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understanding reflection

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understanding reflection

(TITLE)

BY

David Michael Moutray

1975 -

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2003

YEAR

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ABSTRACT

understanding reflection is a collection of poems which examines reflection both as an element of memory and self-image. The thirty-six poems represent devices and conventions employed by Philip Larkin, Donald Justice, Kamala Das, and Adrienne Rich. The style and voice mastered by these four poets served as an inspiring force in my creative efforts. The thesis introduction examines the voices of these poets and their influence on my work -- particularly in respect to my exploration of sexual, cultural and familial tensions.

The introductory essay, in essence, introduces my progression through reflection. Throughout the course of my progression, Larkin and Justice served as my primary inspiration. While the themes explored are common throughout poetry (love, loss, anger), they are unique to my examination in regard to my sexual, cultural and familial tensions.

I suggest throughout both the introductory essay and the creative portion that there are two predominant definitions of reflection (the physical act of glancing at a mirror and the concept of reflecting back through one’s memory) and that inherently they are related. I found through the course of my thesis that much of our past (that which we reflect back on) bears relevance on the perception we have as we view the physical reflection of ourselves. Whether it is the shape of our nose, the color of our
eyes, or how our hair rests in curly waves over the forehead, we find ourselves interpreting our physical reflection based on our familial and cultural background.

All in all, my collection of poetry allowed me to use both definitions of reflection to examine the familial, cultural, and sexual tensions as they apply to my past -- and ultimately to understand reflection in the present.
understanding reflection

by

David Moutray

Written under the direction
of
Professor Olga Abella

and thesis committee members
Professors
John Kilgore and Bruce Guernsey
for Erin
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Preface

Home is where the god who failed us stands awaiting and his name is sin nothing better, nothing worse.
-- Kamala Das, “The Word is Sin”

You would not recognize me. 
Mine is the face which blooms in 
The dank mirrors of washrooms 
As you grope for the light switch.
-- Donald Justice, “The Tourist from Syracuse”

I am taking the structure at the level of the subject, and it reflects something that is already to be found in the natural relation that the eye inscribes with regard to light. I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.

The following poems were written over a seven-month period. The primary aim of these poems is to examine the various constructs and interpretations of reflection - particularly in relation to familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. The title of the collection, understanding reflection, is as much meant to demonstrate the fundamental concept of understanding reflection as it is meant to illustrate the complexities of attempting to do so. The collection, written under the direction of Professor Olga Abella and committee members Professors John Kilgore and Bruce Guernsey, is also a representation of devices and techniques (stylistically and conceptually) linked to the four major influences in the creative portion of my thesis that serve as not only the basis for my creative efforts, but also as my inspiration. My influences are Kamala Das, Philip Larkin, Donald Justice, and Adrienne Rich, predominately. The style and voice mastered by these four poets have served as an inspiring force in my creative efforts. In that respect, I have drawn on their poetry to
provoke much of the same voice, with particular emphasis on the introspective and pointed style evoked in Larkin’s “High Windows.” Larkin conveys a sense of reflection pointedly layered and reserved throughout not only “High Windows,” but much of his work.

Reflection, in and of itself, is a somewhat vague term. There are two predominant definitions of the word (the physical act of glancing at a mirror and the concept of reflecting back through one’s memory) and I argue throughout the creative portion that they are related. Much of our past (that which we reflect back on) bears relevance on the perception we have as we view the physical reflection of ourselves. Whether it is the shape of our nose, the color of our eyes, or how our hair rests in curly waves over the forehead, we find ourselves interpreting our physical reflection based on our familial and cultural background. My attempt in the following collection of poetry is to use both definitions of reflection to examine familial, cultural, and sexual tensions as they apply to my past -- and ultimately to understand reflection in the present.

On the advice of my committee, one of my first methods for developing a conscious approach to understanding reflection was to examine the assertions of French psychologist Jacques Lacan in regard to our perceptions of reflection. Lacan argues that reflection, in fact, does not need light, i.e. one can be blind and still reflect. He asks, though, “[h]ow can we try to apprehend that which seems to elude us in this way in the optical structuring of space?” (93). The contention becomes that if we imagine our point of vision extended to the object, a thread may be envisioned as the connecting point. Lacan suggests that “this thread has no need of light - all that is
needed is a stretched thread" (93). For me that thread became the link between my reflections of the past and my perceptions of the present. Metaphorically, the thread is my poems.

Much of my creative work, in fact, has become a progression of perception. It could be argued that we often become reflections of the perceptions of those around us -- whether of familial, cultural, or sexual definitions. In part, I would emphasize the truth behind that concept, and in actuality, the creative work represented here becomes more than that -- it is a representation of my perceptions progressing through my reflections.

