

Summer 2011

Footprints Fill and Fade

James Conrad Beck
San Jose State University

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FOOTPRINTS FILL AND FADE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

James Beck

August 2011

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2011

James Beck

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

FOOTPRINTS FILL AND FADE

by

James Beck

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2011

Dr. Persis Karim	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. Alan Soldofsky	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. Catherine Gabor	Department of English and Comparative Literature

ABSTRACT

FOOTPRINTS FILL AND FADE

by James Beck

Footprints Fill and Fade, the collection of poems that comprises my thesis, is organized into three sections entitled “Breath and Body,” “Memory,” and “Polemic.” Many of the poems in the collection are inspired by Buddhist thought and essayists and poets writing about Buddhist thought. In addition, the Korean poet Ko Un and American poets William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Raymond Carver have also influenced my writing.

Poems in the “Breath and Body” section are meditative and are about looking and seeing. The poems in this section borrow from the major ideas in Buddhism, including mindfulness, focus on the present, and the illusion of “self.” In the second section, “Memory,” the poems touch on how memories become ghosts and can haunt the present if we allow them. The final section, “Polemic,” includes poems that take on political issues, such as war, the School of the Americas, and gay marriage.

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PREFACE

According to Steve Hagen, Zen Priest and instructor at the Dharma Field Meditation and Learning Center in Minneapolis, our concept of a “self” is illusory. In his book *Buddhism, Plain and Simple* he writes:

We suffer deep existential angst because we misinterpret actual experience.

Instead of simply attending to what we actually perceive, we conceive a self and then quiver in our boots, afraid that it might be taken away, injured, or made unhappy. (133)

Poems in the “Breath and Body” section practice “attending to what we actually perceive.” The poems preserve a moment as experienced by the speaker. Preserving a moment creates a paradox, however, for moments cannot actually be preserved, and words are not a substitute for direct experience. If we see each poem as an experience itself each time it is read, then perhaps an alternative explanation is that a new experience is created for the reader out of the poet’s original experience. Thus the original experience is “preserved” when a reader recreates it with each new reading.

One poem from this section, “California Rain,” creates a collage of two specific moments: sitting at home listening to the rain, and riding the elevator at the end of a work day while listening to coworkers’ conversations. The act of mindful listening ties both of these moments together. Consequently, my poems emphasize words that mimic different sounds in the poem: rattle, pluck, hum, sigh, and thrum. The complete poem, “California Rain,” reads as follows:

The rain rattles the screen.

Leaves pluck
from the Mulberry

and the Lupin hums.

On the elevator at five forty-five, sighs:
No T-Ball tonight. No BBQ and beer.
Nothing at all

but the thrumming, rattling

rain.

Built from two separate experiences, the poem becomes a single experience for the reader by juxtaposing two different perceptions of rain, one direct and the other interpretive. The first four lines comprise the first perception, for they are “simply attending” as Hagen writes. These lines focus on the rain’s effects on the screen and trees. The next three lines are the second type of perception, an interpretation: the rain is a nuisance, a spoiler of plans. The last three lines of the poem hinge on “Nothing at all,” for this phrase can be interpreted in (at least) two ways: careful attention to the present (the “now”) or feelings of disappointment due to foiled after-work plans. The poem suggests that our perceptions, therefore, color the world for us if we let them. We have it in our power to enjoy the rain, as infrequent as it is in parts of California, or curse it for interfering with our leisure pursuits. In other words, in trying to live a planned life, we may say we appreciate rain, yet we do not want it on this or that day. Clearly, that choice is not ours, and if we cannot accept that, we invite frustration. The choice, however, to accept the rain as simply rain is within our purview. And acceptance of the present, the now, invites a state of non-frustration.

