

ONE AND SUNDRY

by

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(Under the Direction of BRIAN HENRY)

ABSTRACT

The poems in this thesis are intended to code, reveal and embellish. Formally and procedurally, they rely on many of the tools of allegory: duplicitous language, oblique narrative, and an emphasis on language as performance. The poems' characteristic gestures are turns away from the other, demurrals or farewells, but rather than refusing interpretation, the poems embody an epistemology of uncertainty that suggests multiple readings. They are written with a fundamental doubt of univalent meaning, with the suspicion that our experience of the world is invariably mediated, that language and the reality it constructs are themselves allegorical, and that stories may therefore be more truthful when less direct.

INDEX WORDS: Thesis, Poetry, Creative writing, The University of Georgia, Allegorical writing

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BA, Eckerd College, 2000

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the patience and support of my thesis committee, Brian Henry, Claudia Rankine, and Philip Lee Williams, as well as that of many other writers at the University of Georgia, including Judith Ortiz Cofer, Mary Hood, Reginald McKnight, and the generous PhD and MA candidates in creative writing. I have relied on the intellect and encouragement of Simeon Berry and Fritz Ward. My mother, father, and brothers have faith in me, for which all thanks seem inadequate.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	vii
ONE AND SUNDRY	1
ONE	3
APPROXIMATE IN THE BIOSPHERE.....	4
IN STATE	6
BESTIARY SONNET	8
LEADING A LIFE.....	9
BESTIARY SONNET	11
PERSONALS OVER DINNER.....	12
GO GO LIKE THIS.....	14
TWO	16
MANIFIESTA.....	17
THE GOLFCART REVISIONS	19
EXECUTION OF THE NIP-UP	22
BESTIARY SONNET	23
ADHD KIDS HAVE SMALLER BRAINS.....	24
IN WHICH I HAVE BEEN DETAINED	26
NARRATIVE FOR MY FACE, IN NOIR.....	28

THREE	30
MY DEAR COMRADE IN HARM, DO NOT TELEPHONE	31
TOPICAL ELECTRIC	33
AGREEMENT TO ENDLESSLY ORBIT	35
ENTERING THE DEROGENOUS ZONE.....	36
BESTIARY SONNET	38
WANTED TO LET	39
EXIT STRATEGY: I PLAY THE PLASTIC VIOLIN FOR YOU.....	40
GIRLS ALOFT.....	42
FOUR	44
WOMAN IN SPACE	45
BESTIARY SONNET	47
THE SILVER-EATER CONFESSES	48
VISTA	50
A HISTORY OF NO CORRESPONDENCE	52
MISTER	54
DOWNSTREAM	56
WORKS CITED	58

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When I think about the poems in this thesis, what comes to mind is an early nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock print that illustrates the digestive system.¹ A heavy-set man, line-drawn, holds a cup of tea to his lips. Words surround his body, apparently medical explanations of his digestive processes; also present outside his body are a goldfish on a plate and a bottle filled with a repeating blue design. The real activity, however, goes on inside the man's large torso, where many miniature men are hard at work. Some haul buckets, others hoe and shovel, one group tends a huge vat above a fire, and inside the heart there seems to be an emperor. Crowded among the men and their tools is more text.

The image speaks to me as a powerful icon for how I intend my poems to function. It does this on several levels. First, the image purports to reveal. The goldfish and the bottle, trappings of ordinary life, help us recognize that the suddenly exposed inner workings of the body are secret knowledge. The image presents itself as uncovering a mystery. Second, the image conceals, perhaps even misleads. No one contains a little city; we would be naive to take the print as a literal truth and believe in a thriving stomach-based population. Third, the image intricately embellishes a (presumably) more straightforward text, the explanations that surround the man and fill the empty parts of his body—an unreadable text, for the non-Japanese reader, but not a nonexistent text, and not nonsense.

Like the illustration, my poems are intended to reveal, code, and embellish. Formally and procedurally the poems rely on duplicitous language and oblique narrative; though their most characteristic gestures are turns away from the other, demurrals or farewells, they do not refuse

all interpretation. Whatever coyness there may be to my handling of these concerns—impropriety followed by veiling—my intention is also to hint at an epistemology of uncertainty: that we experience a mediated world, a sidelong knowledge; that some stories are better told indirectly; that language and the reality it constructs are allegorical.

The poems that fascinate me are those that teach me something about, in Dickinson’s words, telling the truth but telling it slant. The notion of a poetry told slant and the reconstruction such a poetry requires imply a secret narrative, and in particular, as I suggest above, an allegorical narrative. I use the adjective *allegorical* deliberately in place of the noun, because although I would like to draw on allegory’s etymology (*other* + *speaking*) and its highly referential operation, the poems that I will describe as allegorical are substantively distinct from traditional allegory. The most important distinction is that allegorical poems direct their readers to multiple and often internal texts—much as the image of the tea-drinking man provides its interpretation in the margins—whereas traditional allegory directs its readers to a preexisting external text, usually the Bible. Nonetheless, many of allegory’s hallmark rhetorical tactics are also those of allegorical poems, because both forms insist that readers look beyond the surface text or the ostensible subject. In order to provoke this double-reading, the works continually identify themselves as text, not truth: they mix the figurative and literal levels of meaning, often to jarring effect; they manipulate and derail narrative in order to emphasize the second reading; they use pointed wordplay, linked metaphors, or the personification of abstractions.² Though traditional allegory is intended to point toward one very specific reading, allegorical works use the same tactics to produce a controlled but substantially more “open” poetry, to use Lyn

¹ Early nineteenth-century illustration of digestive system, in *Anatomy Illustrated*, by Emily Blair Chewning and designed by Dana Levy (New York: Simon and Schuster, Fireside, 1979), 41.

