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Image in poetry

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IMAGE IN POETRY

Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jeffery G. Hallford

May 1995

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ABSTRACT

IMAGE IN POETRY

by Jeffrey G. Hallford

The critical introduction addresses the nature of image in poetry. Images are divided into three types: literal, dark, and grotesque. The three types are defined, and the explanations are supported with examples from master poets, examples from my poetry, and observations from respected critics.

Following the critical introduction are poems that explore the following themes: the relationship between parents and children, the individual's confrontation with death, man's interaction with nature, and glimpses of divinity.

There is such busyness in the world that the mind is often overwhelmed with a seeming chaos of movement, color, sound, and scent. The elements of existence commingle in such profusion that the patterns, the very compositions of reality, are blurred and even lost to the mind's eye. It is the poet, through inclusion and exclusion, who brings reality into focus in the imagination of the reader. In his book Painting and Poetry, Franklin Rogers maintains that "the poet enhances and intensifies the sense of reality, if only by discovering to the eyes of his readers new patterns of relationships among the elements of the 'real' and thus new significations for these elements" (212). The poet does not use image as just a technique; he sees patterns, then composes reality into images that reveal order out of chaos; vision does not inform the poem, it is the poem.

The image, then, is at the center of my poetry. There is in poetry such concentration, such intensity, such sound, that other literary forms feel so diluted with excess that they are bland by comparison. Also, I do not see with a movie camera eye the long chain of events that creates plot. I see most often with the still camera eye the moment frozen, the one or several images that, if focused on, can reveal much. To take a moment from the run of time is to pare away the glut of things that confuse the eye. Poetry wants to stop the reader's rush, and roving eye. "A moment," it says, "a moment is important, for life is a series of them." Perhaps, ironically, the pace of our lives today creates a greater need for

poetry than when poetry was read more widely and deeply, for we need to stay that headlong rush, to pause and focus; so my poems most often freeze the frame into one or more images.

I have been influenced by so many poets in regard to image that economy dictates that I divide images into three types, each represented by a single master poet. The literal image is drawn from the reality we all experience but have difficulty seeing clearly. It is the poet's vision, revealed in the images, that clears the reader's sight. The process is one of inclusion and exclusion. The field of vision is so cluttered with things that patterns and essential relationships are invisible. So, to make them visible, as Rogers explains, the useless or contrary "elements of the object Absolute are filtered out, others retained in a selection-construction process . . ." (32). The poet's eye brings only some things into focus or foreground, leaving the rest a felt blur.

Wallace Stevens writes images that are a wonder of precision and clarity. Because they are drawn sharply from literal reality, they are stunning in their immediate evocation of appropriate response from the reader. When he writes "As a calm darkens among water lights," in "Sunday Morning" (279), one must see the light-reflecting ripples settle into a flat, nonreflecting surface and connect it instantly to the redeeming, forgiving, and thus calming sacrifice of Christ which ironically subdues earthly beauty.

In my poem "Winter— Golden Gate Park / San Francisco, " I see a series of

images showing spring colors emerging from human activity against the lifeless backdrop of winter. The strongest is the image of the black saxophone player standing in the shadows of a dark tunnel mouth "coaxing blue moans and golden bursts / that float forth into frosty air." The poem continues to set color and energy against the winter backdrop, moving from what can be seen as the tunnel to the underworld, through the harmonizing middle stanza, to the nurturing old ladies, not defying, but supplementing nature's meager season. So here, nature and human activity not only inform but enrich each other.

To opposite effect, inclusion and exclusion are clear in the literal images in "Rucker's Knoll." The speaker introduces the reader to the vision of Rucker, a now deceased office worker who used to escape the "ordered office" to eat lunch where he could watch order and uniformity become a "rabble of color." The speaker, becoming a Rucker, takes pleasure in the images of order and regularity being reformed with the energy of chaos, and so declares himself by scuffing " . . . up groomed green grass / with my wing tip toe."

Continuing with both the literal images and exploration into the human position in nature, "Snail Slow Power" invites a comparison between the lowly snail and human activity. The images suggest destiny is not destination; perhaps we too move from one mystery to another, our only visible accomplishment the tracks of our journey.

Moving into two themes I often work with, the literal images of "Good Grief"

explore the human relationship to both God and animals. Worse than accidental killing is the lack of compassion which can prevent the good that comes from grieving. This same lack of compassion turns good grief into "God's grief" which is the fallen man.

The previous poems all reveal literal images containing only those objects and actions which when imagined by the reader call forth both emotional and intellectual responses. The images are clear and complete, providing what Rogers calls "an illumination, a flame, with which we, the viewers, the readers, now equipped to see as the artist sees, may enter upon our own lives . . . equipped for discovery . . ." (216).

But what if some essential element of the image is left out, creating a black hole of ambiguity with a gravity so great that it draws the reader's imagination into it? What shadows of meaning, what horror, what awe await the reader drawing the dark image in his imagination?