According to Thich Nhat Han, a Buddhist priest and poet, the breath is an essential tool of Buddhist meditation. He guides participants through meditation by asking them to use one of several common meditation phrases during the in-breath. Examples of these are *I have arrived* and *I am solid*. Likewise, the out-breath can be accompanied by *release* or *I am free*. Following the breath in Buddhist meditation focuses the meditator on the present and guides him to understand that beginnings (inhalation) and endings (exhalation) are both contained in this moment. Thus Han makes the point that beginning and ending, what we identify with birth and death, are not separate concepts. A poem from the “Breath and Body” section that deals with the focusing power of the breath is “Spaciousness.”

The sea surface
rolls in torrents,

plated silver
with moon,

ground ferrous
under mercurial sky.

Sunlight lightens the blue
and fishermen slice

the surface red.
Deep underneath

is the breath,

stillness
of sea depths.

This poem uses the sea’s surface and depth as metaphors for life’s anxieties and the calming effect that can be found in the breath. On the surface of the sea, and at times on

the surface of our lives, events seem to “roll in torrents.” There is constant flux, seemingly beyond our control. The sea, and ourselves, are victims of fate, “plated silver/with the moon” at one moment and “ground ferrous” in the next. The end of the poem suggests a place beyond this topsy turvy experience: focus on the breath, for “Deep underneath/is the breath/stillness/of sea depths.” The title of the poem, “Spaciousness,” is a Buddhist term that posits a mind that observes the thoughts running through it, as observing a river from its shore. However, we do not get so caught up in this flow that we begin to believe that flow is us. A spacious mind realizes it is not the flow of thoughts running through it; rather, the mind is simply the awareness that observes those thoughts. This meaning links with the details of the poem in that “torrents” on the surface of our lives are not as powerful as the calming power of breath and meditation.

The second section of poems, “Memory,” addresses the bitter effect that memories can have on us. Memories represent our past, and we cannot get here without having first been there. However, we can often shortchange the “is” by yearning for the “was.” Looking at a photo from years past, or running into someone whom one knew during a very different time in one’s life, often demonstrates that we are no longer the selves we remember. And often, we mourn these selves that we have lost or have been remade by experience and aging. A poem that attempts to describe these feelings of loss borne from memory is “The History of Things.” This poem uses parataxis, the deletion of “function” words, to create a slightly disjointed feeling akin to what we feel in dreams and the memories of distant points in our lives. The poem reads as follows:

The History of Things

haunt me
selves that no longer exist
home on a christmas

such gifts
a recipe
for chilaquiles

gone the ornaments
wrapped in tissue
boxed beneath

a late-morning dream

the Schwinn
off its kickstand
and years
shifting

In addition to the parataxis that disorients the reader through the omission of articles, verbs, and prepositions, the syntax calls upon several phrases to play two semantic roles. For example, in the third stanza “gone” may work with “a recipe/for chilaquiles” or “the ornaments/wrapped in tissue.” Similarly, “a late morning dream” works figuratively with the preceding line, “boxed beneath,” and more literally with next line, “the Schwinn/off its kickstand.” This two-way, multiple-meaning syntax keeps the reader slightly off-balance, which is how memories of the past work on our present.

Another poem from this section, "Oceanography," describes walking along the seashore in the fog and wind, with the speaker observing the rise and fall of things. The lines “the quick-moving tide/slides back to sea./Faded hulls roll/by the years” suggest that rising and ceasing, the movement of the ships’ hulls, are parts of the same cycle. The speaker in the poem mourns another who is no longer a part of his life, and the presence of the sea and its unceasing currents evoke this memory. Yet as Thich Nhat Hanh says,

waves are also water, and that basic element does not cease; it merely changes form.

Thus “Oceanography” creates an effect of impermanence:

Perfume of drying seaweed
woos the fog to shore.

The quick-moving tide
slides back to sea.
Faded hulls roll
by the years.

You never knew the sea
but loved it, stared

into the overcast in your dark glasses.
The whip of winds and restless surf
held you here so briefly.

