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DUMB AS THEY COME

by

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B.S. University of Kansas State, 1978

A MASTER'S REPORT

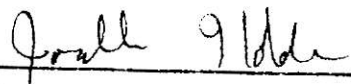
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requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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Writing poetry means many things to many people. For me it is both a highly private affair and a social engagement, as well. As a result, I find I must rely upon myself and upon my friends and allies.

Therefore, I thank Allah, for he has given me a tongue to touch my lips, and a hand that I may touch the palms and hearts of others. I thank the Muse, whoever It is.

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And finally, to Professor Will Moses, who has long been my idea of all that is sage and distinguished in a poet, my thanks for being here now. To these and many others unnamed but not forgotten, a solemn gratitude. Bless you.

I: IN THE LIVING ROOM

"You shall stand by my side
and look in the mirror
with me."

---Walt Whitman

AFTERNOON IN THE LIVING ROOM

There's a spot of silver
so intense
I can't begin to tell you,
melting a hole
through the window,
blinds,
beholder..

There's a runaway collie--
St. Bernard mutt maybe
galumping down the zigzag
lumpy red cobblestone sidewalk,
avoiding the puddles
with icy in-between paws.

Such dumb craft
few men master.

Looking at all this
you know beauty
comes cheap.
You can afford
to ignore it.
Every way you look,
no way to avoid it.
There's an art
just in the way
someone last washed the windows.
In the puddles of sky
on the sidewalk.

Meanwhile, there are these spots
of gold and silver lavas.

SHOP-WINDOW TALK

Hey there, passer-by,
you are welcome
to pause and admire
my manniken essence.
Please,
don't be afraid to stare.

See,
I change clothes
like so many force fields--
belts around my navel.

When your eyes rove
over my shoulders,
the hairy wools
around my waist and hips
itch with static
electric
hiss.

Come on in, friend,
lay your hands on,
make me all yours
for the taking--
forever skin to skin.

A SOPHOMORE REBUTS WILLIAM BUTLER

Seriously, nobody could pay me
to take the chance.

Nobody could put me
that deep in a trance,

Send me outdoors
with a single glance,

Send me sailing
the waves in dophin dance,

To see some perfect birdee
squawking on a golden branch

Suddenly spread-eagle,
like somewhere outside phoenix

Fire-off, confuse the sky,
lord, in little birdee dance!

Not this body, uh unh,
not a chance.

TRACE ACCUMULATION

Smaller than the hours
now before, too dinky to count,
too fine to measure,
a grainy sleet adds up
to little more
than crystal cover.

There are two bold-signatured
boot-tracks turning up
on the sidewalk. Two absent feet
in bas-relief stomp runes
up the porchstep, and disappear
under the door.

This ghost-wake quickens my eye,
freezes my attention.
And the windchill factor
dives toward absolute zero.

I sit still on a cinderblock,
finish off a crisp winesap apple.
Posing a mouthful,
I swallow big as a kid
watching the late-night thriller.
And nonchalantly tossing
the bruise-brown core
into the moonlit desert,
I rise,
following the ghost inside
up the stairs,
to my apartment,
lonely on the second floor.

THE HARD ONENESS

Out in the hard, cold oneness,
nothing is surely seen,
except by fools,
and only by them
trusted in.

(Remember the one
with the Christmas whiskers
and the Tupperware hands?)

Glazed meat wrapped up
in Wonderland.

(He never flinched once.)

And the wrought-iron clank
and the tin-foil boom
of the boxcars joining,
severing in the very next room,
so close we thought
they'd slip in their tracks
and slush us,
they do not worry us.

They are just bigger
than us,
way out
in the hard, cold oneness.

SHE BEATS ME TO IT

The lone, stern widow who always turns
up a grey coat, a blue scarf
humbling across her orderly porch,
watches the thaw of the yellow ice:
nine clay pigeons dotting her rooftop.

Two slate eyes follow the weather
behind white lace curtains.
Mornings after a snow, she's first
outdoors, scooping, brooming, bringing
the concrete back, sure as a turtle.

White trenches bury her
up to the knees.

She bothers me so I take her to bed.
Her fur-topped rubber boots plod
wearily through my head, drop full of water.
Thalop, thalop, carefully rising, carefully
drop, as she bows low to meet the pavement.

The dream changes clothing, music thaws
from her gutters on a morning waking up
with Spring. Pigeon shadows dance over.
Steam rises from the melting sidewalk
and curls about her knees. Suddenly,

she drops her broom, spins on a toe,
jumps high on noon, nimbly click
her heels, leaving her boots behind.

LOFTY ISSUES ON A WINTER NIGHT

I focus like a telescope.
With my tweezer fingers
I bear down hard upon a blackhead
of my imagination, hear
something shifting,
splitting in the woodshed.
I squeeze my pale skin red.

I stand, I yawn,
one hand extended,
standing and yawning
on the frontporch steps.
I amble off around
the dusty gravel bed
about my house,
making a circumambulation
of the holy cubicle of sorts,
and have some general notion
of the stars overhead.

I reassume the porchsteps.
After all, it is but this.
I am content to reassume
the frontporch steps,
and watch my breath dwindle,
drifting off,
with some general notion
of a ghost overhead.

SNIDE CONCEITS?/GEMINII OBSERVATIONS

Who is that void
oval in the mirror
on my shoulders?