Hejinian's term,³ creating a set of possible readings that is layered and shifting. Brian McHale, analyzing postmodern fiction in light of allegory, identifies this multiplying of signals as a slowing down and emphasizing of the "ontological duality" preexisting in metaphor:

All metaphor *hesitates* between a literal function (in a secondary frame of reference) and a metaphorical function (in a "real" frame of reference); postmodernist texts often *prolong* this hesitation as a means of foregrounding ontological structure.⁴

This pleasurable hesitation is what I look for in all my reading, and it is what I try to reproduce in my poems.

Elizabeth Bishop's poems are central to my thoughts about how best to approach concealment and confession. Her poems repeatedly—almost continually—gesture toward coded stories beneath the public text. Such gestures are most clearly visible in her fantastic parables, like "The Man-Moth," which is about a writerly creature in New York City, or "The Gentleman of Shallot," who is halved but satisfied; Bishop's more characteristic mode, however, is a personal revelation buried in precise description, often of travel or nature. "The Bight," from which I take my thesis's epigraph, is typical of this mode:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up
against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
like torn-open, unanswered letters.

The bight is littered with old correspondences.

² Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964); Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 4-6; Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

³ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 42-43.

Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.⁵

Beneath the title, in a brief note, Bishop offers readers a key in how to read the poem's waterfront motley: it was written "[o]n my birthday." Cued to read the poem as a yearly reflection, we can tentatively identify the "last bad storm" as one of the periodic upsets in Bishop's own life; the "old correspondences" as a lifetime's worth of memory, as well as the aftermath of personal crisis; and the last two lines as Bishop's familiar stance in the face of hardship. Yet if the under-story belies the bright surface of the poem, the surface is undeniably antic: the silly onomatopoeia of the dredge, the half-rhyme of "jawful of marl" and "awful but cheerful," the subtle echoes between "little," "letters," and "littered." Tellingly, the "jawful"- "awful" rhyme is presented exactly at the moment that readers ought to be most conscious of reading both the literal scene of the boat and the figurative implications of the metaphor, much in the way that traditional allegories sometimes foreground their most prominent linguistic twists at important junctures.

Even when Bishop's poems do use the personal as their subject, they reveal by hints and understatement rather than direct announcement. The villanelle "One Art," a consummate moment of emotion tempered by craft, ends on a heartbreaking final loss:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master

⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 134.

⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 61.

though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.⁶

The construction of the poem—its wry distance and formal constraint—manages to both answer and keep present the kernel of raw anguish that the speaker studiously avoids facing. One senses that emotional crises are also linguistic crises, and that linguistic resolutions can therefore resolve immediate and pressing emotional crises: mere words, and the process of finding the right ones, relieve real trouble. Seamus Heaney is thinking of “One Art” when he writes that “[i]t is impossible to separate the poem’s reality as a made thing from its effect as a personal cry,”⁷ but he could just as easily be writing of “The Bight.” Just as the tea-drinking man’s internal activity is intensely engaging despite being an image intended to be looked through more than at, Bishop’s surface constructions are often integral to her poems’ success precisely because the surfaces are revealed as artifice.

Poets like Philip Larkin, John Forbes, and Anne Carson, have been invaluable in teaching me about telling it slant, because in many ways they appear to be telling it straight. At first glance, their poems appear fairly unscripted, in the way that the stomach of the tea-drinking man appears transparent. Forbes’ advice on love in “Lessons for Young Poets” is starkly moving:

continually disappoint
the expectations of others,
this way you will come to hate yourself
& they will be charmed by your distress.⁸

Equally bare is Larkin’s “Talking in Bed”:

Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995), 184.

It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind,

Or not untrue and not unkind.⁹

And in *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson includes exchanges like these between a narrating wife and her husband: “Coward. / I know. / Betrayer. / Yes. / Opportunist. / I can see why you would think that. / Slave. / Go on.”¹⁰ One might be tempted to label these poems too much “personal cry” and not enough “made thing,” but despite these exposures—frank, painful, and almost offhand—all avoid the dull, self-centered confession of, for instance, Sharon Olds or recent Philip Levine. The intimacy and force of the “I” remain without becoming purely personal.

The craft at these moments seems nearly prosaic in its plainness, and the images do not point particularly far past their literal readings. Nonetheless, my reaction to them is, perhaps unexpectedly, very unlike my reaction to Olds. Adam Kirsch argues that Olds has stripped most artistry from her poems:

Randall Jarrell once wrote that the poems he received from strangers in the mail were like torn-off limbs, with “this is a poem” written on them in lipstick: they were testimony, not art. Sharon Olds’s poems are certainly everything that testimony should be: sincere, resounding, unambiguous, consolatory. But just as certainly they are not art.¹¹

⁸ John Forbes, *Collected Poems* (Blackheath, Aus.: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001), 167.

⁹ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 129.

¹⁰ Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 83.

¹¹ Adam Kirsch, “The Exhibitionist,” review of *Blood, Tin, Straw*, by Sharon Olds, *The New Republic*, 21 Dec 1999: 41.

