

ABSTRACT

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IN THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

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The poems that make up this thesis are divided into four sections. The first section is focused on outside characters, from a dancing nurse to the figures in paintings. The second section moves more into the first person and explores the ideas of watching and seeing, and begins to reveal more of the existence and state of mind of the speaker. The short third section pushes the characters more clearly into the realm of the imaginary and the unreal. Finally, the poems of the fourth section deal with language and the act of writing itself.

IN THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

By

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I

In The Portrait Gallery

They stare at us, unblinking, their cracked eyes
sometimes calm, sometimes crazed. They are always
facing us, or turning towards us; they have been waiting
for us, it's true, and it seems so cruel that when we finally
arrive they have nothing for us, that their eyes don't light up
at long last, they don't complete that turn or stand up
from that bow or finally, finally let their cracked lips turn
into a smile, open a little as if to speak, even frown or grimace
and draw their eyebrows down as though what we did mattered,
just a little, and we would know whether to be proud of our buildings
and our bombs, the rising murder rate in Baltimore or the latest
Pulitzer-Prize-winning author or even the fact that, for the first time
in my entire life, the Tigers have made it to the World Series.
What better brother or sister are they waiting for?
Don't they know that they, too, are slowly fading, their colors
dimming, their skin flaking away? In a few months,
they will be taken, covered in shrouds and stacked
in dark rooms. In their place will be great silent places,
photographs of mountains in black and white, strange angles
of telephone wires against clear skies, things that are expected
to say nothing.

Living Room

Over the fireplace sits a painting
of a round-faced woman, smiling,
her hands folded in her lap. Her dress
is stiff with lace, and her husband,
standing behind her, wears a fine
brown jacket, a bright grey vest.
Underneath, on the mantel, sits
a misshapen mug of blue clay
with no handle, baked perpetually
half-melting. Then a Christmas card
three years old, dancing penguins
in winter hats. Trinkets, too,
gifts of pinecones, wooden apples
and a pewter sphinx. Even
the pieces of a broken Easter egg,
promise you'll never throw it out,
solid blue and dancing with stick lions
and giraffes. It's impossible now
to tell which were which, the heads
and bodies, lines all mingled,
pressed up against each other
as though afraid to be alone.

Gloria

She dances down the hallway
In her new white shoes
Handing out pills and lollipops
To all the boys and girls.

And switches on their televisions
Empties their bedpans
Kisses Hector on the cheek
And puts his mask back on.

She was there when Mattie died
When they unplugged O'Keefe
She took the flowers from their rooms
And tossed them off the roof.

She watched them flutter to the ground
Like worn-out butterflies;
Then clocking out at 9pm
They crunched beneath her shoes.

Old Man Cowley at Golden Gates

His wife was always coming
Next weekend.
Would you like to see her picture?
It's here somewhere, he's sure.
Her hair grey, her face grey,
Although he points out
She never really looked like that,
At least not then, a young woman,
But maybe later, maybe now
She's paler still, an odd thought.

But she wasn't, she was brighter
Outside the window that night.
She didn't look lost, and yet
She wasn't stopping there.
Out the window he followed
And down the darkened street,
His robe fluttering up.

They found him in the morning
Five miles away, sitting on a bridge
Tossing pieces of his picture of her
Down into the river.

Chaos Theory and the Midwestern Earthquake

The whole house shuddered when he left.
For weeks, he couldn't be avoided:
Echoes, aftershocks, the windows
Trembling in their frames.

Is there a point
Where all movement stops?
Or do the ripples
Move back and forth
Forever?

Exactly one month
After he walked out the door
The floors cracked, walls fractured,
Roof beams sagged and buckled.

Next door, the neighbors didn't even wake;
If it hadn't been for the news,
They wouldn't have believed him.
Surveying the ruins, his neighbor smiled.
Once in a lifetime, he told me,
And you were around to see it.

