

PULSE



Today we are all Hokies.

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Spring 2007

PULSE

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Of Lamar University — Beaumont**

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Dept. of English and Modern Languages

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In reverence to our fellow university, Virginia Tech, *Pulse* dedicates this issue to the memory of those who were slain on April 16, 2007 while pursuing their educational goals.

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Amber Placette, "Let Those Among You"

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Zeb Lowe, "Rooms Less Traveled"

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Mike Dunklin, "Faith Less Than a Cup"

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Amber Placette, "Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Kind of Spiritual Kindergarten"

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Fine Dining

Kevin Colton
The Enigmatology of a Poem

Questions for the Dead

Daylight tilts its head and snakes through blinds.
Your dusty bed and all things white are browned
by breath of time. Where can I find—
You? Old lady, who peered into that mirror?
Old lady, who ferried heartwood piece by piece—
who sizzled pork and saved the grease for simple cakes?

Who slaughtered your pecan to smoke their beef?
Where is that tree, dotted with days of counting birds?
Has their abacus, pecked in flaking bark, been burned?

You were either loved or unloved? Or did
your sons all die in war? Or did they steal
pecans like I did—creep through the moonlit nights
as I did? Your tree is gone, my bucket empty.
If I filled it with water it would still be empty.
I leave it with you, a pitiful offering among
porch artifacts: your rust-scaled hoe,
your pitted iron crock, your horseshoe spilling half its
luck

Diospyros

At the road's edge, where the tar-pebbled blanket
threatens continuously to unfold
and cover, greater still, the high bermuda
or carelessly to choke the exuberant red oaks,
there grows a tree which seems to lean
on some unseen shoulder,
its leaves curling like wax in the indiscriminate sun,
stealing the breath, petrifying the breeze,
of one who passes through
an abandoned camp

Persimmons are the loneliest of trees.
They grieve as they weep their October fruits
like lava drops sinking into high grass,
melting into wrinkled, half-moons
with bletted berries too soft for most tastes
or too ephemeral for significant worth.

Though, I have sampled this bounty of Zeus,
plucked the green fruit from the lowest of limbs
and felt my mouth draw so tightly in
that nothing could be said of that flesh.
For all the bitterness surrounding the roots,
one might stumble upon a berry so sweet
it defies each thought he might think
he came to know—
that that same fruit fell from the very same limbs
to be enjoyed,
if only for one moment,
as it faded quickly away. Away.

Canoe

My darling dear's much larger than I am;
sixty men she has to plan her dresses—
Kitchen mitts they weave to touch her tresses.
Her breath's less subtle than a mountain ram's.
How could I ever write her name in sand,
when sewer rats eschew her 'sweet' caresses?
Her snaggle teeth and gums have six abscesses,
though every day she eats Virginia Ham.

My pool, just as well, is fairly slimy,
with rotten fish and turds and typhus too.
I cannot find an airline that will fly me
to anywhere but here or Timbuktu.
My darling dear is queen of Tennessee.
Her face won't ever launch a damned canoe!

Her Mother, the Ornithologist, Orates on Her First Egg and Better Birds

"The male Bower Bird ornaments his nest
far south of here while searching twigs to tweeze.
He nuzzles trash. He's Darwin's biggest sleaze.
'What's this I spy in the flora—' he coughs
inebriant songs of the truest mawk.
'A condom wrapper. I've found you! O my Love!
'And finally I'll be her turtle dove!'
'This will fit finely on the portico
with the Heineken caps I have placed just so.'
'She'll think me no dull bird with lack of plumes.'
'I will get her inside my chamber room
and have my way.' "

"What is more," she adoringly advised,
Is that "Gender can be characterized
by this act, alone. There are many species
singing similar songs, most feeding feces
to their young in lieu of more wholesome worms—
and I know that my words may make you squirm,
like the grubs they are, but at least they are not shit.
Dear, do not fear this, your attention flits
into some noisome world. For my agenda,
and I won't amend it or distend it,
Is not to scare you but to tell the truth:
You will find better birds if you're not aloof."

"Bower Birds mimic waterfalls with beaks,
and be aware that they seek to entreat
your love with such ephemeral things as looks,
and ev'n more cowardly from books
with tired lines from the dying or the dead;
they repeat and repeat until you dread
the sight of the morning sun—and you're done—

done for with a black eye and three tattoos
you can't remove from your memory or skin.
But please, remember dear it's not a sin
to love, or even to give love love's chance.
But don't waste all your time on cheap romance."

"Today, my darling, you've begun to bleed
like every woman who has spread the seed
of all life in this revolving world.
So realize, when guys have sexy curls,
that salons and saloons grace every corner.
Know that I'd date parrots before the former
and that we pine. And piningly we must
go till we've eaten up the final crust
God has so kindly tossed us in this cage.
The story is the same from page to page;
To the untrained eye the buzzard seems regal.
I implore you to find the stoic eagle,
Sweeping without guile, and to marry him—
and to always place your nest on healthy limbs."

ELISE DAVENPORT

The Other Bride's Bouquet

On the desk near the window . . . was a bouquet of orange blossoms—a bride's bouquet: the other bride's bouquet!

--Madame Bovary

The heavy air drifts, laden full with sleep.
Bound up in swaying strands of waning light,
The hours of afternoon are growing deep.

The minutes settle in a dusty creep,
And on dried petals gingerly alight;
The heavy air drifts, laden full with sleep.

The bouquet seems a strange relic to keep,
And while she prods the fire, flickering bright,
The hours of afternoon are growing deep.

Silk flowers, paper berries look so cheap,
While over what once had been a bride's delight,
The heavy air drifts, laden full with sleep.

Or, maybe, their crudeness had made her weep,
The new wife thinks, recalling her own rite;
The hours of afternoon are growing deep.

She moves her hand—a single angry sweep,
Watching, and while the painted leaves ignite,
The heavy air drifts, laden full with sleep;
The hours of afternoon are growing deep.

Addie's Epithalamion

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. . . .

I knew that word was like the others, just a shape to fill a lack.

As I Lay Dying

We stepped outside the sallow one-room church;
The words came raining down in tiny grains.
They hid among the grass to be devoured
And burst the bellies of the spring bluebirds.
It serves them right. Each wasted year they sing,
Inviting back the noise, the dust, the hate,
The ruthless snapping of the hickory switch.
Hypocrite spring has always been the worst,
Coaxing the life to tear out of the earth,
Expecting her to smile. She moans to me;
Her damp vibrations whisper in the leaves,
And choke up in the bubbles of the brook.
I tell her life is tearing through me too.
She nods, and lets the dead words settle in,
Or peel and crack, stretched flat against the wall,
Until it's time to clean the house. The spring
Cannot raise us forever. My father
Said the reason that we live is that we're
Getting ready to stay dead a long time.
I'm ready. But marriage, love, and death
Are all just shapes to fill a lack, just words
I sweep off of the cedar porch each day
Into (the other word) oblivion
And strangling arms of this, my wedding night.

Catherine of Aragon

Yo, una princesa; no, una reina.
Hermana del rey, hija de reyes—
Espero el invierno gris, mojado
en este castillo frío, una cama fría,
donde las piedras miran con silencio pesado.
Son piedras ingleses—son piedras míos, pero no son míos,
y durante la noche, las oigo, susurrando,
mientras crece la cosa, dentro de mi cuerpo,
apagando la última llama, lentamente.
Y mientras espero por las campanas a resonar
sobre la nieve, cantando la muerte y más que la muerte,
el calor de la cama de mi esposo, y Isabel concibió,
escribo una carta, y la firmo
Catherine, the Queen.

(my own poem, translated)

I, a princess; no, a queen.
Sister to the king, daughter of kings—
I wait the gray, wet winter
in this cold castle, a cold bed,
where the stones watch with heavy silence.
They are English stones—they are my stones, but they are
not mine,
and during the night, I hear them, whispering,
while the thing grows, inside my body,
snuffing the last flame, slowly.
And while I wait for the bells to echo
over the snow, singing death and more than death,
The warmth of my husband's bed, and Elizabeth conceived,
I write a letter, and I sign it
Catherine, the Queen.

A Milton Primer

L'Allegro likes to hang out with the chicks
And drink his amber brew from a beer bong,
Il Penseroso wears jet black lipstick
And skulks around the mall all evening long.
To be a friend of Thyrsis is a trip
And occupational hazard all entwined,
Poor Lycidas went right down with the ship;
His buddy Damon wasn't far behind.
God and Jesus aren't all that exciting
They are, you might say, something of a bore.
Satan's pad just seems much more inviting—
Sauna, heated pool—simply to die for.
And that, my friends, crams heaven, earth and hell,
And the work of Milton in a nutshell.

musical interlude

After Man Ray's Le Violon d'Ingres

she's wearing a stupid hat
some sort of sad attempt at the everyday exotic
but who's looking at that, really
when the lines flow from her shoulders
dripping like steam from the shower head
curling like the velvet ribbon of smoke exhaled
from a spent cigarette into some violet dusk
materializing a familiar shape in the grainy dark
pale and silver, shining on the page

the curves Stradivari knew so well
unfold on naked flesh branded
with sinuous hollows, open mouths
for musical strains struggling to escape
from the confines of her dusky corners.
she sits alone in a pool of silk
where are her friends, the cellos,
the violas, the double-basses,
and why so silent?

imagine fingers brushed over that spinal
string, what music would then flow forth

Penelope

After Tennyson's Ulysses

An idle king? At least that much is true.
And little profits? Yeah, let me tell you . . .
There were no crown jewels for this faithful queen,
Though I waited through the fat and lean.
But while by night I stripped away my loom
In the secret confines of my room,
Besieged by sleazy suitors twenty years,
My husband and his men put 'round their spears
Into whatever flesh . . . or shall I say . . .
Whatever female beast of prey that they
Should come across.

