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## Delinquencies

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Delinquencies

by

Bryan Rice

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Abstract

*Delinquencies* brings together forty-eight poems that reflect some of the aesthetic, philosophical and cultural interests I've attended over the last five years or so—namely, ideas related to failure and abhorrent behavior.

## Introduction

My thesis, *Delinquencies*, brings together forty-eight poems that reflect some of the aesthetic, philosophical and cultural interests I've attended over the last five years or so. Since its completion, this wayward child of mine has assumed many titles. Originally, the working title was *Stories About John and Other Poems*, a playful (perhaps *too* playful) gesture towards my interest in genre-bending and, especially, towards my interest in writing poems that combine elements of narrative and lyric. In this way, the title directs the reader's attention to style. Rereading the thesis, however, I concluded that the "John" poems aren't central enough to bear the weight of having the entire manuscript named after them. Moreover, many poems resist the techniques inherent in narrative poetry—transitions, namely—and resist telling a traditional story with a clear beginning, middle and end.

My next choice was *Happy Children*, an ironic allusion to a poem by William Blake called "Cradle Song," part of which serves as my opening epigraph. Ultimately, I scratched this title out of fear that the reader's attention would be drawn too exclusively to the content of the poems: an inclination might develop in him or her to seek out every reference to children—indeed, there are many—and anticipate an arc in the book that moves from childhood to adulthood, innocence to experience (*a la* Blake's early masterpiece). Even reversing this arc—adulthood to childhood—seems stale and predictable, if not altogether gimmicky.

Therefore, since I am more interested in experience and remain skeptical of our shared Wordsworthian conception of innocence, I've decided to call the manuscript

*Delinquencies*, a title that most fittingly compliments the epigraph and, most importantly, the poems themselves. Obviously, *delinquency* brings to mind *experience*, as well as notions of unlawful behavior, social deviance, punishable tardiness and so on. A handful of the poems included here embody these particular delinquencies: “Stories About John,” “To a Juvenile Delinquent,” “Charity,” “Sodomy” and “Hell” come to mind. Worth bearing in mind, *delinquent* has its roots in the Latin word *deliquentum*, which means “to fail,” “to desire but fall short,” or “to relinquish.” As it happens, failure and relinquishment are additional themes in these poems. (See “On Slippage for Wordsworth,” “From the Spanish,” “On Waiting for the Great Image” and “Paradise”).

I’ve always been interested in the idea of failure (rooted in the French for *fallir*—to miss), especially as it pertains to the failure to recognize truth even in the presence of concrete, contrary evidence. I particularly enjoy crafting poetic utterances in which in which the speakers misinterpret the images they’ve chosen to absorb and render. The epiphanies are misguided; the images don’t add up in the way the speakers believe they do. A reader may notice my occasional use of the qualifier *believe*—a way of implying that these speakers’ epiphanies (unlike those of James Wright and Gary Snyder) are suspect. In my work, these failures and anti-epiphanies provide the necessary space for ambiguity and, perhaps, different kinds of emotional truths: in essence, I want to shift the focus from what the speakers realize to what they don’t realize.

I wanted *Delinquencies* to begin with poems that mirror divided states of consciousness, driven by concrete (yet fragmented) images and unusual syntax. In accordance with this conception, the first section begins with a poem called “John’s Sentence,” which details the moment following a public execution. In spite of these grim



circumstances, the speaker of this poem (John the Baptist) decides to spend his last moments of consciousness observing as much physical beauty as possible. I originally conceived the poem as an exercise in syntax: I wanted to write a poem using only one sentence and I wanted the syntax to push the occasion further into the past. The remaining poems in the first section deal with fragmentation by making use of techniques (white space, lack of punctuation, seemingly-erratic line breaks) found in the works of so-called “Experimental” poets. While some readers may regard these techniques as gimmicky and unnecessary, I feel that they are necessary for they allow the speakers of the poems to broach occasions and weave narratives in ways that traditional modes of thinking don’t allow.