Perceptions themselves are often complicated and complex dimensions of our reflections. Two psychological definitions contend that there are two approaches to perception: an inherently ecological approach and an approach confined to internal information processing. Psychologist J.J. Gibson argues in his book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* that perception is ecological in nature as the "active perceiver explor[es] and mov[es] about the environment" (88). David Marr states in his book *Vision* that perception is "the process of representing information from the world internally . . . [and] as information from the world is processed, it undergoes a series of internal manipulations" (56). I would argue that perception is a combination of both; internal and external manipulations on our perceptions ultimately purport a significant effect on both definitions of reflection, with internal reflections representing the act of reflecting the past and external representing the physical act of looking in a mirror. Consequently, we tend to externalize our physical reflections based on our internal reflections of our familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. As we
look in the mirror, we tend to externalize facets of our past from our reflection that in turn conjure up internal reflections, e.g. the scar from the fourth grade, the dark blue eyes of a grandfather, the receding hairline of a father, etc.

Essentially, the creative portion of my thesis is divided in respect to familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. Familial tensions, in context to the poems, represent the transitions I made as a writer due to reflections of my past. Philip Larkin primarily influenced this segment of the poems conceptually as much as stylistically. Larkin, as a youth, drew a cartoon entitled “Portrait of the Author and Family, 1939” which depicted the artist’s family: his father, mother and sister are facing one another and talking about various subjects; all of these figures are talking at once, and disregarding each other’s conversation, yet they are still loosely connected in that they face each other even while engaged in other occupations. The father is reading a newspaper, the mother is knitting, and the sister is standing facing them, gesturing with one hand. What is compelling about the cartoon is that the young artist is completely outside the circle, sitting at a desk scribbling with one hand while looking up. His face is turned toward the viewer, suffused with dark emotion, while a huge wordless exclamation point hovers over his head. This sense of alienation, in contrast to the familial setting, becomes the subject of many of his later poems, most notably his pointed “This Be the Verse”.

In this poem, Larkin conveys a disdain towards his family that resonates with an inherent bitterness: “Theyfuckyouup,yourmumanddad/Thymaynotmean to, buttheydo./Theyfillyouwiththefaultstheyhad/Andaddsomeextra,justforyou” (1-4). He implies that faults pass between generations. Larkin’s bitterness and
disdain for this act of familial inheritance inspired my examination of the effects familial reflections had on me. In "birds of my neighborhood" I indicate that:

I have settled
for the idea in the mirror;
my hair will recede, eyes darken
and the birds of my neighborhood
will leave;
I will leave with them.

While I recognize physical familial inheritance, and in a sense settle "for the idea in the mirror", I also indicate that the knowledge will not keep me in the neighborhood.

As much as Larkin influenced me in respect to familial inheritance, Donald Justice allowed me to understand that my reflections (as much memory as anything else) should be understood as a construction. The transition from Larkin's pointed comments on "mum and dad" to Justice's reflections in "Men at Forty" became apparent to me upon reading James McCorkle's suggestion that Justice's "use of conventional forms has as its intention clarification and sharpening of memory, while also implying that memory is composed or constructed" (184). The idea that memory can be composed or constructed directly coincides with what I am doing with the creative portion of my thesis. Part of "understanding reflection" is understanding that reflections can indeed be constructed or composed, much as Larkin and Justice have done with their own "reflections". It can be argued that Larkin's memories of his parents inspired "This Be the Verse", while it must also be assumed the poem was "composed or constructed" from his reflections of those memories. Larkin's use of
the pronoun “you” suggests that he “constructed or composed” a distance between the poem and himself by not referring specifically to himself in the first person in the poem, much like the distance he created in his cartoon as he drew himself outside the familial circle.

Justice’s “Men at Forty” directly links this distance with the concept of familial inheritance and the physical act of reflection creating an emotional reflection:

And deep in mirrors
They rediscover
The face of the boy as he practices tying
His father’s tie there in secret,
And the face of that father,
Still warm with the mystery of lather.
They are more fathers than sons themselves now.
Something is filling them, something. (9-16)

Justice’s use of “they” creates the same distance Larkin incorporated into his construction of “This Be the Verse”. Justice’s personal voice is nowhere to be found in “Men at Forty” just as Larkin leaves a distance between his narrator and himself. The connection to Lacan’s assertions on displacement can be found when he argues “[t]he picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture” (96): essentially. Larkin and Justice have the “picture” in their eye, but leave themselves out of the “picture”.