I know the cock-and-bull
Excuses of his silver tongue in full
Detail. Calypso held with all her might—
Yes, I'm sure he put up such a fight.
He had to plow that Circe like a field
Because if he refused, she'd never yield
His herd of squealing swine, though I may say,
Ulysses should have let them stay that way—
It was a truer form.

But I digress,
My husband didn't only chase the dress.
Why wasn't he home when he'd helped destroy
The new-fallen walls of once golden Troy?
Because Ulysses managed to displease
Poseidon, moody god of seven seas
By whacking off his one-eyed monster brat—
And not to seem too crude, but well, if that
Is not a metaphor then I don't know
What is.

But even though I had been so
Long faithful, fighting hard until the end

To turn away the crowd of vulgar men
 And preserve his house as best I could
 Raising his son to be both wise and good,
 The moment that he stepped inside the door
 He smeared my walls and floor with blood and gore,
 And while I mopped up all the filthy ooze
 All Ulysses could do is accuse
 His queen of sleeping with those brutish boars
 That I was helpless to turn from his doors.
 But even this I could endure because
 I really, truly believed that he was
 Home for good. But no, he had to go—
 One last foolhardy quest before the snow
 Could set upon his thinning head of hair.

So, don't be wound up in his fine-spun words,
 And cheer him as he sails off with the birds.
 All he can say is that I'm an aged wife?
 I'll take out some insurance on his life—
 And his quest? Instead of trying to stop it,
 I think I'll turn a little profit.

The Tale of Molly and the Peg-Legged Preacher

Behind the house are thick and towering pines
 All overgrown with Kudzu vine that chokes
 And tangles in the Yaupon holly brush.
 The summer air is sweet with muscadines
 Hanging fat and round among the branches
 Above wild violets clustered in the shade
 Of the creek's damp bank, as mayhaws ripen,
 Reddening in the dappled noonday sun.
 The air is cool beneath the canopy
 Of swaying green and native summer fruit,
 But the speckled sun illuminates
 A sign that man has walked these woods before.

Just off the winding trail a hollow sits,
 That's bordered in the back by fallen logs,
 Floored with a carpet of pine straw and leaves
 And roofed by vaulted branches overhead—
 A true cathedral transcendental.
 But in this still church of god in ruins
 The two stones stand, though not as an altar—
 Each just two feet high and as much apart,
 The left of marble, the right some red rock,
 Shaped and graven by a human hand.

A sculpted dove hangs suspended in flight
 At the top of the little left-hand stone
 Pure white, winging its way through clouds of gray
 That streak their way throughout the marble slab.
 The inscription on it simply reads, "Molly
 Henderson," and then the line below,
 "Born and died June 9, 1805."
 The other stone has been worn smooth by time,
 But if you ask the man who lives inside
 The house beyond the secret graveyard's woods,

Old Marvin can tell you just what lies there.
Among dusty shelves of rural artifacts—
Enamelware, a whiskey jug, and what
He always liked the best, a bank that looked
Just like an old outhouse, that exploded
Each time you put a quarter in the slot—
He'll offer you a glass of lemonade
And putting down the Farmer's Almanac,
He'll say, "Molly was the stillborn baby
Of my great-grandmother, but the other
Is not a headstone—more like a footstone—
You see, it marks an amputated leg.
I'm too young to have known, and way too old
To remember the man's name, or the day
They buried his leg, but I do recall
Why my pappy told me they cut it off."

"The way he used to tell it was, the man
Had come up in the middle of the night
Wantin' to tell the neighbors 'bout some kind
Of new religion—why he couldn't wait
'Til mornin', well that, I don't even know.
But the neighbor sees a stranger comin',
Middle of the night, and up and shoots him
Right in the leg—he didn't know but that
The man was a trespasser on his land.
So he got gangrene, and they cut it off."

"But he went on and settled down in town
And they called him the Peg-Legged Preacher.
So the Peg-Legged Preacher's leg is there
Buried 'long side my stillborn cousin, and
The feller went kinda strange in the head
And decided he'd buy it a footstone."

Old Marvin lives on his family land

That's been handed down just like the story
He tells anyone who will stop to hear.
He inherited the graves with the rest
And tends them often as he tends his lawn—

And Molly and the preacher's mangled leg
Sleep quietly amongst the swaying pines—
A country churchyard with no elegy.

Yard Sale Surprise

The sun shone bright upon the lawn
Covered with trash and treasure
For Hester, who rose with the dawn,
To rummage at her pleasure.

At first she gave some skates a try
Then saw a Beatles poster
But nothing really caught her eye
Until she saw the toaster.

Its sides were made of gleaming chrome,
Two slots to put the bread in,
She knew that she must take it home--
Five dollars was a bargain.

She put it by the kitchen sink,
Proud of her well-spent money
But soon Hester began to think
That there was something funny.

The same shape burned in all her bread,
She showed her husband Neville;
His eyes popped clean out of his head--
It looked just like the Devil.

She tried all breads—white, wheat, and rye;
Despite each new endeavor,
The devil's face came up each time
She pushed or pulled the lever.

It toasted bread with heat from Hell,
Possessed with evil demons
And Hester thought to herself, "Well,
It wasn't such a bargain."

Next time a sale should catch your eye,
Don't cause a cataclysm--
Be careful that the thing you buy
Doesn't need exorcism.

Let Those Among You

My sins were always very small.
I lied to my father about my spelling test;
I smacked my brother with a fishing pole,
or stole change from my mother's purse.

It wasn't until I hid in the confession
underneath the bench and heard a dozen
requests for a blessing after sin
that I understood: all sins are not small.

Marie Cipriano confessed that she had
sinful thoughts at Joel's Diner
when she saw a red straw
and a sprinkled chocolate donut.

Marty Jackson cheated on his wife
on soiled sheets at the Seashell Motel
on October 4, 1983,
the day his son was born.

Michael Mason spent his entire check
on a horse called Caesar, whose elegant black back
caused Mr. Mason such sensations that he worried
it might be a form of bestiality.

And my mother—she had dreams.
She dreamed of putting arsenic
in my father's chicken pot pie
and then finding her own father
and serving him the leftovers.

Different Brands Different Windows

On that day I was small too small for shoes or school or
guilt
running on the beach in the sun learning to tap dance with
the waves
the foamy blankets that covered the shore my toes and then
pulled away
and I wanted to run into the crest and collapse like a
drunken man
longs to tumble into a sea of spilt beer and inhale its sour
sweetness
but I knew that I couldn't because I was too small but big
enough to understand
that death is what lurks in the water that you can't see the
bottom of and sleeps and waits
so I ran to where the two bodies stretched out in the sun
like twin bronze hot dogs
and took a superhero's stance my hands on my hips
forming perfect right triangles
and casting my own dark shadow and blocking their self-
sacrifices to the sun
*Dad I want to go in the water can we go in the water now
please*
and my father grunted sat up mocked a sailor's salute and
squinted one eye
and stared as if I were a sandy water nymph come ashore
to seek a mate
but my mother took her rolled-up *Star* and made staccato
swats at him
*For God's sake take her out in the water Eric you've slept
for a whole damn hour*
and he picked me up like a piece of the driftwood that
cluttered the shore
and took me so far into the sea that he had to leap in order
to rise above the waves

and the salty water jumping into my mouth reminded me of
my only lost tooth
when I had gurgled a vat of salted tap water and spit out
into the sink
a sea of polluted crimson creating my own ocean and
waves
and my father's mouth was open too peeling a paean of his
own joy
of being a man taller than even a multitude of angry
toppling waves
and his mouth was a censer releasing a power perfume
more powerful than even the stink of the sea around us
of his cold coffee chili with onions and sour cream and
Marlboro Lights
and I could feel with such intensity the earthquake of his
heart
pulsating through his chest and reverberating through my
head
as it rested there until my weaker rhythm conformed to his
and then my father must have swallowed a gulp of the
ocean
or seen a jellyfish lurking just below the crashing waves
to suddenly release his once unyielding grip on my body
and I slid out of his golden arms like an avocado slides out
its black skin
and I fell below the waves and into the calm part of the
water
and it was nothing like the wishing fountain at the mall
where I could submerge my face in the lent littered water
colored cerulean by tiles and keep my eyes open and see
mounds of pennies, nickels, and accidental washers
but it was harsh and opaque full of invisible arms reaching
for me
and I suppose I was lucky that my father caught me by the
ankle

and lifted me out of the water and held me like a sopping
bed sheet
until he realized his mistake and grabbed the right
appendage
and it was only then that I heard the words he vomited
Oh damn shit dammit holy shit shit shit shit
and as we returned to the shore my mother was thrashing
about
double waving her arms over her head as if we did not see
her
the human grape griping in her lilac-colored one piece
I told you Eric what the hell did I say to you you idiot
and they placed me on the shoreline and felt all over my
body
as if I had some hidden valve that would release any lung-
lingering water
and when they studied me like fervent students study the
snack machine
my father declared that I was fine and insisted I be
bandaged in a towel
but she brought the wrong towels bathroom instead of
beach
so I sat wrapped in onionskin on genuine leather seats
that on my pruning chill-bumped legs felt more like
sandpaper and nails
and they continued to wrangle by chain smoking different
brands
out of different windows of his old Ford and I was lost in
between
their attempts to lay blame like they used to lay hands on
each other
in the same truck parked on the same beach but it was dark
then
and nobody asked to go in the water to chase after the
waves
I told you Eric what did I say you're just such a bastard

Tell me Janet do you ever just shut the hell up shut up Janet
and he puffed out his last lung full of smoke and flicked the
butt
and began to chant his own incantation that gave them both
some comfort
It was just a stupid accident I didn't mean for it to happen
shit just an accident

Down the Hall and to the Left .

