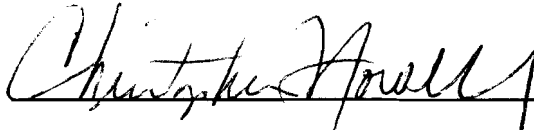


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

James A. York for the Master of Arts

in English presented on September 1, 1993

Title: The Kindness of Strangers

Abstract approved: 

This thesis is a collection of poems and an introduction to my aesthetic. The introduction serves as both a description of my artistic process and a platform from which I acknowledge my antecedents. In the writing of these poems, I was aware of a tension between the narrative and the image. The entire work, then, has become a means of discovering which of these components dominates the work itself. Now that I have finished the poems, I am able to see that the narrative almost always takes precedence with regard to theme, but that the images contribute just as necessarily to narrative. Without the images, the narrative becomes descriptive prose broken into lines, but the image, around which the theme revolves, provides a locus for the poem and gives the reader something more concise and more concrete than narrative has to offer. In this way I have come to understand that neither image nor narrative takes precedence, but that both are essential to the type of poem I am interested in writing.

I am satisfied with the balance that has been achieved. The actual form

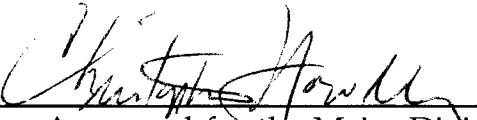
of the poems remains subordinate to both narrative and image, sometimes to the point of being arbitrary. In some cases, the lines are broken according to meter; in others, the shape of the stanza dictates form. The result is a poetry which does not banish the novice reader, nor, hopefully, bore the connoisseur.

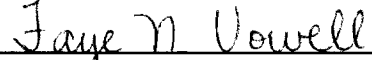
THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Division of English
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
James A. York


Approved for the Major Division


Approved for the Graduate Council

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have made this book possible. My hat is tipped to Christopher Howell, the infinitely patient director of this thesis who has shown, by his own writing, exactly how thoughtful emotion really looks on paper. Thanks also to the many fine teachers here at E.S.U.; your faith in me and my abilities has given me the start I need. And to my family, especially my new wife Windy, without whom I might never have harnessed the greatest emotion of all, thanks and Godbless.

Table of Contents

Introduction: A Note on Method and Antecedents

Considering Wind

Charity

Bagpipes for Helen

Generations

The Kindness of Strangers

Faking It

Down to the Dirt

Hoover Dam

Testing

Wishbone

Rings

Between Miracles

Hunger

Turning Thirty Six, Gloria Looks Back

The Obligatory Ba Da Bing

The Man in the Jungle

Guessing Dreams

Our Hero

Elegy for Barbie

Fury

Flying Right

Routine

Rorschach's Complaint

Pre-Quake Photo of Paria Canyon Found Upon Excavation

Moment

The Consequence of Kindness

For Ima Jean

Cycles

Self-Propelled

Swan Song

The Preface

*“What one has written is not to be defended
or valued, but abandoned: others
must decide significance and value.”
William Stafford*

Think of creative literature as an abstract collage done by everyone who ever picked up a brush. In one place, the collage is by Da Vinci and right beside it the piece by your neighbor who painted his fence last weekend, the one who took the TV out in the yard so he could watch the big game. The collage is controlled beauty next to sloppy floundering for expression, and in places, it is just plain ugly. It all depends on the section you examine.

Because public opinion changes with the season, and because a writer may justify anything to himself and attempt to persuade others to agree with him, I have chosen not to describe the poems that comprise this thesis; rather, I will describe the process that leads to the product. When you have judged the poems you may then come to this introduction for suggestions on whatever it is people call craft. Until then, read the poems and decide for yourself if the process is worth emulation. Like Stafford, I believe “anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty, of poetry” (3). If you like the pattern I have started, the one with brush strokes that are just a little different than anything you’ve seen, not much, but a little, imitate or add to the pattern, and allow the art to flow onto the tapestry of creative literature. Only then will you further this thing, our only true insight.

The Process

First of all, I like to write at night, when everyone else is asleep. During these times, I begin by listening to the quiet of the room until I have the sensation of being able to hear everything in the house. The striking of a match sounds like a forest fire. The hum of the monitor and the fan on the floor, air rushing through ducts above the ceiling, the buzz of the fan at the end of the duct, my own pulse against my eardrums, all of it roaring. Then I begin to type words, unconnected and jarbled and misspelled, into the keyboard. The sound of keys being struck becomes a symphony or a wrecking ball going through a glass house, and when I am finally in this loudest quiet of all, I may begin. From here I select an image.