Mercy

When you face the doctor
And see, behind him, months
Or years of tests and charts,
Being slid in and out of tubes
And sliced and sectioned,
Sent away in pieces, and still
The slow decline, inescapable
Fencing against Death
Who dances around you, striking
First this part, and then that,
Touché, your wife will drive you
Or, perhaps, you will go nowhere
Further than the railing of the front porch,
Touché, the contractors will come
And install the metal bars, horizontal,
That lead you through the house
Like a scared animal, clinging to walls.

Then, think of the zebra.
Not the proud horsy beast
That thunders in herds across the Serengeti,
But that one, behind,
Who feels his heart twitching in his chest
And has no time to think
Of stents or balloons, only time
To feel the sharp bite
Of teeth into flesh, stumbling
Wild-eyed, rolling with the lion,
And one last kick, connecting
With the air, before the snap
And sudden disentanglement
Of beast and beast.
Do you see it?
That is nature's mercy,
The zebra's white unseeing eyes
Turned towards God.

The Stage

There are many people milling around, strange people in strange clothes, a fat man with a greasy beard is staring intently at a dagger and saying the same thing, over and over, each time moving his eyes and the dagger a little differently. And there, there is a short man with a feather in his cap, pacing back and forth, scratching his chin. In half an hour he goes on, marches out onto the stage a short man with a feather in his cap, and just like every other half an hour before going on, he's very afraid that he is not in fact a short man with a feather in his cap. He is in fact a short man whose hair is just a little thin on top, who has an apartment that is slightly too small for two people, as his girlfriend tells him often, that would never do for a serious couple, she hasn't yet said marriage but sometimes he hears it anyway, so he tells her, who can afford a bigger apartment, it can't be done. Once in a dream he had an apartment with a staircase inside, two levels, and she was there, dancing up and down the stairs, at first it was nice but she just wouldn't ever stop, up and down those stairs, and everywhere she stepped there were rose petals. *The first flowers I'll ever get will be white lilies,* it came to him quite calmly one day during lunch, but she only narrowed her eyes at him and started in about how to fix the air conditioning. *In all my life, they'll never throw any flowers, not until I'm dead.* Sometimes she tells him *you're still young, you have a lot of plays left in you,* and sometimes she tells him *it doesn't matter that you're not the star* and sometimes she tells him *shut up about your goddamn flowers,* but she certainly never brings any. Who brings flowers to Feathered Cap Man or Butler or Assistant #2? And the more she talks about the apartment, the more he talks about flowers. He won't get the apartment. She won't get the flowers. It just goes on this way. It goes on just this way.

To Hal Struthee

You made it into the news today, Hal.
What you died of, I can't pronounce
but I hope it didn't hurt.
Maybe you think I'm being too light,
but then again, I never knew you.
Who did? You weren't survived
by anyone. It's not to say
you had an empty life, of course.
I can see it all here, first the army,
then college, New York City,
then Detroit. Such work you did,
an advocate for the disabled, although
by advocate I mean businessman,
part of the state's largest producer
of prosthetic arms and legs.
You felt their pain, true enough;
a freight train took your legs.
But what did you do? They'll hire
someone else now, legs or not.
Why should you care? After all,
would it be better if you'd left
people behind? We don't live on
in our children, or it only makes
the fading slightly slower.
You changed the world no more
than anything else in it, the
whirling currents of air or the
endless grinding of rocks.
The things we do
flatten under history, they're
worn away. Your friend says,
"His impact was immeasurable."

His Grandfather's Trumpet

Skirts twirling madly, hair swinging wildly,
Shoes flying in the air on kicking legs,
Faces blurred in the haze. The tones were
Breathy and real, the deep growl of a singer
Who has chain-smoked for twenty years.
Fingers to valves, effortless, well-oiled,
Just the slightest resistance. No band concert
Had ever been swung and rocked
The way this one would be, like his grandfather
In Chicago with this same horn.
The solo in the Christmas Medley written out,
He could do better. He would stand up
And be heard.