7
And that is where I found myself -- using displacement to convey my physical reflections creating an emotional reflection (inherently familial). I found myself as Larkin found himself: outside the familial circle using my perceptions to write about my reflections. This displacement became a necessary component of the section about cultural tensions. In “Departures” I write that “I am today / a poetry of departures / vacant from notion / distant from thought / my exposure is absence.” In a sense, I aligned myself with Larkin’s displaced reflections of home in “Home is so Sad” as he describes his home as it was: “Look at the pictures and the cutlery. / The music in the piano stool. That vase.” (9-10). Similarly, I find myself in “understanding reflection” observing

a fading green plastic plant
on a seldom used kitchen table
next to an upright with its dust
and the Zenith with its missing knob
stacks of National Geographic
circa 1975
the light switch
which hasn’t worked since 1969

Larkin’s reflections of home is further illustrated as he writes that home “stays as it was left / shaped to the comfort of the last to go” (1-2).

My mother was the first to go. Resolved to reflect honestly, I confronted this issue as a displaced observer, creating thought and emotion where I thought they should be. In “letters of sin”, I refer to her imagination procuring an “imagined letter
/ blazoned on her forehead” that forces her to realize that “charades tax the mind /
obscure self reflection,” while my father’s eyes bend at the revelation and his
rationale becomes a parable -- but one that forces him to ask “consoling publications/
[ . . . ] Where is honor? . . . Where is God?” Not getting an answer, “he finds
imagination / stronger than fear.” My inspiration for the context of this poem came
from Das’ “The Word is Sin”; the connection between home and sin is exemplified by
her as she writes: “Home is where the god who failed us stands awaiting / and his
name is sin / nothing better, nothing worse” (15-17). The correlation between God,
home, and sin is a presiding influence over me, not just contextually, but spiritually.

My cultural tensions became evident through my tendency to rely on familial
reflections, and growing up in a Baptist home this became a reflection of a spiritually
influenced cultural past. Robert Pack writes in his essay “The Idea in the Mirror:
Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness” that our “role as God’s creation
is fulfilled in imitating God as creator”; thus our environment “is always being
enhanced by each human being’s description of it . . . [and] it is incumbent on humans
to interpret what has been divinely offered -- physical reality -- and thus to wed words
to natural objects, creating a new and complex entity, the poem of existence extending
itself” (51). This extension is for me the bridge between my inner and outer world -
and really, the idea of an inner and outer world supposes many connotations; beyond
the obvious, I define my inner world by the physical reflections I maintain of myself,
and my outer world as that of the cultural, familial and sexual tensions that I reflect
upon. Pack suggests that the “artist must necessarily become conscious of one’s own
self, and of one’s own activity as an artist” (51). Essentially, Pack is describing my
“activity” of extending myself from my inner world into my outer world; and just as
my poetry can be seen as the thread linking my reflections of the past and my
perceptions of the present, it can also be seen as the bridge between my inner and
outer worlds.

Adrienne Rich’s explorations of her own familial tensions inspired much of
my creative energies, especially in terms of exposing the bridge between inner and
outer worlds. Sylvia Henneberg, in her essay the “Slow Turn of Consciousness”,
writes that Rich’s “representations of her relationship with her mother and father
move from bearing the scars of alienation and anger toward reflecting a new readiness
and ability on [her] to reclaim and render usable her family bond” (2). But this
transformation was slow to come; in Rich’s “Dark”, the speaker is torn between her
love for and hatred of her father, between her desire to see him dead and her need to
“stir [him] up” and to know their struggles are not over (Early Poems 227). In her
early poetry, Rich illustrates her feeling that “she did not turn out to be the perfect
golden child”(3) her father longed for.

Rich’s move “toward reflecting a new readiness and ability [...] to reclaim
and render usable her family bond” begins to surface in her poem “Sources”: “It is
now under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no
part of my own” (9). After reading these words, I began to struggle to find my own
“powerful, [...] manly lens” and to begin “reflecting a new readiness and ability” in
order to (re)discover my own family bond. Just as Rich’s new lens “enabled her to
take the time to ‘see beneath’ the negative traits in order to understand her father more
fully and to create a space where she and her father can coexist in peace” (Henneberg
4), I too felt the need to “see beneath” the traits I felt my father passed down in order to create a space for us - but not so we could coexist, but rather so I could understand my reflection(s).

In order to understand my reflections, I felt I needed to explore my cultural tensions. The poem “conversations” became the poem that essentially centered cultural tensions in respect to my family. Growing up in a town of 2700 creates a tension of its own; as a result, I found myself “painting pictures / of [the] town [...] limned in ripple-cubism [...] my family in the background.” I painted the town with the poems I wrote to describe those same tensions.