If the door is not shut
so that the stopper clicks,
it will open by itself.
The staples are coming out
of the acorn-colored carpet
and cereal crumbs linger
between fraying fibers.
In one corner – stacks
of over a hundred
back issues of
National Enquirer and *People*.
And in its twin – homeless
books without shelves.
The shelves are reserved
for sacred collectibles:
dusty candles without wicks,
a pile of toenail trimmings,
a small bowl holding candy wrappers.
The sheets and quilt
are pulled up
to where the snot blown
into them is impossible
to notice.
The crucifix is lonely
and hanging, and
Jesus has no face.
There used to be pictures
on the wall with the
faceless son of God,
but Mother burned them
yesterday morning.
You only miss them if
you look carefully and see
the holes left by the nails.

R.S. Gwynn

I have a collection of poetry
taped to my office door.
It's old and dirty and torn to hell,
but that's what poetry's for.

Reproduction

This is the black evening
of my godfather's depression.
Like a bored lily he
palpitates and divines
until the coffee can snatches
the justice that he imbibes.
Thinking of him, I shuffle
a team of birches
in a barn by the beach.
I am not an African gray, but in his mind
I choose confessions
and repeat them one by one, like a prayer.

The Thorn Bush

My mother planted a thorn bush
outside the door of our house.
It was there from the time I was four
and fell facedown into its daggers,
connecting my amber freckles
with thin bleeding stripes.

Whenever I passed by,
the vicious plant would molest
my pant leg, groping for contact.
And every day, I would curse the damn bush,
hating it for interjecting itself
where it did not belong.

In time I learned to hate
grass and roses and leaves as well
because if the thorn bush had a family reunion,
they would be invited.
On its final day, the thorn bush tattooed
my leg with its razor-blade fingers.
I stopped to look down at it,
a mass of emerald needles
delighted in piercing me.

It only took me a few minutes to locate
the container of scented bleach
and fill the cup with gleaming liquid
and empty it onto the roots of the antichrist.
But as I stood there, knowing I had stifled
the thorn bush's bloody reign of terror,
I realized I did not hate grass or roses or even leaves,
for at that moment, if ever the thorn bush had a sibling,
it was me.

To My Father on his 44th Birthday (April 18, 2007)

April is the hazy month in Texas
when God's fingertips smudge the azure sky
and smear it with colors not man-named
although he has tried in vain –
sapphire, hazel, ruby, golden, ginger.
What is the color of brilliance so immense
that it burns through your eyes
and singes your brain, rendering it useless
and finally reaches your soul and feels at rest
where there is no language?
Your eyes remind me of this.

And the ground—not the grass, but what lies underneath
the damp shamrocks, each one individually the same
and smooth like the down hair on a baby's bare skin—
that earth that is rich and supple and sweet
like brown sugar clumps that break in your hands
and hide in the eternal crevices of your palm,
a tender blanket of gentle satin
that is weightless as it embraces your skin.
The smell is that of a man's first days in life,
an overpowering strength of soft sweetness.
Your hands remind me of this.

And the cerulean rain drops down
like small beads of your last memories
and lands on your forehead and dances—
swims down to linger on your eyelashes
and causes a second storm when you blink
a sprinkle down your dampened cheek
as the thunder and the wind wed,
forming a cyclone of sound veiled in your heart

that reminds you of being at the center of your darkest
dream
and feeling the calming force of the marriage of fear and
peace.
Your voice reminds me of this.

And the tree—the immovable one planted by the water—
holds up its many arms scattered with jade leaves
as you stand at the base of its ebony trunk
and try to wrap your own arms around it
pressing the side of your warm freckled face
against the giant that shades you from the storm
until the small sooty chips of wood and your skin are
coupled
and you dream that the roots upon which you stand
are connected with your own winding veins
and hold you down and hold you safe.
You remind me of this.

Writing Poetry Is

like peeling back five layers
of blackened scar tissue
your warm blood washing
over a white linoleum floor in scarlet currents

like eating a heaping helping of cabbage
and then revising the meal several times
by vomiting the acidic taste in your throat
while you wait out the burn for the tickle

like using a cheap plastic lighter
to burn the very tops of the skin on your fingers
so that you can smell the singe of it
and enjoy your homemade aroma therapy

like suddenly becoming elderly and incontinent
and watching the spreading stain seep
through your khakis and onto the chair
leaving only a moist imprint when you stand

like holding your child in your arms
as it squirms and wiggles away from you
onto the floor and screams at you
as it wallows in your blood, charred skin, and urine

but no one else can hear or see

or even knows you have a child.

Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Kind of Spiritual Kindergarten

"Suffering is but another name for the teaching of experience, which is the parent of instruction and the schoolmaster of life," once wrote the Greek poet Horace. Horace's theory denotes a particular subject in modern American literature: the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. Robinson's life and literary works are both examples of perpetual conflict. His life was in constant turmoil from the moment of his birth to the last minutes of his death. His poetry and other forms of writing were also drenched in conflict, causing critics to debate and "call Robinson an idealist, Platonist, a transcendentalist, a pantheist, and many combinations thereof" (Cary ix). If Horace is correct in his evaluation, Robinson's poetry should be ingenious as he had one of the harshest schoolmasters of life and learned the lesson of suffering well. Perhaps the question is not of Robinson's genius, but rather where to place that genius in accordance with other types of literature. Some critics maintain that Robinson was a traditionalist, a cousin to poet Robert Frost in his imagery and his attention to tradition. Others would argue that Robinson is simply a mediocre writer of verses, a type of poetic coming attractions for the poets of the modern movement. However, Robinson does not conform to either of these assumptions, but rather defies any type of categorization or labeling. To truly understand the poetry of Robinson, one must not only examine his own biographical information but also the impact of traumatic events that would later influence his choices involving characterization, diction, and themes in his writings. Robinson was obsessed with the ideas of isolation and failure within his own life as well as within the lives of his subjects. He focused on individuals and individual relationships in society and how ultimately, every single individual feels a sense of isolation, desperation,

and failure. In actuality, Robinson was ahead of his time; he was preoccupied with the failure of his subjects and yet creates a sense of irony and compassion for them, making him a true pioneer of the modernist movement.

Edwin Arlington Robinson was born in Head Tide, Maine, on December 22, 1869 (Coffin 17). From the moment he uttered his first cry, Robinson was predestined to become a man who understood the complexity of failure as well as individual isolation from a surrounding environment and other human beings. Throughout his childhood in Maine, Robinson was constantly reminded by his parents of the success of his two adult brothers (Barnard 12). His mother, often cited as "New England's first colonial poet" (Coffin 19), and his father, who had reached the age of retirement at the time of Robinson's birth, recognized the boy's exceptional intelligence and yet tended to ignore their youngest child (Barnard 14). His family often viewed him as a disappointment, and his parents' preoccupation with material achievements handicapped him, forcing him to face the world with a jaded and disillusioned outlook. Following his graduation from secondary school, Robinson spent four years in a state of apparent inactivity, endlessly studying literature and struggling to write his own lines of poetry. The fledging poet then studied philosophy, literature, and languages at Harvard University for two years but had to withdraw from the institution due to the death of his father in 1893 (Barnard 20-23). The years that followed marked a time of great depression and mental anxiety for the young man as he suffered with a chronic ear infection, the depletion of his family's wealth, the death of his mother, and the end of an important love affair (Anderson 44).

Robinson moved to New York in 1895 after his mother's death relieved him of his obligations to his family, and he continued to pursue his literary career. Despite the fact that he had already managed to publish two

volumes of poetry, Robinson struggled financially, relying heavily on the aid of friends and infrequent, temporary jobs (Coffin 24). In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt's son Kermit read Robinson's collection of poems, *The Children of the Night*, in school and urged his father to take an interest in the poet. At his son's insistence, Roosevelt presented Robinson with a job at a customs house which was deliberately structured to enable him to work as little as possible in order to devote the majority of his time to poetry. However, Robinson did not find the situation ideal and decided to recommit himself to revising his old poems as well as writing new ones (Anderson 42). Suddenly, with the poetic revival that preceded the First World War, Robinson found an audience for his poetry. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times during the 1920s for his works, *Collected Poems*, *Tristram*, and *The Man Who Died Twice* (Franchere 34). Robinson continued to write poetry for the remainder of his life, working himself into a state of exhaustion. As Hoyt C. Franchere notes, "He lost the power of compression and precision; he lost much of the control of structure" (45). Robinson died in a hospital in New York City in 1935 while revising his final work *King Jasper*.