This, the second type of image that has had a profound effect on me and my work, could be exemplified by several poets, but let me call T.S. Eliot forth. Eliot has revealed many images that have a dark power, the power to startle and even shock the reader. They contain such boundless ambiguity that one's imagination is drawn back again and again into them without ever coming to closure. When Eliot takes us for a climb on the purgatorial staircase in "Ash Wednesday," and we look back to see a penitent "Struggling with the devil of

the stairs who wears / The deceitful face of hope and of despair "(472), we are stopped cold and stare. We feel the struggle between hope and despair, but keep returning to "deceitful" to try to bind it down. It would be so easy if it referred to just "hope" or even "despair," but both at the same time? So the inherent paradox of the human condition is revealed in the paradox of the image. What is missing from the image is the clarifying element; instead, we have the black hole of ambiguity.

In my more disturbing, even shocking poems, this type, the dark image, makes them move and open up a black hole whose powerful gravity draws the reader's imagination. I work a lot with parent / child relationships, moving, I think, beyond simple abuse to deeper, darker implications. In "Please," we see a mother, perhaps an abused wife, emotionally abusing her little boy by attempting suicide in front of him by crawling halfway into a dark oven from which she speaks. The poem's final image: "Mother and son together at the oven door / looking into darkness" is powerful in its suggestiveness. There is both birth and death in this dark womb / tomb figure, but is it the birth of a woman resigned to life, or the birth of a boy into a perverted manhood by a mother whose life has been fouled by manhood? There is a terrifying irony here that defies clear, linear explication. And, I say yes to that. This is an image that keeps evoking.

The dark side of the nurturing mother is evoked in the extended image of

"In the Wink of an Eye." John Ciardi, in his book of essays on poetry, Ciardi Himself, suggests that "a good extended image . . . is made of various elements and is marked by both sequence and structure" (22). In this poem, I structure the developing image by altering the point of view in each stanza. The poem opens with the distant view from the nurturing dinner table of the mother protecting the source, the garden, from a thieving gopher. The second stanza brings us right to the tunnel mouth and introduces the turning motif.

Descending to the center of the tunnel in the third stanza, we discover another nurturing mother being drawn to the surface of the garden. As the mother gopher ascends, she sees the huge human eye and turns, too late for escape, and the competing mothers are fused in earth and death. The poem resolves at the return to the dinner table, and in the celebratory moment of victory the knife is passed on to the daughter, and the dark conspiracy of motherhood is affirmed with a wink and cyclic turn.

Working still with the dark image and structure, the poem "Burning of Autumn Leaves" opens with the speaker in the autumn of life, alone with memory. And it is image in memory that is as much a theme in this poem as child abuse. The speaker tries to remember sentimentally, but the dark truth rises, wedging itself into the almost saccharine images. The dark, brutal images can be pulled aside to let the sentimental lines snap together, forming a grammatically correct stanza fit for Reader's Digest. The dark, truthful inserts

also form a unified whole, but either set separated cannot form a satisfying poem. It is the concluding irony of the resolution that forms the whole from contrasting images. It is silent memory awakened, for as Ciardi suggests, a poem "is a stirring awake of words in a haunted silence. It is not an assertion but a being, a harkening to being . . ." (59).

Perhaps my most poignant poem on parent / child relationships, "To Play Ball," is filled with images both clearly real and darkly evocative. The boy in the poem is tied to his ailing mother, but there comes a time, as it must, when the cord to her is broken. The call to his own future becomes stronger than her call to him. The baseball images proclaim spring, youth, and healthy outdoor play. The mantra that he chants to drown out her call to him changes from "Sticks and stones will break my bones" to "Sticks and bones will break my stones," suggesting the breaking of manhood by the bones of his mother. The baseball images grow brighter, and the rhythm intensifies, drawing the boy from home into the world as he steps over the dark bony image of his mother. There is a heartbreaking and heartmaking inevitability in the contest between images, between dark and light, between mother and son, yielding a closing image that is meant to feel dark and mysterious. In both "In the Wink of an Eye" and "To Play Ball," the closing image feels unfinished; some element is missing that would provide a clear, linear closure. This is as it should be, for as Rogers suggests, "If one says 'finished,' there is no life there anymore, but if one says

'unfinished,' life continues . . . " (91). And, if life continues, the mysteries continue, so the dark image continues to draw the imagination into it.

There is in the parent / child relationship a bottomless pit of darkness for a poet to explore. In "Fang and Claw," the reader and I go to the circus where we see the wildness from nature, the big cats, contained and controlled by man. Within this theme, which I explore in other poems, is the terrible mother who, with a toss of her "mane of hair" and a sinking of "her nails into his shoulder," ironically drags her little boy away from these "vicious things" into the show. The boy, perhaps a little "Rucker," rejects this display of nature tamed and creeps back to the lion cages where he feels so comfortable that he crawls inside to await the returning cats. The closing image is of the little boy offering "up his smooth pink cheek / to rough tongue, so much softer / than he expected." This dark image continues to draw the reader's imagination. Are we to see a gentle lion simply licking the boy in contrast to the mother's rough, almost vicious treatment of the boy, suggesting an unnatural cruelty bred of society's controlling order? Or are we to yield to the mother's scream and see the child mangled by untamed wildness? The element that would resolve this dark image into a literal clear image is missing.