The Long Dead

There is a good reason the furniture here is covered in white. Maybe you like the idea of the portrait room, maybe you think it's charming like aristocracy. Or maybe you think it's just a symbol of people with more money than sense and more pride than charity. Why else have this long, useless room, filled with a procession of people who, frankly, didn't change the world even a little? Why am I expected to remember, even honor, this man, on horseback, staring boldly, as I'm sure the painter claimed, into the distance? What, exactly, did he do? He was a manager. If it hadn't been him, it would only be someone else standing here, some other line of faces; I don't believe a single thing they did was ever unique. Once, guests were probably shown this room, but now the furniture's all covered and the faces are growing dusty. The most recent here is already past one hundred, and we had long since left playing at horses, he didn't have to pretend any other kind of boldness than his own dull talent for numbers or people or whatever it is that keeps a fortune growing. His portrait is the best, I think. There is a sort of cunning in his eyes to put the nouveau riche to shame. Who could work in this room? Who could sit under those eyes and sip tea and eat biscuits? Well, it's over now. They will go to some country cousin, I suppose, or to America. Who doesn't have relations in America? Or even, you never know, some obsessed collectors who know the names and dates of every minor painter of the forgotten ages. I suppose that's the moral of the story, that every useless thing is wanted by someone. That's what he knew in his cunning eyes, how to find the things and the someones. What eyes to have to live under, be watched by, what a thing to try to live up to.

Father Thomas

If you sit in the first row,
There's something in his eyes,
His manner of speaking, like
Uncle Sean, who'd say,
After each trip north,

Oh, you should have seen it.
Clear water, cold as ice,
And not another man for miles,
Just you and the fish,
Bigger than any you'll ever see.

Sure, he brought some back,
Packed in ice, scales dull,
Gold becoming orange, silver
Turning to grey, ready to be
Stripped, gutted, and eaten.

But the look in his eyes
When he told the story
Of the one that got away,
Snapped the line, disappeared
A silver fish in a silver stream,

That's what you remember now,
Looking up at Father Thomas,
Clutching the sides of the pulpit
Like he might, at any moment,
Be washed away.

Enter Stage Left

The church was handing out free meals that day
Of runny stew and carrots from a can,
And close to noon the line ran down the block,
Most men, old bearded men, as though a call
For casting Homeless Geezer Number One
Were being answered, and they looked the part.
They practiced, too, while standing in the line:
You've got to get your head around your role.
Think like a homeless man, invent a past
To bring you where you are; think how the man,
The man you are, would act while waiting here,
Prepare. Shake out your wrists and arms and neck
And take a breath, remember all your past
And keep it yours, don't even say a word
To all the other men who want the part;
Keep yourself yours, that is your claim to art.

She

She tells him he cares more about fish than he cares about her. He calls her the Queen of Fish. He says she has fishy lips; she remembers reading somewhere that lipstick is made from fish scales. He says she is frigid, right out of the river in spring. She says she hates the river, she hates the town, she hates fish, she hates him. She says she wants to be in New York. She says she could have been a doctor, she dropped out of medical school to marry him. He reminds her that she hated medical school, that she wasn't even going to classes anymore when they met. She says she is going back to school, she is getting her degree. He says she is too old, they don't have enough money. She says her family will pay for it. She says they will be pleased she has left. She says they never liked him anyway. He says they are snobs, nobody would be good enough for them, and what's wrong with banking anyway? She says he's worse than an accountant. He says he never talked about his job with her anyway. She says he never talked about anything with her anyway. The women from the church volunteer group tell her she should work things out. She says she doesn't think it will work. She doesn't say the only reason she even volunteers there is because she is so bored. Her friend at the salon tells her to leave him if she's unhappy. She says she doesn't know if she can. Her friend tells her she can do better. She says she doesn't want to do better. She says she is fed up with men. Her friend tells her to go back to her family. She says her family is angry with her. Her friend says they will forgive her. She knows her friend is only being supportive. Her friend never disliked her husband before this. Her friend doesn't know her family. The woman at the ice cream shop tells her to follow her dreams. The woman tells her to go back to school. She says maybe she could do it. She doesn't say she doesn't want to be a doctor anymore. She doesn't say he was right, that she never wanted to be a doctor.