If the poems of the first section mirror a state of consciousness somewhere between sleep and dream, the poems making up the second section are rooted primarily in lucid dream. The poems are less Imagistic, more narrative. Many of these poems owe a large debt to the Eastern European poets Marin Sorescu and Novica Tadic, as well as to Americans May Swenson, Charles Simic and William Matthews—none of whom are typically regarded as “narrative poets.” What I love is how all of these poets engage the world with wonderment; such wonderment, in turn, results in a poetry that radically defamiliarizes the things that constantly surround us. The speakers of my poems make extensive use of allusions (literary and non-literary) to find additional common ground with the reader and to make sense of their experiences in a figurative language that most closely mirrors their thinking patterns and worldviews. I try to use similes and metaphors that these particular speakers (rather than a poet) would use. I enjoy including references

to both high culture and low culture, sometimes in a single poem, to see how these seemingly disparate allusions interact with, and ultimately compliment, each other.

While the poems of the second section engage with the reader through storytelling and occasional humor, the poems of the third and fourth sections are more inwardly meditative and somber. In these sections, the speakers are wide awake; the poems are grounded more firmly in the physical world. A good number of the poems in the third section are about the creativity that happens (or doesn't happen) in a quiet, solitary space. The poems making up the fourth section of the book comprise a five-part narrative about an accidental prodigal son. As much as possible, I wanted to mirror the doleful ruminations of a man driving at night, how one thought leads to another and another. The longer enjambed lines yield a greater chance for introspection, letting one idea or image continue down the page, like water, as in some of Robert Hass's and Philip Levine's meditative poems. As it happens, the final poem in the book was inspired by a graphic design of a man tied to a fence post like a scarecrow and (presumably) left to die. I decided to give the design some context (the Matthew Shepherd murder came to mind) and compose a few lines from the point of view of a man encountering the fence post and being transformed from stranger to mourner. The final image in the poem (and the book) is a metaphorical crowning—an interesting contrast, I think, to the first image of the beheading, meant to suggest eventual triumph, even in death or failure.

One

*Sleep sleep happy children.*  
Blake

*JOHN'S SENTENCE*

On the morning of my beheading  
hours before the French maid  
displayed my O  
of shock like a hollowed pumpkin  
on a silver platter, before  
I was picked up & cradled as a child  
cradles a basket of dyed eggs & before  
a bouquet of roses burst open  
between my shoulder blades, before  
my bound hand relaxed, before my  
bound hands made fists, before a blur  
of metal wrenched a long sigh  
from that body & before I recognized  
the executioner's timbre  
and my name—my only name—sung,  
I looked into a mirror & thought, Jesus,  
so this is how it's going to happen,  
this is the destination I stiffly treaded  
the earth's skin to reach, this is my idea  
of salvation, for an instant, the world  
so sharp, so bright—

*LIFE BEFORE MAN*

In the cavernous basement  
of the public library,  
the snug stacks close in.

I am like a cricket  
in a boy's hand,  
small, almost extinct.

(Imagine steering  
the ox-drawn plow  
while the earliest human light

strips the fur  
from your body and your bones lengthen  
like stalactite.)

Closing time,  
I rub my eyes and return to the cold,  
still without firecraft or drive.

*LINES DURING PEACETIME*

The jagged shadows slip in like oil,  
collars tense,  
flamencos retreat from the sea,  
our view of a manicured lawn's now obstructed  
by soldiers, the paper plates  
blown away. The wind  
wipes sweat from the dogwood,  
and we crouch together  
on the sidewalk  
like orphans boarding a train,  
waiting for the cadence and trumpet-grip  
to slacken. When our legs surrender,  
we're lain in a bed of salt and carted straight to Hell.

*A VARIATION OF INFANT SORROW*

I pity you as I pity  
that fruit fly  
in blind pursuit

of vinegar  
in a jar.

\*

At the foot  
of a glass casket,  
I, too, am useless,

my hands  
eggshell-smooth  
and hard and my mouth  
dry as mortar.

\*

“Do not ask  
for what you shall never  
receive.”

\*

The newborn stirs  
in her incubator.

The heating lamp  
cannot be lit.

The fog rises and reaches  
the eaves.

The river turns to coal.  
We whisper through the curtains.  
We don't wish but dream.

We limp eastward  
in deerskin boots.

*SLAIN ADAM: CODA*

You sent me to bed.  
    Early.  
Without supper.

    Without lullaby.  
Of light rain.  
    Mew and croak.

And grunt.  
    And hiss.  
Grew faint.

    Without lullaby.  
Something was in the water.  
    Something sent me under.

Without supper.  
    You combed dense papyri.  
Early.

    Like the beam of a flashlight.  
Without lullaby.  
    Gathering evidence.

Seeking the perfect bone.  
    You sent me to bed.  
Come morning.