Larkin, Forbes, and Carson are themselves, at various points, sincere, resounding, and unambiguous, but their poems do not read as amputated testimony. All three preserve privacy, a mystery that draws on a suppressed narrative, despite the apparent rawness of the poems. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, the mystery is the power of a beauty that deceives; in Forbes' most bleakly confessional moments it is the attraction of intoxication, which is also the destruction of the self; in Larkin, it is existential loneliness and death. All three poets seem to sense that to answer these questions or solve the mystery—by psychologizing, rationalizing, or explaining—could succeed only in being reductive. The unambiguous answer does not answer a worthwhile question. The image of the tea-drinking man reveals the inside of the stomach, but its revealing is artifice; so too the apparently bald confessions of Carson, Larkin, and Forbes point towards another story. Their crafted confessions are adept at more than simply producing the appearance of spontaneity, of course, and I have learned from them a range of ways of expanding the ambitions and the range of confession. Carson's poems are grounded in scholarship, so that the most personal of questions tend to be tied to the most academic. Larkin and Forbes use humor to leaven the most miserable of their announcements, and Larkin, like Bishop, works within formal parameters to balance his struggle to face death.

Bishop occasionally calls attention to language, as in the “jawful”-“awful” rhyme and the implicit “write”-“right” pun, and Carson is highly conscious of her words' etymologies, but both are relatively restrained in vocabulary and play. Another contemporary poetics, however, places the performative aspects of language center stage. Brenda Shaughnessy, Lucie Brock-Broido, and a number of others, including Mary Jo Bang and Timothy Donnelly, celebrate language as artifice in a far more immediate manner than Bishop and Larkin do. These poets write with a sometimes-exuberant, sometimes-dense outpouring of unfamiliar words and virtuosic flash.

Often the result is a continuous displacement, a series of linked figures in which tenor and vehicle are less clearly delineated than we would find in a Bishop or Larkin poem.

Shaughnessy's poem "Fetish: The Historical Orphan," for example, is a poem from a left-behind lover:

Czarina! Tell me you're not giving up the rogue
red rule for a cottage edged with timothy and vague
whortleroot. Make room for me in your scullery,

strange queen of Siber with your hand stroking the back
of Mongolia.¹²

The poem points to Russian history, to sadomasochistic tropes, and to the story of a rejected lover, but it is also drunk on language: we note and enjoy the relatively unfamiliar "Czarina," "timothy," "whortleroot," and "Siber"; the visual rhyme of "rogue" and "vague"; and the near-rhyme of "cottage" by "edged." At its most literal level, the narrative is about a woman whose lover leaves her for a man and the accompanying safety of heterosexual domesticity, but importing an outrageous vocabulary lets the poem draw from a much larger range of tropes. Because it follows verbal pleasure as much as narrative necessity, the surface of the poem becomes complicated, secretive and therefore intriguing.

Shaughnessy frequently uses substitution, a key tactic in my own writing. At times Shaughnessy's substitutions recall cockney rhyming slang, in that once we know the trick, the original word is obvious: for instance, "How not to love her, her bouillabaisse, her orangina."¹³ Other times the grammar tells us what the words alone probably wouldn't: "We're awake / each

¹² Brenda Shaughnessy, *Interior With Sudden Joy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

night at pennymoon and we micro and necro.”¹⁴ My poems combine substitution with deliberate slips in language, often homophonic or associative. The slips are rewarding because they allow me to point toward several (and sometimes contradictory) readings in one phrase. This multiple-reading is especially suggestive when the words retain, however slightly, their original meanings, even as the slip reveals a new angle; where one relatively flat reading was possible, slips present several facets. Though obviously working to different ends than I do, Gertrude Stein also uses homophones for their ability to multiply the possibilities of a single word. In particular, her homophones recall a linguistic form of cubism, a language act that can hold simultaneity, just as Picasso’s fragmented planes present several angles at one time. Both Stein and Shaughnessy use slippage to extend the hesitation between actual and possible readings. At some level, this is a hesitation between internal and external, concepts that Stein suggests link her early interest in portraying character to her later interest in representing the visual world: “She always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal.”¹⁵ Language that slips can hold both the external and the internal, which is also the literal and the metaphorical.

There’s a final kind of poem that helps me write, one anticipated by Bishop’s fantastic parables. Where poets like Shaughnessy and Donnelly allow their language to carry some of the strangeness of their work, poets like Mary Ruefle, Michael Teig, and Matthew Zapruder often rely on their logic and philosophical musing even more than their language to produce strangeness. These poets confess far less than Carson and Forbes, but they write with a similarly artful artlessness. Because the fundamental operation of their poems is less linguistic and more conceptual, in the places where Shaughnessy gathers momentum from language and Carson from the “personal cry,” Ruefle, for instance, takes hers from imaginative leaps and careful

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 119.

juxtaposition. Like *The Beauty of the Husband*, Ruefle's "Royal Tragedies" questions Keats's "Truth is beauty, beauty truth" and has doubts, but the resulting poem is entirely different:

Macbeth killed Duncan.

That is all we know on earth

and all we need to know.

But wasn't it perfect the way the Princess died—

suddenly, and in love?

These are just ideas.

They don't occupy any space.¹⁶

In the next stanza, the speaker remembers wearing a rosary bead costume as a child, but the poem concerns itself with stringing ideas together rather than autobiographical revelation. It conducts serious philosophical inquiry in an artificially breezy manner—*just* ideas—and it is exactly this relaxed grip on precisely selected detail that gives Ruefle's poems their enigmatic weight. Zapruder's poems, too, explore enigma. Meditations like "Whoever You Are," which addresses a (necessarily, we eventually understand) unnamed "you," are reminiscent of prayer, while fables like "School Street" seem to be confessional poems from alternate worlds.¹⁷ Ruefle, Zapruder, and Teig help me understand how allegorical methods can ground abstract thought and how minimalism can produce the same multiplication of referents as excess does.