Since I refer to the familial, cultural, and sexual aspects as “tensions”, I feel the concept of tension needs to be explained. William Van O’Connor in his book *Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry* suggests that tension [...] serves the double purpose of presenting an attitude or statement precisely (not necessarily simply) and making possible the experiencing, re-creating, of it by the reader. The attempt to achieve tension helps keep the poet from falling into sentimentalities, irrelevancies, exaggerations, unqualified moralizing, formlessness, vagueness, and incoherencies. (146)

Justice invariably encompasses this as he “re-creates” a rainy Sunday afternoon of contemplation in “Variations on a Text by Vallejo”:

I will die in Miami in the sun [...] (1)

And I think it will be a Sunday because today,

When I took out this paper and began to write,
Never before has anything looked so blank,
My life, these words, the paper, the gray Sunday;
And my dog, quivering under a table because of the storm,
Looked up at me, not understanding
And my son read on without speaking, and my wife slept.
(14-20)

Justice incorporates a sense of tension and displacement (much like the displacement Larkin indicates in his cartoon as his family is unaware of his activity) devoid of “sentimentalities [and] unqualified moralizing”; ultimately, the poem re-creates a reflection of one “gray Sunday” as Justice uses tension to express his fears of mortality and his family’s ignorance of his activity.

Larkin demonstrates a similar method of tension and displacement in “High Windows”: “When I see a couple of kids / And guess he’s fucking her and she’s / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm, / I know this is paradise” (1-4). Inherently, Larkin layers the poem with sexual and religious tensions that are as interrelated as Larkin is to the poem itself at its onset. And while he composes/constructs a distance by the poem’s end (“Rather than words comes the thought of high windows: / The sun comprehending glass, / And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless”), he clearly places himself in respect to the poem’s sexual and religious tensions (“[ . . . ] I wonder if / Anyone looked at me, forty years back, / And thought, That’ll be the life; / No God anymore, or sweating in the dark / About hell and that” [21-25]).

In her book Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work, Janice Rossen explains that his
“fury against women is not so much a declared state of siege against them personally as it is an internal battle raging within himself” (66). Larkin’s battle between his inner and outer world becomes evident through his guilt (“No God anymore, or sweating in the dark”) and the distance he composes/constructs to address his conflict. In “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album,” Larkin admires “a sweet-girl graduate” (8) that makes him “choke on such nutritious images” (5); while the photo album sufficiently creates a distance for him, he recognizes “that this is a real girl in a real place” (25).

Similarly, I attempted to compose/construct Larkin’s combination of sexual tension and displacement, particularly in my poem “leave the girls,” as I discovered that sexual tensions are as much a part of my physical reflections as my familial and cultural tensions - and you might even say, to some extent, more so. The connection between my sexual and cultural tensions became apparent contextually for me in my poem “homeland”: “beyond pastures / and knots of fields / in white churches / where we replaced / innocence with faith / and sin with guilt / my childhood grew”.

By degrees, my cultural tensions (which, as mentioned earlier, encompasses religious tensions) became an extension of my attempt to demonstrate displacement. In “Atlas” I write that “This world of mine, / vanquished from paper, absent from any globe, forfeits direction for loss”. This feeling of loss resonates contextually throughout much of Larkin’s, Justice’s, and Das’ work; in that capacity, they became the source for much of my creative energies conceptually.

Stylistically, I was compelled throughout to maintain no more than a page for each poem. Much as Larkin and Justice tackled seemingly complex issues in less than
a page, I felt the need to reflect that convention. Each poem became a snapshot, either of a particular self-reflection (familial, cultural, and sexual) or of my reflection (memory) of the past. Just as one might flip through a photo album and experience reflections, this collection of poems maintains the same effect. The exception to this device was the title poem, “understanding reflection” -- this poem tackled themes of reflection larger than a “snapshot.”

“understanding reflection” is the culmination of my attempt to “see beneath” the traits I felt my father passed down and create a space for us - but not so we could coexist, rather for me to understand my reflection(s). And as much as Larkin, Justice, Das, and Rich influenced me conceptually and thematically, I believe “understanding reflection”, along with the other poems in this collection, already existed. They just helped me find my voice. Consequently, I feel confident through “understanding reflection”, and throughout the course of this project, that I found the voice that allowed me to realize that “mirrors hold no more / than I let in” as much as they show nothing of who I am or where I came from the color of my eyes the tint of my skin the tilt of my nose.