Like my friend
in stereo,
we lie here, too,
"In the ruins
of our pleasure."
And time our fall
with laughter.

As far as I ever
remember, we were
the only ones ever
and always alone
in the bathroom, where
no one could interfere.

So why do you smile
back at me? Who do
you think you're fooling?

God, what is there
between us? Are
we joined at the hip?

Or just the parting
of two lips?

SONG OF THE WALLOWING PUNKSTER

True, perhaps I am too
old to be an adolescent,
but I'm ripe for the part.
I am the yawning brat with little
to go with my patience.

Slowmoving as a gawdy pearl
dropping clean through Prell,
I take my time oozing down
to the clear, unbreakable bottom.

And don't you believe
old Theodore Roethke
could have been my father.
Fat, hell he had a bellyfull,
and a double-chin
trembling like me.

And as his jiggly twin here,
could get far without
going any great distance.
The fellow had seen it all before,
you see, from the dent
in his pillow.

THE POEM BLOOMS

At dawn
there is a whirlpool
in my forehead.
Snowflakes
in the familiar rings
around my earlobes.

I got to get upright.
No fat lying flat
after seven.
Fat on the move.
I leap out of bed
like a bubble.

Outdoors,
it's true--really.
The snow takes a liking
to me, steams my words
like incense.
Now if I could only say
what hangs out ahead
that quickly drifts away.

Two blue tennis shoes squeak
over the snow facts.
Tracking again--
at last.

DEAR MATTHEW,

If I am
like some nut cracked,
". . . a disassociated voice
diffusing through a living room . . ."

Just so many glass nouns,
just so many stiff verb phrases
falling out, raining down
from a burning yellow mushroom cloud.

Just a radiant sprinkling of dust
mounting up on turn-
or coffee-table, collecting almost
silently on the T.V. or
the E.V. stereo speakers,
then tell me then,
and make it plain,

How can I refuse the charge?
How can I come clean of my fall
out shelter? O brother
black and blue, O fellow
atom-splitter.

Listen, I know deep inside
the guts who the real pro is.
I'm the anti-matter--

half sincerely yours,

Billy Razz.

II: IN THE MEAN TIME

"For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;"

---Geoffrey Chaucer

RETURN FROM WINFIELD ON K-177

Forever I am coming clean
just to tell you something.
So make a pot of coffee
and just sit down and waste
a minute or two. I could be here
on the double.

And I'm there, just south
of the I-70 underpass,
barrelling north on the Prairie
Parkway, I guess,
in that swervy ol' brown Dodge,
the one with all the chrome corners.
Coming fifteen miles over
the limit, and I'm not
even driving.

But I sure as hell am
coming like the nose
of a rollercoaster, falling
and rising to the flintheills.

The acreage of peoples' lives
passes in the blinking
of my passenger eyes. Fescue
and Buffalo grass and herds
of black angus bellow out
like hung laundry in a pasture
someone forgot.

It's just noon now
or a little after
four. Any moment now

I'm on the way. You,
do you hear the tires
on the asphalt, my tennis shoes
on the gravel?
Don't you hear the aluminum
hinges screaming at the screendoor?

You see me coming, and
rise from your coffee cup.
You know I'm coming again
and again, coming just to tell you
I am going.

THE I-CHING SAYS: SEARCH THE ABYSS

Right to the right
of nextdoor's rusty gutter,
just left of the slap and tear
game of the trees,
I watch the sky for hours.
Falling stars and angry angels
trace that inkblue chasm
with their lingering ruby tails.

Right there,
always present
in the firm limbs of a maple,
runs the ceaseless outline
of the rip and tag game
of the wind. My teeth chatter
a secret that shivers up my spine.
It comes from a kingdom
far below my ankles.
It says I'm It. I know

It's taking. It says:
Never did potter throw
pot on the spinning wheel,
that holding the days and nights
of the water of time,
didn't eventually shatter and spill.
Portion flows back to source,
and your dark wine is leaking out.

Sitting here with the empty glass,
there are no lights on, no shades
on the window.

I raise my dead
prayer to the drop-ceiling
of the Sun.

"Hail, O Inkwell, High Above.
Hail, O One Bare Bulb, Alone.
Burn me dry
in this wet weather
of what and why--
crisp, like a single, sharp leaf
on a maple. Snatch me up,
a wrinkled handkerchief
when I'm only half awake.
Rip me in the vise-grip
of your invisible wind.

Hear me. I am
struggling to surrender.
Water falling
in a rusty gutter."

LOWER FORTY

Taking three brown furrows
to a stride,
then staggering one straight
for a while.

It's much later than afternoon.
A milky glaze steals
through
the sunset flowers.

And you can't hardly come
see Kansas anymore.
Just the ticky-tac-toe
of a square engineer.

The rolling prairie's patched
and dammed, parted by rods,
linked into chains.
A connect-the-dots dream drawn
and quartered--squatted on.

You got to look days
into the limestone shadows,
ease between the barbed-wire mazes,
disregard the red and white
relay towers.

(The field darkens.)

With a sonic boom
comes a white-assed shower,
antelope skip along
the headlong grasses.
The buffalo thunder
not far behind.

You got to look harder these days.

But even out walking
some iodine dusk like today,
you could stumble a moment,
not sure where you're going.

Something behind you makes
you think of turning back,
of taking a closer look.