In the final two stanzas, the speaker and the person he remembers confront the present differently. The speaker wonders consciously, “the restless surf/kept you here so briefly,” while the other ignores the present by putting on “dark glasses” in an “overcast” where glasses seem unnecessary. The speaker observes through his senses--the smell of the shoreline, the movement of tides and boats--and also observes his thoughts about the passing of time and the too-early disappearance of a loved one. Importantly, he distinguishes thoughts about observed events from the actual events themselves. But the other seems caught up in feelings triggered by physical phenomena, and cannot perceive in any other way. Wearing dark glasses on an overcast day suggests isolation from the world around. Thus the speaker realizes Hahn’s waves and water, whereas the other seems to have missed part of the equation. The speaker mourns this fact as much as he mourns the loss of the other.

The final section in the collection is “Polemic.” The poems in this section touch on topics such as war, prejudice, religion, and gay marriage. For example, the poem “God Loves SF” is a response to the Religious Right and other groups who are ceaselessly working to curtail our freedoms while using disingenuous slogans such as calls to “protect” marriage. The poem highlights the diversity of peoples and lifestyles found in San Francisco, a city whose tolerance is often a thorn in the side of many religious groups and individual fundamentalists. The poem lists a variety of citizens: “accountants,” “newly anointed hipsters,” “head cases,” and “a palm reading/cowboy.” The poem also uses phrases that carry religious connotations, such as “stained glass,” “congregation,” and “eternal.” However, each of these references, in context, denotes a non-religious object; these double meanings are meant to suggest that meaning has plurality, including religious meanings. Ultimately, I point to the need to respect each other’s lifestyles so long as they do no harm to others. The poem’s final stanza reads:

A palm-reading
cowboy laughs and
follows her heart line
into the Tenderloin.

The Tenderloin is currently a “challenged” neighborhood in San Francisco, but “tender” and “loin” also suggest its humanity, and the respect we must give to those we see as “others.”

Poets who have influenced my writing are Ko Un, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Raymond Carver. Williams’ choices of everyday objects, his use of common American speech, and his preference for short lines in much of his poetry were my first inspirations as a poet as I began writing and sought to emulate his style.

Likewise, Robert Creeley inspires me with his spare poems, though his poems are often more abstract (though Creeley might object to this term) than Williams'. I have also always appreciated Raymond Carver's poetry as well, though he is admittedly less recognized for his poems than his short stories. His poems capture observed moments which are compelling, understated, and often subtly tragic. Finally, the Korean poet Ko Un, who according to Gary Snyder in his introduction to Un's collection *The Three Way Tavern*, "writes spare, short-line lyrics direct to the point, but often intricate in both wit and meaning" (xii). Though Snyder's description is not strictly true for many of Un's poems (for many are quite long), I quote him here because it is Un's short-lined poems that I most appreciate. Brevity in both line length and count are important to my poems.

As a poet, my first model was William Carlos Williams. In 1916, Williams, himself influenced by Cubist and the Futurist painters, began focusing his attention on the object as itself rather than as literary device. In "To a Solitary Disciple," Williams states that it is more important to tell

that the moon is
tilted above
the point of the steeple
than that its color
is shell-pink.

He wanted readers to have immediate, direct experience of the poem's details rather than focusing on them as metaphor:

Rather observe
that it is early morning
than that the sky
is smooth
as a turquoise.

Though I use metaphor in my own poems, I appreciate Williams' point because he seems to be asking the poet to simply *see*. In other words, in writing the poem the poet is "awarenessing" the moment he is in. This "awarenessing" a term used by both John Cabot-Zinn and Steve Hagen to describe the experience of mindfulness, the state of being alert to both the world immediately around you and your mind's tendency to conceptualize and compartmentalize that world. Both of these authors, and I believe Williams as well, stress the importance of seeing things as they are, and being aware of when the mind wants to layer concepts over these immediate perceptions--what we perceive through the senses. Metaphor is one way of conceptualizing what our senses perceive.