In the time following Robinson's death, the volumes of critical interpretation were both immense and conflicting. Although the critics are generally in agreement about the basic aspects of his works, differing opinions about the interpretation of Robinson's verse are as numerous as the critics who strive to understand this deceased visionary. The consensus remains that Robinson was an original individual, obsessed with the themes of human isolation, the tormented introversions of the human conditions, and the frustrations and pain of humanity as it struggles to inhabit a world which God has apparently shunned (Cary 112). James Dickey concludes, "No poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson or knew the self-

consuming furnace that the brain can become in isolation" (qtd. In Lowell 99). Therefore, his poetry's subject matter often deals with individuals who are perplexed, unfulfilled, and unsuccessful to various degrees. The characters in his verse tend to be victims of modern conceptions of success (Cary 155). The question as to why Robinson devoted the majority of his writings to characterizations of failure is often debated. Possibly he was motivated by his own sense of failure from both his family's perspective and his own as an unappreciated writer (Lowell 165). Also, the plight of his morphine-addicted brother, the bankruptcy of his father, his own alcoholism, and his financial struggles possibly contributed to Robinson's obsession with characters who had failed either spiritually or who appeared to be failures to society but in actuality had succeeded in wisdom (Cary 45).

Despite Robinson's pessimistic attitude, he refused to adopt a naturalistic point of view in which human beings must struggle relentlessly against the uncontrollable elements of the physical world (Anderson 37). Robinson was naturally introspective and conscious of the psychological depths of the human mind as well as intensely aware that man was a spiritual being and interested in man as a social creature only as is related to his internal composition (Lowell 87). Therefore, Robinson is indeed modern and writes in an existentialist manner, concerning himself with humanity's very being, with its perpetual, anguished struggle to exist. He is a modern writer who deals with the idea of outcasts, individuals on the outskirts of society, and how society views those it rejects. In this way, Robinson is revolutionary, analyzing the isolated individual far earlier than other modernists such as Truman Capote, Saul Bellow, and Flannery O'Connor.

Robinson's most infamous poetic work is "Richard Cory," a shining example of modernism centered on a man who is the typical flawed failure that dominates much of

Robinson's works. This poem is a thriving example of Robinson's observation regarding conventional success: that outwardly a man may maintain the appearance of accomplishment while he succumbs to an internal sense of disappointment (Cary 64). In this poem, a man's life is condensed into sixteen lines as seen through the eyes of the "people on the pavement" who believe that the title character seemingly has everything. The poem is a powerful statement of the inner turmoil of a man who fails to connect with the world around him and therefore becomes the fatal character of his own tragedy. Robinson does not explain why Cory feels desperation and isolation, which ultimately leads to his suicide, creating an even more shocking sensation for the reader upon the discovery of the final line of the poem. As previously stated, the theme of many of Robinson's character sketches is one of seclusion from the surrounding society, and it is within this framework that Robinson weaves an intricate yet simplistic web of words. Robinson approaches this particular poem as well as the entirety of his work with a philosophical point of view, perfecting each choice of words and agonizing on the desired message he was striving to reverberate (Cary 55). The end result of such attention to detail is a piece like "Richard Cory" which is an enduring and severe work that transcends generations. The crashing climactic moment when the man who outwardly has achieved much commits the ultimate act of desperation generates a sharp sense of emptiness, of a life wasted, and of failure – all themes that characterize the modern movement.

"Mr. Flood's Party" is another of Robinson's poems which emphasizes his adherence to modern themes with its solitary figure saturated in isolation and failure. The poem centers on a man, Eben Flood, who has positioned himself atop a hill overlooking his town and his life. Flood is older, an alcoholic, and contemplates his life and failures by talking to his alter ego. He is "climbing alone" to his

"forsaken upland hermitage," which holds "as much as he should ever know/ On earth again of home" (Robinson 34). Therefore, Flood has no wife, no family, no true companions, and very few possessions. He is the true isolated figure, talking in fragments only to himself in a manner that constitutes a soliloquy (Franchere 45). However, Flood was not always alone. Robinson explains that in his town "friends of other days had honored him." He has simply outlived his friends and must cope with the deadening solitude. Mirroring the poet's own life, Flood uses alcohol to combat his loneliness and poverty, ultimately creating a sense of complete desolation and sadness.

As in most of Robinson's works, "Mr. Flood's Party" is about a man challenged by hardships, loss or personal failure, consequent defeat, and isolation. In this way, Flood is an example of an existential character. Robinson is struggling to understand the "I" within the man. Robinson envisions that a man's inner being is a force within him that is isolated from the outside world. As critic W.R. Robinson notes, "The self, Robinson therefore came to understand, is not identified with character or personality, with, that is, the conscious social aspects of a man's being, but is an activity, a truth-determining, moral creative force not identifiable with or derivable from a role, idea, institution, community, state, or culture" (114). In other words, a person is truly isolated, like Flood, and can ultimately look inward to determine the true nature of his being. In terms of modernism, Flood is somewhat of an archetype. He is a man on the outer edges of society who appears to be insane according to social standards. He is standing on a hilltop in the middle of the night speaking to an alternate personality he has created while drinking alcohol. Also, there is no true resolution at the end of the "party;" Flood is "alone again" after his final drink and travels back toward Tilbury Town and faces the truth about his life: "There was not much that was ahead of him/ And there was nothing in the town

below--/ Where strangers would have shut the many doors/
That many friends had opened long ago" (Robinson 34). Flood will obviously die alone and lonely, completely rejected from the social world. Using traditional language, Robinson is commenting on the modern ideas of isolation and disillusionment with the world. Robinson's picture is not a sugarcoated, pastoral view of New England's countryside; his portrait is a bleak, desolate landscape of the abandonment of the individual by all others and the segregation of the self.

In the greatest example of poetic irony, a man whose name would continue to be studied by students of American poetry did not receive it until some months after his birth (Barnard 12). It is therefore not unfounded to say that Edwin Arlington Robinson was destined to become a man whose life was a reflection of irony and a sense of isolation, the boy who lacked even the most basic of human recognition was born to voice to the pain and desperateness of separation. But perhaps the greatest ironies of Robinson's life and works continue to be that the man who felt like his existence was riddled with failure is often viewed as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century and that his ability to express his own sense of loneliness unites him with humanity on innumerable levels. "The world is not a 'prison house,'" Robinson stated, "but kind of a spiritual kindergarten, where millions of infants are trying to spell 'God' with the wrong blocks" (qtd. In Lowell 78). Robinson saw himself and his poetic characters as member of such a group of infants: individuals whose minds could never encompass the truth about the world which they inhabit but who nevertheless keep on trying to do so. His own life is a testimony to his destiny to become one of the first writers of the modern movement. One critic notes, "If Robinson's life sometimes seems a reflection of his poetry, there is no doubt that his finest poems are in part a reflection of his life" (Cary 66). In this way, Robinson is more

modern than most critics will ever allow. Despite his obvious adherence to traditional form and devices, Robinson is a lone figure; he is a poet who defines categorizations or labels and emerges as a modern writer, isolated by greatness and genius.

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Rooms Less Traveled

Here in this room
the ceiling leaks.
The walls are hollow
and bone dust dances
down from the ceiling
when the neighbors fuck.
The carpet here has
seen the end of its
useful days,
with its mangy look
and hardened semen stains.
I can trace the mold,
the coffee stains,
that inch disease
slowly down the four
corners of the walls.
It crawls down, keeping time
with the rhythm of the
rocking ceiling fan
that slowly leads me to sleep

Canyon Psalm

Prostrate, lying near sand walls under a
mud sky, the sage make love in the dunes.
She births another sun to surrender the old.

Fleshy roots, pale and soft, pump
The blood of the harvest east to west.

I sing alone in this painted canyon
with horse hair pillows and a well lit fire;
beating my chest on a desert plane,
naked and feeding on space,
smelling the rain and retreating to caves.

Dance of the Gods

The ebb and flow of the tides
wash against the lavender skies.
At that point on the horizon
where the polished plane is reached,
there the Gods dance on their wing-ed feet.
Lying back into the wet sand

I find relief as I exhale,
observing breath nearing night.
Their pillow, cloudlike forms rise on.
A sigh comes from knowledge of
expectations never reached.

Never to dance with the Gods on
their tang floor of the sea.
Nor dance on their wing-ed feet.

The Mennonite

And I say to you, you heretics and soothsayers

You who steal and rape the East
You who forge and mold all things West
You who live behind closed curtains
in smoky living rooms with velvet crosses.

You who frost your hair on the natives' fruit
You who pray with legs straight and proud
You who feed on life through Sunday
luncheons and Pyrex dishes.

You who bathe in wine but taste not
You who drive your car to fetch your mail
You who have become drinkers of the sand
that slake your gullet with dunes

You who, through restraint, cum
You who shout your silent gifts
You who take down your masks daily –
seven clay masks of safety that tickle eyelashes

You who have never feasted on locusts
Nor tasted of mead
Nor washed worn feet
Nor knelt in darkness
Nor shied from sun

You who were never a carrier of the light
that once surrendered to the night.