Don't.
Keep you hands up,
keep moving.
Stiffen your spine.
Stack your o's.
Slash your x's.
Never mind the frown
you fashion Kansas.

Back home,
if the feeling grows,
cut out the eyes
of potatoes.

GRAVE DIGGING

Forgotten just inside
the sleeping lips
of the dirt-brown princess,
my latent grain breaks
green to the sun,
juts white roots into
the dank realm of worms.
I hear them drilling
past my hairy tendrils.
Blind in the head,
each mouth eats its path.

And they are circling in.

I have tried to bury the seed
of all I loathe.
I have sown it in the hearts
of the people I love.
I have burrowed under the flesh
and pain of my sternum
and tasted the mess
of my own ghost.

The make-believe enemy I am
and not the friend I seem.

SHORT WORDS TUESDAY MORNING

Though I am miserable now
and the snow melts cold
on the north window,
I'm still alive in the future.

Tell me if it starts tomorrow.
Another weekend of bitter
drinking starting Thursday
and still drinking, still burning.

I vanish these days
like dark stairs to a basement.
I wonder who's down there.
Is it the ocean?

Is it like drowning?
I will grow fins
and go under for good
with the dolphins.

THIS MORNING

I wake dead up.
Panic? No panic.
I don't believe
my own stone skin.

The sun's not here.
My windows bleed.
I'm a sick fish
in a cool aquarium.

Casually my sins
swim by and dive
to a secret cave
under my feet.

Things sneer
and disappear.
In the gloom
it dawns on me.

The blood I see,
that's my blood.
The cliffs I fall over
are my own knees.

THE DARK HEAD IN MY CHEST

There is sweetness in this coarse
wafer of remorse.

My hangover hurries my return
to that dark porch and its door
where sorrow is living under
my name and address. Grows rich
while my heart grows poor.

I'm the fool who pursues
the twinkling carnival light,
grabbing with thin fingers
at the sheer, plunging rush
of joy--my great downfall.

When I laugh,
birds fly away, embarrassed.
My friends fall
silent a second.
And here, in the spark of my eye,
the foolish stupor of believing
I was born happy
again.

The joke I am
bearer and brunt of;
a shove in the back
I never see coming,
the dark lips grinning
seeing me slip.

But wait, really,
I want to call out to you
in plain English,
shaky fingers faltering
above my lips.

I want to ask you, there,
with the brown eye turning browner
every minute,
each painful tick:
take me back.
I'm just about begging
and ready to need you,
all my brothers and sisters.

But then,
I have these ways
of forgetting my sickness.
And you have your way
of recalling the charm
of my illness.

2:30 AM KEGGER REVELATION

I finally get it, friend,
and I owe it all
to our space program.

You see, I am still
always waiting to happen
whatever I plan for.

Like a rocket on the pad,
I am, say, T
minus seven and counting.

I am, like you, my fool,
in the linear negative
of all I realize, or

dream of blasting to
in the knee deep
black of kingdom come.

ALERT: THE WAR OF THE WORLDS IS OVER

There's no need to panic.
The worst is real.
All is lost.
Our dignity.
Us thinking we were
who we thought we were
all these years.
The stories.

Here it turns out
all the data assert
we were really cooked up
by overcrowded locusts
over fifty million years ago,
give or take a few zeroes.

Beneath a dull purple sky,
those martian plains
were hard and bare
when we got done with them.
Plans were made,
the wing enlarged
and presto
here we are.

AFTER EIGHT REFLECTIONS

Go on sun set
take your old flames
with you, take the hem
of your dress.
I'm not one.
Alone in my shade,
I know too well
what science versifies.
You've got the hardest
heart in the system.
That's what draws us in.
But I'm out of orbit,
falling
to my own distance.

Come on moon rise.
Your nine ivory eyes
blink red and blue
diamonds in the brown leaves
of the fading elm tree.
Bring all your new
and changing faces, too.
I need a new one.
Give me a pebble
or a pouch of dust.
Give me charm,
the guts to be pale.

And throw in,
why don't you,
the sore will
to be beautiful.

NOT KNOWING

My Dear,
there is always this
sad apprehension swelling,
a deep pulse across ocean floors,
a giant heart drumming along the walls
of continental shelves, curving
under the cold poles:
the staring lyrical eye of the whale.
Waves break one by one on the shore.

And we are here in Kansas.

Arm in arm,
we feel the itch in our skins.
The dark cold-front cuts slant-wise
over the dusk of our horizon.
And the elms, the elms have brittle fingers.
In this mounting gloom,
meagerly do we see each other's features,
my Love, staring even eye to eye.
And meagerly, the moon rising,
do we wish to.

MEAT LOVE

O my dearest
filet mignon,
my most tender
center cut,
I will not
butcher your sustenance.

Like the ham
I am
yours.

Meditate
on my miserable state.
I'm missing.
Everyone has her
piece to bear.
Bear me.

Cause I hear
between the sky
and the earth
there is a dark line
of demarcation.

A slip-through crack
into the undefineable

Love,

APOLOGY FOR BELIEVING

Anyone can get suckered.
The sun half-set,
the moon rising like cream
over the raspy elm,
who could resist? Not me.

My love has wandered
out of its fence.
The blinders of my youth
are lost and I am left
making my own death.
Running to the higher pasture
where the lonely graze.