However, while enjoying the red wheelbarrow as simply a wheelbarrow, it can also act as metaphor. The object possesses meaning and beauty itself, and the language of poems should reflect this beauty, but metaphor can offer a poem greater complexity. An example of this tension between the literal and the metaphoric is seen in the lines quoted above from "Oceanography": "the quick-moving tide/slides back to sea./Faded hulls roll/by the years" I chose these specific details for their beauty. Ship hulls are graceful as they roll, and the up-and-down movement of moored boats is calming, as is movement of tides. I want the reader to see these objects; however, I want these objects to work on a metaphoric level as well. Thus I use them as "evidence" for the Buddhist observation that time is not defined by a beginning and an end, but rather is ceaselessly rising and falling. This is the multiple meaning effect that metaphor can produce.

I appreciate the acceptance of the present, the choice of subjects, and the unadorned descriptions in Raymond Carver's poetry. Carver often describes day-to-day hardships. The Sanskrit for suffering is *duhka*, though Hagen says this is at best a rough translation. He also says that *duhka* arises from three human cravings: that of constant desire for a "good" life; that of not wanting to die; and, paradoxically, that of wanting to be released from "this world of pain and vexation" (33). I see *duhka* in much of Carver's poetry. But in observing that suffering, as Buddhist thought claims, there is often release from suffering.

For example, in his poem "Sudden Rain," Carver describes the events immediately following a downpour (22). The speaker and his partner at first seem oblivious to the rain, for they are arguing and continue to do so without thinking to take shelter. On the other hand, donkeys know better, and in the poem they take shelter until the rain abates. Here is one facet of human suffering: we don't perceive reality because we are caught up in our own worlds, yet to perceive reality is something so natural and simple that donkeys do it. Carver concurs: "We stand in rain, more foolish than donkeys." My poem "Morning" has details similar to Carver's in that it describes how "we rush out/without cover./We stand/under dripping oak." Like Carver's "more foolish than donkeys," "Morning" suggests that we do not allow ourselves time to stop and take a deep breath. However, unlike Carver's, my poems often suggest a solution. The final three stanzas in "Morning" read:

We stand
under dripping oak

while dawn whispers

to the vagrant mind:

the dew, the swagger
of light.
Listen.

The “solution” here is simple: be aware of the present moment. I offer concrete objects, “the dew” and the “light,” to illustrate this. The poem also suggests an unconventional use of the senses: To “listen” to objects in addition to observe them through sight.

A poet often associated with the Black Mountain Poets, Robert Creeley seems to write as a means of discovery, and wrote “I do feel poems involve an occasion to which a man pays obedience” in his short essay “Poems are a Complex” from 1966 (278). Years later, in his poem “Mother’s Voice,” he observes an amalgam of remembered feelings, born of occasions (204). The first two stanzas of his poem read

In these few years
since her death I hear
mother’s voice say
under my own, I won’t

want any more of that.
My cheekbones resonate
with her emphasis.

Creeley’s short lines and stanzas, and the idea of his mother’s voice being “under my own,” partially inspired me to write “Spanish Lessons,” a poem that remembers the language my mother used. The first stanza of my poem reads

Mijo!
a women calls.
I turn by instinct, see the word
take the boy by the hand.

This opening suggests that the voice of the mother is always “under” our own, as Creeley

says. It becomes an “instinct” and guides us as if “by the hand.” My poem ends on this same idea, but uses a new image to express it. The final stanza reads

Cachetes
Her cheekbones pierce the dark.
She says, That’s the Indian in us, *mijo*.

Ending on “mijo,” the poem returns to its beginning, and similarly, “cheekbones” suggest inheritance, something that continues the circle of life. The stanza also suggests that we pay attention to memory as inspiration. In this case, as in Creeley’s “Mother’s Voice,” the inspiration is an amalgam of memories surrounding a powerful figure in our lives.

