locate this paradoxical poetics in relationship to another model, consider Friedrich Schiller’s distinction between “naïve” and “sentimental” poetry, the former a poetry of “being,” the latter of “becoming”; one “realist,” the other “idealist.” Naïve poetry we might call, in modern terms, *closed-form*; it gives birth once and for all. Schiller’s sentimental poetry we might call *open-form*, focused on process. Some have used this distinction to address the difference between, say, Theodore Roethke and language poetry. In following this model we find ourselves placing poems on a single-dimension spectrum. Some poems, however, seem to fit on one extreme end of the spectrum in some ways and on the opposite extreme in other ways—or even at both ends in the same way. The extreme ends of the spectrum at some point begin to resemble each other, like the North and South poles, which couldn’t be further away but are similar in climate *because* of their direct opposition geographically. Schiller’s model isn’t therefore a poor framework for this poetics; I mean to suggest, instead, that the model displays exactly the paradoxical nature at work.

A prayer might exhibit the “childlikeness” and “undivided sensuous unity” Schiller associates with “the naïve,” and might also provide a perfect example of nature acting through the speaker, limiting his freedom, another “naïve” attribute (184, 200). On the other hand, prayer conceives “the ideal as an object of affection,” and strives “pulsat[ing] between conflicting feelings,” never achieving the goal (which is, in any case, a mystery from the beginning)—these are aspects of “sentimental” poetry (205, 223). In sentimental poetry, as in prayer, the “poet does not complete his task, but his task is an infinite one” (234). After all, it’s not the nature of prayer or poetry that it ever succeed once and for all.

Prayer always falls short of its desire—the unity it aims for languishes as only a vague hope or, at best, a moment of ecstasy briefly won and immediately lost. Prayers continue on in seeking, in process, in serialized form. One must, as Paul and later Emerson and Ammons instruct, “pray without ceasing” (1

Thess. 5:17). Thus, Herbert and Donne cannot remain consigned to given forms and must find new ways to expand them, Herbert by adding the visual, concrete element as another dimension of meaning, as well as writing *The Temple* as a sequence; and Donne by working in series, irregular meters, and paradoxes that defer meaning indefinitely; others by breaking the voice into dialogue to highlight conflict as in Marvell's "body and soul" poems; if not, we see the old forms burst at the seams, as in Hopkins's sprung rhythm. A similar urgency leads Christopher Smart in *Jubilate Agno* to break free of the traditional forms he typically relied on. In recent years, Jorie Graham's *Overlord* and Bruce Beasley's *Signs and Abominations* have both resorted to serial or sequential form in their attempts at poetic prayer.

## Experiment

It may be a revisionist reading of Genesis, the Psalms, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Adi Granth, but it's not inaccurate to say these works utilize heteroglossia, collage, juxtaposition, and intertextuality. What this means in terms of literary lineage or influence remains murky, but whatever poetic overlap exists between David, Rumi, Yeats, Jorie Graham, and Ronald Johnson—aside from the most general characteristics of poetry—must surely be important.

To explain such connections between ancient and modern literature, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. employs two terms from Claude Levi-Strauss: *la pensée sauvage* and the *law of participation* (40). He sees this rebirth of "savage thought" in the new avant-garde<sup>4</sup> in literature, theatre, painting, and music.<sup>5</sup> Just three years before Scott's *Wild Prayer of Longing* was published, Jerome Rothenberg's ethnopoetic anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, had insisted that "primitive means complex" (xxv). In this "savage thought," nothing is objectified because everything is open to dialogue with the human spirit. What Scott considers a highly rigorous thought process involves a "logic of the hand, of actual practice" (27). The other mark

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<sup>4</sup> "New" as of 1971, when this book was published.

<sup>5</sup> Scott could be accused of conservatism or nostalgia except that the past he would revive is echoed in the edges of experimental art more than anything among the mainstream.



of this poetics, the “law of participation,” upholds juxtaposition and heteroglossia as unifying forces. Scott recalls Heidegger’s notion of poet as watchman or shepherd, leading us back into “proximity of the Source” and, in Scott’s words, a “sacramental universe” without supernaturalism (74). Rothenberg, who in comparing modern and primitive poetry cites a long list of modern equivalences (again, largely concepts associated with the avant-garde) including performance poetry, surrealism, composition by field, concrete poetry, happenings, dada, Rilke’s angel, and Lorca’s duende, reminds us in his 1984 “Pre-Face” to *Technicians* “that a poetry of the spirit—a visionary poetry—is not only to be found apart from us; that while it pervades many old cultures, it has, since the nineteenth century at least, been a prominent mode among our own poets” (xxiii). The movement of thought is both forward and backward, exploring the edges of each. It’s always and necessarily experimental. If Watts’s hymns aren’t bizarre, that’s no fault of the Biblical Psalms themselves, which form a chaotic collage of voices, techniques, and attitudes across centuries.

Again, I must return to the idea of a poetics of prayer being a poetics of relationship, keeping in mind the constant volatility and flux that word implies. Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, describes two possible ways of seeing: I-and-It versus I-and-Thou. The first simply represents the relationship of a subject and object. The object is wholly discrete, wholly other, a thing. The latter suggests a dynamic relationship in which the subject is ultimately undermined because it finds its own essence inextricable from this other (which is not so “other” after all). Such a perspective perhaps explains why the Bhakti poets can find no higher use of language than in praise. Namdeva’s pronouns, as he celebrates the world around him, slip between first, second, and third person as if there were no difference; he offers a perspective of radical inclusiveness. In a web of inter-relationship, by speaking one makes room, makes a place, for another’s speech, another’s turn, and in turn, a place is made for silence as well. The shaman’s costumes—a negation of ego in favor of connection with other—allow the shaman to speak the secret language, the animal or spirit language, and thus move through the cosmic zones, recovering a primordial condition free of separation and enmity between man and spirit and animal. In this way he conquers the

“paradoxical passage” making it possible to “transcend opposites, to abolish the polarity typical of the human condition” (Eliade 486).