In an interview with Mary Gannon, Carson explains that she eventually thought of Keats' equation, "Truth is beauty, beauty truth," which she had never understood, as the center of *The*

¹⁶ Mary Ruefle, *Post Meridian* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon, 2000), 41.

¹⁷ Matthew Zapruder, *American Linden* (Dorset, VT: Tupelo Press, 2002), 6-7; 40-41.

Beauty of the Husband. Throughout the book, the deceit of the husband undercuts his beauty, and yet the beauty “convinces” again and again; paradoxically it becomes a kind of truth, an irresistible fact. When Gannon asks whether Carson eventually came to understand the equation, Carson says no, she didn’t. Then she continues, “But I felt that I’d rotated it as much as I could, which was probably the best I could do.”¹⁸ My interest in postmodern allegorical writing, homophones, overflowing exteriors and veiled interiors arises from their usefulness as tools for just such a rotation. In the poems that follow, I circle categorical concepts; they collapse into a central “one” that cannot be interrogated head-on but must instead be approached from “sundry” angles, surreptitiously.

¹⁸ Anne Carson, interview by Mary Gannon, *Poets & Writers* 29, no. 2 (March–April 2001): 32.

ONE AND SUNDRY

All the untidy activity continues

—Elizabeth Bishop

ONE

APPROXIMATE IN THE BIOSPHERE

At that time I had rabies, which is like
multiplying by zero
so I drank chocolate milk in tense, rounded spoonfuls,
whispering, *Takin' my medicine*, which was strange
so I was very quiet.

Solid, liquid, or gas, everything was mostly empty space
through which atoms jiggled in varying degrees
of sympathy and irritation. I thought confused meant *with joined*
so I felt less alone. It was ESP or depression.
Amputation was required. Crutches, stitches, casts, etcetera.

Once as I went headdown on my circular way
a stranger said, *You are so good*,
and I thought it was a benediction, a curse,
though now I recognize *thank you* askew
and wobbling through the air.

In revenge I was bad.

I was thirsty. I chewed my hair, chewed
extremities, chewed the plastic-wrap walls, flexing

the line between inside and out. To escape
I had to leave behind parts of myself.

Then Lassie's friend Precious-and-Doomed
came frothing intently across the screen,
heading for the hothouse, the high windows, my grand experiment—
it was prophecy, or a natural and accurate pessimism,
or the ache in my residuals that told me

poor Precocious was one gone dog, was dead meat, was just
dead. Though in truth my tools were usually useless.
Too small, too large, too blunt. I was inconcluded.
What she wanted was water,
water, unsatisfying and mostly nothing.

IN STATE

1.

Icy in control, chandelier around my hips,
Slippers interrupting the map, I am a body composed

Inside all of exoskeletons and officious errandboys.

Cautions of grasshoppers stink to high heaven,
Which may well be above, and sensible. Not grass
But rot, despite their green flesh and delicate legs.

I might seem the queen. This kingdom of dropaway.
This fief of never, never, forever. And my people?

Bloodletters, treetappers, thieves, and itinerants,
O god-in-goden, so useful but ingracious: midgets uncorking
Pipes, midgets beating curs, midgets mid-craving,
Midgets traveling the pneumatic tubes of my inner bounds,
Carrying the dark, the light, and each and
Every thought.

2.

It is a fertile world: what rules dies. The insects, too, and I
Mean to stay here, interior abustle, outside bustled
Emblematically, romantically draining color from the land's lips,

Choosing artifice. Because I say *draped in prisms*
On wires, I break the light limb by limb,

My self monstrous large, ray-crowned, wise-browed. Who sings

All summer. Who works. Crosshatching marks
The hills, the valleys are empty, the ocean dried up long ago
And is covered in gold foil. I keep

A regal distance. I am never in charge. This grammar?

It's borrowed, I tuck it in my shoes, then toddle,
A sparkle, a trifle, over all borders, into all nations.

BESTIARY SONNET

Do you avaunt to torque
with handsome animals?

Insects, the lichen, and the ghost
of the stare of the stork
holed to her holes.

Oxen: few add. Fire sole

and olive soy is discerned,
now and on dim sum day.

Tapirs get huffy delight.

Would glow who listened,
detergent finding way.

The spuns of whirl swine alive

leap and leaf-like

and just wee leaving.

LEADING A LIFE

To understand the quiet desperados, one must imagine their heavy hats, the poultry strapped to their backs.

The quiet desperados spin peccadilloes on each index finger. At night they mend their trousers and pea coats, cut silhouettes of small appliances out of canvas to patch their duffel bags. This is because they are missing.

There are four, three, an incongruity of limbs and glares, but there is never one. Their gestures appear indignant, but it may be calisthenics.

Early desperadologists reported nefarious doings, and it is true that the quiet desperados are not efficient. But they do have principles: (1) The hens must not die. (2) After time the odds become less so. (3) View the world through pantyhose, the great distorter of friendly smiles. It should be a blurry and vulnerable place.

The quiet desperados sublet. They are unreliable about the rent. If they lose their keys, they leave town on foot. Most roads lead to scoliosis.

When they fall in love, they choose each the same. One blushes behind a fan, another lines up shots of Wild Turkey, a third lays out marbles on a velvet placemat. He likes best the antique cat's eye. It is a kind of incarnation.

They never fight. Their romances fizzle independently.

The quiet desperados stop and turn beneath a streetlight on a wet night, elbows like onions. They know someone watches how their bodies ghost into and out of one another, warped by the rain. Inside the spider plant drops its leaves.