    No part of my body.  
Lacked function or ache.



*GOOD MORNING, PIG-PEN*

The moment I woke and realized my nose  
had dissolved in the night

I thought, Today is the day I empty that bowl  
of papery petals  
and grime  
in which a spider recently drowned,

clutching itself with all its might as though  
—in the world to come, once it  
slackens its deathly grip on life—  
it, too, might rise  
to the surface  
and break away from its blossom.

*ON SLIPPAGE FOR WORDSWORTH*

Drizzle demands            a careful stride  
   I trod the planks            slick and streaked  
with grit where other            walkers slipped

   and I run                            my fingers slowly  
over miniature    lakes whose splintery  
   shores recede                            I'm shocked the banana

spider's web is still    intact delicate  
   geometric trap                            nearly invisible *O*  
*Look!* A bobber's    caught in a branch

   a bottle's caught    in a net of scum  
a dragonfly            a paperclip heli-

   copter skims the water                            an egret inquires  
—*pee-lull, pee-lull*—                            they are too quick  
   for this gaze to                            pin them down

the planks' creaks    send the snowy  
   egret yonder    into sunlit steam  
rising off                            the lake                            I wipe

   my dewy brow                            resume my easy gait  
overstepping                            my bleary-eyed bounds

*PER BIBLICAL ERRATA*

Thomas made a megaphone  
of his hands: “Yes, yes, yes!”

Mary Magdalene demurred:  
“No.”

The Virgin asked: “Can I get to *know*  
you first?” [Emphasis mine]

[There is no record  
of “Joseph.”]

Shalimar turned cynic; King David  
turned to logic.

Lot: “What happened in Gomorrah stays  
in Gomorrah.”

Lot’s Wife: “What exactly happened  
in Gomorrah?”

Eve never talked  
to strangers. [Debatable]

\_\_\_\_\_ beheld the final version  
of his sun

and shrank in horror from the shadow  
of his right hand.

*MIDWINTER FRACTURE*

My apartment window's  
                        cracked; I can't shut it  
As my better arm's  
                        fast asleep. What good  
Am I if I can't  
                        sign my name, open  
A can of soup,  
                        soap down my body  
Without straining or  
                        catching myself if  
I slip?  
                        When the ceiling  
Leaks, I'm calm enough  
                        to find a kettle  
To collect the drip.  
                        Then my fractured bones  
Pipe: "Wait until it  
                        tips. Then what?" Well,  
I'll grow so heated  
                        I'll rush outside and  
Make lopsided beasts  
                        in shallow snow, I'll  
Scrape straight singular  
                        lines in shallower  
Snow with my one good  
                        hand and you'll confess  
You crave the cursive.

*THE OLD MUSEUM*

Somberly lighted  
hazily traversed

open country  
of walls and frames,

of shadows  
darkening and sharpening

the closer we get  
to the edges,

to windows  
unreflective and fogless.

*LINES FROM A POEM TITLED "AT LINCOLN MEMORIAL" READ IN  
REVERSE*

Wretched human eye  
Invisible to this

Through a maze  
Threading its way

That swift housefly  
How greatly I envy

*PARENTHETICAL ASIDES FROM AN ESSAY ABOUT A EULOGY*

(as though reading words from a teleprompter)

(deadpan, kind of funny)

(the eulogist's *delivery*, not the eulogy itself)

(or like Peter Jennings on Ritalin)

(his mother yawned, too)

(understandably so)

(G.I. Joes, He-Men, Kool-Aid)

(i.e. spoiled rotten)

(in the neighborhood of a blink)

(from inside the school, too, you could hear  
the music  
of all that metal)

("unexpectedly" also bringing to mind  
his father's decision,  
later, to dismantle  
the tree house)

(a place better than earth, presumably)

(as if he had a choice in the matter)

(though perhaps he meant, "I cannot *comprehend* how...")

*FIVE DEPOSITIONS*

1.  
Unexpectedly when the earth tilts, the winter coat  
comes undone in a slow series  
of clicks, a wounded V  
widens its jaws.

2.  
Rain drubs against the window separating  
an amputee  
swaddled in gauze  
from a sky churning with molten pearl-of-bone.

3.  
Last breath.  
One gold star for this model  
of submission!  
And the sun tries to sketch  
a map to Atlantis  
across that bastard's chest.

4.  
“...Then how is it we're still bound  
to his bedside  
like army nurses?”