## **Hybridization**

There’s plenty of evidence suggesting that American poetry comes to us a bifurcated thing, quibbling with itself like a two-headed monster. This distinction may have first developed as the difference between poets influenced by French Modernists and those, on the other hand, writing in the British Romantic tradition. Or perhaps such contentiousness arose as a response to the desire among some poets to write a distinctly American poetry in opposition to European trends altogether. In any case, diverging camps have been delineated and realigned by each generation of American poets and critics, a process made explicit in the anthology wars of the 1950s and 60s. The terms differentiating the two sides: cooked and raw, traditional and experimental, closed and open, formal and free. However useful such a reductive model might be in understanding American literary history, a history that has been given ample consideration by others and to which I can offer no new insight, poets have moved on—not from the lessons each side offered, but from the mutually exclusive, binary understanding of poetics, which perhaps no one ever trusted to begin with. The critical recognition of those different modes seemed not to invite subsequent generations of poets to choose sides but, instead, to break ranks. Even Robert Lowell himself, author of the cooked and uncooked distinction, shifts toward a poetry more pink in the center throughout his career.

Cole Swensen, in her introduction to *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, argues that “the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous ‘camps’ in diverse and unprecedented ways” (60). Indeed, many new literary journals seem dedicated to no other aesthetic position than eclecticism, publishing poetry of widely disparate aesthetics and practices on consecutive pages, as if they derive from the same tradition, which, after all, they do. Even those journals that tend to lean in a more experimental direction are likely

to publish poets whose work can also be found in more conventional outlets. If the oldest and most prestigious literary magazines represent American poetry's mainstream, then the mainstream is a small minority of questionable relevance. If, on the other hand, the level of activity and energy and sheer numbers represent the mainstream, then I suspect the "New (Hy)Breed" poet Swensen describes has moved American poetry into what were its margins, which have proven to be its most fertile ground. It's as if a civil war ended and those on the frontlines simply moved in together to start a new family. As Swensen points out,

considering traits associated with "conventional" work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of "experimental" work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which changes dramatically depending on the others with which it's combined and the particular role it plays in the composition. (63)

Distanced from the politics and history of the anthology wars, and having read Whitman alongside, say, Allen Ginsberg and Elizabeth Bishop in their high-school textbooks, these young writers sense no contradiction in claiming all three as influences. Furthermore, they're able to employ all those tactics in new contexts and permutations.

Applied to contemporary American poetry, the poetics of prayer described in this essay can be understood as a mode of such hybridization. It collapses the archaic, the traditional, and the modern into the present moment. While its desire for spiritual communication may seem on the surface firmly aligned with the Romantic impulse to treat language as only a referential medium for conveying thought and meaning, in practice a poetics of prayer recognizes that language itself must be understood as a physical site for meaning-making in order to pursue that original goal. In that sense, a poetics of prayer might be a kind of alchemy—a rational science for the sake of irrational spirituality. While we've come to understand the differences between American schools and traditions of poetry, a poetics of prayer might explain both why and how modern and contemporary writers have reconciled such supposedly contradictory traditions.

## **Equivocal**

Julie Carr's *Equivocal*, published in 2007, can be understood in the terms I've employed here and thus offers a contemporary example of a poetics of prayer at work. Her book focuses on the relationships between self and other, creator and created, individuality and unity. Her method of inquiry is personal, subjective, and endless. Distrusting every answer to her inquiries, she finds the only suitable response in new sets of questions, such that every line of poetry seems to end in an invisible question mark. This inward, reflective method is more akin to American Transcendentalism than American Confessional poetry, though both probably inform her work. The speaker of her poems builds an understanding of the world based on subjective perception rather than empirical evidence, but the self must become something like Emerson's transparent eyeball, as Carr makes clear in "Wrought History":

I speak exactly as everyone else speaks; fall asleep exactly  
as anyone else falls asleep.

There is no greater expression of pride than to refer to oneself  
as nothing, no greater claim for one's centrality  
than the claim that one has none. (8)

The vitality of the self depends on the recognition of its unity with all else. Perception, then, can become more than objective observation, but an active force, affecting what it observes and thereby providing the self an opportunity to play a transformative role in the world (because of, rather than in spite of, the self's relegation to nothingness or transparency), she hopes in "Equivocal": "Gaze at an ordinary object, I instruct my children, / let's see if it transforms before your eyes // into a portal to the eternal" (62).

This is not hubris, but its opposite, as is clear in her philosophy and her association of such techniques with child's play. In "Time Paper," Carr recalls both Pessoa's claim to be "nothing" but "the extended commentary / on a book that doesn't exist" and Emerson's assertion that "the private thought is the universal / but it must never be construed as the universal / lest we kill its difference" (7). She then rewrites Emerson as part of her recursive exploration: "The tapestry of the now is endless, / would be another way to translate the philosopher" (7). In that case, understanding otherness means, in part,

understanding the self and other as simultaneously unique and inseparably unified. The personal, for one whose definition of the personal has become so inclusive, animates what it perceives as if it were all part of the same body, as if merely stretching out its own hand. To her, as to Emerson, the individual's place in the world is, or can ideally be, like that of the child whose imagination redefines the world and his place within it at the end of "Time Paper" when he "walks upstairs on all fours like a cat" (7) or, in "Wrought Gerund," makes "the plastic things talk" (4).