In that respect, this collection of poems is representative of my discovery that while “[t]he picture, certainly, is in my eye, [. . .] I am not in the picture” (Lacan 96).
I. Beginning Reflection
Letter to Philip Larkin

Your words came
before I did
but they were mine
scribed post WWII

Right now,
I don’t hear so well
and I need your words;
post-mortem, they are more alive
than mine.
II. Sexual Tensions
Long Texas Shadows

The last girl from Texas,
hiding her love in shadows,
holds her own hand
glances in mirrors
sees nothing but herself

her state is bigger than her
envelopes, as much as stretches
across land, heart and body
and the Midwest boy knows
her heart has a border

he feigns ignorance
holding on against boundary
dreams her away on I-59
into Arkansas, Mizzou, and on up
borders, a distant memory

for her,
high school football Fridays,
beaches of Galveston,
Houston Christmas shopping,
Gulf swept air through her hair
make for a strong border

for him,
the last girl from Texas
to hold his hand, his heart
remains hidden
in long Texas shadows
impostor

glass and wine
inside my mouth
across this table
distance grows a fever

you eat without prayer
smile for glamour
dabble in the art of now
and I’ll never know how

smaller and smaller,
this restaurant, my meal, my appetite
words meet, agree, fade
and we eat without hunger

I feel tomorrow in tonight
one eye on a green wall,
another on a digital clock,
I leave in silence

the pause I feel
in doorways, outside car doors
you take for love
and I smile

your head on the pillow,
dreaming a life of us
feeling everything
in bliss colored naïveté

my day will exist,
somewhere in consistency,
I will remember tonight,
the small table, the big meal, your smile,
your words that should have been
for someone else
Walleye Monday

I keep thinking of Monday, 
the fish fry’s I never liked, 
walks on Lost Bridge Road 

these words betray me 
walleye Monday reminds 
the distance is getting closer 

Mondays feel like yesterday 
and yesterday bears repeating 
I know -- you are almost here 

not sure how to say hello 
feels foreign, like Latin 
I'll feign a smile 

I never did like fish 
minuscule bones scare me 
choking not my preferred way to go 

swallowing you was harder 
I would choke on words 
smaller than any bone 

and here, 
the stars run out of night 
faster than wanted 

and in my bed, 
I wait, 
still, silent, sorry 

knowing, 
you are a dream away 
and I sleep to dream
November, 1995
	his poem
is already too long
I should have left
and mourned with exit
leaving words within

but here, shallow in thought,
turning memory into regret,
the yesterdays become countless,
and the one calendar day,
remarkable, irretrievable, congruent
matches day upon day

your mark was impenetrable,
a target unworthy of an arrow,
I left no mark, not a blink was shown
the overshot arrows
became tombstones of their own

and Saturdays were unremarkable,
from picnics in the sand,
traipsing in sun downed land,
leaving the moon to battle sun alone

I am left to learn
from sun burned days
memories are born
to die in yearly reflection
passenger

Sacramento heat
inside a grey Sunday,
following me, heavy mercury
where morning relief should be
I wait for coffee
leaving a world of Saturdays

Erin, we left the central states
many rest stops ago,
the west coast overtook us
somewhere between Wednesday
and today

clouded by a Sacramento Sunday,
I smoke, just outside exit 21
and I watch a woman securing
her baby inside a car seat,
fastened tightly in vinyl and faith

her love inches me
inside reflection:
your womb could have been
a car seat moment in faith
two hands tightening a heart

but leaving yesterday
coffee sober, your picture
wedged in a dust worn dash
is stronger than any memory,
and we will drive
nameless diner

I have eaten,
and hungry still,
moved on

bright day,
breakfast in the air,
I drive

the waitress,
left in aisles, booths
envies my road

and I carry her
in fantasies
too big for my pocket

interstates, highways
sweet daydreams
turning me

I will come back
music in voice

why the girl sings,
for love, loss, to linger;
I'll never know

but the voice, beyond the words
ground my thoughts,
giving them grave, silent rest
mystery

fast asleep
wake to light
and let me see

she is not awake
she is not asleep
she is somewhere in between

undiscovered amidst dreams
dormant, mystical, and mine
I will wait
poem in red and gray (the sweater I remember)

colors
leave me colorless

demonstrate, ask for more
dry what is parched

I have pronounced
language colorful, lifeless

and the song I sing,
leaves me humming in silence,

remarkably, I blink
and blind, I wish for color

your sweater, unremarkable
becomes a moment

and I wish to see
red and gray
reflection in border
	right in my eye,
you look

I am peace removed,
your clock moves backwards

and you have forgotten
to forgive

you question
my place in this country

I am lost in a place
called America

cost to coast,
is there a signal there?

the car radio
plays James Taylor

and “Fire and Rain”
moves on your lips

but I can’t find my way
out of this hunting ground

L.A., NY,
did I get lost in it?