Silly, can there be praise
for the smudgy line
on the yellowing paper.
You blotch on the cosmic page,
no one will read when eyes
no longer see. The ears listen
but the mouths are stopped.

But just come hold me so
when it's cold and blankets
do not warm. The left
palm cozes to the right.
Nor can either clap well
without the other.

FEAR OF LANDINGS

(Counting breath at the airport)

My Guru is
without doubt
circling over
the great Ohare
of my heart.

He hangs out
up there
out of sight
in the clouds.

And the traffic
is thick
here below,
cluttered
and confused
with the business
of myself.
Delay after delay,
the pattern
holding.

But in an hour
or two or
a year,
when the runway
clears,
he will alight,
rubber screaming
on the asphalt.

Eyes on the observation
deck will widen

in amazement
or despair.

He touches
down--
seemingly
suddenly
appears.

DEAR GOSS, LOST & FOUND ON THE COAST

Transmitting tonight
through the rubber tree
that stands to the right
of my longing.
I feed it. It feeds me.

Dit Dot Dit . . .

The chill of ecstatic calm,
the numb thumb of affluence.
I'm not asking you to meet me
at the Eiffle Tower, buddy.
Let's rendezvous in Saigon.
You be the holy Temple of Spine.
I'll be the Viet Cong,
Charley creeping up your vertebrae,
rung by bamboo rung,
ringing the song of the sung.
Striking your gourd,
it thunders like a gong.

Lost Love is the password.
Forget it.
On the keyboard of your breast,
let your fingers dance
lightly on the gleaming ivory--
two tarantulas
slowly on the crawl.

Love,

Out.

III: IN ASSUMING ANIMALS

"But ask now the beasts,
and the fowls of the air,
and they shall tell thee:
Or speak to the earth,
and it shall teach thee:
and the fishes of the sea
shall declare unto thee."

---Job

DEAR BROTHERFOOL,

Remember the fourth
bluebarrel we ate like death?
We were wrapped up.
Indian blankets
staring black holes
into Papa Bear Canyon,
listening between our knees.

Well, Katagiri, Zen Master
of the northern plains,
suggests zazen on the edge
of a cliff.
Floating blank-eyed
into the abyss.
So what do you say
we rendezvous
smack dab at the bottom,
Shortstuff.
You be a pebble.
I'll be crumbling dust.

Down and out,
I'm taking my sitting
a little seriouser
since that nipponese warrior
stabbed me through the head.
It was eyeball to eyeball
till he split my pupil clear
open to the vision pit.

What can I say about it?
Attack your zazen, foolbrother.
Make tracks no one can follow.

Get lost,
don't come back.

We are the Don't-Know-Much Tribe.
See us dance clear through
our cold blanket-bones.

Just a couple of dumb-braves,
just a couple of shit-sticks,
looking for a way out
from where we sit.

Waiting, hoping
we are fit
for Papa Bear's
deep, deep gullet.

LUCKY CHARM

When I was a little bunny
(and I know you believe me)
I hadn't much to hop about.
But hop I did
with four legs for it.

Dumb bunny I was,
and dumb bunny I am.
And try as you might
to learn me out
of my furry dummy-hood,
you never will.

My never having
understood.

CHE BEA!

I know its meaning now
retouched in these four trout,
in the Brook, the Rainbow
and in the hints of Brown.
(Sky is pure and pale as water;
they shine with surrounding color.)
In the slowly going gleams of Brown.

Four trout are dressed out
on a wooden plank,
on a worn and wooden plank,
are cold as the springs
that spawned them.

Rubbing the rose with a thumbtip,
nudging the spots with a finger,
"How beautiful!" was all I offered
the old man's lesson in gutting.

And it was all I could feel
for the seven that yet remained
of the handsome eleven fishes,
the seven staring fishes
stuck fast in the creel.

PIGEONS

I don't like a lot
about pigeons.

I don't like the way
they walk all up and
down my roof, all up
and down my neighbors'.

And their roman heads
bobbing back and forth,
weaving and jerking back
with all the second thoughts
of pigeons.

But at dusk,
or midnights too cold,
or at dawn, the sun
yawning at the end
of the street,
an unearthly, guttural
chant drips big drops
of darkness from the eaves
and into my ears
and my gutters.

And last night
I stood on the peak
of my roof.
My arms were wings
and my fingers feathers.
And somehow I knew
without thinking
the strange, dark song
I was singing.

FALL RIVER RESERVOIR

Up here above the beach,
hands in jeans,
wind in hair,
I spot a rotten stump
with brown fungus for ears.
I bet I could drop it,
rake my fingers through
the warm loam under it,
feeling for a row
of milky tits. I mean
a nice, curled, white circle
with eventual feet upon it.
Something me and Mother Bear
alike would be proud of;
some fat pale grub.

Instead, I timber down,
seep along the limestone ribs
bared by the knife of the water.
I drip into a hole, sit
like a puddle and listen.

I wish, I will recall
the old prayers to the rock
and the water at the shore
of their meeting.
I wish hard.

And to all the creatures
that crawl, or fin, or fly
across their features,
I offer my meager hand.