Her exploration teases out the endless complexity of her lines of inquiry such that each step she takes toward an answer seems to lengthen her total distance from the goal. Yet, she carries on like a gerund verb: "to bear, to carry on" (4). The question throughout the book, but especially in the "Letter Box" section, is one of language: "the name of love, the definition of a maker," and how her relationship to letters and words affects relationships with family and others (19). In a body that makes all the world seem separate and distant, and in a tongue that objectifies everything it names until "a tree looks / like the letter T" (15), and even the self is cut off and "framed" (28), how can we mend our separation from "within" where "the characters weep" (15)? Her response points out a paradox: emphasizing language's physicality and its inability to access the spiritual creates at least room for the spiritual: "I know the / ground by my feet on it, know my mind by your distance / from it. And may all things bear a new name // in the rush of becoming unknown" (15). Let the physical be understood physically, the spiritual spiritually, and let language provide a reference for determining our distance from what we wish to know or say, a process which would, after all, offer profound insight. If language makes a whole owl into three letters, o-w-l, then we, by knowing something of an actual owl, might be able to estimate the distance we've placed in between. As it is, we mistake our familiarity with *owl* for an understanding of the raptor itself. Should owls be given a new, unfamiliar name, this difference would become especially clear and measurable, triangulated as it were between the word we know, the word we don't, and the being we wish to know. Carr engages this possibility by toying with language's arbitrariness in order to "turn such devices to [her] own use" (18), employing non-sequiturs and illogical re-namings, a kind of defamiliarization, until "we can't remember // the words for anything at all / and begin to cry" (22).

Bizarre and sometimes surreal phrases and images increase in frequency toward the end of the book, half whimsically, half ominously, until coat pockets sewn of pig bladders, meadows made of fish bones (63), and “a rose made of chiming” (60) all make sense. The goal is to transcend language through language and arrive at “the eye-bolt: a silence as empty as a flash of perfect distance” (32).

Carr’s use of equivocation plays a role formally as well. In “Equivocal,” the final section of the book and the title of a series of poems within that section, one never feels sure whether a poem is complete at the end of the page or carried on to the next page, as some poems share titles with others, other poems have no title at all, and even the four discrete sections of the book are woven into each other thematically. The placement of the “Equivocal” poems on the page—justified sometimes to the right as if prevented from reaching their goal, or sometimes placed lower on the page as if whispered from a downturned face—are sculpted just as Carr describes in “Letter,” that is, “with my hands, like a cake” (18).

These poetic gestures, these experiments and theoretical postures, are only as complex as they must be, for her object could not be clearer or more fundamental. She desires connection and unity—with her son, with her grandmother, with her husband, with her maker. What must be done or said in order to “enrapture” the other (63)? To understand her relation to others, she must understand her own existence, which surely means knowing something of creation. “So my maker, the only way to echo you is to echo you. / As when in sex we mimic the breath of the other,” she writes in “Envy Song,” exposing the mimesis of divine, romantic, and familial love all at once (11). Thus, she understands creation through her own acts as writer, lover, and mother. Yet even as the book nears its end, her questions persist and intensify in rapid fire, fervent and direct, reaching at once toward song and, on the other hand, nursery rhyme, but unwavering in their intention to communicate clearly with the objects of her affection and, at once, to answer “the outsider’s desire to come in” (67):

If I sew to your eyes the scenes of your bedroom  
and tie to your hands the hands of the others

If I fly to your bedroom or burn in the garden,

cluster like glue in the sounds of your tongue

...  
If mending your eyes means boiling my soles  
and cities grow others skyward unheeded (66-67)

The book offers no final conclusion or even a place to stop and rest. But we do end with hope, despite the violence and desperation of this final section. The “doorway” is “swung and banging” when the last line intones like a promise, “living or lit / into one into one” (67). Such a gesture only hints symbolically at what Carr hopes to accomplish here; the book’s intent, however, is not to make one understand through metaphor, but to make one *feel*—not sentimentally, but through a physical or near-physical interaction with language. If language can’t carry my mind to yours, she seems to say, it can at least offer a hand and ask for yours.

\* \* \*

## The Dog Poems

My dog poems and my interest in exploring a poetics of prayer have always been separate projects, the former begun before I'd conceived of the latter. My theoretical position is not an apologia for *The Dog Poems* in particular. Nevertheless, somewhere along the way, the two projects have, without my conscious intent, come to inform each other.

According to Mircea Eliade, the dog is the weakest animal spirit a Yakut shaman can utilize (90). Strong shamans call upon the spirits of eagles or bears to facilitate their ecstatic travels. But the dog, as he does in my poems, stutters along meekly, as poor among the living as among the dead, but a "helping spirit" nonetheless. The dog, like a prayer, wants to live in two worlds, failing both. The *Dog Poems* don't glamorize such a lowly state, but they do validate it, call attention to it, bend an ear to the dog's anxious half-groans and undertones. In that sense, the dog poems are prayer-like in their desire to submit, to serve, and to praise. They beg that the imperfection and insufficiency of their own voice be filled by another's. A dog wishing to initiate play (which is to say, a relationship) with another dog faces that dog and bows deeply, chin to the ground, forelegs outstretched, tail in the air. The position is a gentle invitation, if not a respectful show of manners as we imagine. It's also an ideal position from which to pounce suddenly in any direction.