Finally, the short-lined poems of Ko Un guide me as I edit my own poems. Editing has become an effort to use fewer words to express my ideas and render descriptions. Brevity is powerful, as illustrated by *Twitter*, the 3-minute pop song, and the traditions of Chinese and Japanese poetry. I strive for brevity in my own poetry not only because I believe each word becomes increasingly important in short poems, but also because I want my poems to be read by casual readers in addition to dedicated poets. This is not to say that long poems are read only by professors, literature majors, and practicing poets, but rather that they often require a level of reader-dedication that many casual readers may not always have time for. As a writer who loves individual words--and a good pop song on the radio--I prefer short poems because they convey so much with so little. For example, “A Cup of Green Tea” is a short poem from Ko Un’s *The Three Way Tavern* whose meaning is conveyed in brief fashion (39):

A bag of young green tea leaves.
And this mature, full taste
brewed from it.

I've been sad poring over that *hwadu* for thirty years.

In this short poem, “mature” and “brewed” conflate the processes of tea preparation with *hwadu*(meditation). Thus the reader must consider a multiplicity of meanings for each word. Secondly, in the short poem each word intimately juxtaposes with every other word, as compared to their long distance relationships in longer poems. For example, “young” in the first line of “A Cup of Green Tea” pulls against “for thirty years” in the last line, and this tension keeps the poem moving in a cyclical motion. The poem is balanced between youth and age; the poem itself grows old from beginning to end despite its length of just 25 words. Though few poems of mine are as short as “A Cup of Green Tea,” every poem of mine is measured against Un’s use of brevity and balance.

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BREATH AND BODY

The thawing earth
has not questions for the spring haze.

- Ko Un from "Empty Field"

What Poem?

for Thich Nhat Hanh

Poems carve
mountains with snow,

leave autumn
in crimson,

and empty minds.

Poems are made
of non-poems,

that half
moon that hangs

in the window
the moment

you look through it.

Meditation on Self

Arms reach
for branches
that carry

winter's
purring snow.
The river

rows
a skiff
unmanned,

and wildflowers
flood as fluid
tests its vein,

the deep red
stain
of spring.

Motorcycle

Eye the turn
roll

the throttle
lift

and lean skyward
dip

over yellow
lines,

the sun bone-white
and rising

with you.

Morning

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

-Rumi

When cat claws drag your dreams
from dawn's nest,

you plummet

rushing out
without umbrella

and stand
under a dripping oak.

There the day
whispers

to your vagrant mind:

wet leaves, swagger of clouds.
Listen!

Breath

The sea surface
rolls in torrents,

silver
with moon,

then green-gray
under mercurial sky.

Sunlight thins its blue
and fishermen

slice it red.
Underneath,

on the sea bottom,
the stillness of depths.

Clouds

The mountains drift
under clouds. We fear
they get away,

so we name peaks
Santa Lucia and San Joaquin,

as if these names
can hold our ground.

But in ten thousand days
snow carves the face
we've always known,

and we drift
over nameless peaks.

California Rain

rattles the screen
and plucks leaves
from the fruitless
Mulberry.

The Lupin hums
and the elevator
at five forty-five
fills with sighs: that damn rain--
no BBQ or ball tonight.

Nothing at all
but the thrumming, rattling rain.

The Motion of Trees

From my window
through linen blinds
leaves beat like anxious hearts

and I am at peace,

the solid trunk,
the boney roots,
fissured deep and out of sight.

Ode to a Backyard

A 60s' Austin Healey
peers from its cover

through a peeling picket fence,
where a garden has gone to seed
and someone has planted a plastic

sunflower. It leans forward,
listening for tired
hymns across gravel.

Road Prayer

Our father who art in the ignition
and sun-baked leather boots.
I toe the kickstand and thumb the key
before Saint Christopher hears it's me.

Snug up against three gallons,
my daily bread races up
the on-ramp and weaves
around those who trespass.

For it's commute hour:
the unwashed
and unrepentant
are on the road.