Missing also from the closing image of "House" is the key element that would resolve this dark image into clarity. The poem builds as a house is built, from the ground up, sealing out the chaos and energy of the natural world and

creating a controlled, organized environment. Feeling satisfied and safe in this inclosure, the reader is suddenly confronted with the image of house-as-coffin. But, what are we to do? Stop building and living in houses? Continue to live in a safe but deadly environment? We feel trapped in a dark ambiguity.

The situation of "Tit for Tat" is also ambiguous. The reader sees the stark image of a woman who has undergone a mastectomy and radiation treatment. In a powerfully emotional moment, she blames her commitment to her job for the cancer that has claimed her breast, and perhaps her life. The image is sandwiched between two observations by a coworker which create the ambiguity. Are we hearing compassion, or dark humor? Perhaps we are to hear both; perhaps they are not mutually exclusive. The element that would eliminate one or the other is missing; so life too is often ambiguous, lacking some key element that would resolve complexity into a wished for simplicity.

The dark images just discussed certainly raise a question that demand an answer. The ambiguity engendered by a missing element suggests that our perception of life, our vision is incomplete. Life is too broad, too deep, too dark to see it all and come always to a clear, linear, satisfying understanding. The poem is not a puzzle to be solved as some readers believe. Nor does a poet begin with some linear idea and transform it into a nonlinear image, for, as Rogers maintains, "the objectivist reader assumes that the poet starts with a prose summary, a down to earth concept, which he translates into a poetic

equivalent through the extravagance of metaphor and simile" (131). The poet does not deliberately leave out some essential piece to tease or confuse the reader but reveals what is seen.

What is seen, however, sometimes is modified beyond what we can see in literal reality. This, the third type of image, I call the grotesque image. This image may be seen in the poet's imagination as a fusion of two images that somehow came together to inform reality. Rogers explains: "The formation of the artistic image . . . the fusion . . . [of] images to form a composite documents the fact that to see as an artist sees is to compose" (81). Or, the grotesque image may appear to the artist as deformed reality where size, shape, or color have changed fantastically in the artist's vision: Swift's Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, and Yahoos; the portrait of Dorian Gray; the wonderland of Alice—all come to mind. When the grotesque image appears, it has great evocative power, for, as Rogers asks, "Who has not caught his breath in wonder at the brief, vivid glimpse of another world which comes with a brief flash of lightning?" (54). The poet who has most influenced me in this regard is William Blake, who reveals images of the world swollen, pinched or shrunk out of all real proportion. Whether it is the great figure of Urizen being bound by chains upon a rock, or an old woman catching "shrieks in cups of gold" (203), or Luvah's daughters who "dance around the dying, & they drink the howl & groan" (281), or the sick rose being destroyed by the "dark secret love" of the worm

(47), it is Blake who shows images that only resemble reality. But in their resemblance, these grotesque images, almost cartoon like at times, evoke puzzlement as the reader tries to make them somehow conform to his sense of reality. It is this process that makes the images work. If the reader does not have an imagination that can compose the grotesque images, then he will see no truth, no reality in Blake.

I felt the influence of Blake's vision when in "Communion" I saw and drew Christians into wolves, "lapping of blood, / . . . gnawing of flesh," while the moon, in collusion, watches—pleased at this transmutation. When I opposed the curse / blessing of determinism in "Fertile Seed," I saw a Blakean worm curling about the core of the apple that connects Eve and Newton.

While remaining serious, I have seen humor in the grotesque images that are part of my vision. In "Sanctuary," the speaker, like Orpheus, will not accept that death perfectly informs life even though his cat Eurydice tries to show him. The clear, literal images of a real garden are fused with the deformed image of Eurydice "at her ease among shadows," snickering at his fear with a paw over her mouth. Likewise, in "Let George Do It," the images begin in a literal, but sentimental reality, and the rhythms run smoothly until both break in the poem's grotesque resolution. The speaker's confrontation with death is so fearful that the image becomes grotesquely funny as he sacrifices his beloved George to death, and the rhythms underscore the grotesque, becoming a string of stressed

syllables.

In "Angel Droppings," the unwilling confrontation with death begins with the literal image of an old woman standing in the waves pouring her husband's ashes into the sea. The reader's eye follows the old woman's absurd prayer as it floats toward heaven. The image turns from literal to grotesque as we see "unearthly angels, not hobbled by dark / shadow feet, graze and gaze down on us." The angels, not affected by death themselves "grow fat" on mortal grief. The humans below, hoping for some divine relief, receive instead the waste of their digested, absurd desires. It is the fantastic quality of this grotesque image that can shock the reader's imagination into an acceptance of reality.