HIKING DREAM RANGES

In a saddle-back
suddenly my old scout troop
meets us, coming the other way.
The Senior Patrol Leader laughs
blond as a German.
Just that instant
my pack slips and splatters
its guts in embarrassment.
Stooping to recover, I look up
and see clouds, amazing purple
dimpled--large udders across the sky.
Anyone from Kansas would know trouble.
The wind dies.
The earth rumbles.
The Scouts are gone in a second--
whoosh!
We watch their soles grow
tiny commas in the distance.

We run for shelter
under a huge red aqueduct.
Nothing could budge it
but here it is moving.
You are there crying and red-faced
"We are all done for!"
We are old
suddenly with wrinkles.
The world goes by in big chunks
and flashes of color.
I feel good
and scared for once.

I turn away from you
and the others.
There is a girl
calmly at my left elbow.
I hold back my tears.
Politely she tells me
I got reason enough
to cry.

The next heartbeat,
sky blue,
a lazy fly dancing
the wind
a couple of cares
or two
in the world
sunshine.

FISH TRANCE

I sit dumb,
old fat fisher
backseat canoe
a blue long belly
moonlit lake.

Red and white bobber
watch all night.
Slight wobble,
water rings say
somebody down there
under my butt,
worm-chewing.
I chew too
whole-leaf tobacco.

(Beth kissing me
earlier tonight
on the shore,
I flashed "Wormlips,
wormlips, they're the same
things flirting
with different beings!"
Worms are the lips
of the earth.
No wonder the fish
are in love!
Beth wasn't impressed.)

This big cat below
has known the pain of love.
His kisses are cautious.

I feel up the fiberglass pole,
and down the monofilament
to the flesh that flirts
with his whiskers.
He gives me the picture:

A shiny chrome hook
slipped neatly through
giant Marilyn Monroe lips.

Seriously.

On top of a tree,
on top of a hill
facing me,
a beacon blinks
forty times quickly
the strategy by which
all existing catfish exist,
an underwater motto:

Seek and Behold!
Seek and Behold!

I paddle home
empty.

SONG SHAKER

I was only in and out
the reeds of my mouth
harp. I was moonwash,
believe me.
Wandering no path
through the high pasture,
the knee-high grasses and weeds.

My eyes were only mazes,
puzzles unsolved
and solving just before
the tread of my soles.

I played my own tune,
whistling between my teeth,
and was the first to hear
it singing between my ears.

O, split-tongued voice
of the genders;
cool, blue-silk throat,
tough, red-hide tongue.

May static stay far
as my fear is near.

Look-see! Six feet of S's
just left of me, Triangle Eyes
frozen above the ground,
Ol' Diamond-belted,
my fond and ancient Evil.

Three long notes
shower the air.

I think I made them.
Then a fourth
cold one
that doesn't belong
to my tongue;
sharp, pin-prick song.

I sweat hard
to be humble.
I seek truce with all
the slippery slidings.
Will my heel ever heal,
can I get back in touch
with every limbless belly,
is it too late, Shaker?

What do you know,
that snake told me
the weeds and the rabbits
are still pulling for me.

Not to mention
my ancient enemy,
hissing

It takes It
It takes Time.

THE WILD KINGDOM

Marlin Perkins turned me on
to this.

There are messages
from the wild kingdom, too.

I know one or two
mosquitoes.

They come from the blue
clouds, that school
of floating fishes
drifting away
with the sinking moon.

Hey Moon! Hey Moon!
sinking down
to full-moon noon
in China.

Say Moon! Say Moon!
when will you come
round again?
(She winks twice
at the morning
star.)

Look on my knee,
what do you see?
Big Mountain Mosquito
with four spots
on his front feet.

Go on and take it,
Stinger-Nose, Siphon-Lips.
But give something, too.

My blood thins.
Tiny silver bells
in my ears
singing.

Hey Moon! Hey Moon!
Goodbye again.
The Big Red Bully
comes roaring over
the tree tops,
drowning us out
where we sit.

Again,
the bells,
dancing;

Black veins of marrow
race through the heart
and hole of bones,
mountains.

Soon, soon.

THREE-QUARTER MOON

Tonight I return
where the hawk never ventures.
The owl glides silently
where the sun never sounds.

Above these branches,
who knows these clouds,
who claims them?
(I'm still faithful
the moon's up there,
just bashful.)

Laughter behind the bushes.
I don't care.
I know my ritual
is so many rags
and so much shaggy stitching.
Weaving the world,
weaving it together,
weaving the webbing.

Just then, a hole!
A skychasm for an eyeblink.
She was there,
her old chalk cheeks.

Listen, my White One,
I want my belonging.
I begin my becoming.
My heart, muscle-red,
my tongue in my head,
they are the same organ,
blood singing through them.

Taproot dug in the soil,
singing cell and mineral.

Moon, watch me pale
below you.

Straining, I bear
your weaving praises.

Look me in the eyes.

You will see me see you.

You will smile us waving
to the unseen shore.

HOMAGE WITH THE COWS

Out on the autumn mesa
we took from the same cup.
Our fingertips spoke.
Our lips singed
with the second.
There were holes
in our faces.

The sagebrush shook,
the hounds baying a rabbit.
We followed in the hoofprint
of cattle.
We stopped when nobody
told us,
kneeling in sand
just like us.

The full moon,
she rose
over the apple mountain shadows
crowned with two red haloes.
The sun sinking in the back
of our heads.

It was just us
and the unseen cows
lowing around us
who will witness.

The Moon, The Moon,
She is more, more
than a Mistress!