The woman looks happy. She wonders if the woman dreamed of being an ice cream woman. The stranger on the flight to New York asks her what she is doing. She tells him her story. She doesn't know why. She tells him about the divorce. The stranger is silent. The stranger looks into her eyes. The stranger says life is all about experiences. The stranger says this, too, will pass. The stranger says he wishes there was something he could say to help her. She says thanks. She says she's okay. He asks her if she wants to get some coffee at the airport. She says no thanks. She says she has someplace to be. The stranger gives her his phone number anyway. The stranger says she should call if she ever needs anything; he says it's a big city. In the taxi from the airport to her hotel, she writes his name and number on a piece of paper and sticks it in her purse. She picks up the phone in her room to call her family. She sets it back down. She sees, hanging on the wall above the television, a painting, a vase full of flowers, a glass bowl, staring out a beautiful gold fish.

Woman on a Greyhound Bus

The bus is nearly empty,
Just an old couple up front
Holding hands in silence
And, behind her, two rows back

A man in a gray jacket
Memorizing her brown hair
So like his first wife's
That he had forgotten.

She has not forgotten these fields,
Even the cows look the same
As on her first trip down this line
Twelve years ago, sitting beside her mother

Who sat with yarn in her lap.
Going home was easy then,
Holding her mother's hand
She couldn't get lost

Even in the crowded station
In Des Moines.
The bus was crowded then,
Although she's forgotten all the faces.

Even her mother looks hazy
Reflected in the window,
Staring down into her work
As the cows pass by outside.

She can see her now.
No longer bent over her knitting,
But staring out the window
At the endless fields of corn.

II

And the World Went On Drinking and Dancing

Outside the window of my living room, I see the light
from the all-night 7-11 across the street.
Sometimes there are brake lights, too,
when people stop in for cigarettes or soda or whatever else
people suddenly find they need at four in the morning.
I've never been there myself. I don't know what I need
at four in the morning. To renew my drivers license.
To get ahead on my work. To finish reading
a number of long poems on esoteric subjects,
often set up as plays with characters like Apathy
and the Moon. Everything means something
very important and hard to describe. If I wait
long enough, if I do nothing, eventually maybe
someone will explain it to me, and then I can sleep.

Sisters of Mercy

I have counted every tile
And every gray spot
On the white floor.
That's not quite true.
I used one tile,
Multiplied for all the rest,
And then moved on.

The walls themselves
Are plain smooth white,
There is nothing to count.
But I have noticed
If you stare too long
You may lose your sense of depth.
Distance will be nothing
In the face of their whiteness;
Once, they seemed to fall away
Until I reached out to touch them.
But now the illusion is gone
And I can't bring it back.

I could draw you a map
Of the details on the door,
Of all the knots, the way
The pattern seems to flow
Like water down the wood.

And a study is under way
To determine the folds
In the ceiling-to-floor curtain
That separates me from no one.

Hotel on M Street

Outside the window is a cab. It seems
That people are always leaving.
Someone else is hefting her luggage, torn old leather,
Into the back. It's never cars, real people's cars,
But always cabs. Someone else is holding open a door
For her. Of course it is cold, of course she gathers up
Her coat around her shoulders before she climbs
Into the back.

 In this room, there is a bowl of fruit
Addressed to someone else *with all my love*. Soon
It will be a painting, frozen, another stolen thing
As all his canvases are stolen things. Even the room,
Reserved for him, seems hardly his.
Sometimes he thinks it's full of other people,
That all the people who have ever been there
Are still there. He thinks that someday maybe
One of them will stop whatever they were doing
And turn to him, that they might give him something,
That he might have something of his own.