So blessed be lane-splitting,
disc brakes and the chain,
and even the Buick—God love him—
on the cell
doing 58
in the fast lane.

(non)Fretting

I leave thinking
about locks.
Did I lock the front door?

And the stove.
Is it off,
the tea kettle
not burning
through the
second floor?

And that tire in the rain.
Can I make it to work?

And I'll need my notes,
which, I'm sure,
are in the trunk
beside my packed
lunch of noodles,
baked chicken
and broccoli--

to be eaten
with a fork
left in the top drawer,
meditating
on its non-being.

Bring Your Zen

Because ours
is spoken
for in this city
where hipsters
fire thin-crust
pizzas and dream
of vegan
donuts,
where dogs
and poets
pander
in the parks
amongst
the crackle
of families
unwrapping
sandwiches,
one little girl
all smiles
with whole wheat
and a little zen
stuck between
her teeth.

The City is Full of Happy Dogs

They smell the coffee,
tied to Japanese maples
outside the cafe.

They chase
rubber balls
in the park,
mouths filling
with earth.

They peer
from baskets
like urban gophers
pawing cell phones
en route to fair trade
Americanos.

They run alongside their owners,
and in their dog brains believe
the day is not drawing to a close,
the grays of winter's coat not creeping in.

Freedom tugs on their leash
as waning sunlight clings
to each leaf of the maple.

Before and After

The walk was damp.

The snail had taken
all night

to cross it
before I smashed it.

After, as I dug for keys,
I heard waves
curling
off the sea.

MEMORY

Grief and hope
the skipping rope's two ends,
twin daughters of impatience

--Jane Hirshfield from "Nothing Lasts"

Regret

New Years is full
of clocks,
sullen faces
counting
sighs at some
final hour,

hands half open,
time without end,
not enough
to mend the rags
of regret.

Oceanography of You

Perfume of drying seaweed
woos the fog to shore.

The slow-moving tide
slides back to sea.
Faded hulls roll
over years.

You never knew the sea
but loved it, gazed

into the overcast in your dark glasses.
The curl of winds and surf
held you here so briefly.

Spanish Lessons

Mijo!

a women calls.

I turn by instinct, see the word
take the boy by the hand.

Mis lentes?

My glasses? mom asks.

She digs in the nightstand
and the dark soil of her potted marigolds.

Dolor

Her eyes open in pain. She tastes metal
and won't drink the tea.

What time is it? she asks.

But I can't see in the dark.

Quien eres?

Who are you?

Mom, it's me.

I'm just turning off
the light.

Cachetes

Her cheekbones pierce the dark.

She says, That's the Indian in us, *mijo*.

Homecoming

Our rented van moves south
out of Albuquerque.

Great Uncle
points to where tribes
descended from mesas
to trade in silver and turquoise.

He says when my uncles
visited here as boys they
tossed young turkeys
to watch them fly.
Mamo came running, shouting
Dejenlas! Let them go!

Mother said
she dreaded trips to New Mexico.
She wasn't interested in turkeys or
creek beds. She sat in kitchens
breathing in the burning air.

Our van arrives at a cemetery overgrown
with creosote. We tap the dry earth with shovels.
We pour concrete, place the urn of her ashes.

South, a bare foundation marks where the house once stood.
Great Uncle draws walls with his index finger.
In this corner, he says, the kitchen.

He wants me to know, and I turn
to ask about the swollen river, the Indian
who smiled in my mother's profile, but

I am back in California and it's only 5 a.m. I've woken from a dream
of silver, the dust of galloping horses caught in my throat.

La Maquina

Copper, iron and tin,
the machine hissed and spit,
a monstrosity we packed
with grounds at nine
times the pressure
of a human lung.

It pounded out espresso
with delicate hints of dark
berry. It flooded the floors
some nights, and others,
refused to pump a drop.