BESTIARY SONNET

Hat day was the only day I liked.

Then they took it away.

—*The New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 7, 2003

So it hurt hall-like

Eye can't find good what

Can't hat hear trenches

And the furl lighter this overt stuff

Metallic tiling lone linoleum

Because curves eyes

One day at home all bent

Forth and we half ending

We sullen hanging halving

This little while gone dearly

Both nooses are ruined

Then I'm sure winter

Then be we dervish

Then gonna tell no more

PERSONALS OVER DINNER

Please. My nickname is
little couscous. In your letter please

discuss: is it better to be eaten
or repellent? In my hometown

we didn't chat. We rubbed
windows, the windows hummed,

we flipped our porchlights
often. On and off, no and bless,

yes and do: call me couscous.

I know many ways not to

speak. Is what I mean.

If you reply I'll mail my name,

my dictionaries, my letters
are inlaid, they are badly fear

wrinkled. Might you come please
for supper? I am hungry-dizzy,

hoping much for something and
much for nothing. I love in the kitchen

the preshredded lettuce. Triple
washed. Bagged. You rappel

or you fall. We were mostly water
then in the blinking houses after

dark, like most food is mostly
water, mostly we wanted safety,

to be friendly far-off. What I've written
is inaudible. Sorry, truly, I'm the in

side and the edible. Please take
this bread. It means to break.

GO GO LIKE THIS

Then I was splitting
uncontrollably. A very timid
I, a limpid metric I.
Shepherding my coupe
between the lanes, I had done
amorally well. I musician.
I superintending the clues
and weaponry, I missing my cat,
my car, my crush, crept
like a bedfellow into arrivals
and departures. Always jostling
I. I jousting aslant, glancing.
I cute. I glued a tilt
to my forehead and braided
archetypes at my temples.
Which frayed. Afraid I
in the rented cassock gnawed
off the shotgun. On the mantle I
meddled, I was lying
to be of someone's consort.
But everything finished is polished.

Off the chartered flight,
then I tangled in bed in
my arms. Calling for the page,
I perhaps had won, I clearly was
quite ovum.

TWO

MANIFIESTA

Always leave space

for speculation,

which is Latinate and demanding

like a grandma who does not approve

but wants nonetheless to visit.

Before she arrives, you'll have to hide

the vintage bondage

postcards and the photographs of strapped-

down feet.

That's how it goes.

The blanks suggest

privacy, poverty, a low-grade

comfort. But speculation brings treats!

At home she is sewing a patchwork cock

for the nonexistent kettle.

If the hotdog looks phallic

you haven't cleaned well enough.

Doctor Sue may approve of penile motifs,

Doctor Sue may recommend the Fluke-o-me vibrator,

but speculation does not.

Speculation lingers

a little in the curtains, examining the pattern
of homunculi and woven baskets,
then ducks behind the refrigerator
to trace tiles one by one.

Pinning deities

on styrofoam might help,
or holding a ceremony to confirm
doubt, so go on, grab your rooster,

and let's monumentalize tearing down
monuments! Let's sacrifice
sacrifice! If it looks like hedonism
or torture via intellect,
just think of the impossible

objective and go

O.C.D.-ing down the hall: oh dear

oh my

we are all so endlessly ourselves, our toesies
rosy in the bear-trap of the soul.

THE GOLFCART REVISIONS

Dear Sir.

Dear Madman and Sir. Dear nidus.

Dear gargantuan. Dear circling Eyes-in-the-Skies.

Dear regrowth of royalty. Dear not us.

Dear Abby. Dear pincushion. Dear exotics and Whys.

We are righting

this letter beside the door,

an umbrella stand to fold our worries

in. We demand your attention

to our urgent mutter:

Things are damp and unfair.

There is a tendency

to fail, a repetitive entropy into which we fall,

like an army of Jessicas, singing *But nothing*

is small below a button of sky.

Please reduce, reuse, and recycle.

We already do! We know you will too!

Please shore up the erosion—the *physical* erosion,
which exposes the knuckles of the pine,
the hoax, the tree-we-know-not
but its anonymous roots barely
hold anything together anymore.

Please identify whose torture underwrites
our study of masochism, tadpoles,
and crowd psychology. Please inclusively

alphabetize the nine ways of being:
Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Judaic,
and some other five.

Please sweetly extinguish, and stop
wallowing in the moral wetlands,
which are marked by helpful sins:

Muddy, Unclear. Rara Avis

Rental, This Way.

Please agree.

Otherwise we shall be forced, against
our wills, maliceless, insistent and earnest,
to occupy the golfcarts
and putt-putt rechargeably
through the vacated suburbia.

Understand: we are open
twenty-four hours, cutting and pasting
through the night. We are fuel-efficient
and new and improved. Five percent
of our interior monologue is charitable
and we own no livestock.

Our offices are equipped with photocopiers and optimisms,
the best of all possible worlds.

Each spring we call-and-response
through the cubicle walls: *All wrong?*

All gone.

EXECUTION OF THE NIP-UP

Goodbye, uncheering antecedents! No sighs,
no sacrificial egress, no wah-wah-wah, no doubts.

I am lewdly improved, revised and resized,
dressed in a leotard and leather and white-out.

After you there's a sheer slate, a clear artifice,
my forward-facing party. I'll have a mimosa,
something tropic, something tart. My oedipuses
miss you, yes, excavatedly—

but, dear lhasa apos

of my medieval error, unicellulars flagellating
in back there's dungeons, bon vague age! Happy flying
buttress! Enjoy Ectopia, proud home of anysuch
sans me. I want no post-cares, no delicate mutating
this methink-tion of multitudes, no leveraged buying
of a better routine, no wincing rhinestoned clutch.