LIVING BEFORE BEAUTIFUL

There was a sight
before my eyes
saw yours, a vision
of drooping vines,
the hiss of jungle floors.

I was a keen Bengali
Tiger then,
melting yellow,
I crouched low
on all fours.

Through those noons
and in those shadows,
I lived on
and on an animal
forever.

At dusk once,
stalking a past,
I saw to my right
shafts of light
through bamboo slats--
each color of the rainbow
splitting from the river
of white.

Living there low,
even as a fur, froze,
I knew that sight
was beautiful.

A FABLE

Say

I'm a squeaky big-eyed rabbit
darting back and forth
between the skin and bones
of my temples.
Scared in circles.

While over my left shoulder,
over the fur of my haunches,
over the eyes of my nostrils,
the Shadow-Fox lengthens
and quenches.

In that shatter-glass silence
of tooth sinking
through sinew,
in the hollow crack
of the horizon at the back
of my neck,
there is a sound
and a motion like someone
shaking his head
emphatically No!

But for the prey,
that rabbit--me,
limp in the jaws,
it is the deepest,
most relaxing,
comfortable blood
letting go.

IV: CRITICAL APPARATUS

"That area which produces most human food
Produces automatically
Most human excreta."

---W. R. Moses

I wrote these poems over a span of nearly two years, and the majority of them in the past year. Having never written a book of poetry, I was uncertain how to best go about it. As a result, I continued to write in the only way I knew. Whatever occurred to me as a good idea for a poem on any particular day is what I wrote. I am not sure how other poets work, but as for myself, it would be impossible to set so rigid and conscious a goal as a series of poems, all bearing a consistent tone or theme. Instead, a line, an image comes to mind, and I do with it what I can to turn it into a poem. As Theodore Roethke said, "I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs."

Having written in this unplanned fashion of the past two years, I discovered that I could make some sense and order out of my body of work. In the process of weeding out poems that would not fit, I had to ask myself a couple of questions. Does my poetry evince a common theme or themes? And secondly, is there any other criterion by which my poetry may be organized? This report is my answer to those questions. To a great extent, I believe the one poem "A Fable" may embody that reply. It is the germ, the nucleus of most of the verse herein, though chronologically it is not the first poem I wrote. Its theme is the Self. It is a theme of fear, death by brutal outside force, and of an implied rebirth.

As the order of this report implies, there is a descension in section one that continues to pick up speed through the

second part, with the offer of a resolution in the final, third section. From a station of cool, often smug isolation as seen IN THE LIVING ROOM, the poet slips gradually into the maw of doubt. The poet is literally or figuratively inside his house throughout. He is cut off from nature and humanity (or at least seems to think so)--cut off from any real companionship, whether that might cause comfort or pain. More importantly, however, the poet is shut off from his own self. 'True self' is a risky, nearly trite expression, but there is an argument throughout these poems that the poet is unsatisfied with himself and knows he needs to change. By the time we come to the second section, IN THE MEAN TIME, he knows one thing for sure: where he is at is not where It is at. Indeed, the letter to Matthew shows a growing if unwilling awareness of this fact.

Actually, I think the poet has known all along (unconsciously perhaps) that he is in trouble, but only in the second part does his pain make him confess it, own up to it. Looking into the abyss is, of course, not my invention, nor is the experience original. Facing up to the pitfalls and shortcomings of oneself has been more the necessity than the chosen task of anyone who is the least bit introspective. Poets, I believe, must at some point look into the mirror of themselves and try to describe the portrait they see there, however unpleasant, however ugly.

The poet of part two, however, is not altogether honest with himself. He has means of obscuring that reflection in

his mirror. He has ways of distracting, destructive as they are. Of these, the most obvious is drinking, but the poet's use of alcohol may stand for any form of intoxication, anything (physical or otherwise) which essentially interferes with the necessary work that he needs to do on himself. Interestingly, in Arabic, the word for wine, khamr, literally means 'that which covers'. A cloak that conceals, temporarily at least, the truth, the gnawing reality. Many of the poems of part two have a quality, an eeriness much like that of a hangover, the morning after the attempted escape and its brief result and lasting consequence. The poem "This Morning" is very much concerned with this, as is "The Dark Head In My Chest". Hungover the abyss once again, the poet sees the sad facts for what they are.. Moaning is his reaction and his penance. In this sense, IN THE MEAN TIME is confessional.

In addition, though, during its lighter moments, it is a truthful recognition that the poet is stuck in limbo. In the mean time, he will wait and seek his own patience. True growth of spirit and real maturity take time, even as success requires work. The struggle is endless. The poet knows this, as shown in "2:30 AM Kegger Revelation", and tries to persevere. Nevertheless, he is again and again pulled back into the mire of self pity. Of all plights most destructive, this self pity is yet another sign that he has yet to reach the true "unbreakable bottom", where even self pity is consumed by the divine fire, sacrificed to its smokeless flames, thereby allowing a natural reverance to take its place.

IN ASSUMING ANIMALS offers a different direction to the previous sections. Its poetry is at once the most risky and, I think, the most successful. Out of pure, desperate need, or out of a pure leap of faith, the poet reaches a place where he is willing, where he has to let go. Waiting for Papa Bear's gullet is the wait for annihilation, an annihilation that precedes rebirth. This extinguishing of the ego is not something that occurs suddenly with fanfare and angels falling out of the sky, etc. Rather it occurs in flickers at first. As the self becomes thinner and more thinly stretched across Death/God, then more and more frequently do the sparks and meteors of insight stab through to the poet.