5.  
We rest our hands  
on the berth, we divide  
the metal stitches equally.



*FOR A SCRAPBOOK*

All eyes are on the man  
whose charcoaled  
knuckles work overtime  
to sketch an angel  
for the little girl  
with a dollar bill  
balled in her fist.  
She wants flight  
and a gray-swipe of sky  
and a place to praise  
at duskfall. He sketches  
a shadow that could belong  
to any of us—  
a double-blur splayed  
wide as the arms  
of a woman searching  
a crowd for her child.

*CODE AMBER*

In the time it takes to suck down a single cigarette,  
something has happened.

My car roars again.

Billie Holliday's alive again,  
breathing despair.

The road lays on its back and plays dead.

The eyes of deer flash.

"Elegy is a form  
of compliance."

My headlights stake their claim.

*APPALACHIAN MEMOIR*

Tunnel of breath.  
Cement river.  
Pinkish winter clock.

Hammer-of-God  
hauling coal  
over that steel bridge

Saying, *Don't leave, Stranger,*  
*Please don't leave,*  
even after Mother

has unfastened my coat and combed  
the dust from my hair.

*for Brandon*

Two

*SHAME*

I once made love  
to a streetlamp.

Oh, how our nude spines  
shimmered with dew!

His hooded  
eye-of-Cyclopes  
winked orange heat,  
casting a code of moths  
around us.

What made things hard  
was warding off  
those moths, who seemed  
to want a piece  
of our sidewalk romp,

who seemed, like daybreak,  
to want to peel back  
night's curtain  
and catch us in the act.

*TO A JUVENILE DELINQUENT*

Dennis Mitchell, I've given  
your case careful  
consideration  
and determined  
you've got all the potential  
of a pinstripe suit  
soaked in kerosene.

I've considered each time  
you've sucker  
punched the head of your class  
and I've considered  
the shark-fin's ease  
with which you've abandoned  
etiquette and hygiene.

I've narrowed these  
considerations to a bright  
and alluring conclusion:  
You're a leader in the making,  
beyond earthly censure,  
you're the desert bush  
that burns and burns and burns.

*CLOWN*

Pediatric Oncology's always  
a real drag, except  
on certain Saturdays, when Jug  
Pinwheel, a clown, comes bearing  
his bright and joyless upturned  
frown, his Bicycle cards  
that vanish and balloons he manipulates  
into animals and fruits and other  
lifeless things.

One afternoon,  
I join him on the loading dock  
for a smoke. It is winter but by  
some twist of grace  
a fistful of tulips spike  
savagely through last year's  
grave of mulch. *Those  
won't survive much longer,*  
Jug mutters, his eye weighing  
a tulip pink as ground  
lamb. *Frost'll get them.*  
Is it my place to agree or disagree? *Yes,*  
*frost will probably kill them,*  
I say, and our little trees of smoke ascend.

*for Dan*

*CHARITY*

Two black suits  
made my family an offer  
we couldn't refuse.

One suit took out  
a clipboard and drew  
a line through our last name.

The other suit, whose face looked like  
a scratched-off lottery ticket, patted my head  
and told me our lives would improve:

"You'll see," he said. I saw milk  
and frozen butter.  
Thick loaves of bread

shaped like torpedoes  
fresh off an assembly line.



*DELINQUENCY*

You refuse to recognize  
foreshadowing  
in spilled milk

groping toward the kitchen corner  
crouching there  
dust bunny with a frantic pulse

The stain on your bib  
looks like a lopsided Kentucky  
a state whose lonely lengths you'll drive

to lap sweat  
off a male hitchhiker  
in a public toilet

Years later  
your body weeps into knotted  
bed sheets—

white satin canvas  
on which you leave behind  
an emaciated angel

recalling the names  
the hard flanks  
& the tongues & the lamplit alleys—

all the men  
you still believe you knew

*SOOTHSAYER*

She sold carnations  
in front of a delicatessen.

The butcher worried  
she was bad for business,  
but he had a soft spot  
for blind women.

As did I.  
I'd leave a buck  
in her coffee can.

When I introduced myself,  
I offered an alias:  
Charlie Chaplin. At which point

she removed  
her sunglasses. Her sockets  
were black as the pair  
of shoes I stared into  
morning after morning.

"Snake eyes," I called,  
when she cast her die.

To this day, I'm still  
waiting for God to force  
his tongue into my ear.