somehow, I crossed a line
and border became a memory
darkness and reason

on nights of cold and dark
brightened dimly by false light
I bend my eyes on your naked back
your curves come to me
soft, and then hard
like words well intentioned
but with edges sharp

beyond darkness and reason
I am still here
When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise -- Philip Larkin

girls running
in pony tail innocence
campus at their heels
boys,
burdened by gender,
sexualize their steps

the walk I make
in the first five minutes
brings me back,
unremarkable cracked pavement
supports, carries me

by degrees,
age sheds illusion,
parental warnings on sex,
whether she's on the pill,
wearing a diaphragm,
blurs any illusion of bliss

and the bliss they make,
beyond streets, in rooms with
loud posters, caricature beauty,
lingers, thoughtless and free

ageless, they run
through days, careers, love
on remarkable, smooth streets
III. Cultural Tensions
Atlas

This world of mine,
vanquished from paper,
absent from any globe,
forfeits direction for loss
shows no sign of life

I wait for sun
pointing west, heading east
and Polaris showing north
finding my place
in a celestial compass

I imagine sailors in a time past
lost, sea strewn by storm,
missing direction,
waiting for sun and star

their mothers and lovers,
fingers on an atlas,
imagine their place at sea,
wait for coastal greetings

but some never happened
the sea, pulled in various directions,
carried them beyond sun and star
and they stayed lost
homeland

beyond pastures
and knots of fields
in white churches
where we replaced
innocence with faith
and sin with guilt
my childhood grew

narrow, broken streets
narrow, dreamless minds
filling this small town
resolute in conformity, virtue and value
parading down Main Street once a year
celebrating broom factories and beer
and here,
they forget
long days, slow hours

the mayor,
big in stature,
small on ideas
begins town meetings in churches
and ends them in bars
his son, groomed to fill his shoes,
followed, eyes wide, ears open

but I never really listened
train whistles, bus calls
filled my background instead
I find comfort
in the mystery of faces
under umbrellas,
by street signs,
and in tall buildings
where I am just as much
a stranger
as they are
conversations

everything on purpose
everything fading

the bus stop in my neighborhood
tells me the world is bigger than I,
and a gray man tells me tomorrow
will be sunny and clear

I want to believe him,
his words weighted in years,
I’ve been painting pictures
of this town, 2700 strong
limned in ripple-cubism,
for years, my family in the background
and while my back was turned,
the sky grew clouds dark and gray

and on purpose,
I miss streets cracked from sun and play,
the farmer days in August,
the smell of broomcorn soaked in air,
distant girls in prom skirts,
and Mr. James at my bus stop,
talking weather
Macon County

deep in here,
farmers separate corn
from stalk, good from bad

and that is why I leave
I am changing
who I am

colorful, desperate,
scenes change, fade from yellow,
to gray, and then black

a city greets me,
indifferent, feeling nothing
but my need to be there

borders have faded,
and blended into one, many
and the same

I am you,
quietly, silently
waiting for green lights

a hand waving us across,
familiar streets, vacant seats
in crowded L’s, tight buses

destination our goal,
forgetting the sky, the land,
leaving corn for stalk
leave the girls

swift promenades
sifting through this town
pompoms and skirts
kicking legs high
arms out, and their shouts
eyes raised about
streets swinging tandem
the town stops, stares
circles,
and circles again

leave the girls,
let them stand
in promenades,
in circles,
in loud streets
distance will fall in place
names and streets, you’ll forget
the girls will vow, wed, leave
skirtless, pompoms behind,
left in closets,
in empty houses,
and in the hum of vacuums,
in the silence of drying dishes,
they will wish,
they will miss,
swift promenades
Departures

I am today
a poetry of departures
vacant from notion
distant from thought
my exposure is absence

my town
now grows without me
twice the size I left
borders expanded
commerce exponential

men from Chicago, Springfield
calculate land gains
mall development, tax breaks
and a school proximity
much too close

my school now remains
only in yearbooks,
a new one,
illustrious, grand,
stands in its place

Pepsi machines, condom dispensers,
resident health advisors,
fill halls of aged innocence
where guilt was a night away
and morning brought a new day
Variations on a Theme by Larkin

*But for the thought that nature spawns*
*A million eggs to make one fish*
*Better that endless notes beseech*
*As many nights, as many dawns,*
*If finally God grants the wish.* – Philip Larkin

I.
All these faces
some contorted
most giving away nothing
but behind their eyes
lie concerns of mortgages
credit cards, other lovers

II.
I never feel as small
as I do among this sea of faces
so many parallel thoughts
about broken lines
fences straddled, and then crossed
even the direction they are turned
is the same