The machine's
clatter of solenoids,
the powdery
grounds pasted
to each demitasse,
released us from languorous
afternoons. We entered dusk
eager for anything.

Reading

The homes looked down on Jacaranda,
and further, the sea. Under the
opaque lavender children hunted

lizards in sweet-scented air.
They turned earth while
sea swallowed sun.

Stones flew from their soles
like pages torn from stories
where *coastline*

could be divided by syllable
and *trees* replanted in pages.

They set their pencils on *J*
of *Jacaranda* and waited
for *lizard* to dash across the *day*.

Slim Boys at the Lake

The slim boys fished with worms and a bright orange lure.
Old fish rose but didn't bite.
They dove and disappeared into ink.

Frogs drew under bushes along the shore
the pontoon 20-yards-out bobbing against its moor.

The boys jumped and swam for outlines,
each stroke blending water and light,
but summer amid dark woods refused their grasp.

The History of Things

haunt me
selves that no longer exist
home on christmas

such gifts
and a recipe
for chilaquiles

gone the ornaments
wrapped with tissue
and boxed beneath

an early morning dream:

that Schwinn
off its kickstand
and the years
shifting

Suburban Summer

The summer's pleasant sun,
no wind or rain, teaches me dying is a droning hum.

But winter, assassin of halcyon
days, assails the nascent sun.

Well-clipped yards, suburban pantheon,
assure me dying is a humming drone.

The Sunday mowers, pious guns against
my head, wail dying is a droning thrum.

But the city's neon crowds
beat back the relentless sun.

The summer ends and I'll exhale:
the pleasant is impermanent, a dying hum.

4 a.m.

The wind perfumes
the room in primrose.
Voyeur moon surveys
the ruins:
a door ajar, closets cleared
in green-eyed rush.

Now what?

Listen
to cicadas,
the pulse under skin.

Headlines

Coffee in paper cups,
men wait for work

reading news in dust
of an empty lot.

Plaid skirts
swoop

at the bus stop,
white space exposed

to inky hands and
eyes that scan

each line for love
and blood.

Raking Leaves

The leaves rudder
earthward.

Boys shadow box
on the sidewalk,
mimicking fathers,
wet breath coiling.

Mothers rake leaves
over lawn, recalling
lovers puzzling over
blouse buttons,

intoxicated
by the burning oak,
the dark plumes rising
from memory.

How Love Feels

Entering the body
of another
as if to dream--
 a crush of leaves,
 the gait of daddy-longlegs
awkward across a wooden floor.

The fears of another
through your heart.

The wash of color
on lips not your own.

Last Call

Our conversation untied
the evening's impatient
red ribbons. We ordered
dessert and its bittersweet
desire clung to our lips.

We were roused
at nine the next day.
I slipped out in red
boxers, a gift you said
was intended for a birthday.

That night I saw you
at last call, your gin tonic
half gone, a sleeveless arm about
his neck. Crowned in noir bar
light, you'd moved on.

POLEMIC

Ah, what an age it is
When to speak of trees is almost a crime
For it is a kind of silence against injustice

Bertolt Brecht from "To Posterity"

God Loves SF

The streetcar runs in eternal
loops along Market Street.
Its congregation peers
from the stained glass at
sidewalks where accountants

collide with uncounted lives,
and newly-anointed hipsters
from Phoenix and Taipei
rubberneck for the ghost
of Kerouac.

Head cases and flower stands
are in full bloom.
A bare-chested dancer fevers
on cardboard for quarters
as chile verde charges

up Mission Street,
seizes the picket
“God Hates Homos”
and folds it into a taco.

A palm-reading
cowboy laughs and
follows her heart line
into the Tenderloin.

Funeral

Each humid August we pedaled
bikes borrowed from cousins
up alleys and between backyards.

We dipped our feet in placid
lakes, each holding the same
tumultuous sky.

Thunderstorms rose and
shook our plans, leaving us
to deal gin all afternoon.