It is this same desire to thwart death that is dealt with in "Bear's Nose," where I achieve the most grotesque and darkly humorous image. The poem is touching as the speaker introduces the survivor, from a pair of ferrets, to death. Bear's reaction to the death of his brother is somewhat shocking, but we can accept the species' ritual. The poem seems to conclude on a sentimental note, looking resignedly ahead to "Beary's" death. It takes a moment, perhaps reflecting on the title, "Bear's Nose," before the grotesque image of the speaker biting a dead ferret on the nose and shaking the body rises up before the reader. Again, reality is informed by the grotesque.

Not only reality, but life itself is informed and saved in "Just Enough." The character in the poem is on the verge of suicide, but as he takes the gun out and

handles it, he is seduced back into life. The image grows from just a gun, to an old, warm, friend that he has neglected. As he begins to clean the piece, the diction of the image reveals a feminine nature which contains "six mortal noses" and requires "a drop of oil / in each secret place," and even seems to breathe. For the character, it is the grotesqueness of the image itself that has the power to save the literal.

Finally, in "Poppy's Eyebrow," total acceptance of death is revealed in a grotesque image. An old man on his deathbed in a hospital is visited by a youth who still believes in victories. The literal images of the hospital are drawn with battle diction and lead to the closing image of death dragging the old man off the battlefield of life by the foot, and we are left with the realization that the acceptance of death is also the acceptance of the meaninglessness of life's little victories.

After image, it is necessary to focus on metaphor and symbol in my poetry, especially since figures and symbols so often function within images, for as Rogers argues, "The verbal metaphor is the most fundamental archetypic image . . ." (116). Most of the metaphors I've encountered, as I.A. Richards would agree, are prosaic. The tenor is often imposed on the vehicle, which is an attempt at clarification or illumination. However, when a metaphor is essential, when the tenor already resides within the vehicle and the poet exposes it to the reader's eye, why then it is a rare and marvelous thing.

For Robert Frost, however, it is not rare. Whether it is a stone wall, apple orchard, woodpile, two roads in a yellow wood, or birch trees bent from boys swinging them, we see in Frost's work the whole poem, a series of images, as metaphor. And, see is the best word here, as Rogers explains: "The verbal metaphor is comprehensible only through visual metaphor" (120). The people, objects, and situation comprise the vehicle, and, as we read, the tenor is revealed so seamlessly and naturally it has to always have been there; we just never saw it until Frost showed it to us. One could do worse than imitate Robert Frost.

When "Failure" and "The Tub," were born, and there is no other way to put it, I knew immediately they were essential metaphors, and I was amazed. I did not devise them; they came out whole and complete. I had to clean them up a bit, of course, for birth is a messy affair, but there they were. I had not really known that what the ancients called the Muse is really a midwife until these two poems. I had not really understood what Walt Whitman meant when he asserted that the poet "is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself" (448). So, standing there with a dying ferret in his hands, the speaker realizes that man's relation to his pet is parallel to God's relation to the man; and our failure, in pet terms, is parallel to God's failure in human terms. Likewise, watching the boys around the bathtub placing bets on the drowning guinea pigs certainly suggests the

parallel to human existence. As poet, I saw inside the scenes, saw that more than one thing was happening at once, and my poems reveal the tenor that was always in the vehicle.

Within images and metaphors there sometimes reside symbols. I do not consciously create symbols. As Ciardi points out: "The language is wiser, deeper, more sentient, and more haunted than anyone who uses it" (59). I do not think of Boswell ferret or Snowy, the guinea pig, as symbols for humans, or the bathtub as the world, the oven as a womb / tomb, or Mary's credit card as her contribution to Christianity. That does not mean that they have no symbolic value; they do, but they appear in an image naturally, and when the people, creatures, and objects interact aesthetically, the image resonates symbolically. Thus, the elements can be said to have symbolic value.

No poem can succeed solely on the suggestive power of its images, however revealing. It must reach the mind and heart of the reader via the ear. It is the sound, its melody and rhythms that carry it to, or as Paul Fussell maintains, impinge upon, the reader:

To do something to the reader is the end of poetry: a poem is less a notation on a page or a sequence of uttered sounds than a shaped and measured formal effect that impinges upon a reader or hearer. The reality of a poem is more basic—and I mean physical—in its effect upon the reader than the metrical element . . . (110).

It is the sound of a poem that I work and rework. I write poems out loud. I prefer the colloquial voice, whether I am speaking as the poet or have assumed the

persona of a character. The natural speech patterns are what I begin with, then I drop superfluous words to achieve the rhythm and emphasis that pleases my ear, so my verse is free from preimposed constraints.

The poets I read and learn from see the world in ways that inform my own vision. There truly is a literal world so filled with stuff that the only way to understand it is to isolate and focus, to limit the perspective by exclusion. But, despite clear vision, there are aspects of existence that remain dark and ambiguous, images that call and recall to us the mysteries of life, death, and consciousness. And finally, life, clear or dark, can be informed by a vision of what isn't really there, images that spring from the poet's imagination to be composed in the reader's imagination. There is such beauty in images where figures reflect and symbols echo, where the sound plays about the ear—the very porch of our awareness.