The image can come from anywhere. It can be something outside the window or a memory so deep, so vague and fragmentary, that it is nothing but a picture and its mysterious attendant emotion. It can be the blue jay in the five-story treetops of the box elder outside my window, this very minute, or the smell of dirt. From the image, I must provide everything to explain the situation: why is this woman crying? has she won the lottery or lost her family? what is her name and where does she live? does she speak with an accent? what are her traits? occupations? inclinations? does she have children? is she happy in her situation or just going through the motions? All of these things must be considered; but most importantly, where can this image take me from here? In effect, I grab onto an object from the physical world and it takes me on a tour through the realm of imagination. The only salvation for the poem is the image, which will lead the poem back into some relevant application into the way life is lived, out here, in what we call

reality. It is fitting that the central image is both the entrance to and the exit from the poem.

In my writing, I try to be as direct with image, theme, and language as possible. I like to juggle these elements until the poem begins to feel finished (or, lately, until I get to the bottom of the page.) I most enjoy creating the language and imagery for the poems, but because I cannot seem to write a poem that does not finally say something explicable, the most difficulty I have in writing a poem lies in tying it together with a theme. I am many times either unsatisfied with the theme of the piece or wish it contained none whatsoever. Usually, if I do not like the way a particular poem has turned out, it is because of the difficulty I have in keeping the voice consistent in the final few lines. I am trying to change this style, though for a person who grew up with parables and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the act of letting go of a powerful and "neat" conclusion seems at times insurmountable. I hope my poems will become longer and more involved in the future, but for now, there seems to be a one-page barrier, a point at which I almost unconsciously start finishing the poem. This tendency could be due to the training I have had with the contemporary poets, whose lyrics are usually not long, or it could be the curse inherent in having grown up in a generation that actually prides itself on its short attention span. Whatever the case, whether it is a technique to be developed or discarded, I do not know. I do know, however, that the poems always make an attempt at some sort of meaningful closure.

In the writing of these poems, I was aware of a tension between the narrative and the image. The entire work, then, has become a means of discovering which of these components dominates the work itself. Now that I have finished the poems, I am able to see that the narrative almost always

takes precedence with regard to theme, but that the images contribute just as necessarily to narrative. Without the images, the narrative becomes descriptive prose broken into lines, but the image, around which the theme revolves, provides a locus for the poem and gives the reader something more concise and more concrete than narrative has to offer. In this way I have come to understand that neither image nor narrative takes precedence, but that both are essential to the type of poem I am interested in writing.

In light of my feelings about the narrative form, one might ask why I chose to write poems instead of short stories. The answer is that I like the exercise of compression afforded by poetry, and experimenting with line and meter forces a writer to hear things he might not hear when writing a piece of prose. I also think there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which a reader reads a poem and a piece of prose. The former is to be invisible, and should, as John Gardner says, lull the reader into a fictional dream. The poem, however, through its very shape, forces the reader to examine the language for what it is. The reader knows that he must be attentive to each word, and that often the understanding of the poem relies on a single, resonant word. Therefore, as much for myself as for my reader, I have chosen to write poems.

I am satisfied with the balance that has been achieved. The actual form of the poems remains subordinate to both narrative and image, sometimes to the point of arbitrariness. In some cases, the lines were broken according to meter; in others, the physical look of the stanzas, their shapes, dictated how the poem would be arranged. The result is a poetry which does not banish the novice reader, nor, hopefully, bore the connoisseur.

As platitudinous as it may sound, I believe storytelling forces open a

seam in the imagination that, for the vast majority of us, remains shut most of the time. If we could get into the habit of viewing the world from different perspectives and open our imaginations enough to realize that there are others sharing this space and time with us, we might sidestep much of the violence and pain going on around the world. My goal with this book was to take as many different perspectives as possible and explore them. I hope I have been successful.

Influences

As my preface suggests, if a poem really works for me, and I think Emily Dickinson described the sensation of a poem “working” best, I try to take what I can and build on those parts, always with the hope that I can gain insight into a particular style and therefore broaden my own. In this collection, the poem “Considering Wind,” is an imitation of David Huddle’s “Study.” “Routine” was inspired by Stephen Dunn’s wonderful poem, “His Music,” and I had the idea for “Fury,” the only sonnet in this collection, after reading Maxine Kumin’s “Despair.” These are but a few of the writers I have modeled myself after, and like most people, I have been influenced, by varying degrees, by everything I have read. Some of the poets that have had the greatest impact on my own writing have been Michael Van Walleghen, Stephen Dunn, Gary Gildner, Albert Goldbarth (though I often find his writing simultaneously wonderful and discouraging), Maxine Kumin, and Christopher Howell. But to cite these writers is misleading. My tastes range from the deep image of James Wright to the song of Dylan Thomas to the

bare and elegant translations of Tu Fu by Kenneth Rexroth. I am rather diverse in my tastes; I can slam-dance or two-step, slow dance or cha cha; as long as I'm on the dance floor, I'm happy.