The *Dog Poems* enact a kind of ritual, beginning with a simple testimony of existence and relationship: that a being *is* and *is* in some particular relation to the world at a given moment. Along those lines, the poems employ repetition, the still center of a spinning wheel, the constant of change and movement. The shaman, the liturgist, and the supplicant all know that repetition can act as rungs on a ladder, each offering a new vantage point before leading to the next. For the dog, it's not the words that change, but the world that changes them, each bark reflecting, praising, and burying that world as it passes from physical to spiritual at every moment.

These poems were written under a single (broken) formal constraint, that the title of each poem begin with "The Dog of." Most are short lyrics, alert to sound and shape. The series often includes mini-



series of two or more poems within the larger series or, elsewhere, individual poems divide into mini-poems. An individual poem's internal sections seem nearly discrete at times, but do relate to and rely on other parts of the poem and, ultimately, the whole series. In that sense, each line, stanza, or other poem division may represent the whole poem in brief, which may represent a section of the book in brief, which may represent the project in brief. To put it another way, the long arc of the book is made up of many smaller arcs, which are made up of even smaller arcs. This pattern appears visually in the form of poems like "The Dog of Eight Breaths" or "The Dog of History," in which these mini-poems are separated with formal markers. Other poems divide into completely separate pieces like "The Dog of Prophets" and "The Second Dog of Prophets" or the two poems titled "The Dog of Hearing." On the other hand, the titles (not to mention the content) of "The Dog of Conversation," "The Dog of Conversing," and "The Dog of Commerce" indicate a relationship between these poems that may not necessarily tie them together as one, but certainly suggests that one poem converses with the others. A similar relationship exists between even the stanza divisions of a poem like "The Dog of Names."

As a result, these poems appear like the remains of a destroyed building—shards, rubble, layers of broken structure. One can recognize these fragments as belonging to a whole, but their use and meaning has been stripped and reordered. Thus, we find an improbable range of language in juxtaposition, often skewed or skewered as if from a mouth guarded by fangs. What imaginable "whole" might this junkyard indicate: a whole word, idea, line, stanza, poem, series, book, being? Perhaps it most closely resembles a family, an ancestral genealogy, various expressions of a singular pool of information.

Subject and object shift often and ambiguously here. Some poems refer to a dog, often masculine but sometimes feminine, in the third person. Others are spoken directly from the dog's mouth: doggerel. In a third category of poems, the dog figure never rises to the surface, though I imagine it as a flea irritating the undercoat of each word. Should I strip every poem of the "Dog" in the title, the poems would hardly be affected except that readers might wonder why "fur" and "paw" seem to appear more often than "skin" and "hand," a question readers might ask anyway.

Ultimately, the dog is only a way of speaking, but to say so would be to speculate rather than describe. And the poems do sometimes speculate on their own existence in just such a way; the “Dog of Speaking” discusses their (the dogs’) use of prepositions, and the “Dog of Conversing” bemoans “that // damn dog’s damn / hollow // mostly air and slobber / errant love note.” A dog, by its nature, by its culture, and by its instinct, knows how to protect the jugular with stance and sound and power, and knows also how to expose it in submission. The dog can never reach the thorn in its paw. Some call the resulting limp *intuition*.

The Elizabethans and the metaphysical poets whom I was reading as I wrote some of the first dog poems deserve admiration beyond the kind they’ve received as New Critical darlings and subjects for classroom necropsy. Their worldview and sense of order—the chain of being and corresponding planes; the hierarchy of divines, men, and beasts; the cosmic narrative; the bees and ants and birds always figural; the sciences figural; chemistry a mystical subject—were not less beautiful than others, especially if we recognize the elegant desperation of such a mythology. Instead of exploring ways in which dogs are figures or anti-figures for humanity, my poems treat such elegant desperation as if it were itself a figure or character. The dog refuses to serve as mirror or one-to-one correspondent with any thing in particular, but remains a shadowed, swirling center. The dog is whatever the poems are, a being inextricable from its environment.

In high school, we get the sense that evolution results in perfect balance, perfect creations in a perfect ecosystem: bird beaks the size and shape of flower pistils, frog skin the color of mottled leaves, tree-necked tree-eaters. But ask even a highly successful species—ask the crow—how perfect a being he is, how perfectly adapted. Well enough to raise his luckiest hatchlings to sexual maturity, though it requires every effort and every trick and every member of his family to do it. Evolution is slow. But change isn’t, and by the time a species has adapted to one way of life, it better be able to survive another. It better be able to improvise a new use for that beak or that neck or that squawky voice.

If the story of the dog is *like* the story of humans or anything else, it's because, though we're all out of place, struggling with or against our world, the dog is more out of place, more off-balance, more willing (or perhaps just more *able*) to lose itself for the sake of fitting into a niche than the rest of us. Among dogs the struggle is exaggeratedly physical and visible, as if the entire species lived only in a circus performance played out over hundreds of years. Few species have such pliable DNA (or else they've been spared the elasticity-test of their genetic possibilities). Dogs, in only a few generations, can morph into whatever their environment calls for; would, for the sake of their symbiotic bond with humans, look or act like creatures almost wholly unlike themselves, fighting constantly their own instincts and bodies, like those show-horses trained with tacks in their hooves; that is, with pain in their gait but food in their trough.

Dogs have learned something of our complex faces. They've learned our neuroses and vices, learned to be sad and sedentary. We command them: "speak." But even after their skeletons have stretched and deformed and shrunken into costume-bodies that could not survive without an air-conditioned living room and enriched wet food, a dog's tongue can crush bone against the roof of its mouth even after its teeth have rotted out. That kernel of ancient and immutable self will not give up—will not trade a meal for a word. So the dog must live with people, and with that jaw and that mouth and those teeth and that throat, and bark madly its stillborn language.