You who never beat your breasts, licked your tears,
clawed your throat, and turned sin to song.

I say to you, you shade tree prophets and worshipers of
wheat

Have you danced naked in the desert, stirring up dust
letting rhythms exit our fingers... and toes
conjuring visions of ancient shamans?

Have you receded back into the dark water of the night
feeling the greasy friction against your skin
inching its way into the far corners of your mouth?

Have you hesitated with every breath for
fear of inhaling and becoming the disease
as the Low-men with sallow, sunken faces
reach with their worn, raven talons to bleed you
hollow?

On Making Me Enjoy Writing Formal Poetry Instead of Free Verse

And so I see, you've laid the gauntlet now
you snake. I swore I wouldn't fall for it.
But I suppose you've got your own black magic
they share with you in your "professor" like
circles – circle jerk is more what I think.
I think I have a gilded turd for you.

I also wish you knew how much it blew
to us an abacus to write and plow
through formulas that make your poems just stink
anyways. Although you really hit
the nail right, square, and true (which I don't like).
R.S., I confess, you know how to trick

those poor and young lost souls that'd gladly lick
the mud off your boot, or remodel your bathroom for you.
What do they know? They're just like
kids (you, of course are grand). "They would plow
the rice rows up and down and they would spit
'Tobaccy' out their windows," I'll bet you think

as you sit – arms folded and you wink
while girls walk by and try to flick
their cigs, so cool like on T.V. Your wit
is sharp as a tack, just as azure is blue.
To you I submit, you do reign supreme, but how
on earth can you (with all your years) still like

to teach young fools (or scholars) who do not like
the form, and only provide your colleagues a wink
and nod. I know you liken their minds to a sow
-the kids of course- we really don't know dick.

I wonder, have the years caused a darker hue
on that once bright third eye (as I imagine it)?

I hate to say, you're right about all of it,
prodding you, you watching me squirm and the like.
Just how many students have tried to put the screw
to you? I know that we'll be just fine if you wink.
If not, I feel quite sure I'll need lipstick
because I'm screwed right here and now.

On Reading Nabokov Whilst Teaching High School English (Thank You, R.S. Gwynn)

Letting the tips of my fingers graze lightly upon
her porcelain skin, those ivory towers of Abolonia-
her coarse grained pages- I moan in hurried breaths. Now

*Sweet Lord, there is no possible way you're a
sophomore,
not with those budding breasts just below your chin
and your
perfume of experience, so noxious, you wear so thick.*

I return to her, my love, my child, my muse. Had
we but a minute in time to taste the friction between
our wanton flesh, we surely would find our other half. You

*I have got to stop reading this damn book. My
nymphete-
Remember, seventeen and below will get you fifteen
or more. Oh God, you have a question. You're coming
to me.*

Vivid Amoral Knob! How could you create such divinity,
allowing me the distaste of pleasure in her almond eyes,
parted lips, and her hair – a sea of heather and caramel, or

*I beg you, stop leaning over my desk. Arms apart,
hips swaying to the rhythm of my breath, you exhale
deeper so I may see the rise and fall of your suppleness.*

could it be that her pages now turn flush with desire?
I can feel the fibers respond to my touch and follow
my finger tips' slightest grace upon her spine. And we
dance.

*Yes my lovely queen, my virgin priestess, my little
lilac, I will be available for tutoring after class today.
No, I will not. I beg of you, my dove, please be on
your way.*

Prelude (For Odin)

I paid the price for wisdom once that now,
Upon a moment's thought, has served me well.
My eye I had to give, and humbly bow
Before the cypress king as oceans swelled
Their tide of protest so; licking his bough.
He drowned the sea in floods of fire that fell;
Just as the prince himself once did the night
He cursed the sun, and waged his war on light.

Then from his breath the wind rose up and laid
Me down upon the tree. My hands were nailed.
My feet were bound. The vultures cried, and weighed
The sol that lay below (they saw it pale).
Sallow, their faces turned, and talons splayed
My chest (inhaling all that I exhaled).
For forty days I hung upon the tree,
My ichor spread across the fiery sea.

After forty days had passed, the rats
Knelt down before me. They worshiped at my feet,
They offered up their souls, and praying for bats
To join our land, I begged my legion, "Eat
The ties that bind my feet and nails that
Now pierce my flesh, and made Valhalla weep."
And with the swine, we dined on flies and wine.
To me, they bowed and prayed – a king half blind.

Swamp Song

The alligator dies under a yellow moon.
An old man breathes his last.
Marsh skies, thick with flies, carry
the stink of blood mixed deep
with the mud of the South.
Rebels come alive in forgotten graves
with the wind that carries
howls of ghosts and slaves.

Misunderstood blood feeds the mossy oaks
that pump life into a soggy grave.
The alligator dies under a yellow moon.
Ancient soldiers whisper secrets to
an old man coming to meet them.
The bayou takes its form of vampire,
Sucking...feeding,
breathing fog upon its waters.

An old man breathes his last.
Moss of the oaks know the southern
song. Deep, bad magic plays
aerials in the marsh night.
Cold blood, thick blood breaks
the poke salet surface of the bayou.
Willows dance with the songs of slaves.
The alligator dies under a yellow moon.

When the Man Comes Around

I met the man who came to town that day
in burlap robes, with eyes like burning moons
sinking down farther, beyond any known way
to reach such depths. His hand lay waste and doom.
His tongue was cut. His throat was stitched, and leaked
sweet curdled blood (oh, I recall that smell).
That acrid lavender scent of bloodlines that peaked
when time was young – before the garden fell.
He spoke through wind, in wind, around his breath.
Nightly he bathed in blood of rams and kings.
And for Melchizedek he came with death
and wrath to strip the king and rape his queen.

I pray that you, my child, will leave this town
and not be near... when this man comes around.

Faith Less Than A Cup

Molly Allinder McRae bounced her fussy nephew on her knee while her six-year old niece, Amy, kept up a non-stop commentary as she played with her Barbie dolls. Molly strained to listen to the local public radio station while Amy rambled on and on and Dewey squalled. Matt Henderson was doing his weekly "Bookfest" radio show. Matt had a dreamy voice. He sounded young, or at least he seemed young to Molly since he was funny, hip, cool and sexy. He sounded like everything she thought she would want in a potential husband. Soon, she figured she would be in the husband market again if her current one didn't kill her first.

"Mom has a don't talk to me ring," Amy said, stripping the bathing suit of Ken and placing him between Barbie's upraised legs. Matt was saying something about minimalism. What the hell was minimalism? Amy began to rock Ken back and forth.

"Puddin' where did you learn to do that?" Molly asked trying not to allow the alarm to seep into her voice. She wished her husband, Carl, would rock her like that. Lately the only marital attention she got was either a tongue-lashing or a backhand across the face. She guessed she would trade her sex life for a little more peace. Besides there were other ways, she thought, and then forcibly suppressed the idea of sex altogether. "I saw it on TV," Amy said, adamantly, as if television offered the only real authority.

"Oh," Molly said somewhat relieved. Matt named Bobbie Ann Mason and John Barth as examples of minimalism.

"Where did you watch such a show?"

"We can watch anything when Daddy is taking his

medicine." Amy said. Molly could picture her brother-in-law, Devin, sprawled out drunk on the couch while the Playboy Channel played on his big screen TV.

"Well, could you let Ken rest awhile. He and Barbie are supposed to be just dating. You wouldn't want it to get around that your Barbie is cheap now would you, Peanut?"

"Don't call me that," Amy said with a yard of lower lip hanging out. However, Molly gratefully noted that she began to dress Barbie. Ken remained naked on the floor. Molly could mentally picture a tiny doll cigarette dangling from a big smile on his male doll face.

"So what's a don't talk to me ring?"

"Mom puts her diamond ring right here," Amy said knowingly, pointing to the ring finger on her right hand, "and guys won't talk to her she says."

"Does she wear just her engagement ring all the time?"

"Sometimes she wears both, sometimes she wears none," Amy explained impatiently, with a rushing sigh at Molly's unbelievable ignorance. "It depends on how she feels or if Daddy is around."

Molly could picture the tricks that Darlene did with her wedding and engagement rings. No wonder Devin drank.

Keep your mouth shut, Molly told herself.

Matt, on the radio, mentioned that the East Texas Writers' Union was meeting the following night at the college library. Molly made a mental note to check it out. Dewey began to squall again, and Molly put him up to her shoulder and turned and patted him gently on the back. He belched louder than any infant Molly had ever heard.

"Oooh, that was a six-packer," She cooed tossing him in the air a couple of times. He ceased fussing and began to giggle.

"You're just a regular guy aren't you?" Molly teased putting her face against his and making a face which caused Dewey to laugh.

On the radio, Matt started talking about a novel called

"Feather Crowns" which he claimed was a departure from minimalism for the author, Bobbie Ann Mason. Molly made a mental note to try and find it at the library. She tried placing Dewey down in the play pen, a netted plastic affair, not the wooden cages she remembered from her childhood. Dewey immediately began squalling again.

"He doesn't like the play pen," Amy said.

"Well, he's going to have to like it while I get a cup of coffee and smoke a cigarette."

"Cigarettes are bad for children," Amy said, slamming the still naked Ken like a gavel.

"So are stressed-out babysitters," Molly said, looking sideways at Amy.