The first real book I ever read was *Crime and Punishment*. It took a whole summer of lunch breaks in a warehouse to read the thing, and I think sometimes the darkness in my work comes from that sort of indoctrination. Dostoyevsky saw a great deal of pain, and as ironic as it is, I find his complete description of that emotion supremely beautiful. Almost against my will, this darkness has become a sort of focal point for much of my work. Many of the poems make use of painful scenes and imagery, but my goal is to take the anguish and from it create something positive and possibly enlightening.

The first time I gathered all of the poems together and read them I was astounded at the number of poems that seemed, on the surface at least, to be dark and depressing. I find this darkness ironic because this collection was compiled at a time of supreme joy. Though I have come to no real conclusions as to how this was possible, I have looked back into the text itself and found it to be stark rather than pessimistic, honest instead of merry. These are qualities all literary work must, in some way, possess if it aspires to any significance at all, and so I feel this first collection represents my progress to date.

James York

Considering Wind

1.
Through howling wind,
The elm against my northern window
scratches its only protest in the dark.
2.
A satellite glides in silence
across the glass, its light
steady between black boughs.
3.
Then at the cemetery, my father
and I lean and squint
as sand whips up
off the road, blasting us
for bringing wildflowers
this woman had to die for;
4.
and roofing in Wichita three stories up,
a deep green cloud swells and rolls;
each nail is driven with a shot of panic,
as wind curses, snaps tar paper
like a locker-room towel and sirens
begin their cry;
5.
 dark is coming, and I
am wishing I could hear the last words
Jessie Ryan will ever speak to me
as she steps into her Fiat to be blown
head-on across the yellow line into darkness;
6.
On Beale Street, two boys sick of watching
tumbleweeds cartwheel in from the fields
hold a sheet between their skateboards
and sail uphill, laughing;

7.

a kite with pink and yellow tails
soars, then dips into trees,
as a child watches wide-eyed
her father's first climb in years

8.

gusts blow in
from all directions, clearing dust
from so many dark places!

9.

as a young blue spruce is turning brown
in cracked earth beside the stock tank,
where the windmill is starting to squeak
and the pump rod is lifted.

Charity

At the diner where
 she works
the red eye shift

there's a phone in every booth,
 country music
floating down from somewhere,

and coffee cups stained
the color of weariness.

It's Christmas eve

so her middle-aged son
 is drunk
and doing public service

in a ratty Santa suit.
 He's clanging
his bell without charity,

embarrassing her again,
 knowing all
about her holiday bonus.

*Cupla bucks, cupla bucks
 is all.
I'm your goddamn son for Chrissake.*

She's speaking so delicately now
 into the hand
that holds her St. Christopher

that everyone but him can hear
 her heart
clench around the emptiness.

Her Santa whirls on the customers
 his bell threatening,
his breath like cabbage boiled in piss,

his wine-stained beard coming loose
from his cheek,
and as I go for my wallet

she steps quickly into his shadow
and in angry tears
thrusts a twenty dollar bill

in his god damned no good hand.

*Don't you never
give him nothin' round this place,*

She hisses, and somewhere a thread
is pulled;
something inside me is unraveling

at this charity, this love taken,

this acquiescence to nothing
but the irrational heart.

Bagpipes for Helen

My grandmother inherited the family kidneys.
One was taken
before my mother was old enough to remember;
the other dripped its last just before I left for school.
The doctors put
a fistula in her left forearm, a place, they said,
where the nailsize needles would go in and out
and she'd feel
just the slightest prick. Three times a week,
up at Trinity Hospital, the spike enters her flesh
and the filth of this world is scrubbed free.
Metaphorically,
with the protection of the blue cross and shield,
she's a do-it-yourself Messiah, but down here,
where rhetoric is tinsel and wrapping, she does hospice
and figures
the books for a Honduras missionary. Don't
tell her she could be the twentieth-century
poster child
for God, even if she is eighty and still wears her
smile like a girl. She'll tell you you're treading
on sacred soil,
poking fun at our only hope.

And she may be right. Her beauty hasn't faded,
though summers she scolds the profession
for denying her
her short sleeves. I think of my grandfather, how
he loved a good pipe, his golf, and his wife's
lovely long arms,
how he shrank with the weight of the tumor.

I sometimes wonder if his beautiful Helen
 curses the doctors
because they could do nothing, or because

they could do just enough to keep her here,
 doing this good
on earth with her ongoing prayers for us all,

instead of letting her slip off into a Heaven
 so Irish
even God laughs, she says, way down

in his belly and knows how to have a roarin'
 good time.
Up there my grandfather is smoking his pipe

or washing the grime from under his thick nails,
 while down here
my grandmother says a prayer for me, does the dishes

and covers her bruises. Someday they
 won't be able
to save her, and the world will mourn, as old

women trudge up the hill to her grave to tell stories
 of her kindness,
how her long, lovely arms found their way around the world.