See the World

He's gone to Europe, he's bought
a European coat. He says, I don't even
need to learn French, everyone here
speaks English. I don't understand why
he loves the Euro, I don't understand
why he insists that where he lives
there's nothing to photograph, this part
of Belgium isn't interesting, just old.
But the selection of potato chips, it's amazing!
I went to Germany once. I wanted to see
the cathedrals, the old town halls, the narrow
winding streets that are closed to cars.
He wants to buy a moped to ride to work.
Should I feel a little disappointed that I never
get a postcard? Maybe this is the difference
between visiting and living.
When I think about D.C., I don't think about
old and stately mansions or the decorated dome
inside the Capitol, I think about how the Metro
hurts my ears, the good tuna at the Old Ebbitt Grill,
how thankful I am that I have a small car.
We have a cathedral here, I've seen it
rising up, always just a little in the distance,
but I've never been there. He's going horseback riding,
drinking his roommate's pomegranate margaritas.
He says, I think, after I've been discharged,
I'll stay right here.

The Visitation

While going through the store to buy a snack
I noticed something strange; for in the back
The manager was stocking in some beer,
And just beside him, whispering in his ear,
There stood a figure, and I thought, I know
That man, I'm sure I've seen him come and go,
Or someone with his bearing and his clothes,
The same dark suit, the same important pose,
As though whatever thing he had to say
Was more important than the everyday
Of turning labels so they face the crowd,
Which passes by, their faces a great cloud
Of features, blending one into the next,
A case of Bud, perhaps a case of Beck's,
While round the pair the carts and shoppers swirled,
And how could I intrude upon their world?

Metaphors

I'm beginning to think that they've all
been used before. The fireworks of the
neurons that fire in your brain, the hands
that flutter like wings and crack like bark,
even the stars that shine in your eyes.
Everything new is ridiculous. Should I say,
your hands are flapping like carp
drowning when someone reaches down
to pull them into the air? That the fine lines
on them are like tin foil that, once used,
can never be smoothed out again? Maybe
these metaphors work, somehow, maybe
they're just nonsense, your eyes are like
the power indicator on my tv antenna.
Controlled by a little plastic dial?
Bright and surrounded by darkness?
Keeping me awake at night?
It all falls apart. There's nothing else to say
but this: *There is a man. He looks sad.*
I saw him, lying in his white bed.
When I saw his eyes, I thought,
he must know something, something awful.
But, after all this, I'm no closer to it,
I'll never be any closer to him,
than this.

Street Scene

It has all been arranged so carefully,
there is a sense of purpose. The cars,
all different, parked along the side of the street,
they have been washed clean by rain.
They were left here by someone. Many people.
And a man, walking down this sidewalk, dropped
this fluttering receipt just so, knowing
I would be coming this way. He conspired
perhaps with the city wind on just where
it should land. At first it seemed as random
as a photograph, but now I'm sure
it was intentioned as a painting. I feel
there is some pattern behind it, like
the invisible mathematics of music.
The puddles reflect parts of buildings
and the sky, they give such ordinary
balance to the scene. How can they not know,
the drivers, the man, the wind, the puddles,
what they are doing? How can you say
it just happened to be?

Confessional

Because it is too easy to speak directly to God
To ask him to forgive you for the time you wished your dog were dead
 (She was fifteen years old and almost dead)
But it was a mercy-killing in your mind, or rather
It was your own mercy, for yourself,

Have mercy on me who must sit on her piss-stained couch,
Have mercy on me who must let her in and out now, during dinner, during movies,
during sleep, for she is too old to see her door,
Have mercy on me who must look in her milky sad unseeing eyes and remember
them bright and focused, remember when she knew me and greeted me and was not
afraid as though we were strangers.

Because it is too easy to assign yourself a penance,
Today you must not eat anything after dinner, or
Today you must not speak with any of your friends, or
Today you must scratch her behind the ears and bear the awful feel of her loose skin
and the awful stink of her fur.

Because all this is nothing if it isn't told,
Because you must pay for your forgiveness with the telling
Even through a darkened window to a face you cannot see, this is worth something,
Because they are both worth something and the exchange too is worth something,
The economists will tell you, there is no worth until there are two people,
And they will be right.