THE DOG POEMS

“Haw haw haw—hem, hem—haw, haw, haw, haw!”

Hawthorne

## Family & Society

## **The Dog of Speaking**

1.

We made all the prepositions

with our faces  
in the fair  
of each other's

links and tethers

with all the routines  
known to our neighborhood

our outings and every one one.

2.

That's really something, of course.

That's democracy with us: mouth  
down to eat, up to speak.

## **The Dog of History**

\*

What's there

to tell  
between

\*

My love

with your big bad eye  
and blue-blind womb

\*

So what winter's late

Whose love's a late winter

the creek burned out and the dead  
frogs echoing in the drainpipe



\*

Speak up:

your head's hung to know leavings

I am speaking up

\*

Your snout slit: biology miff muff myth

Up front: scent enter

Aside: the slag

So as they say about *shall the twins meet*

And say *get yers from out my line*

And a line goes one way forever

\*

My face was born like that

One thing I know about

history's the litter spitting up

## **The Dog of Fathers**

is each foot bound  
and each post named  
after each foot bound.

The locomotion is thus:  
teeth, dirt, pull, hurt,  
and this is made effective.

The dog learns stillness only  
to teach it. When the dog learns peace  
he cannot speak his own language.

His commandments go and go.  
What's left is solid and wrath:  
never show your teeth among his children.

## The Dog of Eight Breaths

\*

Between: as in lines, phrases, measures, sobs, errands, degrees, lovers, teeth, walls, ribs

\*

Relief valve. Wailed heavy on his father's chest.

\*

A sighway. Hello, epiglottis;  
goodbye, heart. Blue dumpster.  
Cheek cellar. Molar spit-suck.

Don't move your lungs, just breathe with your mouth.  
Okay, now just your lungs, no mouth.

I'm just asking.

\*

Sign with your  
lips full  
of blood and cracked  
hugging incisors  
like a boxer.

\*

After words retreat  
To the breast  
Milk and funnyache

Father, father  
Pumped my mother  
Caught his breath  
And shaped my brother

\*

face to the air  
to the skyline: empty, full,  
to the ex-haled wares,  
elm, tower, leaf-left, bare,  
wearing mother's labor,  
a neighbor from every floor

\*

What sigh are you  
keeping, well?  
What reserve in store,  
what cloud before you  
reap? From the leavings  
of whose field harvest  
wind to speak?

\*

The more empty the more full, these silos, near my heart, left me by inheritance.

That is, someone breathed her last.

Expands in me the horizon.

The senses are mindful, of mind. But not the breath.

Old Job, in his home, fat of breast.

Remember the mothers, his mother, fat of breast.

This is the story about sharing.

## The Dog of Siblings

\*

The dog has many siblings somewhere,  
never counted how many,  
can't pronounce their names in harmony, or know when  
any one of them is afraid.

\*

The dog is truly a hive inside his skull.  
His mind bristles as the sky spills over  
a fresh burn. Like he's worn all the pines  
fresh out. Like a bright hum enters a colony.

\*

He dreams he's a bird in a nest,  
though he never saw a bird in a nest  
but the sky's nest is in a bird  
he thinks as the earth nests in the sky

\*

and the dog's mind's cradle's dirt-water.  
Sleeps on the ground to feel his dreams thumping.  
Hears a dog in the night *HAR HAR HAR*.  
Thinks *here comes a song from the future*.

\*

Did you hear the one about your mother?  
Will you sing the one that goes "haroo, haroo"?  
Will you sing to us until our eyes shoo?  
Will you play grandmother or do I have to make you something first?

## **The Dog of Lies**

is also the dog that would lie for you.

Little half-backwards step and bow.

Sports his father's prurient brow.

And all the wives he can barely speak to.

What does he think as he grins?

What am I thinking?

What am I thinking now?

He sweats out the curious.

Let him

fuck his weight in gold.

Everyone howls when the howling  
will drown them out, then keeps  
their mouths shut afterwards.

Just watch their dumb backs tensing up.

## **The Dog of the Nest**

You'd too if you'd a lord  
and din know his call from  
a cricket's bird magic

The doves raises up on fear  
or mourning one just like a man  
lies to his best faces *oh*

*God oh darling* heart-swollen  
jaw I meant your neck's lost  
its turn but I hear you I see

Where you smell from so  
much inside us razed the same  
old deer-dropped weed nest

## **The Dog of Homemaking**

you wouldn't believe what's in the air you  
and me our guts if I had just little courage  
for the local talk talk about local it's here  
this the one place I'm not afraid of poi-  
son I know at least what's wrong like I hear  
your wheeze in back the yard and recall how  
long we waited for the sun and dug three  
degrees warmer the wrong way ears half raised  
for orders from which distant dirt-maker  
now we'll trust what's far enough to forget  
us that far's the fat world on which these innards  
push what they know what they're doing tangled  
roots with yours and whatever's said grows  
up and down into us and our place we can't  
speak for any earth we didn't pack our selves



## Body & Behavior

## The Dog of the Throat

Dear throat:

Given every living thing,

given the farmer's  
and butcher's slaughter

—in you are the hog's hearts,  
the stalks, and the milk,  
and the grain of the wind,  
the grain heard, the flock herded,

the swallow, the holler—

what, throat, at your age,  
given every sing

—and you cough and collapse  
and hack clear a way  
back through for so little  
a cry as the flies make—

whose moan's still born?