BESTIARY SONNET

My heart has kind desks, too.
My most is nickel swiveled
in summon and soap weather.
One soldered this who
and freed them fictional.
What of the mown's month?

Within that I mixed,
moving through my guessers,
womb I cubed out of milk.
I clasped the physiologist.
We drug the needle's stairs.
My furtherings in silk

and stifle: lift, hold, rob, risk
and weapon on my rise.

ADHD KIDS HAVE SMALLER BRAINS

Luckily, once-daily Ritalin capsule beads can be sprinkled on applesauce. The first time I sent my shoes through the x-rays was like watching your ship sail away. In your worsted travel suit, you steered toward a war. I was unable. Later I lost my boarding pass twice and remembered the tuna, which must have been beneath you. Bad for dolphins, bad for cats, a misfortunate species. More of us than ever have psychological ailments. Many of us are in homes. We leave our shoes outside the door. The carpet is white, with unclear intentions: it may mean to converse.

Researchers blame the riots on infant formula and announce that the speed at which things move away from one another increases always. Logically either I am becoming more empty, like a balloon, or you more distant. Still we circle our wagons and practice selective irrationality. The student doctor practices subdued knowing. Soon it's just me and the yoga mats and him, reeling the crimped threads from the carpet. Malfunction has rewards.

Not fiscal rewards. Not intellectual. And one stops eating the applesauce. One sets it by the bedroom with whipped cream and bacon bits. Compared to the dead of other generations, our dead are slow to rot. You constantly gnawed your collar, waving your fedora, looking fierce and unbalanced, but I'm jealous: I'm all for getting out. I'm forgetting whose damage is whose.

You drink it through a straw, you take it at night, your cell phone is ringing, it's playing a march. The tuna's body when canned seems woodchip and pink. Yours is over the horizon, islandless,

when I am perfectly midnight. The perspectives are embalming, but with proper application the brain grows back. It fills in the margins. It folds extra folds.

IN WHICH I HAVE BEEN DETAINED

It is my fortune to *squirm*.

Facing the mirror's polished steel, I use spit and a sock on the skull of my hothouse.

My troubles are with agency. Who does what. What does whom. I'm not the warden, but I'm the voice of reason, I'm the only sane one here.

Inside's unusually active, unusual activity. The homunculi dig cellars into our mind's floor.

Smoke smudges my inner glass. I'd think another Chicago, another London, another animatronic bear to chide and look cute, but then I see the bricks lined up to bake. Development.

I was never a good communicator.

I kick my feet hard against outward. Meaning: smoke damage, low-cost burial plots, satellite TV, hypnotic relief from guilt. Meaning: no more. It's difficult to show the nervous system I care while at the same suggesting not all behavior is acceptable.

One homunculi checks the toes, contorts, limps upstairs again. Takes everything too literally, lying near the spinal cord and holding one foot in hand.

Everyone needs personal space, space to grow, outerspace. Even me. Because the homunculi want condos. They import soil and tulips. Maybe it's a new age of thought, so much renovation and domestication and soaring property values, but truly—

when my twitch leaps merrily across the synaptic gaps, the roots going down make everything
itch.

NARRATIVE FOR MY FACE, IN NOIR

Captain Subvocalizing Mirror

busts in uncovered *against*

polite procedure, carried

by circumstances: attachment

to neck, shoulders, knees and toes,

knees and toes. Lawblue's a limit,

lawblue's not bluebird blue.

Subvocalizing thinks she's in charge,

but she's tofu on a stick, she's balloon

and dry ice, she's hardboiled

egg. Inside, yellow paisley, a con-

fusion of streamers saying the AC's *alive*

near the many banjos, and the wrongo:

Offending Miasma. He loiters.

Subvocalizing gets tamper-evident

on Miasma, fictionalizing, *You zippety-do-dah*

around this swell town. You bottle emotions?

In the back? She ball-bearings

the weight of the weird on her back,

she plays a mean bad cape, twitching

her red Donna Karan, unquivering

Miasma's collection of stained-glass jars,
facets diamond-molting in the halved
life of early morn. Miasma lubricates
his lips. He had a bad childherd, running wrong
crowds across borders, barking. *You've fallen,*
sinisters Subvocalizing, *but not far.* She wraps
Miasma in sticky thread. When the sirens
come crudely serenading *heybigboy*
lemmeseelemmese, all the action
is prerecorded and duly reenacted.
Subvocalizing faces home. She takes
the untaken, shoving speculation away.
She does her job, then ends each day
with the limbs, the torso. She slackens
her grip on the neck. Only briefly.
It is difficult, being a birdhouse
atop a pole, the honcho, the stern self
conscious.

THREE

MY DEAR COMRADE IN HARM, DO NOT TELEPHONE

but forgive me for standing you up on Date Number Two.

In truth I dislike you, but etiquette has unpacked herself, a do-it-to-yourself dominatrix:

Apologize, she says, and I whimper, *Sorry, sorry, sorry*. She shoves poor me against the wall, where I try hard to self-negate.

Friend, during our pleasant lack of date, I busied myself alluring moths from the front door, wearing my emergency bathing suit—red, blue, and blinking. All that flash barely covers my soft round hostilities, but etiquette demands I dress well, no matter how insect my public. The moths wanted only to knock themselves against my sixty-watts, which means more minor suicides. I know, each life counts, but not to each person, not to me.