Molly padded to the kitchen in her bare feet. The tile felt cool, but gritty. Carl had his weekly poker game three nights before and what beer he and his fellow deputies didn't drink got spilled on the floor. Now for the past twenty-four hours Amy and Dewey had added to the mess. Molly had wiped till she ran out of paper towels then surrendered to the inevitable. There was no point in mopping the floor till the Spillmeister kids went home, Molly told herself.

She poured herself a cup of coffee. From the radio, Matt enthused how "Feather Crowns" was dripping with details. Molly struggled to hear and comprehend over the racket Dewey was making in the living room. Molly decided that minimalism in literature must mean a certain sparseness, not unlike minimalism in women's clothing, although she was not much of an expert on dresses either. She grabbed a clean ashtray out of the dish drainer, a heavy green glass squared-off affair that weighed at least half a pound. She placed the ashtray on the kitchen counter and shook a Marlboro out of the red fliptop box on the counter. She clicked open her Zippo and lit her cigarette and took a deep drag. She felt a rush and luxuriated as the first smoke hit her lungs, but the taste disappointed her as always. I've

got to stop, she told herself. I've also got to quit drinking, find a new husband, get a college degree. The list of things she would have to accomplish before she could have any type of life both appalled her and paradoxically gave her just a bare flickering of hope. As long as you keep moving, you weren't dead, she thought.

Other people have done it, she mused.

The phone rang. She waited a second, hoping it was Darlene. What if it was Carl.

"Hello," she answered, her throaty voice squished into an uncharacteristically passive whisper.

"You come to your senses yet?" Carl demanded coldly over the line.

"My senses are just fine," Molly said. She could picture him in his uniform, the big deputy sheriff's badge over his left breast pocket and his thick gun belt creaking as he rocked back and forth on his fancy Python boots, making his six-foot four inches of massive presence even more menacing. She had been in a bar and witnessed him doing the same thing with drunks. Most lawmen tried to cow troublesome barflies; Carl invited them to try and hit him. He relished violence.

"You might think better when I get through with you."

"I told you I wanted you out."

"I pay the bills on that dump. How are you going to pay the bills, bitch?"

"Well, that was sweet, Sugar," Molly cooed into the receiver. "I think I ought to get a tape recorder so I remember all this flattery when I get old and grey."

"It ain't likely...."

Molly slammed down the receiver as if it were a snake. Best not to let him get wound up, she thought. Then she snatched the receiver up and set it off the hook.

But what if Darlene were trying to call, she thought. Reluctantly she placed the phone back on the hook. She felt a surge of gratitude when it failed to ring.

Picking up cup and ashtray, she let the cigarette dangle from her mouth as she walked back into the living room. The hardwood floor creaked beneath her. Dewey was red in the face. Holding onto the plastic netting with both hands, he rocked back and forth as he screamed.

"Just two minutes, Sugar," Molly tried to coo in a honeyed tone, but the words came out in a raspy groan.

In response Dewey let go of the netting and threw himself on the floor of the playpen, his face growing into a deep crimson.

"He's having a tantrum," Amy pronounced with more than a hint of accusation.

Molly sighed, took two quick drags, licked her fingers then brushed the embers from her cigarette. Two hours, Molly told herself and I will finish it. Noticing that a finger of smoke rose from the ember, she poured a slight dollop of coffee into the ashtray and heard a slight satisfying hiss and sizzle as the fire in the ash died.

She took a gulp of coffee, put the half-full cup on the end table and rose and picked Dewey up.

Immediately Dewey clammed up, looking around the room as if mystified by the sudden change in altitude.

"What was that all about?" Molly cooed. "Why are all the men in my life so damned needy."

On the radio Matt was ending his show by talking about a summer writing seminar between semesters. Molly thought she would like to go if she could come up with whatever tuition was. In her mind, she could picture a young, good-looking English professor falling in love with her, but she would brush him off till the end of semester, earning her 'A', well, at least a 'B'.

In response to Dewey beginning to squirm, Molly grabbed him under the armpits and twirled about in a flat-footed pirouette, her bare feet squeaking on the hardwood floor.

"Doesn't he ever calm down," Molly asked Amy, who

had finally dressed Ken in a skimpy bathing suit and had him doing what could only be a lewd dance in front of a Barbie that was now seated in a straight-backed plastic chair. Molly knew the plastic doll was doing a pretty good imitation of a male stripper. God, Molly thought, I have to speak to this kid's mother.

"He usually screams when Mom puts him down for his afternoon nap," Amy offered.

"When does he nap?"

"Hardly ever. Mostly he just cries in his crib till Mom picks him up again." Amy said, looking crossways at Molly and rolling her eyes at the adult's total cluelessness with regards to childcare.

The phone rang. Molly placed Dewey on one hip and danced to the phone and answered, not missing a dance step.

Don't let it be Carl. Don't let it be Carl, Molly silently prayed.

"Molly, Honey," Darlene said over the line, "I know this is short notice, but I need for you to keep the kids tonight."

"Darlene, you can't do this to me. You said you would pick 'em up last night. I'm bombing here," Molly said, her heart racing, her normally deep voice sounding squeaky and panicky even to her ears.

"Don't worry, I will pick 'em up first thing in the morning," Darlene said, oblivious to anything but what she wanted.

"No, you can't because I won't," Molly said, then realized she was talking into a dead line, the dial tone sounding like a death knell in her ear.

"Want's to be with her boyfriend," Amy pronounced.

Molly sighed, then said, "Well, if you're going to stay here, Peanut, we're going to take Ken out of the strip bar and to the prom where he belongs."

Molly chuckled as Amy gave her a sidewise glance and

pouted again. Molly pictured meeting the handsome-sounding Matt on campus as she gallantly fended off her English professor. Carl would grant her a divorce. They would live in a small, but well-kept, rancher, and Molly would keep the flowerbeds, but he would cut the grass. At church people would comment on what a good-looking couple they were.

Molly wondered if she were being too Walter Mittyish and decided it did no harm. Daydreams provided powerful medicine when your life had sunk to rock bottom.

"We'll see you again tomorrow," Matt said on the radio.

"Count on it," Molly said, as Dewey began to cry again and Amy looked at Molly with silent contempt.

Looking through the front door, Molly could see a hummingbird pecking at the feeder she had hung on the front porch. All sense of incompetence and fear left her.

Life only required feeding on the good, Molly thought.

The End of the Line

Beneath the surface, crusted with coral
living barnacles leaching the steel,
the greyhound of the seas, reduced
by Japanese shells to battered junk
transformed by the years to a living,
breathing reef, only the barrels of her guns
retain some measure of random
violence, pointing to all points of the compass
firing in local control as she went down
ripped by shells and the last three torpedoes
that put her down and scalded alive all
those still alive in the forward firerooms.

Few remember today, fewer yet recall
that the whole Texas city mourned when she sank,
and recruiters had to turn hundreds away
that wanted enlist to replace her crew.

"We can only take one thousand," they said.
"Come back next week."

Only one of that P-R inspired crew actually served
on her replacement ship, but that one counted.

He served as the damage control officer who
saved her when she was torpedoed twice,
patched her up and got her to Ulithi,
welding braces over her buckling frames.

Saved her to be turned to scrap in '62.
Few remember her either, or her older sister
there beneath the waves at Sunda Strait.
Put a light on the stern, there in the deep
you might still make out the name:
HOUSTON, good ships, both good crews. Forgotten
only because we have grown old
and have more current, pressing wars.

A House Divided

Suggested by a Poem by David Mason

This bedroom high in the old house
lies on a borderline divided
not by geography but gender.
Sisters on one side, brothers on the other.

"Some strange religious sect,"
the realtor explains with a maternal
wink and smirk as she flips
the switch installed in later years.

My grieving wife and I gaze at the fields beyond,
and I try to imagine what bizarre
religious quirk would split a house
into double stairs and border walls.

We stand rooted at the bedroom window,
and I wonder at my wife's cockeyed plan
to salvage our marriage through work
on a century-old fixer-upper.

"An enterprising couple like ya'll
could make a lot of equity here,"

the realtor advises us, brushing
dust from her gold jacket. I can
sense a desire to close the deal
and hurry us on to further rooms
and further gems of canned
realtor wisdom. Instead we stand
at the top of the stairs

and stare out the window at curing hay
and the dark green of the loblolly
pines beyond the farther fence line.

In the field a bare-chested
teen-age boy sucks the hay into
a New Holland bailer, and the machine
spits round bails out the back
at distant but regular intervals,

like babies.

My wife, the city girl, stands transfixed,
and I wonder if the her mind is on the boy,
hay, machine, or her own dead child.

"You could sublet the other side,"

the realtor says, her tone
slightly conspiratorial, like she just
thought of it, instead of rehearsing it for days.

She stuffs her note pad into her bulging purse,
then once again plucks dirt from her gold jacket.

"Or we could put a door there," my wife says,
in a whisper, "Maybe knock down a wall or two."

I add, watching the bales drop,
insurance against the coming winter.

Somewhere near here the treeline ends

Not abruptly but by degrees.

Pines giving way to scrub post oaks
and triple-leaved sassafras trees.

Beyond this point the plains begin,
and gentler eastern thought was left behind,
jettisoned from wagons as useless truck.