## **The Dog of Hearing**

Hears with her *here*

Tongues meat  
Out her molar scars

Hears her tongue  
Her open mouth hears

## **The Dog of Hearing**

*What did the deaf dog say  
To the other deaf dog*

I don't know  
    how my wounds  
    compose my skin

no story but now  
                    I fear the emptiest

no story but  
                    now I

listen to my digestion please

if I've whispered once  
    a thousand psalms  
dirt on the paw  
                    heart on the air

no story we didn't say  
                    and we never said

where have you been all my life

in the hot snapping ends of every dendrite

your love is old and eats well

and you can have it  
                    each alveolus full

## **The Dog of Keeping**

And so keeps  
    pissing on the scent

And the squirrels are worried about us  
And so are we

And so keeps  
    a few sharp teeth  
    a scab in the fur

The rule:  
    you leave  
    what's of your body:

    voice, print

Make, dog

## **The Dog of Keeping**

Wind in the ear's palm, in its bottleneck  
Barely a crow on the phone line

Hips don't last but  
    leaving trots down the block  
    sniffs every short life

And our prints rise up to carry  
    our rotted haunches

    our burrs

The crow's flown

Yesterday circles then sleeps

## **The Dog of Food Chains**

We are tied  
we are like  
rope or cord  
three strands turned  
pink-gut out  
our bodies  
twisted formed  
intestines  
but thank God  
for those, right?  
a turd is  
evidence  
of sin and  
for vagueness  
is it not?  
imagine  
being the  
intestines  
full of shit  
and muscle  
we feel it  
move or is  
that us now  
and think how  
what lives here  
and is it  
mine or not?  
what is there  
I won't let  
back in my  
home, Hunger?

## **The Dog of Recurring Themes**

the theme is doing what themes do what  
bodies grow what  
keeps

making itself a self if not

for the air-pressured skulls  
for the gravity-wound grandfather-clock grandfather-faces  
for the free radicals to and from our earthworm guts  
for the earthworm, for example, eating house and home  
for the failing branch failing



## **The Dog of Recurring Themes**

one day  
you cannot walk

and you will say  
with mush in your mouth

I have grown my own cysts

## **The Dog of Recurring Themes**

the wheelchairs we built are efficient  
the people we created

are benevolent

but not to us

our kind, so kindly building

## The Dog of War

is it shrapnel or scrapnel in my hip  
pocket of me is that a body of pocket  
or a pocked body and is that body of  
or in a body hole and if a bodily  
hole's a mouth if muscled and a muscle's  
cleaved where its striations cleave  
to bone and bone's not bone inside  
itself but something else (a magma deep  
in un-hollow or boned holler-  
point) round fired through steel tubing  
then gaseous not-tubing largely  
nitrogen at a pressure sufficient  
to press skin to dripping muscle not  
sufficient to un-drip muscle but we  
in a room in a space the size of hollow  
we do not expand into each other  
without this breach of hollow unto un-  
hollow and pressure sufficient  
to carry a voice intact, wholly  
aired so the blood platelets vibrate  
over the muscle spasms pulling  
and releasing faster than blood  
can pool in the crevice lowest  
and surrounded by itself look  
here it pools a darker self outside  
self in the light still unveined still  
in my voice like my voice  
outside me in sight trembling  
in a pool the magma the earth  
and under the holler the plates shift

Mart & Art

## **What the Dog Never Said**

Frienemy.

Good grief.

Pass the bitter.

Who wouldn't say that?

I'm uncomfortable opening sentences this way.

You count on your hands like a fucking kiddie-garner.

Federal regulations require us to provide you with information.

## **The Dog of Conversation**

Let's talk then about the self

Woof

Look

the dog is sleeping

Like a windmill

## **The Dog of Conversing**

Let's talk about what carries  
a tune in the well.

Contingent continent  
please let me live in you  
as I let song well up  
and spill my face  
deep into my neighbor's that

damn dog's damn  
hollow

mostly air and slobber  
errant love note.

## **The Dog of Commerce**

will clean  
your plate  
or clock

your your.



## **The Dog of Grrrsanthemum**

It's of value what we make.  
Or we draw our brains in sand

by memory. On accident. With love,  
sometimes, like a dinosaur  
makes a carcass. Sometimes,  
like a dinosaur makes a carcass.

You can be somebody's whatever.  
Who's your whatever?  
*I don't care as long as it's you.*

## **The Dog of Advertising**

He whose own mother calls him by his initials hired the dog to write the small-print fast-talk conclusion of an advertisement.

One agency beat another to the shtick. The dog agreed but his price was unmanageable. No man was able to age anything at all. Even the whistling in Fred's nose could barely breathe.

Who's telling this story, you or a jackass version of you?

The dog gnawed his words from the bone. He coughed. The executives coughed.

Den dat dawg tawk lickery-shpit.

## **The Dog of Advertising**

1.  
Get graphic  
Figgy pudding
  
2.  
Sleep like deer next to headlights
  
3.  
To mother and pause shop  
Nickle and dime time  
Get'm breakneck space-age wait-time  
Critical hair-care la la now
  
4.  
The market coughs jism  
Out her cry hole
  
5. Wait  
whom'n whose who'm whom  
I talking to  
and how I choose'm?

## **The Dog of the National Register of Historic Places**

WUZ HERE

the rain washed her  
out her scent a little in the creek

and now she's everywhere a creek  
in a trout and a rainstorm

## The Dog of Graffiti

1.

wholivesheresundaysorever  
yotherweekendorforthatmat  
terwhenicomebyinthenylon  
thinkingcapcauseafteralltha  
tswhenhomemovesandwew  
homakerightherewestayput

2.

wholivesherewe  
llitsnotyourgran  
nybutstilltheress  
omethingsofami  
liarinthepearbran  
chohitmustbethe  
stillnesshowikno  
wwereloversnow

## **The Dog of Marketeers**

make-a-tears, make-appears, mast careers, making beers, masqueraders,  
masked marauders, mac and cheaters, mass careeners, mouse and  
whiskers, fears and jeers, mona lisa, master rears, mighty weiners, mien  
kampf eaters,

had a wife and couldn't keep her  
who had waited very well  
who had sung her head in the well  
who said sneeze dead make him whine  
if this don't come out boil more brine  
baker baker make me bread now  
that's the way I keeps me bread now  
that's the way I keeps me bread now

## **The Dog of Names**

Dog language is a matter of suggestion.  
Dog thought is a matter of intuition.  
Dog intuition is a matter of association.