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Winter— Golden Gate Park
San Francisco

The scum covered pond water wrinkles
against lily pads turning brown,
while from the shadow of a tunnel mouth
a black man fingers a brilliant brass saxophone,
coaxing blue moans and golden bursts
that float forth into frosty air,

while a young white man in red and gold
sweatsuit dances slow t'ai chi postures
celebrating the harmony of man and world
under bare brown limbs of trees
posing up turned finger branches
where sap has slowed almost to lament,

while two wizened old ladies,
faces lined and saggy cheeked,
dip gnarled big knuckled hands
into bags of bird seed
brought in their pull-a-long carts,
and scatter seed for hundreds of pigeons
who coo and peck, then explode
in flurry of beating wings
over their thin pink and blue hair,
to settle again on spare brown grass;
there is no waiting here, for spring.

Rucker's Knoll

Even before his death, half in smirk,
his colleagues called it Rucker's Knoll,
for he came often out of ordered office
to eat alone his lunch here.

I stand here now, sandwich in hand,
and see the distant smear of blue bay
to which housing tracks march down lower slopes
into a rabble of color toward that far water.

Nearer climb the trees whose dark green rends
the rolling brown fabric of the hills,
tearing into chaos the smooth rounds
that once billowed up from flatness.

I never knew Rucker
until, standing on his knoll
I scuff up groomed green grass
with my wing tip toe.

Snail Slow Power

When it's dry, they stay
among, beneath the leaves
and wait for dark rain
or dew so heavy as to ease their way.
They slide out then on slick roads
of their own, feeling their way.
This leap of faith
glides them slowly, blindly,
into uncertain future where foamy eggs may hatch
beneath the leaves to begin
again that powerful process.
All destiny carried on their backs
from wet dark, to wet dark;
from mystery, to mystery;
connected only by silver trails
that shine in the bright, dry, sunlight.

Good Grief

Lisa always keeps behind the seat
clean and rolled a frayed old towel:
a winding sheet to shroud a lifeless cat
found sprawled in gore on street or road.
She kneels to stroke and swaddle it,
then bundles to the grassy verge
and lays it frankly down.
She believes just driving by the greater wrong--
to leave it starting fixed
and stuck on death
void and ripped for owner's eye--
for rising gorge can choke good grief.
I always stop the car for Lisa's cats;
to pass a body by affirms God's grief
and makes the roadkill mine.

Please

Three or four,
at least oven high he stood
tugging on her blouse.
Her head and shoulders buried
in the dark and gassy depths
open wide drawing her in.
Her voice echoed and deep,
 "You have a penis!
 A dick, a cock!
 Just like your father."

He said, "Please Mom,
Mom please."
He always said his please,
but it wasn't enough;
it never is.

From the shadow
her voice echoed and deep,
 "You're a male and like them all,
 you want a slave."
He said his please and tugged
and begged her live.

From the breathless room
her voice echoed and deep,
 "No, not in his world."

The gas thickened his throat
and retching brought his cookies up.
 "You little shit," she screeched
as she pushed out, "My clean floor!"
She gagged and added bile.

Mother and son together at the oven door
looking into darkness.
He said his please,
but it wasn't enough;
it never is.

In the Wink of an Eye

From the dinner table,
watching mother in the garden
on her belly ,
pulse beating into earth.
Left hand poised above
long, wide butcher knife planted,
point barely breaking into dark tunnel,
narrow boning knife clutched for thrust.

Scent of carrot stronger
than mother's warm breath
turning, turning blades of grass.

Drawn by orange scent,
from dark nest murmuring
with soft warmth and tiny blind hungers;
up the tunnel, round the turn
toward the light.

The huge eye, the blink
that turned, that turned
to see the flash of blade
that blocked retreat and locked those hearts,
beating into earth, together
till the thrust that turned.

Mother brings the gopher in
raised high in triumph,
crooked line of blood
twisting down her arm.
Mother's eye stabs daughter's eye.
Knife passes, turning tiny dark eye
toward the daughter, it winks.
And turns; and turns.

Burning of Autumn Leaves

Alone I hear the crunch and scatter
of autumn leaves underfoot,
as skeleton trees lurch from summer's closet
across blue October light.

Dad raked the leaves into heaps,
and I helped in small ways,
but mostly jumped and tumbled in the piles
as Dad looked on and smiled
— a grimace of fury
at being disobeyed. He would drag
me to garage, my shoulder
first to pain as feet
only brushed on concrete-
in love to see me play
in fragrant golds and reds.

Leaning on the rake, Dad drew his pipe
from plaid pocket, to fill and tamp,
and I smelled again tobacco and rum
— alcohol breath so thick
my throat would close
and stomach wrench;
when my hands were tied,
my heart would race away-
smoke drifting. After lighting the pipe,
he handed me the still burning wooden match,
so I could light the leaves.

The smoke curled and rose in column
joining pipe smoke trailing up
through branches bare and stark against the sky.
Dad drew me close; my cheek brushed
— his bright belt buckle would catch
and hold all the light in the world
as I was spun and thrust
against the post to grip
and wait the fall of stroke on stroke-
against soft flannel as he told me how
when I grew up, I would watch my children
play in golden piles, and we would smell
the burning of autumn leaves.