I'm waiting  
to begin my holy  
quest for flesh.

With a little luck,  
my trembling legs will be severed  
at the knees.

*SONG FOR MY SLEEPWALKING BRETHREN (1)*

Once I started going to bed in cheap running shoes and hiding  
my wallet in the back of my closet,  
I felt relaxed enough to appreciate waking to the coos  
of pigeons perched on my knees, and got over  
what analysts considered an “abnormal” fear  
of panhandlers and birdshit and rodent-fleas. Call me  
Lady Macbeth. I learned I can clean off birdshit  
with a soiled shirtsleeve, and by the fifth night,  
I couldn’t feel the buildup of dew-filth on my brow,  
or the roach lovingly sifting my hair for breadcrumbs.  
There are drawbacks, of course—for example,  
I miss out on the curious beauty of my shadow  
slipping through the moonlit park, lengthening beyond the stone path,  
molesting the shadow cast by this town’s founder, giving him  
an extra head and set of arms.

*SONG FOR MY SLEEPWALKING BRETHREN (2)*

Some early mornings, the night patrolman pokes me  
in the stomach with his flashlight and goes *Son,*  
*do you live around here?* and leads me to my apartment  
by the elbow and watches me sink to the welcome mat  
to grope for my spare key. If I have coffee,  
I offer him a cup and apologize for all the trouble. I don't  
worry that the key may disappear and every number I dial  
is the wrong number, that my elderly neighbor may insist  
I am a stranger, I'm the guy who passes out  
religious tracts on the corner of Jackson and Belle  
or I'm the girl in leopard hose and blunt black pumps  
who shudders when children ask if she's impersonating  
Tina Turner. No, I'm impersonating a pussy-of-the-gutter  
who feeds beyond the nets of streetlamps  
and returns home in one piece. Call me Ishmael.

*MOPPING FLOORS AT SAINT FRANCIS HOSPITAL*

Some nights these wings  
are so quiet you don't  
have to strain to hear

the necessary hum  
of electricity. Even  
from inside you'd swear

you picked up the drizzle  
that slowly sheens  
the visitor lot,

the bodies of moths  
that crack upon contact  
with bug lights lining

the smoker porch out back.  
Some nights when I stop  
mopping I'm convinced

I'm like the others, tube-fed  
or helplessly wheeled  
on a gurney. Some nights

these wings are so quiet  
you don't even have to strain  
for the hum in your veins.

## *DISCIPLINE*

No matter where I've gone to school, whenever I need to visit the library for some reason or other, I always find a desk close to where the books related to my discipline are kept. I don't know why I want to be close to books related to my discipline: in truth, I find this discipline very dull. Mostly this discipline involves statistics and percentages and colored columns that no longer make sense to me but must make sense to somebody, otherwise books related to this discipline would not be published. I don't know if I've chosen a discipline that suits my personality, as I don't consider myself dull and certainly not disciplined enough to publish books to further the discipline. But since I crave silence and dullness in order to do what I do when I visit the library, the fact that my discipline is dull is agreeable to me. However, when I'm sitting at a desk close to where books related to my discipline are kept, I'm very likely to run into other people who are in some way affiliated with this discipline. These people tend to be very pedantic and, understandably, very dull. To my horror, however, I find that I am very good at maintaining dull conversations about my discipline with these dull people. But in all fairness, I don't know if the people drawn to this discipline are dull or if this discipline makes them dull. It is possible that at one point, before they became interested in this discipline, these dull people were interesting people. It is also possible that the discipline itself was once interesting, that it has been made dull by the dull people who take an interest in it. Regardless, I should feel grateful that whenever I am at the library, books related to my discipline, as well as people affiliated with my discipline, are close by, and books related to other disciplines, and people affiliated with those other disciplines, are far away.