Dog language is akin to human prayer.  
While prayer desires dog language.  
Which fathered human language.

Which is a matter of teeth.  
Which played the drum for Him,  
Pa-rum-pa-pum-pum.

Human language is for humans between humans.  
Dog language is not language, but action.  
The earth does not speak, but forces.

Dog language is limited.  
Human language is more varied and more limited.  
What is left in speech of scent?

What cent in the air?  
What dog in the window?  
Who breaks bills with mongrels.

As voice is composed, comprised, compromised, compost  
Of what's promised in it. What's in there, voice?  
Who do you speak in, tongue?

If a tongue could hear  
I would cry in sentences.  
I cry only in dreams.

Dreams are mouth-sabbath, mouth-temple,  
Priest of the tongues.  
All things unnamed are loved,

And visible as words  
We've not yet learned to spell but  
Called for, called from, my own family, own chain.

## Philosophy & Prophecy



## **The Dog of Philosophy**

What's it take  
to say *unbroken egg*?

What the equation do  
to be so true?

What would I have  
to do be do be do?

How can you tell  
if not in your mouth?

How long can you nurse a pack of roundworm, baby?

## **The Dog of Clarity**

Sometimes I feel  
like a dog in the sky,  
a constellation of mostly not-me.

If you look as someone once did without light and squinting,  
paws are bodies  
running clumsily away from each other  
and from the noise of the beginning.

## About the Dog

A dog, let's face it, is a way of facing you. Of breaking it to you. Breaking teeth from face to smooth the breath between us. A dog is a way of sighing and seeing. Like a doctor says *say ahh*, then hurts, then helps a little slowly. Toothy smile all eat up open. French kiss, dog kiss, deepthroat, cough. Helloooo!

## **The Dog of Prophets**

The mountains will be hucksters and the hills will be  
The left hand of the sea will not care who  
The little girls will burn their dolls' hair for  
The sake of a ghost they never knew wearing  
What the elders call marriage will be a siphon when  
The volcanoes cry themselves to sleep after  
The families will whisper metaphoric gifts even  
Buried soldiers won't say who did who  
Unburied, who untombed, who unmasked, fuck  
The tiny codes that tiny our own mothers and  
The blind bat fighters and the sleeping  
Cyclops supermarkets will not sleep through our songs  
The dancers fill out the fathers' advice forms with  
Who entered their signatures long as memory allowed

## **The Second Dog of Prophets**

Every soldier has a foot in the song-door every one  
Called "The Seven-Hundred Books of Books" voice  
Called "Not-even-an-option." Remember that, brother,  
There aren't any places without us maps,  
The great dividers of body and soil, the skin  
Scratchers, dividend solders, brother believers,  
If there's a word between us careful it's a hitch  
In photosynthesis, the vine, does that react yet  
O Organism / not-organism, O Love / if-not-love

### **The Third Dog of Prophets**

The seventh verse bird  
play song-mind again if  
I could I'd not have dreamt  
my sons and daughters  
dead in every beginning  
each one each order become  
bob-headed bird black-eyed  
head I could not believe  
so fell the ice so fallow  
the gardener's hand but what  
stalk is not for us what's  
bead or bearing of my word

### William Bradford's Dog of Prophets, a Cento

and lickly, some or all of them together their reasons  
and hops conceived, will labour to stir up and to consume  
& utterly ruinate, conceive them selves straitened

it is funder objected, these things will move the very bowels  
of men to grate within the place they have thoughts on,  
those unpeopled countries of America, which are frutfull  
& fitt where there are only salvage men, which range  
up and downe, litle otherwise then the wild beasts  
of the same; & lamentable miseries befallne others  
in the like designes, will be found bowed

and craked; besides, what could they see but a hidious  
& desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts & wild  
men and they could not but be very smale  
but they will crie unto the Lord, and he hear  
their voyce & look on their adversitie, &c.

they will espie 5 or 6 persons with a dogg coming towards  
them, who were salvages, not out of any newfanglednes,  
or other such like giddie humor, by which men  
are oftentimes transported to their great hurte, but  
for sundrie weightie & solid reasons; and that it cost  
them something this ensewing historie will declare  
but presently, all on the sudain, though they varie  
their notes, a strange crie: "Men, Indeans, Indeans"

the chang of aire, diate, & drinking of water,  
would infecte their bodies with sore sicknesses  
and greevous those which should overcome  
these difficulties, should yett be salvage people  
who are cruell, barbarous, & most treacherous  
and merciless wher they overcome in the most  
bloodie maner that may be; fleaing some alive  
with the shells of fishes, cutting of the members  
& joynts by peesmeale, and broiling on the coles,  
eate the collops; all great & honourable actions  
are accompanied with great difficulties

O! saith he, you, I now see, shew your love but we  
let one another lye & dye like doggs; as their stocks  
increase and the increase vendible, there will be no  
longer any holding them together they will be scatered  
all over the bay, and become a body of them selves  
& will provock the Lords displeasure against them

## **The Dog of Wind**

In the spirit of breathing I  
Am before the face of I  
Am in the image still I  
Must eat or wear out I  
Bore wide the mouthpiece of small life  
Left to fear-fed ancestors my  
Voice is just like mothers I  
Said louder than what I said



## **The Dog of Wind**

breathing never makes  
mirror make sense  
—fog is fog—  
cataracts are fog  
Home is Us  
a bark a wind  
protects, it covers,  
it blows away our bodies

## **The Dog of Midnight**

who said love  
is a force  
field is  
a biosphere  
fun? like me  
to God or God to  
me is knowing  
waiting and pop  
distant city  
house you're  
in bed I'm  
glad I'm not we  
stirred the atoms  
infinite here-to-you  
with knives  
but they are God's

## Nature & Nurture

## The Dog of Working

1.