To Play Ball

His mother often called to him,
tired voice breaking roughly.
He had leaped to help as she grew frail
from vodka, pills, and pain.
A clutter of bones sticking out,
sticks and hard round knobs.

Always leading, supporting her with care
down darkened hall to toilet,
little nightie with tiny yellow daisies
riding up revealing all he would not see.
Till finally she convulsed,
eyes rolling whitely and tongue retreating
from violent flailing of bony arms and legs.
It was the thick rope of drool
strung from chin to breast
that broke her cord to him
and dragged from him the vow;
"Oh never, never, never . . ."

He heard her call to him again,
but he sat upon his bed
throwing hard white ball
into leather glove oiled with care.
With every thunk of ball in glove
he chanted, "Sticks and stones will break
my bones, " against the hearing of his name.

And then the tumbling thump
of her fall from bed
when he would not come
and louder chanted
"Sticks and bones will break my stones."
While that clutter of bones
crawled down the dark
and polished wood of hallway.

From hard smooth wood of whacking bat
the white baseball explodes on green,
bouncing, hopping on green, so green
the grass, and thunk of ball into his glove—
"Sticks and bones will break my stones."
They are his mother's bones
though still in her skin—

And the bat gripped so smoothly,
handle so smooth and sun so gold
in the eye, and the ball so white
in the blue— that step from home
to first, stepping over the bones
crawling, rattling, darkly down the hall,
he sees them, sticking, sticking out,
sticks and bones—
"I'm going, Ma,
to play ball."

Fang and Claw

Quiet lions measure their cages
behind the taut circus tent
where the greatest show on earth
plays to those who merely watch.

Wanting the wild night,
lions pace and paw each other
behind the bars that float shadow
stripes across tawny coats.

The boy, drawn to these darkened cages
and flick of tufted tails, watches
lions pad back and forth through shadows
until his mother sinks her nails
into his shoulder snatching him away.
"But Mom," he cries, "I want to see them
move and feel their fur."
"No," she snarls, tossing mane of hair,
"they're vicious things and need the cage
to keep us from fang and claw.
Now come into the tent and light
and watch the show."

Back again, the boy through shadows
slips behind the tent
where the show must go on,
and the peanut crunching crowd
watches lions balance on gaudy stools
and jump through smoky hoops of fire.

He crawls into a dark and empty cage
and curls to sleep in matted straw.
Lions return to paw the scent
and wake the boy into shadow
stripes, crossing boy and cat,
while mother screams to see her son
offer up his smooth pink cheek
to rough tongue, so much softer
than he expected.

House

Building the house is easy.

You clear the land,
dragging and hauling weeds and rocks away,
driving the bulldozer, blade scrapping
and leveling contours.

Then dig the cellar deep and dark,
pour the concrete, and lay the floor
sealing out the earth.

Nail down the roof, shielding out sun and snow.

Wall between roof and floor
all round to block the wind,
but leave square the holes
for glass and doors to close.

Brightly paint and paper walls to please,
and hang the drapes to complement.
Lay carpet thicker than toes are long,
then carry in and place the furniture.
Draw the drapes and lock the doors.

Pour the wine, fill the plate,
and watch the world from t.v. distance.

Living in the house is easy,
but as hard to leave as the grave.

Tit for Tat

The department chairperson
isn't much of a person.
She's crazy,
and tears at the wisps and tufts
of hair left over from radiation.
She rants, "I gave my left tit
to this place!"
She didn't laugh when I said
we really didn't need it.

Communion

Tonight in the chapel
a gathering of wolves.
Their howls shine
through the stained glass
casting colored shadows of sacrifice
on the moon.

The moon as yellow as
the sharp eye of wolf
looks upon this communion,
this lapping of blood,
this gnawing of flesh,
and is pleased.

Fertile Seed

Newton, if you had just reached up
and plucked that glossy fruit
rather than wait for it to fall—
and we fall down the infinite steps
of antecedent conditions into abyss determined
to see the lock-step mind of God—
then would we be affirmed in our knowledge?

And Eve,
prideful Eve, you wanted to know
with the mind of God;
impatient Eve, you *would* not wait
in that perfect garden
for ripe and deadly fruit
that might never fall,
so picked that fruit and freedom
and now you bear our curse.

But Eve, suppose you'd waited long
under your tree for Newton,
would the garden fruit have fallen
for him? or would he have to pluck it down,
and then what dark worm
would coil about its fertile seed,
and how would fall
our blessing or our curse?

Sanctuary

Eurydice had a tail thiiiis long,
and ate her mousie with salad.
A gardener, green of paw,
digging weeds, fertilizing tomatoes
and stalking me
through rustling rows of corn,
she would crouch to leap at me from foliage,
then, paw over mouth,
she would snicker at my fright.

At dark she'd come when called,
but never all the way.
She'd wait,
at her ease among the shadows.
So, in my fear, I'd have to carry her
the last decisive feet to sanctuary.
She was nearly perfect
when alive.
Now, I still step and stumble
over shadows
and feel her snicker
at my fear of perfection.