## *AND SPEAKING OF ASHTRAYS*

One cannot deny the conspicuous overcrowding of Ashtrays in airports, in buses, and especially in trains, where Ashtrays are practically crammed into cars. One cannot deny that something must be done. There are rumors of unwed Ashtrays copulating in the back rows of movie theatres. There are rumors of married Ashtrays copulating on asphalt in broad daylight. There are rumors of Ashtrays wanting to convert the masses, but in truth, these are not rumors. Last night, an Ashtray handed me a card emblazoned with a likeness of Saint Clare. Moments later, another Ashtray offered me a Gideon testament small enough to hide in my coat's inner pocket. The two Ashtrays wept and walked away and left a coal-black mark on my forehead. This Ashtray world could be improved. There are mounds that accumulate and stay put and harden, as when a multitude of Ashtrays congregate at a public beach and refuse to leave. There are small wars that ensue, as when the aforementioned unwed Ashtrays intermingle and disperse and intermingle again and disperse again. This Ashtray world is not a perfect world. There are Ashtrays, for example, who visit soup kitchens and stand in line for hours, silent as a tongue wisely bitten, and there are older, heavier Ashtrays abandoned in back alleys and miniature, pulp-pink Ashtrays abandoned in hospital entranceways and, practically everywhere you look, shattered Ashtrays that need to be swept up— and look at that, rotten Ashtrays weighing down those delicate poplar branches. As for Ash, one cannot but regard the heaps of Ash, threatening to billow. These we do not claim.

## *WOOLF STUDIES*

### I. Mrs. Woolf's Brilliant Idea

In my long summer skirt, I am a virgin testing  
the weight of obscenities on pink stationary.

My pockets are deep, and large enough to fill  
with stones.

Instead, my pockets are weighed down with money to burn,  
plenty of money to burn.

There are hours upon hours  
to kill.

### II. Mrs. Woolf Visits the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

Sunup, a German shepherd barks  
and a squirrel scales  
steep bark  
for a bullet  
he mistakes for an acorn.

The German shepherd  
leads me to a tree stump  
as intricate and illusive  
as Braille. (Lord, I shan't misplace

my trifocals again.)  
My palms are useless,

and there is no squirrel  
clinging to a tree.  
There are no trees.

Such are the tricks the mind  
plays these days.

### III. Mrs. Woolf Window-shops at the Garden of Eden Boutique

How I long to buy a dildo on Piccadilly  
and scrawl sharp hearts



along the tender, unresponsive shaft:  
V + V + V + V.

If I live long, I'll prosper.

*ABNER YOKUM'S NIGHT AT THE LEATHER BAR*

In a blacklit corner  
his long limbs yawned,  
and the ash on his skin  
twinkled like asphalt in June.

I put down my cue and leaned  
against the wall, blushing.  
The little room contained

Jack-tinged panting and dark  
relief. My fake I.D.  
guarded me like a raven  
fat with roadkill.

Closing time, the deposed hustler  
raised his watch and  
the whole show came to an end.

## *CARNIVAL*

The cartoonist slides a piece of paper your way.  
You recognize the eyes  
that bulge with wrath on the page.  
As for the pronged, pocked tongue  
and the teeth like sharks' fins, these bear  
no resemblance to your own.

When you request a second sketch,  
the cartoonist shrugs, "Sorry, pal, one sketch  
per person, rules are rules."

A cone of scarves pokes at the fire  
whose embers glow like the mason jar in the window.  
She studies leaves in a teacup.  
She shakes her head and frowns.

Outside, in freezing rain, the guy on stilts  
searches a tree for another locust shell  
to put in the mason jar.

*HEMINGWAY: ON FITZGERALD'S UNTIMELY DEATH*

I've paid my respects,  
goddamnit.  
I've got the afterglow  
to prove it.

*MANNA FOR PIG-PEN*

*When I wake up, the porch plants  
gleam as though poisonous and the watering can's  
filled to the brim with the sweat of God.*

Please do not read deeply  
into the voice on the tape—  
you said “Pig-Pen, associate.” So I am.  
I am not a person known to harbor ambition

or greed. That spider at the bottom of the can,  
bloated to the size of my thumb's quivering  
tip, it is a spider.

*YESTERDAY WAS A QUIET DAY*

Yesterday, another bomb  
went off in Kentucky.

The salt shaker trembled  
on your stove and deep  
in the hollow of your ear,  
a bell tolled. The paperboy

brought wine  
to his lips and passed out  
in a hammock, humming *For he's  
a jolly good fellow.*

That night, I made love  
to a blind man and learned my fingertips  
are cold as a lead pipe grazing the belly  
of an infant, and that even my lips  
are cold, my eyelids cold.

He said, "You tremble  
like a wet animal." Behind him,  
the moonlit clouds  
spread their deck of stars.

*HUSTLER'S PANTOUM*

(Hard Rock Reservation Casino)

This, friends, is where the carpet-rainbow ends and I begin.  
Bowie's voice drowns in a drone of sequins:  
"This is not America."  
I dodge drunkards, the bidding eyes of blackjack dealers.