Photographs

It's hard to imagine when you had to sit, really sit,
for photographs. I mean hold still, face the camera,
don't blink, don't smile, just like that, and hold it...
hold it... there, we're done. Slide out the plate.
Now, I have thirty-seven snapshots of my godfather
admiring one birthday present, a little football helmet
that sits on the antenna of his car, all taken so I
could sort through and find, out of all of them, the maybe
one snapshot that captured his crossed-eyes and goofy smile
while he tweaks the antenna with his finger and watches it.
On an old camera, it would be just a blur, unintelligible,
and could his eyes have stayed crossed for that long?
I don't know. I have only one photograph of my
great-grandfather, sitting in a chair, hands folded,
but I guess even back then there were things going on
because something to the side drew his attention,
his wife interrupting to ask about dinner or maybe
my grandmother wanting to show off her new dress,
things which today I would have twenty pictures of
sitting on my hard drive with dates and descriptions
but which, back then, only drew his look away
from the lens so briefly that his face is fuzzy,
his eyes a blur. I don't know what I'm saying.
Is it better that I have my godfather's goofy smile?
Is it tragic that I'll never see my great-grandfather's face?
But I do have a scene, always changing, where he sits
waiting for someone to take his picture, where someone
opens the door, I'm sorry, wrong room, or look, look
at the pretty lace, or you'd better come have a look at
the pork chops that the butcher sent over, and pretty soon
there isn't any more face, there's just a litany of interruptions,
of which perhaps none are real.

Pas de Deux

The wind was blowing sweet and slightly cold
From past the buildings towering in the west
And whistling through the narrow city streets
Until it hit him squarely in the chest

And back he stepped, and back, and back again
His hand held up against his dirty face
His ragged coat was flapping in the wind
With all a ragged albatross's grace

When up the wind and caught beneath his coat
And filled it out in one momentous swell
He stood up straight, his hair a greasy wreath
It whipped around his head as in a spell

And then he raised one foot just half an inch
And all the picture's balance passed away
He staggered back against the rushing wind
And hunched and carried on along his way.

III

Children of the World Paint Jerusalem

There is a parade, a green truck
Carrying flowers and an angel
With a trumpet as big as a child,
And a little yellow car
Stuffed with clowns, their red suits
Pressing against every window.

Then a procession of animals,
A purple ostrich, a pink giraffe,
A golden lion with a green head
And a flowing blue mane.
On the sidewalks, people dance,
Skipping in circles like wedding reels.

On a corner, Moses stands
With his tablets lifted over his head, glaring
At the Mexican boy with the fiddle.
A man with one eye throws knives
Outlining the flowing burqa
Of his lovely assistant.

A red and white plane flies overhead.
From the air, Jerusalem looks like a heart,
The six roads threading in and out like veins
Or the legs of a beetle.
In the plane, someone gasps. *My uncle Pavia!*
As light as a cloud! Do you see?

And someone opens a cage on the roof of a church
And sends a flock of white angels soaring into Heaven.

The Ghost of Flashlight Bend

Coming around Flashlight Bend,
He sees the figure, slams
On the brakes before he can tell
It's not a deer. Too narrow, too
Bright. One thin arm extended,
It waves at him. Not a greeting,
He will say, but for attention.
What should he do? It moves
No closer. He relaxes his hands
From the wheel. Fifty yards;
He didn't hit it. Nothing's wrong.
Just a pale figure. Just moonlight.
Waving, waving. His eyes will stare
Into the distance as he waves,
Watching the figure as it drifts
Down the road, away into the dark.
He won't remember how long
He sat in his car, staring.
He will still be staring at that spot forever,
That empty air.

December Photograph

Where the camera's flash reflected off the falling snow, it looks like fireflies. But really, it was more like little bits of paper, shredded Kleenex, so light that when the wind blew against the house they went rising past my window, little insects that never think of gravity and were never told that everything that rises must come down. But they will fall, wingless, cover the earth, then sink into the ground, and only then rise, invisible, towards the sun. Maybe someone will pray for them, sometime later, will need them or, staring up at the blue sky, will sink into the ground themselves, so we say everything that rises must come down, and so it does, and everything that falls rises up to fall again. But right here, in this picture, it seems these haloed specks are frozen still. It's impossible to tell what they are doing, falling, rising. One moment has been plucked and focused, out of the endless motion an endless stillness, and a silence hovers in the frozen air.