Only harder religions traveled beyond
the treeline, hard-scrabble Baptists and

Hell-fire shouting Methodists
with the Book in one hand as they
wire-fenced, ploughed and broke this land.

Samuel Doak

(A Revolutionary War Minister)

I put the spurs to old Knox
and made the army's rendezvous.

There I preached "The Sword
of the Lord and Gideon,"

on the banks of Sycamore Shoals
as the shallow waters rippled and rolled
and a thousand throats roared back
my words as a battle cry of bloody hue.

I vowed to take up arms and fight the Tories.
But Colonel Sevier forbade it.

"Your place is here," is all he said.
At King's Mountain they won our fight,
and the world changed by stint and view.

I grew old upon my circuit,
sharing my God, folding their lives in mine.
Preaching, marrying, christening, and burying,
sharing all I had and giving God His due.

W/T Integrity

Enfolded in a Hallmark card,
your lines smooth and sacrosanct,
starched as a freshly-ironed hair shirt,
pocketed with Judeo-Christian triviality,
she urges me to brush back the night
with the slender crutch of a metered line.

"Fight evil with polarities,
courage conquers fright,"

but I distrust her frail reed
and seek more than candlepower against the dark.

Stormy seas a stout hull needs,
as insurance against rocks and shoals and greedy sharks.

Bipolarities

Never mind the bitter lines above
the market lies open for the willing hand
the husks are waiting in the trough
for the milling herd with time on hand
to read, but not deeply or even very much
so their diet must be honey-coated, sugared stuff.

Fine Dining

I am the OverSoul, the final hand.
I course through you, tightly clenching your fate.
Do not hold any romantic dreams of me.
To know me, trace the lines upon your cheek.
Your constant friend, I've followed you through life,
and, by the hand, shall I led you to death.
T'was really I who caught you from the womb
and held your bare head to your mother's breast.

With childlike eyes did you first perceive me,
so slowly feasting upon a dead tree.
With a smirk, I fondly watched you run and play,
never knowing, that as I dined upon bark,
I eagerly licked the years off each tiny cell
that circled through your strong and youthful frame.
As you grew into gracious womanhood,
I danced a little jig across your flesh,
leaving behind diminutive wrinkles,
like growing creases in a ballroom rug.
And when you gave birth to your first born child,
I kissed your crown, giving thanks for another snack.

I sipped the color from your hair, like wine,
as time drudged forward, and you started to spoil.
So while you patted your little grandchild's head,
I finally settled on my main course.
The cherished babe, you soon forgot his name.
You'd wake at night with voices in your ear,
wanting you to rip out your heart.
No more could you even thread a needle,
or lift the Good Book. Steady hands shook,
and as they lowered you down, I leaned back,
Satisfied - and dabbed the crumbs from my chin.

Enigmatology* of a Poem

ACROSS

1. A poem, what is this crossword puzzle here?
3. A game with words, a sight with sounds murmured
4. Its end is there, fill in the blanks, erase
6. The words dance around me on the page

DOWN

2. *Another word for being worthless?*
5. Floccinaucinihilipilific
7. Spelling correct? Is it even a word?
8. The answer lies in the English thesaurus
9. Puzzles always seem a lot harder when
10. You realize that they're already written

* the study of puzzles

No Wopen

After the hurricane, a gas station had, in front,
a makeshift sign proclaiming in spray paint,
"no wopen."
'Now, what manner of thing,' I thought, 'is a wopen,
that they should need to proclaim a lack of it?'
Deciding it to be something of dire importance,
I entered and inquired as to where I might find
a wopen or two, as they hadn't any themselves.
With all the candor of a learned sage,
the Indian girl told me, "Not in America."
Not in America.
This, my compatriots, is a tragedy.
There is no wopen in America,
and with the way things are going,
I doubt that there ever will be.

Silo

In the serenity of an open field,
probably during a dusky Spring's eve,
picture something quaint:
a silo.

Let it be empty, save for some grain
lining the bottom on the inside.
It was never painted, and now
the rust has left no trace
that the metal was ever new.

Nobody thinks to use it as storage,
but, more than once, it's been a secret club
with no girls allowed, or the place
where virginities have been lost
and always missed.

If you stand inside and listen well,
past the whispering of your breath
or the drumming of your heart,
you might still hear the old man
from so very long ago.
He's still complaining about broken tractors
and bank notes.
His cough grows more intense
every time he takes a step.

The Song

The engine's drull gives background
to a radio song – guitar and guitar,
and I know this song.

When I get home, I will write about
how the moon was tinted copper
and how that's full of meaning
or something like that.
At any rate, I'll want to.

What I will forget to write about
is the way that this song
made me want to pull over
and take a walk, chords and tones
echoing endlessly in the auditorium
at the back of my head,
beckoning me to free my soul
and drift away.

I didn't actually do that,
but, God, I wanted to.

LUKE GARLOCK

Dar de Luz*

J.M.D., April 6, 2007

the wound
in the world
will be

small

as the silence
you give to
the tubes
of illusory
light

*Spanish, "to give birth," lit. "to give [to a baby] light"

Hero to a Butterfly

Fair butterfly, our beauty we may share,
but never will we our happiness compare.
You flutter high over garden, tree, and shore,
across the Hellespont while I my chore
to Venus must complete without complaint.
My sweetest friend, you know that I'm no saint,
each night Leander swims to share my bed,
so under stars forbidden love is fed.
My tiny prison tries to keep apart
a love that constantly consumes my heart.
You closely wrapped in cold cocoon so tight;
before you spread mosaic wings in flight.
My heart desires your freedom from control;
Around my prison Venus' guards patrol.
Leander comes tonight our love to seal,
before the forlorn morning bells will peal.
No matter what my youthful heart may need,
my only bond with him is love's short deed.
My nights with sweet Leander I will spend,
until the fates my lover from me rend.

Red-Ribboned Hat: Mary Cassatt's "Children on the Beach"

two little girls
sitting in damp sand
building their yellow castles
for clams and crabs.
they sit close together
silently shoveling walls and doors
so meticulously,
like two tiny architects.
one girl turns away
towards the distant sea,
her bloomers peeking
out from her little blue dress.
she pouts to herself
as her sister giggles
because the red-ribboned hat
scratches her neck.
she laments the hat
her mother made her wear,
wondering why
her sister's golden head is naked.
she can't enjoy
her Sunday at the beach
with her pretty marigold curls
tucked tightly under
the silly hat
she wishes her sister wears instead.

My Seleyna

*A conversation overheard by Lord Cezar
on encountering his Majesty, King Horace,
speaking to the painting of his wife,
Queen Seleyna, who was kidnapped long ago.*

Today I cast the rosemary in the pond,
this little plant of which you were so fond
is all that I have left of you, my dear.
What time has passed since I have been sincere
in my affairs with others, might you ask?
Since you have left my side, it is a task
I care not for. And you? How is the child
that hides within your womb? My hope is wild
that I'll have fortune enough to meet him
one day. Will he know who I am? This grim
and stolid countenance would make you cringe
and scold me right and proper. To unhinge
this mood would be your greatest pleasure, I
have little doubt of that. My sparse and wry
humor would set a pretty frown between
your brows. A frightful glare would rise, unseen
to none but me, and I would make great haste
to alter my black mood. But now? I waste
with every passing day. This slippery, sliding
slope to forgetfulness holds me. Hiding
does me no good, the treacherous poison slinks
around my veins; I hardly sleep a wink
for nightmares. I do not wish to lose you,
my Leyna. Tell me how I can pass through
to your new world? Must I acknowledge all
my sins to Him? My lovely shade I'll crawl
across the yawning pit of Death's domain
for you if by your side I can remain.

Rift of the Hellion

Thunder rolled through the city, shaking its very bones.
Cries of souls weary of heartache and toil drifted
along the wind, riding with the song of the vulture.

Tower upon tower rose, in supplication
or in defiance, none were truly certain.
An Angel perched up on the highest peak, waiting.

*Plague be then upon your houses! Plague I say!
For you have defied the Will of Heaven
and crimes such as that do not go unpunished.*

*Will you beg, pretty Angel, will you beg
for My forgiveness? Will you suffer
My wrath, seek redemption in My eyes?*

Waiting, all eyes are waiting for Dawn
to come and bring with Her the time
when the Light finally breaks through the Night.

*And behold! That time has come! You are free!
Bring Light to the homes and to the streets!
Let the bells ring and the clocks chime: you're free!*

Roll back red clouds and separate them no more
from the rest of the world. Let laughter now
flow like honey from the lips of innocents.

*You are free to worship as you should, but let none
forget lest I must remind you who I am.
I am watching, always watching, but do not fear*

*I wish only to see that you prosper, my children,
and none tear you from My broad loving arms again.
Peace to you, my sheep; none shall take you from Me again.*

September 24th

I was once told that the wind can sound
like a freight train when it blows.

It does.

A roaring, shrieking sound that chases
you into your dreams but not forgotten,
never escaped.

Rain pounds at the house, thrown like so many
little soldiers into battle, yielding to
the will of others greater than themselves.
Digging its way past nailed plywood, crawling
through cracks and holes, water pools.

The storm steals the lights at nine, so my bed calls,
but sleep is a temporary escape, even
for me. Soon I join my parents around the
radio, my flashlight bobbing rhythmically in
the dark, hiding me from Fear.