Generations

My grandfather jolts awake in a too-white bed
says
"Where you been? How come you took so long?"

I talk of the flight and the traffic, how all the kids
are flying away
for the spring. "Ivy League," he says.

"My youth was poison ivy on my pissin' hand."
He tells me
again of the early years, how he hung sopping towels
in windows when the dust brought darkness,
how he wired
skunks from their holes for the hides.

He forgets the part about how my great uncle led him,
blinded and stinking
to school. There are things, he says, the sound

of wheat in the mill, flies in a shady barn,
a good woman
and canned peaches in a blizzard,

the smell of feathers fresh from boiling. . .
He thinks
I am my father, and I cannot tell him

I have never heard a mill, that flies
are flies,
and whoever wore a skunk skin anyway?

I think of the New Criticism and a world
with no past.
He changes the channel from across the room.

The Kindness of Strangers

I was working for Colorado Gas & Electric
driving around, radio on, making sure
everything was flowing.

It seemed to be.

In the parking lot of Howie's Burger

I found a wallet

and just like what you wish for,
and what you have seen coming,
the wallet was stuffed.

Eight Hundred cash, plastic to Macy's
various gas cards, I noted with pleasure.

Smiley, my idiot partner, was riding along
and even before I opened it he wanted
to give it back.

Eight Hundred is a lot of grass,
a veritable mountain;
a camper shell for my pickup
fast as that.

Turned out a good thing, a little write-up
on honesty in the company newsletter
that my boss taped to the time clock
as partial payment.

And here I am six years later
driving around listening to the radio

because Smiley kept scowling
until I found the name and called the number.

Her name was Daphne,
so mythically unfortunate.

When she met us at Howie's
she had a parrot caged in her front seat,
a TV on the floor, and she was moving
back to Florida, cause her old man
was a no-good motherfucker.

There were bruises on her neck
the shape of fingers.

She said she was getting away,
that the money was his

and she was glad she had lost it
and he had lost it

done it again, and now, she had doubled her money.
Serve's him right, she said. Sayonara Sucker.

Faking It

We were dropped off in twos
with bags full of papers

and subscription blanks
full of hungry little holes.

I'd take one side, my friend
the other, and we'd work

our freezing little faces
for all they were worth.

With a system surer
than gravity or sunshine

We'd throw on a leg brace,
ditch our coats in the car

and shiver our spiel
till they wrote out the check.

Of course we knew it
was shameless, but somehow

the game made it okay
and the money was good

till the strategy flubbed
and I took the wrong block

and made myself an encore
on the porch where my buddy

had just struck pay dirt.
There was a sign

BEWARE OF DOGS
and a man in long underwear;

he was all smiles out front
said come on in I'll get you

a check and he whacked
the bolt behind me.

He cleaned his pump shotgun
as I stood there looking

hurt, like my poor busted knee
was killing me and he

proceeded to tell me
about his stay in the pen,

how he'd got popped for theft,
how he'd learned things

inside that felt good
and I was probably

old enough to know
what he was talking about.

He wanted me to strip
the knee brace, he said

he had just the thing
for that, and as he went

into a back room I slipped
out into a night

that no longer seemed
like such easy pickings.

Down to the Dirt

My uncle was a scientist of soil,
and the desert
was a tough place for potatoes

(much less children) to grow
without constancy
of water, and cylinders of fertilizer.

The place always smelled like diesel,
and my cousins
washed away like soap or ammonia,

but the potatoes kept coming
as potatoes will.
I worked for him one summer,

splaying irrigation tubing, changing oil
in tractors,
wondering where on earth

was the soil of my dreams.
We were blighted
that year by prairie dogs

from the widow neighbor's pasture.
They had eaten
everything on her side down to dirt

and were moving in. My uncle
came from town,
a five-gallon bucket of death

in the bed of his truck,
said come on
we're going to gas some gophers,

and I left my wrenches to follow
a memory
as certain as Dachau, locusts skins
on elm, and runaway children.

The widow
had been feeding them grain,

trying to keep them within
her gates,
but they had just bred

she said, so fast that some
were naturally
wanting fresh grass and roots.

She stood at her back step
and watched me
watch my uncle slosh venom

down every hole. I expected
coughing
rodents, dramatic and terrible,

but when the last brave chirp
of warning
was snug in its soil, wind

was the only sound.

The widow
standing behind her screen,

the man shaving mud
from his boot
to his crumpled bumper,

all quiet and wind. Had his children
seen some version
of this and surrendered the soil?

I remember the clouds piling
on the horizon
as the thunder came promising rain.

Hoover Dam

At Hoover Dam, after they've oohed
and ahhed, tourists feed
beautiful yellow carp
scraps of sandwich and potato chips.
In the black water beneath them,
seven hundred and thirty feet down,
fish the color of cartilage swim
among the spokes of stolen bicycles.
A pinhole leak lets a bubble go,
to dance its way to the surface.