February

Walking along the sidewalk in February, it's hard to believe this isn't the whole world; it seems that anyone, looking up, would surely see the same asphalt-gray sky, a concrete dome covering the earth. That's how it's supposed to be: we all look up at the same sky, down at the same ground beneath our feet. Only, it's hard to believe that, when you know that a scientist, taking your shoes, could plot out your path by their grit and wear, the kind of sand or clay or gravel you've picked up. And the stars that will be hidden from our eyes here someone will be pointing out in South America. Maybe to believe like this, you have to think that one star is as good as another, that all the clouds look the same. But how much time is spent in charting and in calculating? Forget the scientists, look up into the sky on a bright April day. How many people are seeing bikers, dragons, a mermaid with a beehive? Maybe you can point it out to one person, sitting next to you, before it passes on into some new form, or disappears into the blue air.

Distance

They say the stars are getting farther away.
When you look up in the sky at night, assuming
of course that you're not in the city and also
that the weather is clear, when you look up
at the stars and see them twinkle, you had better
not be thinking about constancy or even about
your tiny place in the universe, because while
you're looking at them they're moving farther,
growing colder, like the lights of a car backing
out of your driveway in the middle of the night
or maybe more like sitting on the runway
looking out the window at night in an airplane,
when everything's darkness and light, and then watching
as all the little points draw farther and farther away.
It may go on forever. You may never land at all,
instead you'll rise above the earth higher and higher,
wondering, will my luggage make it to Phoenix
without me? And all the time, as is common in airplanes,
not being quite sure if you're moving forward or simply
hovering in place, or going very slowly up or down,
it's all the same when you're floating there, you
won't notice. You'll never notice the stars drifting away,
you'll be asleep when the car pulls out of the driveway,
there's nothing you can do about Phoenix, your luggage
is gone, the car is gone, and the stars are still
going away.

IV

The Art of Poetry

All day the cars go racing by, all night,
reduced to pairs of floating lights. It seems
a lot of people have someplace they need to be.
But me? I'm stuck here writing it all down
out of some deep need, or maybe just because
the laws of being Poet tell me this: my job's
to sit and watch the world go by outside.
But that's a lie; many poets live their lives
to find Experience to teach them what to say.
And they're not wrong, they've learned just what they need
through sleepless nights, and long walks through the streets,
or maybe they were born with some deep need to *do*.
It seems I'd rather watch the world go by,
to see in someone else's eye a look
that conjures up a whole imaginary life.
Or just to notice, walking down the street,
the way that greasy hair reflects the light
and for a moment when the sun is bright becomes
a halo, then again a dirty mess,
and though this sight won't change the way we see
the world, and maybe I should think how cold he'll be
when that same sun has sunk below these buildings,
I don't know; I think they matter, too,
these moments when the world changes its shape for us.
Or should I say we change it all ourselves?
We carry with us moments just like these,
I know each one of us can see the world like this.
What's left for me? I know my job is this:
to gather and refine what's seen and felt,
and hope that someday I can give them back to you.

Picture Book

When you are young, it seems that words
are real, the Apple and the shiny red apple above it,
all the way to the striped Zebra horse.
Then you begin to learn the ways
that some things make you think of others,
soon you may end up with an ocean of grass.
It can make you giddy, this kind of alchemy,
like kissing a frog. But they pile up,
these associations, grass is not only grass
or an ocean, it's a carpet, the fur of the earth,
it's the growth in spring and the perseverance
under winter, the solid base for living things,
it's the softness of nature under which hides
stinging insects and the rotting carcasses of birds.
These things make such a heavy web, insisting on meaning.
Words begin to want too much, as though
someone told them they could hold the world.
Each one believes it.