But let me make a clear distinction here. I am the first to admit that I am no enlightened one. I am no permanent address of the great Guru, no full reservoir of Celestial Light, no wide-reaching watershed for the showers of Allah. Saying I was, I would be an outrageous liar and a poet of deception rather than of honest inner observation. From time to time, however, just like anyone who cares to watch, I do see hints, glimpses of It. IN ASSUMING ANIMALS, because of my own idiosyncracies, I attempt to describe these flashes of intuition in the beings of animals, or as the animals themselves. For Job is not the only one who advises that we seek wisdom from the creatures of air, water and land. I, the ego, am for a second or two struck dumb, am silent, and a voice from elsewhere, from inside or out (I can not tell whither) is the voice that speaks. When I am dumb, then those voices come. I am

the static that interferes with my own crystal receiver. Others hear these voices, too, but they think they are a mere invention of their own ears. And perhaps they are. But at times I really believe that the words and lines that pass by my mind's eye come from elsewhere.

Perhaps a note of apology is necessary at this point. On one hand, I am sure that I mean to put on the skins of beasts and speak their message. On the other hand, I am struck with the arrogance of such an assertion. I seem to be claiming the role of the shaman, assuming to have the power of hidden intimates outside the realm of ordinary life. I think I am aware of the temptations and dangers of such an attitude and posture. And for a young poet, it could well be ultimately destructive. Perhaps such a stance only belies my own psychological aberrancy. But perhaps, too, the truth or validity of these last poems lies simply in the desire and need of the poet to find and convey, to convince his audience and himself, that there is yet hope, that despair is pointless and barren, that he can be a part of this world, even if it means that he must pose behind the mask of other flesh and bone.

OTHER POETS

I would like to point to three poets who have, to some extent, shaped my views on poetry and poet. Like singers, poets begin by imitation and then gradually find their own voice. Six years ago, when I had first begun to jot little poems down, I picked up an old volume of Tennyson and would

delight myself by reading his huge, rolling cadences aloud. I did not always know just what Tennyson was up to, or what he was talking about. I often got quite lost in his long narratives. But I read that book all the way through and read the poem "The Lotus Eaters" time and again. I was simply bewitched with his music, the way his sound moved across the page like giant waves far out in the ocean. For a while, too long, I wrote like Tennyson, though certainly not as well. I wrote long-lined verse, full of Victorian vocabulary, in heavy iambic meter, often rhymed. I always sensed, however, that something was wrong, for my themes were not like Tennyson's at all. They were American themes, about American people, by an American.

More recently, I have become interested in modern and contemporary American poets. As "The Song Of The Wallowing Punkster" indicates, Theodore Roethke has my highest regard. Though the tone of my poem may leave the reader questioning my allegiance, I think that the lackadaisical attitude is itself a characteristic of Roethke's work at times. The idea of lazy superiority may be seen in a similarly entitled poem of his, "The Sloth";

In moving-slow he has no Peer.
You ask him something in his Ear,
He thinks about it for a Year;

And, then, before he says a Word
There, upside down (unlike a Bird),
He will assume that you have Heard--

A most Ex-as-per-at-ing Lug.
But should you call his manner Smug,
He'll sigh and give his Branch a Hug;

Then off again to Sleep he goes,
Still swaying gently by his Toes,
And you just know he knows he knows.

Actually, I discovered this particular poem after having written my own. Still, in subject matter and approach, there is a likeness. Roethke's poem also displays another feature I admire about him; his willingness to take a risk, his will to playfulness. I think Richard Hugo, one of his students, has said that we admire those poets most who are willing to take risks. Sometimes these risks work against them, and they end up showing their human flaws. But in the end, when they are eventually successful, they have earned our admiration. Our hearts.

In addition, Roethke is a sound poet, a poet whose ear often takes priority over his mind, over any great idea. To my estimation, this shows a commitment to song rather than to a rationale or grand schemata. I think this is crucial to the writing of real poems. Again, Mr. Hugo once told me that when he reads the poems of beginners, the question he asks himself is simply whether or not their verse sounds good. The young poet can not hope to be overly profound before he has earned his experience, his licks, but with work (and with the gift) he may develop a good ear. Developing the ear also implies that the poem must be spoken or sung, must come off

the page and float or drive through the air, must resonate. I know that for myself, reading poems aloud is important. In fact, most of the process of revision is a process of 're-hearing' the poem, listening to what sounds awkward, and replacing or altering the line so that it sounds fluid, graceful, or whatever the intended music may be. This, in turn, affects the way the poem is presented on the page. For me, the line is a breath unit, and the break at the end of a line should represent a natural pause in oral recitation, while hopefully still remaining visually interesting.

It is too easy for the young poet to live in a sort of timelessness, unaware of his brothers and sisters of the muse. These two years at Kansas State have been beneficial to me because I have started, really for the first time, to read my contemporaries. Many young poets seem so totally consumed in their own work, that they never read others. Other young writers may study the 'great poets' to exclusion of their own age. And while there is nothing wrong with studying the tradition (it is a prerequisite), I do think there is something absurd about not reading how that tradition is being interpreted into the present. Two contemporary poets who have influenced my idea not only of what poetry can be, but more importantly, of what the poet can be nowadays, are Gary Snyder and Robert Bly.