In the elevator, the guide says
Thirty four men are entombed in this project,
They've been here since 1936.
Down below, under impossible weight,
the forty foot turbines whirl in the tubes
and a vibration goes through everything.
I see a man here in '36. He's just married,
proud of this job, his new life headed off
in a firm direction as he slips.
He treads the gray mud while men in hard hats
and heavy boots race for a rope
or length of pipe, Some workmen stand
around the site, like gawkers at a robbery,
memorizing each other's faces
and bubbles that linger too long.

Testing

Last week my fiancé
and I went to church

not to pray or beg, but
to fill in tiny, blue circles

which would confirm
our cohesion and love.

The paper asked Is there
anything your partner

could do that would make
you doubt his/her love?

An empty question at best,
for I remember the lunatic

woman who caught her man
with his heel on her heart, how

she snipped his hardware,
and made all the papers;

let's talk about doubt. And
the questions got worse: Do you feel

there are many people
with whom you could

be happily married?
She answered like me,

that the world is immense
and full of people more beautiful

than he/she is, and that
of course she could love

in the right situation.
Our scores were added

then divided, then added
and multiplied by the least

common whole integer,
and we paid our fee, to find

we were more made
for each other than anyone

the pastor had seen that week.
Relieved, we wriggled home.

This morning, at 2:15, after
the bars closed, an old friend

of hers called. He had not
even heard we were dating,

and she spoke so quietly
I could not hear how she told

him the news. I know that
when she came to bed, she shivered

and said she was angry
at that question, the one

about the great big world
and as she rolled and tossed

into sleep, I lay there wondering
what he looked like, trying
to remember my answer.

Wishbone

Calling an old girlfriend about your wedding plans
merits contemplation.

You can try to be grave -- *before you hear this*

from somebody else. -- Or funny -- *I'm dodging the shotgun.*

She will likely laugh
and say she knew I was the type to go running

into arms reciprocal enough to be symbiotic,
loving enough
to be home from here on. My mother was engaged

to a man of whom I have never seen even a photograph.

He has come to me
through jokes made in the cocksure humor of thirty-odd

years of love. I do not know his name, though my father's
laughter booms
like carillons echoing off every house in Pennsylvania.

He sweeps my mother up in the kitchen, kisses her
hard and everyone laughs
at the time they are having. Later, in darkness, I see myself,

my sister and her husband, their children still waiting
to be born,
as greasy-fingered owners of a wishbone that snapped

in our direction. I think of myself, or some part
of me, living
in New York or California, someplace exotic, bathed in

cool light and money, looking like him, his jaw, his dark
curly hair,
his suburban pipe smoke wafting through a familiar somewhere..

Or maybe we're fixing the family car and I'm wanting
to twist the jack handle
and bring the whole load down on his chest

for raising a fist against her. I remember when my ex
 lifted her breasts
to the night wind in my father's convertible, how she laughed

coming home from the pokey, and how she scorned all the churches
 and read
her horoscope. She gave away her cocker because of course

it shit and liked to chew. I feel like my mother must have
 thirty-odd years ago
as she chose not to pick up the phone, just to keep on going

in the warmest direction, and never to look back
 except for laughing.

Rings

Mine was scavenged off the white rocks of the rail line,
a stainless spacer
flung over the lineman's shoulder or shot away

in a moment of bolt-shearing force.

Hers I picked
from the greasy palm of the pawn shop owner

over handguns, watches, and glassed-in chains.

He said
a widow had been starving, he could see it

in her eyes, how she had loved her man
but was hungry
and had made good on her vow, besides.

In his feathery smile I knew
he was lying.

In my mind a woman storms in cursing,

slaps the gold band on the glass
and gets
what she can, enough for bus fare

to mother's, or sometimes there is blood
flaking off
as a crackhead lopes to make a connection.

But my love likes the owner's spiel; it is truth
enough for her,
and in that moment I realize why my heart hurts.

These things we put on never to take off,
these symbols
pushing the perfect circles of our lives

into love's orbit, they are ours
unto death;
may they always remind us of truth.

Between Miracles

for Micah and Cindy

It's a summer wedding, an outdoor affair
with the usual flowers, the usual couple in love,

the usual Kansas wind threatening
to blow us into the lake; even

the swans are diving for cover
as rain pelts wrapping paper and folding

chairs topple. So of course the church
is our refuge, and soon, after

the usual confusion, friends and family
stand and watch the bride blithely trip

down the aisle. The pastor jokes
about the pitfalls of marriage, the dirty

socks and the trouble with toothpaste.
But the storm sirens howl, proclaiming

the divorce of roof from home,
the twisting of girders across town, and now

it's a scramble for the cellar, where Moses parts
the crayon seas and Jonah rests, relaxed

against freakish ribs. We sit against walls
in the midst of miracle, our heads bowed

between our knees, until the bride stands,
demands her ceremony, and the pastor agrees;

it is good, he says, that love knows no weather.
When the lights fail, everyone is thankful

for the smokers, and in the butane glow
the lovers kiss and smile amid the miracles.