III.
Towards a tall wooden pulpit
where a man tells us to pray
for the forgiveness due to us
but God's shadow feels so small
in that big room with so many pews
with so many faces
and behind my eyes
I wonder just how
it could cover all of us
the drowning

white church,
sweet music, old piano,
the pastor and his soft words,
holy water in my lungs;
I am drowning

his hands, soft as his words,
pull me up, but much too late;
I survived,
his words did not
birds of my neighborhood

from tree to tree,
my eyes have flown
down from branches,
inside backyards
and there, between birch and maple,
three houses into Tyler Dr.,
a shirtless man buries rake into ground,
pushes mower past fence,
guides weed eater through bush:
green, brown, and red unsettled

I have settled
for the idea in the mirror;
my hair will recede, eyes darken
and the birds of my neighborhood
will leave;
I will leave with them
IV. Familial Tensions
tomatoes

thirty odd Kodak glossy prints
of lives that came and went
my mind bent on remembering
for the sake of recalling
the words of speechless faces
gracing pictures that lend nothing
to who they were
so I’m wondering where the hamster cages
and dog leashes have gone
who’s driving the ‘84 dirty grey Escort
and is that house on Lulu still there?

six rows of red and green tomatoes
neatly planted and cultivated
smooth in texture
soft in taste
but utterly useless in photos
reminders though,
of one man determined
to put out the finest on the block
yet forgetting the fruit of his efforts
in the confine of his home
the one with his green eyes
and sunken cheeks
letters of sin

earmarked, silent sinner
guilty of conscience,
breadth of failure wide
seven years
in whispers,
in thoughts,
her love was elsewhere,
at once captured, covered,
and held for rapture

the discovery, as brilliant
as the imagined letter
blazoned on her forehead,
came with her own revelation:
charades tax the mind,
obscure self reflection,
leave a wake of conscience

sights and sounds
and the itch she felt
bends my father's eyes
leaving dull blue on white

his rationale a parable,
he writes anonymous letters
to consoling publications
Dear Abby, Dear Sir,
"Where is honor . . . Where is God?"

responses void of answers
he finds imagination
stronger than fear
leaving the fairy tale

hours in mirrors
shaping hair, painting face
in reds, greens, purples
my sister,
feeling Prince Charming a date away
gathers her confidence in decoration
sacrifices time for glamour

mother, in advice,
points to the blue dress, black shoes
and like that, Bobby James is here,
his own picture of preparation,
hair just the right amount of slick,
brown Dockers an iron smooth,
smiling on cue, and a condom
secure in his billfold

father, in warning,
points to his watch; Bobby nods.
goodnights aside,
their fingers touching, door closing,
porch light underfoot,
their night begins
and I watch from my window
as they kiss against car door

and now, years later,
I think of my sister,
her first date,
and I hear her voice over phone,
the sound of a newspaper
in the background
as she scans personals
easy on the girl

black belt love
welted more
than her backside

her curiosity
lingered past pubescence
overflowed into bars and beds

she claimed love
was more than the making
but that was all she did
ghost on my wrist

I'll wait for quiet
steal a moment
and feel your watch
tightening on my wrist

time was never ours:
golf games never played
paint cans collecting dust
pool cues forgotten

if I'm honest,
I would regret nothing,
understand your world,
and move on in mine

but I know,
you left me
a fake gold watch
and it haunts me
like a ghost
regretting Ann

this beautiful dream
leaving a mark, like a tattoo
etched in my slumbering mind
where you are tucking me in
kissing my forehead
smiling, as if the world is right
but you pause,
just before flipping the light
was it a sigh,
or just another deep breath,
and the deep breaths are becoming few
and between them is a nothing so loud
it echoes off my dreams

the hour is late with night
and I'm given to the thought
that makes her sharp
in my mind
leaving scratches, like memories
but to regret
an investment as rich
as those three words
is better than remembering
the worse is actually the wear
and the slow tearing
of these childhood memories
haunting not just nights,
but days

and so I choose to call you Ann
so please return the apron,
the Black Hills earrings,
the Mother's Day cards --
they are somebody else's
another woman somewhere
is missing her apron
her ears are noticeably vacant
as is her mantle,
with spots reserved for cards
never received
she is the woman
I was meant to dream
it is her hand that tucks,
her lips that kiss
with a smile lacking
the pause, the sigh,
and the deep breaths
four corners

it takes four corners
to make a room,
and this stubborn gray man
with my eyes, my blood,
but not my respect,
seems to fill each one

more calendars have passed
than words between us
and now,
he finds himself in a room
with a numbered door,
a chart dangling from his bed,
men dressed in white,
stethoscopes hanging over their scrubs,
somber lines on their lips,
words edged in doubt

and then, a man in black,
cross dangling from his neck,
offers him a chance
to take it all back:
the words, the silence,
to make the distance closer
but you, father, have gone too far
and time is as unforgiving as I
even as your last breath
chokes out of your throat,
I feel you leave the room,
and now,
I can see three corners
from my corner
the traveler