Let George Do It

George was the finest cat;
would meet me at day's end,
step from shelf to shoulder.
But gentle paws, never a claw—
just soft pink paw pads
and neck nuzzles.
Then to follow me through evening
into dark of night,
where he would hear,
then see what I could not.
His head would jerk up,
and cat lips curl to growl
away the invisible stalker.
Not seeing the dark danger,
I would stroke chin and ear flaps
and tell him it was okay.
When the monster came finely visible,
darker shape than night,
treading dark step toward me,
I cowered and I cried,
holding George up as a shield,
"Take him! Eat the cat!"

Angel Droppings

Humpbacked Annie at the beach
gathers black dress in liver spotted hand
to draw it above knobbed knees.
She toes the foam at wave's edge;
other hand gnarled around smooth urn
stretches out for balance,
then she slide-steps into wave flow.
Shifting sand under thin feet
sways her as she pours her husband,
grainy dust now swirling in sea's ebb.
Annie raises her face, wattles stretching long
and asks, "Couldn't I have him back--
just on weekends?"
Her prayers like cartoon balloons rise,
draw and gather into vast fluffy puffs
where unearthly angels, not hobbled by dark
shadow feet, graze and gaze down on us.
They grow fat on our grief
and drop soft white angel waste
on our suppliant faces
while we pale and thin below.

Bear's Nose

After Bracken died,
I took him to his brother
for final ferret rites.

When I laid the body down
Bear came bouncing sideways in
as ferrets do for joy;
it didn't take Bear long
to ferret out the death
he'd never seen before.

At first, a nosing toss
to lift him from his sleep,
but Bracken only slumped
back upon the floor.
Playful root, and cold discovered
brought Beary's careful body
like a cloak to cover Brother Brack.

Then a desperate washing,
so eyes might see
and ears hear once again.
But anger flashing finally
brought bitter teeth to bare
in Bracken's long and tender nose.

It was this final bite,
a dark and shaking thing,
a rage, a test, a rite;
and stabbing look from black
and beady eyes
that taught me what
I must know,
for when my Beary dies.

Just Enough

Having had enough of life,
he reached to draw from drawer
a loaded gun
to simply put a stop.

As his hand encircled
the palm polished ivory
stocks, they returned his
grip and warmth familiar,
even friendly, and the weight
drew his strength from shoulder
down to finger tips.

As he lifted the glossy blue
revolver into stronger light,
he saw the dust and frowned,
so took an oily rag and wiped
clean the deep and midnight blue,
even breaking out the wheel
where poked six mortal noses,
then tilted up the gun to drop them
in a brassy clutter in his other hand.

As he wiped, he dripped a drop of oil
in each secret place,
so trigger pull and hammer drop
would smoothly snick and click,
and wheel would whir so fast
he could feel the air
like gun breath on his hand.

He wiped each cartridge,
dropped them home,
then snapping shut the wheel
tried to call up the crash,
the bullet bursting forth release,
but sighed, and laid it back,
knowing it would be there
clean and smooth and oily blue.

Poppy's Eyebrow

It was a long war;
and he was old and loose of skin.
Now, at the last battle,
draped in white on field of white,
lungs in rags and tatters,
his only shield -- an oxygen tent.
"How ya feeling Poppy," I asked.
"Finite," his arched reply.

When the nurse strode whitely in
armed with tray of pills and needles,
Poppy asked for another chair
and two glasses of juice
so we could sit and drink together.
The nurse began: " This isn't . . ."
But Poppy's eyebrow arched
and she scurried to his behest.

"In life and death," I offered,
the victories are small."
"No", he declined, "Death will drag me
from the field by my foot,
for in the losing of the last,
I've lost them all."

Failure

Boswell ferret looking up at me,
dark eyes heavy lidded,
clouded, but enough light left
to come to know what I am not.

With tentative fingers,
I helped draw him forth, but
he'd have squeezed into this world
without my trembling pull.

As long as my thumb and pink,
eyes closed, nosing for teat
in mother's fragrant fur
as I nursed my jealousy.

I grew him long and dark,
let him root and nuzzle
chocolate treats from helpful hands
as he grew to love my scent and touch.

He followed most commandments;
almost potty box responsible,
always put his toys away,
and took no other god before me.

Then the swellings, hard and round
beneath his fur, beneath his skin,
beneath my fingers grew,
and breath came hard upon his pain.

He would look to me,
and I would stroke and whisper
soft hope against the hardness
of his lumps and slow receding.

Boswell never mourned his own decline,
but looked to me for life.
Failing him, then he grieved,
not for his life, but mine.

The Tub

Ralph filled the tub with water warm
enough to stay the sudden shock
that might cause early panic
and spoil all the fun.

He carried in the cardboard box
a scramble with guinea pigs,
a crazy quilt of colored fur,
splotches, spots, stripes and solids-
brown, gold, black, rust and white.

They weren't afraid; loved the life
his sister had provided. But the father,
gruff and stern, demanded they be gone.
He was tired of all the mess and smell
of damp sawdust and round dark turds
often under foot.