Then what about her  
who grew bones to hold  
her bones together, a mouth  
to call her face from  
sleepwalking, a skin  
to keep her fur warm?

Just how'd she get to tomorrow?

2.

She built with one paw  
a map, with one a road,  
one to stand on while  
her ribs splashed into her stomach  
one by one, and her right forepaw  
cradled her chest like a sack.

And she worked like a fetus, that's how she did.

## **The Dog of Messengers**

and neither did she break off  
her storm nor remember why  
storm and neither did she  
see the blazed earth in tiny  
dead mosaics, the vertebral cells  
calling down her vertebral cells,  
but run, she thought, or else  
the water, even the river, can  
freeze, even the perch, even the gills  
are made into—but they were making  
already—something to give

## **The Dog of Celebration**

If you have food, bring it.

Poor spider, work here.  
Let me say open the door.

Place your coats on fire.

If you're a rifle, sing.  
If you are hungry, bring hunger.

Song, up like smoke!

Even in our hopes  
(i.e., never even-steven)

There's dance dancing  
her eyes down

every voice.

And who's down each one.

## **The Dog of Celebration**

If there's only one and it's none of the above and couldn't hear it  
through old ears for different reasons couldn't hear it through young ears  
and my own fur is piling up in the world and that's not as soft a bed  
for certain but several have taken pity as I have taken pity for several never saw again  
anyone in the field the field pressed with prints so the dirt's just dirt it comes off  
here but not there I can smell it even after the little buds tried even when I can't hear  
my own croup even when the neighbors are undone ghosts I will wear what I am all the way out  
and the fieldmice in the holes in the birds or the feathers in a nest if all this  
of all worries never did imagine the sun threadbare and bright then threadbare  
and bright the sun is burning up and down a song for every field it doesn't wait  
for the rain it doesn't know better.

Interview



## **The Dog of Interrogation**

1.

Don't you think the Queen is nice?  
I never thought of her.

She wasn't your idea?  
Not like that no.

No?  
How many times must I say?

Exactly the question.  
You mean the point?

How say?  
Not like a queen, calling up experts, breeding her wants alive.

Successive generations?  
Saying the same thing.

We? How many...  
I mean the queen never sniffed ass.

2.

Rutabega.

Rutabego.

Nota bene: I'm just hearing noise and translating unsystematically.

I heard that.

No one to say if I got it right but you.

And I don't say boo.

But you're the dog of saying. I mean

The dog is speaking

one way or another

mother's grammar.

...wait, loved whom more?

The dog of speech

Therapy for phonetic souls?

gnawed vibrant sex toy.

Ah, I 'ear it bzzzzing 'ere your teeth.

Mmmzzz hmmzzzz.

3.

Who are you?

I'm Speaking. As I said.

Not well.

Just be glad

Like rain in your throat.

I'm not using my teeth

Fair to middlin' at best.

for their intended purpose.

For God's sake,

Whose purpose?

let go my raincoat.

Lookie me: weather dog!

You're not making weather!

Hwar crah hawww! Gah SHOO!

Yup uh kay that's...

Hyuck yuck yuck!

4.

Sing a song, weather dog.

Cry at night, dance in the morning after my stretches. *Fin.*

What're you, literate?

Put it thisaway: the "alpha and omega" metaphor means beans to me.

Beginning and end?

Not so far.

5.

Could you explain just one thing?

Him bones connected to the—her bones.

I'm sorry, I hadn't finished

Shy bones corrected all the—small phones.

asking the question.

Head dome suggesting all her—sky homes.

Your voice, sir?

Walkie-talkie movie crotchie—high tones.

Eventually, the song does different.

Oh, lovey-dovey havin' -cakey love!

6.

How many songs can you learn?

Two: out and outing: "OUT!" like that, see, is one.

Is it a sing-a-long?

Please. You already know what concoction.

I've been waiting for you, sir, to set the record straight.

The technology's static, thus static, thus: (farts). Just look how high the horse grows! But me—  
you don't mow the grass, it'll tickle my dick.

They say my dad was a ragweed.

7.

You, you, you've been waiting, turning circles, following me.  
What do you call that number? You learned me the song.

A song of evolution.  
My DNA's a keyboard.

Okay, a washboard. So strum me. I didn't volunteer for this shit.

Survival of the singest?  
Singe, ingest, jest: I don't even remember my mom. She walked like this, like me, I imagine. I got her heart, but she was stubbier, not so quick to cry like the birds. She called me her little crow.

That's what everyone calls you, darling.  
Yes, and I call them right back. They leave me leavings and I call back. I call "take care!" and then I take care of everything and I keep watch all day.

And when all else fails you run.  
Every day, for better or worse, I do.

You hear blood pulsing through your ears.  
I am using my heart.

And I your stethoscope-throat.  
I am using my heart again.

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