Bowie's voice has drowned in a drone of sequins.  
Cripples on cricket legs: I dodge your canes,  
I dodge drunkards, the bidding eyes of blackjack dealers.  
(No pennies gleam at the bottom of the courtyard fountain.)

Cripples on cricket legs: I won't forget to dodge your canes.  
Free cocktails and coffee float past on black trays.  
No pennies gleam at the bottom of the courtyard fountain.  
A blonde pleads: "Please...come on!" Springsteen is on fire.

Free cocktails and coffee float past on black trays  
But I'm patient as a snare, collared to nothing.  
—Please, come on. Springsteen's still on fire.  
A handsome bartender keeps busy by cleaning ashtrays,

And I'm patient as a snare, collared to nothing.  
Although anything goes: even I could be mistaken for a hustler.  
The handsome bartender keeping busy by cleaning ashtrays  
Watches red-faced men feed the slot machines.

Here, anything goes. I could be mistaken for a hustler  
Because this is not America.  
I watch red-faced men feed the slot machines.  
This, friends, is where the carpet-rainbow ends and I begin.

## *INFERNO*

Claims have not been verified by the Pope.  
Sign has very sharp edges. Avoid touching.  
Abandon hope. Garment is not flame resistant.  
Use gloves when handling toxic waste.

Sign has very sharp edges. Avoid touching.  
Do not drink water at boiling point.  
Use gloves when handling toxic waste.  
Do not eat glass due to risk of fatal bleeding.

Do not drink water at boiling point.  
Moving gate can cause injury or death.  
Do not eat glass due to risk of fatal bleeding.  
Safety glasses required beyond this point.

Trip hazard. Be vigilant for brimstone.  
Moving gate can cause injury or death.  
Safety glasses required beyond this point.  
Room does not contain an emergency exit.

Trip hazard. Be vigilant for brimstone.  
Abandon hope. Garment is not flame resistant.  
Room does not contain an emergency exit.  
Claims have not been verified by the Pope.



*PHYSICAL*

The arctic tern, for example, often performing  
his bodily functions after high flight.

In broad daylight.  
then off and away.

Quick, how quickly

you rinse the tears of rapture  
from certain crevices.

Handshakes.  
Soft knocks  
on the shoulder. First  
names suffice.

Excuse him. It must continue:  
this long and necessary migration cannot  
be thwarted.

The pillow mint dissolves in your mouth—

how the lamp on the nightstand trembled,  
how you drove your heels into white percale,

his Southern accent and tagged baggage  
a guarantee of a safe

entanglement.

Three

*BODIES*

During a season  
of whales beached  
and planks swollen  
among the usual  
ceremonial debris,  
you begin to ask  
hard questions  
of a shared past.

There's something  
about a man  
in a shark-skin coat  
pinches your eye:  
reclining beyond  
the dunes like  
an out-of-work  
Olympian, always  
some fool on hand  
to give him aspirin.

Naturally, complications  
arise when he stands  
and you must shuck the suit  
from his bones, and he cries  
for mercy, because  
the salt-choked breeze  
has designs of its own.

When we put our glasses  
and hats back on,  
we noticed dents  
in the sand, too large  
to be footprints. Even the fog  
stood at attention.

We had no choice  
but to build a fire  
and reconstruct the scene.

Why the wind wrapped  
her scarf and disappeared,  
to this day I cannot tell.  
I presented an offering

of foresight, yet  
I kept forgetting  
the exact colors of things,  
the exact manner  
of the fall, so I was useless  
to the photographer  
who missed her train.  
“Buy yourself a coffee  
and wait in the parking lot.”

This country is too foreign  
for my taste, too austere.  
Look at the rope-burns  
on my wrists.

I kneel before you and trust  
you'll do these field notes justice.

*COMMON PRAYER*

Suddenly recalling the plight  
of the newly blind  
we raise our glasses  
of red wine and play-act  
a toast to a clearer future  
and to other matters

We raise our glasses to the tavern's  
four dank corners, to the white napkins,  
to closing time, to the fogged  
windows, to the expanse  
of fresh snow that permits  
Absolution of the world before—  
that is to say, our tracks, our cars  
like mounds of sugar  
we quarter and lap up  
knowing it's salt

*ON WAITING FOR THE GREAT IMAGE*

Having locked the gate and checked for messages  
from acquaintances back in Arkansas

and forked tuna into the cat-bowl  
and flipped off the light

on the back porch and lowered  
the thermometer and put on long johns

I adjust my desk lamp and face  
the empty shelves.