The boys stood 'round the tub,
each made his choice, critical,
weighing furry ball in hand,
probing muscle tone with finger
and finally dropping money in the pot.

While claw feet dug
into tile stained and cracked with age,
a tumble of color splashed and bobbed,
then paddled for the shore
where claws slipped and slid on polished porcelain
never meant for purchase or escape.

"Go Fluffy, my allowance. . ." but
Fluffy despaired of swimming,
just gave up and sank away,
long coat swaying like golden seaweed.

Amid cries of encouragement
Nimble, true to his name,
drove old Grumble to the wall
where paws blurred in frantic scraping,
sank to paw the bottom, as if to walk away.
Then Nimble mounted Snappy's back,
and rode him, wide eyed, to the depths.

While boys, mouths agape, turned their gaze
to Jester and Rusty, stroking laps
strong and serious side by side
till Rusty fell behind,
gasped a breath of water, coughed,
submerged, rose, but dropped away.

Finally, boys grown silent as seas breathing,
saw Jester stop mid lap, slide below
as if lost without Rusty by his side.

The last, Snowy, gently treaded water,
would not panic, breathing evenly
through dilated nostrils.
"Save him," the boys cried, "he won,"
as Snowy trailed two silver streams of bubbles.
"No," said Ralph, "he just hasn't lost yet."

Credit

I ran into Jesus at a gas station,
a Union 76 with a huge orange ball
hanging heavy like the moon.
As He filled His tank, I wondered
why He didn't change water into gas.
But He was with Mary,
so He used her card.

The Maid's Season

The son is so sweet,
but needs a tutor
for those quick and slender hands.
It only takes a sidelong glance
or pouty lower lip
to set him off in hot pursuit.
Up my skirt
with touch to punctuate
my gasp at so shocking speed,
I have to guide his grope,
and slow him down, where it matters,
as he is prone to rush
to each new discovery.
I teach to ease the rush
of each quick pinch and probe;
coach him how to lightly flick
a tongue or barely brush with lips
each moment of my delight.
So often he plunges ahead,
that I must call him back
to take me quickly up again
to that high place from where
I fall to my crying out,
but he never hesitates to
bring again his spring to my summer.

And the father, so strong
I must accept those steady thick fingered hands
that move as inexorably as autumn
against my summer,
after he has instructed me
in taking off my clothes, so slowly;
then bringing me up the old familiar path,
pausing at each pleasing place
to catch the strongest beat of my pulse
before guiding my hand
or lips to our growing need
that pushes us deeper into the night
where that single abyss awaits
our craving fall, that lingers long
as autumn often does.

That sweet green rush of spring
and slow golden harvest of autumn
both embrace and urge my summer's heat.
But if spring and autumn turn and clash,
winter's shriek and howl will drive
the snow and ice to cover cold
these empty limbs of summer.

Tracks

Near enough to hear the thrum
of engines pulling long narrow
box cars, cutting gleaming silver lines
toward some otherwhere, and when.

Hershel listened with vague baby ears
and dreamed soft baby dreams.
Growing, playing, roaming to
the railroad bridge to drift in pursuit
of trains on flashing tracks.

But shadows of trees would darkly
wave children under the trestle,
beneath the shining tracks held
high by the timbers soaked in creosote
and crossed with beams of black.

Hershel would scramble through
the tall green reeds, splashing
muddy water as he captured
croaking frogs; holding legs splayed
in outstretched grasp over
shadow lines staining water dark,
as he tore long green legs apart.

When of an age, a gathering of boys
becomes a gang to meet in dark
beneath the bridge and punch
the tracks into their arms to take
them nowhere, under the rumble
of trains going some otherwhere.

Hershel took his girl beneath the bridge,
in gasps and sighs. Legs splayed,
she wept two shining lines rolling
in the dark to draw him
with subtle passion into life.

But whisper of needle tracks beneath
the rolling of gleaming rails
pander darkly while rude boys approach
with chain and knife to snap and flash
silver, in the dark beneath the bridge.

Survival

When I saw you, I died,
but the power of your eye
uncrushed the broken bones of me.

When your forearm drew parallel
to mine, I felt your hairs
touch my hairs, but it was
the heat that burned me to creation,
and when I carried your hair flowing
out of my hands and buried
my face, despite the tickle,
I breathed in and my veins
grew with the scent of you,
when I tasted the sweet of your tongue
and the salt of your skin
my heart exploded in bloody chaos.

When you said you loved me,
what was left of my mind
thought you could save me,
for I knew more of survival
than of love.

Street Lights

Dark night lighted, poles spaced
so bright poolings dim, almost to touch.
At my back the light, like wind
pushes, and spreads my dark sail before me.
A long street to navigate,
becomes pavement, only real
as each foot steps into its own shade.
Fainter light and shadow fade
till I dissolve into dark cleavage
between the lights, where immortals
or other dead cast no shadow.
A doldrum pause
before bending into the light
to haul long unfurled silhouette
against the tug of pale wind
growing stronger as pursuing dusky self
darkens, shortens, until it clings
only to my soles.