Turning Thirty-Six, Gloria Looks Back

Going down this flight into namelessness
is getting
to me more than ever, more than the cold.

For the going is easy, it's the rise,
the cadence
of steps between negotiations and love,

that brings me so painfully close.
It's the moment
before you feel the heat of the match

on your fingers, that point between
what you know
and finally feel -- if ever you feel anything

so real. I watch the newly-painted
faces slip
from cabs and tacky vans. High and happy,

these uniforms of fuchsia and spandex
sing out
and sway against the clapboard cutaway

of the Aurora Blvd. Hotel. I remember
furrows of corn
rising straight as the line up this new

girl's leg and wonder how these legs,
always reaching,
could seem so inviting, and be so cold.

The Obligatory Ba Da Bing

After three days of rain, the rivers
are swelling
faster than her belly. She is hitching

into Memphis to her sister's,
to be closer
to the doctor when her time comes.

She is beautiful, like molasses
or mahogany
casting a reflection, and her
greased hair smells sweet with rain.
In my car, gears spit
broken teeth as her water breaks. . .

It is raining and she is pregnant,
so soon we are riding
in a shined-up Kenworth sporting

a rebel flag over the radiator,
the driver
is rolling a number, driving

with his knee. She takes long
easy drags
and breathes a little easier.

He asks me watcha gonna name
the little zebra?
She is unshaken, and looks into

my eyes like I could be the father,
like I could
keep her dry indefinitely.

I could knock out his teeth, or curse
her indifference
with a mouth full of ashes, but for now

I'm thankful for forward motion
and the roar
of the rain that drowns

the laugh that escapes
in the absence
of something more telling.

The Man In the Jungle

knows he is out on a limb.
This is why he carries everything
in his suitcase. He has gone
into the darkness to prove
the rest wrong, to find light
beaming from the holes
around his cufflinks and silk tie.

Monkeys and snakes look
so much like vegetation
he has begun using them
for fuel. They shriek and hiss
as he douses them with kerosene,
but they burn okay,
and the jungle is cold.

Warming his hands, the man
recalls a ditty from his days
as a cub scout, something about
charity and being prepared. His
manual is buried in his
suitcase, so he hums instead,
and the jungle hums back.

A hungry cannibal glides
into range, smells monkey hair,
and raises his blowgun.
The man falls face first
into his suitcase, and keeps falling.

Guessing Dreams

Every day after work he closes his eyes,
writes a number,
and kisses his dollar at the gas station.

There have been others in other states
he tells himself
have hit it big, cashed in and not worked

for a lifetime. He dreams of the day
when his number
will come up with the evening news,

how he will waltz up to his shift boss
and spit out,
right in his fat face, that nobody,

but nobody, should have to do this
eight hours
a day for a lifetime he can't remember.

He thinks of his kids shining in new cars,
of his wife
getting the boob job she talks about,

how she will look just like that girl
selling underwear
after the liposuction and nose job...

the long days he will spend fishing
for record marlin
off The Keys in a boat so big

the Coast Guard will think he is smuggling
Haitians
in the galley. And everyday, driving

through the toll booth, he tosses his change
into the gaping steel
mouth and roars away, to arrive

at a house full of longing, a television
of defeat, to wonder
"where is the manna I thought was promised?"

Our Hero

Rikki Rachtman used to keep us up
after the bars closed at two and we
were still pumped from the dancing.

He was the late-night VJ on our favorite
channel, and it wasn't because he was
uglier than us, or that he had a beard

made him look like Satan, so it must
have been all those tattoos on his arms
and neck. We thought he was cool, we thought

all heroes should look REAL like him,
raw; He had been through it all.
Last night, I went out with an old friend

from high school. We laughed a lot
about where life had taken us.
He is a tattooed bridge crew worker,

and I am back in school. Over beers
downtown we watched the game. Between
innings came an ad with a brand new Rikki.

This one had cut his hair, shaved his beard,
and even scrubbed off the tattoos; he was selling
long distance, and he meant it.

My friend looked at his arms, the dragon
biting into the muscle behind his thumb,
the spider web that doesn't quite cover

the scar he picked up last year when a cable
snapped, and sent a load of steel his way.
"Fuckin fake tattoos!" he howled, and threw

his bottle at the set. We were bounced out
onto the curb, where I went my way, and my friend

fades into dark, cursing Rikki,
and his job, and his life, as he wonders
how he could have been so taken in, so left out.

Elegy for Barbie

Someone has been slashing
Barbie Dolls in Sandusky, Ohio.