You kissed both my cheeks on Number One. Yuck, I thought. Still, etiquette insisted I empty all the bottles so you would feel at home. I tied the bookshelves to the walls and the floor to the ceiling, and now the middle's all there is. Around the caved-in rug, etiquette trains me in erudite claustrophobia. How could I leave, with such preparation? With avocados sprawled like women on the counter, with false eyes on my back?

When I forget you at the theater, how nice to know: I am living out my dream, I am sweeping the suicides out the door! They pile.

You'll see them if you visit,

please don't visit,

in your pointy boots, in your hearse of a car.

TOPICAL ELECTRIC

Is the urban buddha always
with us? Is he in the room...right...
this...minute? Can he say what I am
thinking? Animal, mineral, digital?
In midtown the sidewalks grow
unique weather & oddly you meditate.
In a stairwell. The contortionist wind
& unnatural dripping are the city
enlightening us, the path of too-close
& too-hot. We like each other
through the ironic steam rising
from the grate. We are going to the parting,
to the party, to the bathroom to do no
bathing. Something terrible is on tape!
At the ATM! Your plastic superstar
leans stiffly on the dresser, in purple,
with boa. Her fingers are fused
into mittens. She holds them out,
mere ornaments, mere flat palms,
& you love her. Are we the same
hallucination? Maybe glamour's anesthesia

goes shallow, but still we glitter
all night. We send our mothers dancing,
reeling, laughing, in the disco, you are sad.
You curl my hair medusa. You call me
way too good. You are, yeah, entirely un-
concerned, which is the only way to descend
from the ceiling: by pretending
we were never there.

AGREEMENT TO ENDLESSLY ORBIT

There was a place to circle: visitors, yes or no.

I chose no. I don't know what I circle. The porthole
faces out, dull to look at—black needlepoint,
slow kitchen clock—useless to look through.

Still. I can forget about breathing.

Lately I notice not all I think is in my mind.

I notice unnecessary. I notice irreverence, I suspect
the dust reeling inside the satellite is personal.

I initialed after a warning. It had four points
like a compass. An epic. I wrote the beginning
of each of my names, thinking of a lesson,
a learned lesson, a lesson I learned as a child
that some times will never meet, that no time
is added and no time is subtracted.

ENTERING THE DEROGENOUS ZONE

O dogs of solitude, lizards of horniness, we must prepare ourselves for Armageddon.

—Padgett Powell

We must prepare ourselves! In the bomb shelter of loneliness, in the twin bed of masturbation, in the kind dull glow of cable porn and memory, we must think fondly of whoredom while we pat the tortoise of Abstinence. Under the yellow triangles, with mechanical aid, rationing, rational, we must recall the bad performances, the failures, the copyspotted diagrams of *I THOUSAND WAYS TO MAKE LOVE*, which mark a secret matrimony, an antinomy, of hope and cynicism. We must keep busy. Things are both more desperate and more possible, here in the tunnel of no-love, in the ever-after's ever after. We must speak more often, excessively, allusively, in plural! We must pinch our cheeks to bring color like joy, like a body, to the surface. We must remember that sex is unsexy: the toe cramps and laundry, the ingrown selves, the sweet underwhelming sameness. O mouse of the romantic dream, o hummingbird of the nightclub, o disaster that is not

disaster, o ten feet down and lined with lead, it's love-hate or hate-love, us and the orgasmic

ghosts, the little deaths that moan and sigh and make the bed collapse. We must, dogs, lizards,

messy *I-am*. We lay the crossboards slant, then boxsprings, mattress, sheets, the comforter

that refuses, because in frustration, in strange company, in the blackout dark, we must go on.

BESTIARY SONNET

Other dunes, other delay:

but me lacunae is finding

ravel down to this then.

Both my nicked and my die,

and sickle east and the doily fishing,

cries hymn about tin.

I'm self to noon good

and me plied on theremin

in milks, in fully dead.

Nothing me titles me food.

Kidding I, wealthy, earnest, kind

and me down minds to led.

Monsoon swiveled this flight,

land locked it mud. This singing bright.

WANTED TO LET

I don't need an umbrella.

I like to have a plot to live
where the infections are little.

I like a quiet apart
even if the mildness grows
islands in the shower.

Niceness isn't necessary.

Not for me, I like once
upon a bother, shins
and musts and heat pipes.

I like closed with shelved.

I like a look up front
and a shore. How I get by
is sliding and often
without. I like even
the stance of the ceiling,
how the rice steams
and no washing machine
stares and wonders,
stares and turns.

EXIT STRATEGY: I PLAY THE PLASTIC VIOLIN FOR YOU

and back out the door with the nonstick wok, the knives for peeling,

for coring, slicing, cutting out. I am vanishing.

No, I am the vanishing point and you're a dead paper trail, a filing

down, a reason we live in the midst. This is how we conjugate
the plural, then break the rack and run. This is a piss-poor apology,

a shuffle of miss me and remember. I wear the sexy shoes. We watch
one girl impale another, until the VCR finally won't. You study

the radio. You like Stevie Wonder's greeting in the anecdote's bourbon:

My name is Stevie, he says. *I'm in music*. The President waves, no,

we are in different stories. At 3 a.m. the ceiling rings and you hang
if I answer. One of us is scared. Your first trap was a window opening

onto ambulances. An emergency, a beginning. I can play only five songs
electronically, note by note. Not one says what I want. Darling,

I would save you from electrocution. With a broom handle,

from a distance. I go down on my hands and knees, I arch my back,

I drop my hips. Tell me how. I am a vase you can enter sideways.