Wings

Have you ever considered the difficulty
of having wings? Simple things, like
fitting through doorways or buying shirts.
I've often thought it would be wonderful
to fly, but it's so easy to forget the practical.
There will always be feathers, for instance,
clogging up the drain. And no more
sleeping on your back. I know this metaphor
is overused; we like to think poetry
is difficult, underappreciated.
But when I decided to call myself
a poet, all my shirts still fit. No one
stared at me as I walked down the street.
Sometimes I think I have pledged myself
to something useless, like flying. We can't
stop dreaming about it, and yet
don't we get by without it?

On Writer's Block

Where are the words to unwind my thoughts?
Are they sounding somewhere I've forgotten, some
Place I'm not, some present or past
Whose decision left me standing soundless?
A lame horse learns his legs
Superfluous in part; rather, his parts
Are redundant, he can dance with three. But don't
Leave him that leg to limp, to drag
Behind him, heavy with disuse, heavy
With lack of purpose; take pity on him, his pulling
That dead, enduring limb. Dancing
Is not, after all, his art. The axe
(You shrink to hear even the sound) could set him
Free, his fields again for frolicking.
You don't think he would thank you, but this
I know: it's not the lame horse that dances, no.
Four legs refuse to dance as three.

Garden on the Weser

Walking here, through the snow, I can see
The footsteps of the hundred people before me.
I know that somewhere north is the North Sea;
I know that somewhere westward is my home.
Why are these birds singing in winter?
What can I say, it's a foreign land, the homeland
Of my ancestors. The people speak in tongues.
The birds have always spoken in tongues. Here,
The tones are all as unfamiliar as the trees,
As the street, the buildings, or the river
Up which my family sailed. I can't picture
Any of their faces or even say their names,
But right now it bothers me much more when I think,
I don't know why birds sing.

First Assignment

My roommate says I talk
With line breaks in.
Is this the beginning
Of the end
Of communication?

I read in the newspaper
That poets die young,
Younger even than other artists.
My roommate says,
“You could be cryogenically frozen
Until they find a cure.”

We used to argue about
The continuity of time.
How many times
Can you break a second in half
Before you have the primal unit?
Do we jerk through life
Like dancers under a strobe light?
Could you slow the strobe light down?
Watch a whole life in two hours?

You must pick one snapshot
For every year. In fact,
They will be chosen for you.
Your assignment
Is to make a scrapbook.
Blow each picture up
To the size of a page.
Beware of triteness, cliché,
The ease of slipping
Into sentimentality.
Walk the sharp white edge.
Leap from blue to blue line.
Yes, children.
This *will* be on the test.

Apology to the Inhabitants of Poetry

I'm sorry. We fuck you up
worse than our own children.
The things we give you to see;
we sit you down and watch you watch
as your husbands and wives
fade away from terminal diseases,
just to capture the look passing
between you, or the look that passes
between you and the nothing
where she used to be. We want to see
truth, so we give you suffering
when our own fails to inspire.
You stand in fields and ponder
the coming fall, the graves of friends.
If I could promise to give you
just one moment of true joy,
why shouldn't I? To let you
fall in love? But you know the truth.
All your lovers are liars, and your parents
are absolutely mad.

Monkey See

I've heard some learned people take the view
A thousand monkeys at a thousand keys
With time and food and nothing else to do
Could hammer out to be or not to be.

And what would you do if you had the time?
Break down and buy that typewriter you saw
And hammer out the rhythm and the rhyme
To tell the world of what you hold in awe?

And each time, just a word or letter wrong,
The sound not right, the rhythm slightly false
Or someone else already wrote the song
And your small tune was his most famous waltz.

If all the world has heard it all before,
Then tell me who you write your verses for.

Sunrise in the Country

Outside the window, shapes begin to form
against the blackness. No, the blackness
begins to form into shapes. The sky
lightens, trees begin to take form,
silhouettes in a shadowbox play.
Their forms are strange and twisted,
a black net stretching across the sky.
Then depth returns, the branches
aren't woven together, the trees
aren't a single mass of darkness.
Each one begins to set itself apart.
Slowly, things become familiar once more.