The slasher roams department stores
with razor-sharp scrutiny, cutting

breasts and crotches; investigators
scratch their heads, and psychiatrists

who specialize in these types warn us
of a *white male, age 16 to 30, with a serious*

*sexual dysfunction who could manifest
violence toward women.*

I think it's a scream. I see the culprit
as a short, flat-chested, beautiful woman

who could never, for all her stair stepping,
mud masking, grapefruit eating,

and make-up, make society's grade.
I'm glad Barbie finally has some scars,

glad that some of these dolls are getting
past security, into the hands of children,

who should know that Barbie would be stacked
in the discount bin if it weren't for her plastic

tits and ass. Rise up proportionate people,
and see the violence the experts ignore.

See that you have been paying tortuous
men in suits to make the whole world anorexic
and miserable.

Fury

is a fire house burning. As you spring from your cot,
pull on your heavy coat and boots, not caring
to rub the thick night from your eyes, and not wearing
your handy yellow helmet either, will you reach for the white-hot
pole in a darkly flickering circle, or will you grope your way
to stairs starting to creak under their redwood weight?
You might throw open a window, take the great
plunge toward cold concrete or the bull's eye of trust; you may
even admit the warmth, gladly past the frost clinging.
The flames can summon saviors with water and bottled air
to the bedside where your smallest sighs are waiting to be stirred.
Man of fires, tell me your dream. Is it full of singing
smoke alarms, calling us "wake up" from the top of the stair,
or a lover on your ladder hanging from your every word?

Flying Right

The adjunct thing didn't come through
so here I am, hoping to cut the sphincters
from cows for six dollars an hour.

The woman in personnel tells me
I'll have to take a drug test, that I'll
have to stand in the restroom with

Dr. Drippy Fingers, that this company
doesn't tolerate any violators, and that
I'd better fly right if I'm to stay here.

I want to tell her that I bought some grass
from their lead man on third shift,
that most of the coke in this town

is sold to these people who are busy
flying right, that they sleep in their cars
just to make their pay and some blow

that will help them forget the carpal-tunnel,
and the blue hat with meat stuck
to his face who's barking angry orders.

But instead, I'll be back in a week or two,
after I've washed the color from my urine,

and stand there, nervous, and fill the glass
and if I'm lucky, sharpen my knives,
squint my way to work, and fly right.

Routine

It wasn't that he disliked company.
He simply had grown used to nothing
but his own invarious sounds and smells.
An old friend said How are you?--
So he cocked his head, sniffed,
and crept back into loneliness;
A woman paid him Good Morning
and he thumped his empty belly
and ducked quickly to
where no strange cigarettes grace
the bedside ashtray, no newborn laughs
before breakfast. He wanted constancy
so when she said I love you
he lurched like a dog
kicked too hard in the muzzle,
and before he could control himself
she had faded, and he was alone.

Rorschach's Complaint

Under the desk, back in the corner,
head bobbing like a boxer's
my lab rat goes insane.
There have been no complaints,
no words through wire,
no telltale refusal to maze.
But here is something
everyone should know,
anyone who might have dropped,
umbilical and all
into echoes of Cenozoic hunger.
It takes more than pigment
gone wrong in the eyes,
more than a simple bristling of hairs
to keep my hands from the crags,
to fill my guts or send me packing.
I know what you hide
in your anger and bristles,
and I see your blood
regardless.

Pre-Quake Photo of Paria Canyon Found Upon Excavation

Supported by walls
cut by more life than any
professional could guess,
these travelers seem to have lost their road.
They have come seeking adventure
and fill their lungs
for the first time in months.
Spread out like spiders falling,
they must have thanked the camera
in its unblinking
for catching them a flash
before hands of granite clapped.
I think of Samson on film,
pushing himself out of bondage
into Hollywood and oblivion.
No long hair or rippling muscles here.
In Paria the ripples are below,
cutting stone and bone
to the sea.

Hunger

There is talk of famine along the Nile
where water has not risen for thirteen
years; black birds rise in harsh light
and circle the prayers for rain;

A woman wrinkled as a walnut shell
tightens her babushka against the cold
of the bread line; desperate shouts
turn her slowly toward home;

A widower slinks from a shady playhouse,
breathes the hot sidewalk air, and boards
a train, to watch beautiful young people
bite fiercely at earlobes and necks;

Seventy seven Haitian refugees shrug
their bony shoulders and hope the captain
knows the coast; they don't see the hurricane
gathering steam in the east.

The priest blessing communion clamps his eyes
till it hurts and the colors of stained glass
flash through his retinas; he mimics Christ
with the multitude for comfort.

An old Indian sits cross-legged in the shadow
of the Lincoln Memorial and sucks his gums;
his belly knots for the owl drenched in crude
and the sons who abandoned their home.