The funeral brought us
back one last time.
We played the same games

but ruts and politics
had deepened and
darkened the bottoms

of our gin tonics. We raised
our glasses, but listened
for the thunder of jets,

the thick woods falling
away under wing.

My Friend Joe's

is crowded with fading lavender.

The guy behind the counter says,
I've been making espressos twenty years.
He holds a crusted milk spoon
in his paw like a protest.

He stabs the boiling milk, but
the air doesn't move.

Thank god, he says
my parents were hippies.

Windmills

He leans against the counter, wonders aloud,
How much did I drink last night?
That burrito, he adds, bad idea.

His oily hair hangs loose and I'm foolish
enough to ask for decaf. He sighs
as if I'd asked for world peace, for the end of all wars.

I stand aside, waiting for my decaf
to appear with the WMDs and Quixote's windmills,
rearing up and breathing fire.

Finally, he hands me hot coffee.
Decaf? I ask.
He mumbles, turns away.
So I draw my lance, run him through
and through, pinning his treacherous mouth
to the menu between *green tea* and *latte*.

Flight

The Shanghai Hotel for Foreign Friends
serves instant American coffee.
The room is a frayed bedspread
and a TV screwed to the wall.

Outside a leafless tree dreams
of sparrows. Mao Ze Dong
believed these were pests
and told peasants
to clap and clap to keep
them from the trees.

The peony flower did not suffer so.
It wandered continents
for thousands of years,
asking little, leaving only
fortune behind.

On TV the tanks roll through another town.
Smoke rises, a spiral of wings above the rubble.

China Turns 50

1999 October 1 and the evening glows red
 fireworks explode streets swoon buses stall
 orchestras play

The East is red

The sun is rising

China has produced

Mao Ze Dong

thirty-foot Maos in fact in every
 square smiling and waving away
 the Four Olds

Old ideas

Old culture

Old customs

Old habits

but not the steamed dumplings or ovens'
 gaping appetites for coal and heat
 the market vendors' banter and spit
 the chicken blood underfoot
 the Great Wall

in snapshots sold at Tiananmen

spitting distance from where Mao led
 the Red Army in waving
 from a commandeered
 American Jeep.

What We Call Evil

We tromp through tall
grass, not thinking
of snake bites as
just or unjust.

Venom narrows
our vision, and we don't
ask why maps
are drawn to meet the sea.

We kick up dust,
victims in the grass.
Wind muffles our
lashing cries.

We lie down on blades,
wondering, How could this be?
Aren't we the exception?
The chosen, the free?

Not Poetic

The is not a poem
about School of the Americas
because no one wants
to write an ugly poem

about Pinochet's rule,
the tortured in Argentina,
state terrorism in Colombia,
or Mayan villages
wiped out in Guatemala.

This is a poem about Phyllis Martin
and Del Lyon, 79 and 83, married
at San Francisco City Hall after 50 years
of struggle and setback,
prejudice and fear. Violence.

The president responds,
"Defiance of the law by local officials...adds to uncertainty."

One wishes he was
talking about death squads

and not a wedding.

The Trouble with Poetry
for Billy Collins

The trouble with poems
 is wet boughs and wheelbarrows
 sound so last century,

and who has time to blackberry,
 winding a way down to the sea?

Really, poets parting today
 on Cold Mountain should just text
 each other and dispense
 with the histrionics.

High school love declarations
 with all those exclamations
 had it right all along,

for we all understand :)
 but who the in hell knows
 what *happiness* means?

And that's the real problem: words.
 They slow us down,
 make us contemplate

picnic, lightening--

neither one a useful
 search term
 unless we're looking
 for a poem

about Impatiens
 at a moment
 our lives balance

on the tip of a trowel.

What a Poem Can Be

the tree
you never climb

the branch
you fall from

the wet earth
like stained glass

that leaves
cartwheel

across
too graceful

to be caught
on paper

but still
you write

desperate for
wind

and the scent
of rain.