familiar, anonymous
I stand behind you
in train stations, at airports
I am the traveler
without destination

my worldly pursuits
surprise even me
lands beyond myself,
grand, foreign, distantly familiar
bring a new sense of home

and the faces I meet,
through glass, in aisles,
jealously carry my purpose
in handbags, overnights,
and photographs of faces
expected at the end of journeys

but disappointment
is stronger than expectation
I will collect coins
from Barbados, Liverpool,
and empty my pockets in rooms
prepared for one
mother in winter

just past Williams St.
barely into Lost Bridge Road
I find you walking, eyes distantly
carrying the cold air,
feet creating a snowy path,
and cars whipping by, ignorant
of who you are

but I know,
and I see
red and grey creeping out
of your lavender coat,
and straight dark hair afloat
in the January air

I still speak Spanish,
but softly and alone:
the words you taught
remind of the way your lips
would curl with baño

and your words, still here,
heavy in my day,
English and Spanish;
I hope you are wrong
and we are not reflections
of other's perceptions

as I write this, angry at loss,
seeing snowy footprints
in bitter August,
I realize much too late:
it is you that
I reflect
patience in Levi's

(patience was always
too big for me)

I wish 30/30's were easier to find,
mother, you tried

pants not my strength,
I waited for you

strength, or no
you gave me comfort, confidence

from needle, thread
and a Sears sewing machine

patches in places,
my knees wore thin

time after time
needle after needle,

thread after thread
and that damn sewing machine

banging against thin wall,
scraping dirty white paint

father, feeling midnight,
cried in impatience

(patience not strong
with him)
Penance to a Father

You will pray, words sincere
on knees, alone
and I will disappoint
as sinners do

understand,
take your hands off me
I don't belong to you,
you are a saint

I prefer
to be a mystery
let God sort me out
on His own accord

time is His
and I will borrow
understanding reflection

I.
Dressed in clothes of the living
wash worn, scrubbed, pristine
nails perfected, hair neat,
a picture better than life

this man's walk,
ended slowly, in bed pans,
nurse calls, morphine drips
becomes grander
upon its finish

rest well, father,
in the hands
of man made comfort,
for a God that waits,
a family that grieves,
and a son numb at your exit

II.
A lucid gray sky looms
over a dog grave backyard
where the grass never grows
by the cordoned area once home
to neatly planted rows of tomatoes
thru the garage
where a '82 sky blue Fairmont
is parked in its usual place
three lawn chairs past the rakes and shovels
through the spider webs
next to an array of tools
bought at Sears in the decade of Reagan

to a screen door hanging on rusty hinges
a fading green plastic plant
on a seldom used kitchen table
next to an upright with its dust
and the Zenith with its missing knob
stacks of National Geographic
circa 1975
the light switch
which hasn’t worked since 1969

III.
Father’s ghost passed through me
left a chill colander of memories
strained through porous regrets
of those three words left unsaid
emotions banned with the motto
“empty tissue boxes
remedy nothing”
his voice still echoes
“an idle mind
is the devil’s workshop”
so the wood pile never stayed in one place
and the Fairmont still needed soap
and a bucket of water
in the onslaught of January

IV.
I am aware
mirrors hold no more
than I let in

I dye my hair, ask for clipper blade
no. 2, wear colored contacts
and still,
you are here
as if behind mirror
your vanquished presence
lingers, like aged skin
on still air

V.
in truth,
I am no longer here
mirrors show nothing
of who I am
or where I came from
the color of my eyes
the tint of my skin
the tilt of my nose
VI.

and still,
I need to reflect
differently, singular
supporting my own shadow
without his godless eyes,
dull tan, or his simple nose
the nine year thought that became a poem

I.
Lucid are the trailers of death;
I am overcome
by holy words spoken softly

II.
A man in black,
cross dangling from his neck,
told me God's will
is often a mystery

III.
I have no use for mysteries
maybe I am missing the point
in the graves we dig
the flowers we sacrifice
or the dead we resurrect
in memories and photos

VI.
The stench of wet grass
and freshly turned mud
the vividness of flowers
and customary plants
decorating the new home
of my father's father
how I want to feel
what everyone wants me to

V.
Years removed,
inside a building
of forgiveness --
you'd think
I would have been there
V. Leaving Reflection
untitled

i have stopped writing.
empty pages tell so much more;
a blank whiteness, unparalleled
showing a time
when thought stopped,
fingers, beholden to mind, freeze
clueless in method, motive.

my brow, furrowed,
bends my eyes
further from paper
and now separate,
allowed to wander,
does so,
and my thoughts
become paperless.
Literary Bibliography


Theoretical Bibliography


Reading List