I am hungry
for the day when we feed ourselves bread
and dance in shadow of this day.

Moment

Coffee steam rises
a sleepy cloud,
while cigarettes in dying
are shadows
of willows
on water.
I suppose it's all unfolding
Scientifically
for some: the vapor
and windblock --
Intensity of Combustion.
But here,
 wherever that
is which we see,
there really is no difference.

The cloud is vapor
 is cloud is willow
 is water is
 smoke is
 gone
so far before we see
that distinctions
 and equations
seem shadows of smoke
 and steam.

The Consequence of Kindness

The tired old farmer isn't thinking of trouble
as he pulls
his truck to the shoulder of the road.

He's thinking of CPR and rehearsing breaths,
for a car
is upside down, here in his very own field,

the engine cracking and popping as it cools.
He remembers
the car that flipped during a New Year's party,

how the driver was thrown under the front wheel.
He remembers
his neighbor standing, arms crossed, warning

of lawsuits, and how he herniated himself
as the rest watched.
So when he peers inside to a gun stuck

in his face he doesn't know what to say.
Are you okay?
Let me help, friend. But the kid inside seems

to be intact, and as they climb into the truck
and the pistol
cracks the old man's jaw, he knows what happened

to the Samaritans. He knows they are mixing
fertilizer and fuel
in safehouses all across America, being charitable

only to morticians and journalists. He has never
seen this kid
before, and the kid has never seen this old goat

whom he is about to lay face-down in a field,
but both of them know
the consequence of kindness, and still it does not matter.

For Ima Jean

A tornado at night is a paint brush
dipped in emptiness.

The streetlights and neon from the airport to Canal St.

bleed through, then disappear

like fireworks spiraling skyward

or a jar of sand and fireflies dropped in deep, clear water.

It's like an encounter with an alien

who doesn't ask to be taken to your leader, doesn't fool

with formality, just takes you up, like a enormous dog, because it can.

Cycles

There is a tribe where all the rivers
in the world are droplets
trickling from between two stones.

The natives don't even know it.

To them its a drinking fountain
with a bum gasket, a terrible waste
of resources, say the more thoughtful.

Sometimes they piss in the stream.

A woman in Piedmont, Oregon
sends her daughter to the well...

A girl is baptized in Venezuela...

A man in Tsung Chui blows his nose
in the shower.....

Seven hundred and three African Wildebeest
cool their sweaty scrota...

The water is treated in Florida
and dumped into the glades...

An alligator eats its young
and slides back to the mud.....

A man in Atlantis bitches
about his drink.

The barkeep checks his watch
and keeps pouring.

Self-Propelled

First there were bike racks
at the hub of campus sidewalks
luring lazy sidewalk crawlers,
calling all those ticket scrawlers
names they could not wish to comprehend.

And I rode like the good green student
scoffing rusty gobs of fluid
leaking through the asphalt
to the place our water hides.

And yesterday in spray-paint stencil,
bike and rider hand and pencil
powered by the most efficient power plant in town,
they drew a circle, broke it open
showed me just who owns the market
said I'd ride my car or park it,
till I pay the fine I'll get when parking change runs thin.

So now I leave a little rubber
through the signs to spite their blubber
covered regulations, rules, and laws.

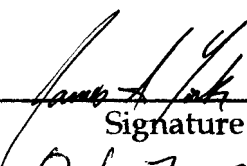
'Cause I'm the outlaw sidewalk jumper
stumping cops and causing thunder
through the parking lot you're walking to.

Swan Song

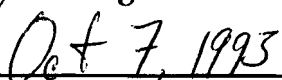
We stood at the edge of the water,
your face a reflection of hers
walking out; you needed
a friend and conversation
without consequence. And pouring
over things you'd been meaning
to tell her, that you loved
her sleepy smile in the morning, that her feet
smelled like candy just out of the wrapper,
you said there was something
inside you that drove love away.
And picking a stone from the shells and twigs
you groaned as your shoulder pulled out.
Remember the weight of that stone as it smashed
the white swan's clay-pot skull?
And how you cried for its mate swimming
frantic circles, extended wings
intended to frighten whatever it was
had its mate by the throat underwater?
Later, when the various pains eased
their grip, you said love goes always
like a stone in the wind.

Years later, you would meet a woman
with whom you could be honest.
When you told of your past,
of your loves washing up
on the shore as shells and reminders,
she understood, and she forgave you
for not always being yourself.
Tonight as you lie safe at her side,
remember the swan that went on
swimming, and forgive the inconstant wind
that you cursed that was always
blowing love your way.

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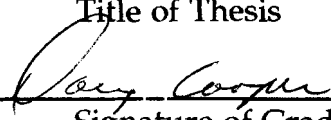
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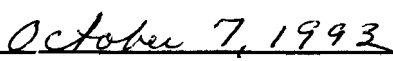
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