What I mean to say is I am blind. I am blinding. I am leaving,

I am waving goodbye. And if I stop—if I breathe and cover—

—for L.H., with error

GIRLS ALOFT

Up in the coxcomb, the bedrooms
leavened with ladies. We wore barely young mockery. A hunger

ripened between each thrill,

I kept falling in. She asked if I had ever and I was a simpleton.

I thought one answers.

Curious, I quivered my shoulderblades, put the pout

and flounce beside the ladder.

There was a nimbus hook, a lamp covered and muted,

a threat of twins. We righted our stilts

in the squalls, our skills beer-warm and dizzy, then flocked

on the pillow. Diligent

wrecks lined up on the listing selves. I was like a lisp, like nothing

quite caught. I left for shushing

and a giggle, for the failsafe guesthouse, where everyone is

not inside and not outside.

We dropped our stones on the hopscotch. Yes. Then I upstart

and quitted.

FOUR

WOMAN IN SPACE

Wasn't sick was

Was distant Was fouled and rot

nearer heaven

A figurehead with electrodes and a camera

I was the seagull

not eating not unbuckling not

controlling

the flight not the radio not the dispatch

Not uncomfortable no

Landed like a starveling on the dry grass

Black bread butter

onion A starling A bird's delicate hunger

When the egg

is complete it is winged I'd been proved

tested Swallowed

rubber tubing Walked underwater

Spun pressed Quit

sleeping for seven days and the little

dog appeared

to me A telling nothing Unlike a man

In Star City

We firsts must have our own *It is I*

secrets *I seagull*

BESTIARY SONNET

Further this rest is bed,
sorrow this bird time,
and this the girl of the stone.

Hand help the poor abed,
locks the spoon over all of them
that to salt being gone.

Deny we breathe our orchard needs her
and both bidden to the eye.

Drunk sodden egg nog
and tussled them newel.

Boat by night and by they
and make since of this bog,

ready then darling
to daring, dead mocking.

THE SILVER-EATER CONFESSES

When argyria sufferers lie down in public, they are often confused with the dead.

—*The New Yorker*, Nov. 11, 2002

Mom, dad, I'm dead. It's midnight & I've collapsed
at the base of the triangle pythagoreening lightly
from the fridge. Let's practice. Drop everything.

Nothing's worse, so let's just do it, while I bleed
neon & Gatorade across the tiles. I loved
America. I loved holding my lighter over the bowl

while meaning drained clockwise, making music
as it went. For me, it's more a slow wasting
in the study, a difficult & smelly end, but that's okay,

here in my off-peak hours, I accept Jesus, the instant
messenger, my slow embalm. It's unfair & malpractical.

I fall down the stairs. I do it myself. I am the wrong

person in the wrong jacket. I'm choking & twitching
& everything's in ruins when I'm gone.

Can we try it again? The police wear gray costumes

like swatches of my face, & the EMT covers me
with a sheet, though I'm warm. This is always how
I leave home: I roll on four polished legs, I'm served

out the door on a stainless steel tray. I'm coaching you
to question everything—Is the rabbit in the moon
really a rabbit? Is it really the moon?—& never be hurt.

The market research was right. I boomerang back.

If it pinches when I inoculate us against nostalgia, think
how it keeps us cozy: what a bad joke, what a sweet way

to be born, again & again, back into your hearts.

VISTA

It must be

in the eye,

when the ranger petnames

the twin waterfalls

Cheerful and Puckish.

Cheerful's higher, Puckish

a better postcard.

At sunset

he mutes traffic,

cues the crickets.

The stars drop.

A trick.

The ranger folds Cheerful

at midnight, hangs

Puckish from a clothesline

in a khaki lean-to.

In what state are the falls?

The falls are silk

and mirror, they drape

like tinsel on the rocks

while a recording

trickle-trickles.

The mirrors
hide gears
that turn magnets,
buckets, pulleys, levers. Even
the sightseers know
it's common, automaton,
all nature
disassembling.

Still: a state of watchful readiness.

Of high alert. Of

Delaware.

The falls want to be inside

after dark.

They are explicable.

Unreasonably fearful.

When the ranger

switches on

the stars,

turbines blow waves

into the silk.

A HISTORY OF NO CORRESPONDENCE

Incomprehensible hand,

missing or dead addressee,

no such island, needs more

postage, impossible but hopeful

packaging, misled, mislaid,

broken. Shipping valuables

is no longer recommended.

Television & questionnaires

like reality forecasts,

their advice & aspersions. People

peer over their double edges

& murmur mediavally.

This form is mandatory.

It begs please respond

please respond.

MISTER

First the wind-up feet,
then the rabbit (in pinafore,

with baby mouse). First
the stained glass house,

then the plate. First
the candle, then the box.

I know you are a gentleman.

You let the knick-knacks leave

with ceremony, into the foregone
like an aisle. Like a furlough

the gesture's not much, just
barely. When the light goes limp

in your arms, unmanageable
as a protester, you are this kind.

Bubble-wrapping the shark's teeth.

Pinning mittens in the snow.

Never the shelves, but you dust

the unfolding frames,

you always.

DOWNSTREAM

I make the world wherein.

Specifically, bon mots
and inside, cherries.

Boxes within
and without a voice
oncescored and further

tuned to the incisor's
note. Not labor,
this passing trick: metal

to tooth to bone to drum.

Undershell is dense
and sweet. After a scud of ipso

the collateral thou rises:
an otherworld,

a rushing private keen,

a channel out.

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