I have read two of Snyder's books, Regarding Wave and Turtle Island, and feel a kinship with him because of his role as a figure of the counter-culture. Indeed, he is a hero of it.

Not that counter-culture is inherently virtuous, but with Snyder it becomes a virtue because of the way he defines it. For him it carries a religious importance. His radical theory and practice is not content only with poetry, either, but will reach into prose to further elucidate his meaning. In fact, Turtle Island, his Pulitzer prize-winning book, has a large collection of prose essays attached that leave little doubt as to his political and social theories. He is a poet unafraid of being engaged by the world, a poet willing to come out of his solitude and take on the large, unwieldy poem of the world. Far from being a movement of narcissistic 'me-ness', his idea of counter-culture is of a movement directed away from selfishness and indulgence, toward sacrifice and conservation.

Furthermore, I identify with his spiritual quest. He is very much influenced by Zen Buddhism and American Indian world views and practices. After going to Japan in the fifties to study Buddhism in a Rinzai monastery, Snyder has returned to his native land to establish place. He believes that a poet must first have the feeling of being somewhere specific before he can launch out successfully into poem. Moreover, his spiritual practice is not so simple as just being a Buddhist. He believes that as children of this land, of Turtle Island, we must derive a practice and belief which is uniquely ours. Borrowing is too simple a solution.

. . . here in North America, Turtle Island, we begin now to look for the next switchback in the path: something drawing on the wisdom traditions of Asia,

incorporating the profound lore of our Semetic, Celtic, African, and Germanic roots--something that walks with the land and the animals of Turtle Island in a 'sacred manner' as the Indians do.

He also believes that it is possible, even necessary for the poet today to become a mouthpiece for the animals and plants.

The shaman speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through him. This capacity has often been achieved via special disciplines. In the shaman's world, wilderness and the unconscious become analagous; he who knows and is at ease in one, will be at home in the other.

Today's American poet is the child of the military-industrial complex, and is usually the spoiled offspring of an affluent society. For such a one, discipline is of utmost importance for refinement.

Living today on a fine, delicate line where at any moment whole species of animals or plants become extinct, lost from time, each person must do his share. Western man has looked at nature as so many raw materials at his disposal, ready to be used as he pleases. He observes nature from the throne of a god, and feels an inherent (and contrived) aloofness. The poet of today must return us to our humility and place us once again in a symbiotic interchange with our intimate, complex and tender world.

And finally, a word about Robert Bly. I have reservations

about some of Mr. Bly's poetry. I am not sure he continually sustains an eloquence as Roethke does. But one thing I am convinced of is Bly's eloquence of being. Having seen him give a reading last spring, I have no doubt that he is right when he preaches (ad nauseum) about the necessity to unlock the poem from the page. As he points out, since the invention of the printing press, there has been a greater and greater tendency to think of a poem as so many words on a page. This has eventually lead to a loss of respect for sound. Of course, the best poets have always been aware of sound, have never been handcuffed by print. Nevertheless, anyone who has grown up reading books knows that it is one thing to read silently, and quite another to hear a poem recited by a person close to it.

Bly makes this even clearer when he joins music with his reading. So what if he plays a shabby dulcimer. A mere few well-timed strokes on the thing, a couple of chords, serve as a backdrop, a beautiful tapestry for his poems, most of which he recites from memory, not having to lower his head to the page, breaking eye-contact with the audience. It is not just that this is good entertainment (though it is), but rather that it has an important effect upon the writing of verse. Because Bly is concerned with poetry that works on an oral level, he is consequently concerned with poetry that is easily 'understood' by the listener who may never have read the poem before. In sum, the poetry must have a more colloquial, unstudied feeling and artifice.

In my verse, I try to create this mood by not only using the second person pronoun, but also by using "fool" or "brotherfool" which attract the audience's attention by seeming to insult them. But when I call my audience a fool, I am implicated in the judgement as well. With the written word becoming as inaccessible as nordic runes to our culture of television, with our amazingly fast transition to an electronic oral culture, poetry will have to learn to be much more 'oral' than in the past, when it could safely depend on a large reading audience. I hope that my poetry can be listened to and somewhat understood by that television viewer, while at the same time retaining the elements of strength that have been preserved in our tradition of song.

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DUMB AS THEY COME

by

Billy Razz Weinman

B. S., Kansas State University, 1978

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of original poetry composed while a student at Kansas State. The poems are arranged in three sections. The first section, "In the Living Room," consists of interior poems, where the persona meditates upon life in general from the cloister of his incompleteness. There is a sense of entrapment which the poet slowly realizes and decides to overcome. The second section, "In the Mean Time," consists of poems depicting a descent into the abyss of suffering and near-despair. The third section, "In Assuming Animals," offers a resolution to this despair and to the entrapment of the previous two sections. This is accomplished through meditation upon the simplicity of animals, or, by actual assumption of their bodies.

In brief, then, what is depicted is the classic motif of a self in search of its true nature, a search which involves dissolution before rebirth.

Finally, a critical apparatus is appended in which the structure and technique of my poetry is discussed. In addition, some space is given over to the exploration of three poets who have influenced my work, namely Theodore Roethke, Gary Snyder, and Robert Bly.