It's too hot, it's too loud, and stories are all I have
to pass the time as my mother huddles over the
radio, intent to catch a new report though
there are none because it's too early, still early
and the wind still blows so, so loud.

RANDY SAMPSON

Luck

Marriage has never quite worked out for you:
your first husband, Jeff, good looking and witty,
left you, three kids, and a home in Salt Lake City
for the cute co-worker he started to do.
Cheated, heartbroken, you picked up the pieces,
no longer malleable, and carried on.

Some years later, you met a man named John
who promised you he loved you more than Jesus:
that union lasted thirty-seven weeks.

You say your luck with men and marriage sucks.
And yes, you're absolutely right: not one of
us can be trusted when it comes to love.

And so you blame your life on luck and fate.
"Luck turns," they say, "soon you'll find Mr. Right—
just trust in God, who'll set everything right."
Give Him time. He'll set up your next date.

March 6, 2007

Five British Tourists Kidnapped Yesterday
Nine US Soldiers Blown-Up In Car-Bomb
Indonesia Rocked By Killer Earthquake
Baghdad Suicide Blast Takes 28
Perth Mom And Dad Confess To Child Abuse

Conspiracy Claims Prince Charles Is Gay
One Thousand Cannabis Plants Found With Bong
"Early Birds" Pay The Price For North House Boom
Asda "Non-Stick" Shirts Go On Sale Soon
Healthy Snacks Taken Off Arena's Menus

My Athlete's Foot Is Acting Up Today
Everything In My Life Is Going Wrong
My Blackberry Is Picking Up No Bars
My Flight To Shetland Isles: Delayed For Hours
While Widescreen Televisions Jabber News

KELLY H. TIBBETTS

Casual Observer

Just past Moonie's – where the drunks
stumble out just after dawn –
I see the convicts
in their sweat-laden white coveralls,
and bright-orange vests,
mowing the Bahia grass
along the highway.
It takes three days
to cut it all.
I like when they mow
because the air around
that stretch of road
becomes thick with the sweet,
pungent odor of fresh onions.
And even though I
want them to look,
they won't pause to notice me
as I fly by,
the top down on my
shiny red convertible,
my naked elbow resting carefree
on the doorsill.

And every thing about my being screams,
I am free and you are not I must be better than you.

Just past the convicts,
I see the same couple every day –
an old, fat lady
slumped over sideways
like a bag of flour
in her wheelchair,

her fake plastic hair in
a grandiose -style permanent.
Her skinny husband stands
hunched beside her
with his rocking-chair joints
and squinty eyes,
wearing what must be
an imitation Stetson.
A yellow poster board stands
propped against the side
of their beat-up,
blue Dodge van:

FRESH BEEF JERKIE

In four years, I've never seen
a single customer.

And every thing about my being screams,
I am young and you are not I must be better than you.

A few miles further,
where I have taken my last exit
before campus,
I am led to an underpass.
It is here I see my favorite character.
A middle-aged creature,
browed by the sun,
dirt smeared over his face and beard,
stands along the concrete island
beside the traffic light.
He holds a piece of box
and in scribbled letters
announces his forlorn condition
and desire for food.
And I want to say,
Your handwriting sucks! Get a job.
But a voice in my head knows

it's not that simple.
I look at him.
He looks at me.
I look away.

And every thing about my being screams,
I am full and you are not I must be better than you.

One of these days I'll
Probably die in an awful wreck
because I can't turn my gaze,
or my thoughts,
away from these people.
So be it.
The unfortunate exist to
be observed by the fortunate.
I like to think it is
as it should be –
but I know none of this is true.

A Dangerous War

You don't mind, do you?

Of course not. No.

He can't expect me to be faithful
When he's away in Iraq for a year.

Certainly not.

How dare he leave me alone with these
Two young children while he goes off to fight.
I tell you, he thinks only of himself.

Obviously, you are right.

And – can you believe this – he says to me,
“Sex, dear, was intended only for procreation.”

The buffoon!

Yes, yes. I know – absurd. But my breasts aren't as large
As they used to be. I hope you don't mind, love.

Don't be ridiculous.

I think I want an augmentation. Yes, I believe I do.
How does a D cup sound to you?

Sounds tremendous.

Wonderful. Then I can buy all-new bras.
You can come with me, of course,
To help me pick them out.

Victoria's?

Oh yes, definitely. They're having a sale.
I just love Victoria's. I got these panties there.
Do you like them?

Lovely, my dear. Lovely.

At least someone appreciates my lingerie.
Oh – kiss me, boy.

Kiss me! That's right. That feels good.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Ah – oh – you're good at this.
Where have you been all my life?

Texas. Ahh --

Be careful! Oh – shoot.

One of the kids woke up. I should check on her.
Make yourself at home. I'll be right back.

Take your time.

That was incredible. You know, love, we have
Six months before he comes back.
And who knows what could happen
With him in the field.

Yes, it's a dangerous war.

Oh, a dangerous war indeed.

January Passes

The crystal vase still mocks me
From atop the kitchen table.
The tulips speaking softly say,
"We are not meant for you."

On the card there is no writing,
And the absence surely stumps me.
No name was ever written,
So the sender sleeps unknown.

Still January passes, and
The flowers start to wither
And in their dying softly ask,
"What time is left for you?"

I cannot begin to answer.
All my dreams consist of tulips
And a lover who is absent
Every day of every season.

Of God and Dreams

Our lives, small and unnoticed,
separate the eternities.
All that lies between
is ours.
All that lies without is silent,
motionless,
invalid.

In the nothingness,
in the absence
of God and dreams,
we contemplate eons
and eons
of nothing.

Sniper

Last week, workmen cut down the tallow tree
that grew in my father's front yard.

The tree had been useful to me each February
when the blackbirds and orange-breasted thrushes
decorated it like Christmas ornaments.

I spent entire afternoons
with the BB gun my father gave me,
lurking like a sniper in the garage,
waiting to pluck them out.

The first bird I felled from that tallow
was a female sparrow.
I shot her in the mouth, shattering her beak.
Jubilant, I woke my father from a nap
with the thing still twitching
on a thin and bloodied paper napkin –
an offering to the king.

Once, I killed fourteen in one day,
so many I had to
stuff them into a plastic sack
and bury them in a mass grave.
But I didn't dig deep enough.
soon, the air around the garage began to sour,
and my father had to sprinkle
lime over the ground.

I did this until I was sixteen –
slaughtering the birds each season,
aiming for the orange breast,
or black,
with anticipation before the shot
and after, a euphoria for blown feathers

exploding into the sky.

The last one I took was a large grackle
perched on top of the tree.
The first shot killed him,
but his feet still clung to the branch.
I had to shoot him ten more times
just to knock him down.
Then I tossed him into a neighbor's yard
and left him for the cats.

Now I am grown, and that tree is gone
along with my desire to hurt things.

At least, I think that part of me is gone.
Still the birds return each year by the thousands,
safe now from a darker season
when I would have destroyed them,
without cause or remorse,
like Kurtz, in the Congo,
come back to life.

The Wounds

The light flashes, flickers, and is done.
A soft wind rustles through bare limbs
and scatters unseen into pale skies.
I notice these things because
I exist and am alone.

Archaic images of a god I once worshipped
turn yellow and are forgotten
because parts of me
crumbled into that book.

Even sightless things are made to move.

Broken, the sun bleeds but does not weep
that I bathe in the wounds,
laughing and celebrating
this insignificant life.
But what I have learned is this —
 people are not changed; we are damaged.

Some dead person once told me
winter is a name;
it is not the thing.
The light flashes, flickers, and is done,
no man can be wise and happy
 or wise and young.

Contributors

Nicole Anderson is a sophomore majoring in English.

Kevin Colton is a sophomore majoring in Communication.

Matthew Crumpler is a senior majoring in English.

Elise Davenport graduated in May with a B.A. in English.

Mike Dunklin is a graduate student of History.

Luke Garlock graduated in May with a B.A. in English.

John B. Hillin is a junior majoring in English.

Danielle Husband is a senior majoring in English.

Zeb Lowe is a graduate student of English.

Amber Placette is a graduate student of English.

Amanda Pooler is a junior majoring in English.

Randy Sampson is a graduate student of English.

Kelly H. Tibbetts is a graduate student of English.

WE REMEMBER

Ross Abdallah Alameddine
Christopher James Bishop
Brian Roy Bluhm
Ryan Christopher Clark
Austin Michelle Cloyd
Jocelyne Couture-Nowak
Kevin P. Granata
Matthew Gregory Gwaltney
Caitlin Millar Hammaren
Jeremy Michael Herbstritt
Rachael Elizabeth Hill
Emily Jane Hilscher
Jarrett Lee Lane
Matthew Joseph La Porte
Henry J. Lee
Liviu Librescu
G.V. Loganathan
Partahi Mamora Halomoan Lumbantoruan
Lauren Ashley McCain
Daniel Patrick O'Neil
Juan Ramon Ortiz-Ortiz
Minal Hiralal Panchal
Daniel Alejandro Perez
Erin Nicole Peterson
Michael Steven Pohle, Jr.
Julia Kathleen Pryde
Mary Karen Read
Reema Joseph Samaha
Waleed Mohamed Shaalan
Leslie Geraldine Sherman
Maxine Shelly Turner
Nicole White



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