The night will be long  
and the shadows steep.

I'll spend hours thinking about lines of Lao Tzu's  
regarding the soundless coming of the great image

until the winter sun rises and gives shape to dust and removes  
every shadow from every surface.

*RAW MATERIAL*

There is no further use  
for the liquid glass  
we blew to the size  
of a cathedral  
and forced  
through the eye of a needle,

or the cockatoo  
we shrank to nothing  
and set loose  
into the open throat  
of a canyon.

We must learn  
to profit from the loss  
of a paper boat  
sent skimming toward  
expectant hands  
on the opposite shore.

*FROM THE SPANISH*

Stubborn Poem, I want you to cross  
your arms and say, "I prefer the company  
of koi to men," because  
the men I've known rarely  
behaved coyly. Will this work?

All right, then try to say, "When I drop pellets  
of fish-food into sunlit water  
the koi clamor like children  
clamoring for a candy bar,"  
like the children in Nogales who once  
begged me to purchase a stick of gum.  
Does that sound better?  
Boy, we're so directionless: the sidewalk  
that bends through these public gardens urged us  
Come this way, toward  
the macho fern—No, that way, toward  
the banner of silk roses! Cross

out the tree whose twisted trunk  
looks "like the spine of a Polio  
survivor." Cross out the koi, and the macho  
fern. Leave the roses on the threshold,  
and swear to God "they bring to mind martyrdom."



*HOW*

Put the urge on the back burner,  
beside the red kettle.

I'm talking of holding your breath  
and listening to the stones' whispers.

Later, you can wipe away the leaves  
matted against your damp cheek, later.

The whorls of silence  
are not digitalized, manufactured

in Japan, not unhesitant  
and crisp as the rhombus

of an envelope. The lightest  
among them will hum through the wind:

This, my love, is how you break  
every bone in your body.

Four

*PARADISE*

A summer evening, the highway  
crawling like a drunk through unfamiliar dark,  
windows down, industrial fumes  
clogging the vein of a pleasant memory  
I failed to invoke. In the distance,  
the power plant holds the bruised sky  
in place, guards a river stained  
at *any* hour by blue and yellow tower-flames.

I wonder why the steel bridge  
has been condemned  
—the bridge, as a child, I believed led  
to Paradise, or, at the very least, farther  
up the yawning river, to the great state  
of Ohio. Riding home  
with my father at night, I'd sometimes  
notice the same uniformed man  
leaning against the rail,  
waiting for the stillest moment  
to sprinkle ash and hope onto the muscular back  
of the Kanawha, his shoulder blades rising  
and marking his stake in the world we shared.

All those years, I learned  
nothing about that man,  
who might as well be pure vapor, or a photograph  
I've gone to great lengths to keep  
out of scrapbooks out of shame.  
When I reach my old house  
and pick along the streets—though I'm an adult—I'm  
half-afraid I'll encounter these ghosts  
still hunched with yearning and hurt beyond  
the tender burn of travelers' headlights,  
and half-afraid I won't.

## *SODOMY*

In this country of unions  
and wholes, our bed  
tends to be the divider.  
The act itself  
is ultimately fruitless,  
yet occasionally includes  
fruit. Ours acts  
out passion  
where the square's the deceiver,  
and the slattern restores  
order. We are a family  
that rarely makes family,  
but the truest "family,"  
as its roots are concerned:  
submission and servitude.  
We, too, hurry to the myth  
of the straight line,  
even as our hearts grow  
knottier and knottier.  
Our act lacks  
nothing, yet comes  
to nothing, every time.

## *HELL*

When I last drove home from Ohio,  
coasting into the blinding morning  
light, I politely tipped my hat  
to the husks and to the stiff  
workpants left overnight on wires  
durable as the laces of military  
boots. I didn't think I'd abandoned  
myself to strangers' kindnesses in Ohio.  
Drawing near the dividing Ohio  
River, I pulled off to cleanse myself  
of the smell I associated with rapture:  
latex and copper. I was twenty-seven.

Dedicated to a boy kidnapped, beaten  
to pith with a metal bat, the rest stop  
welcomed the fatigued with broken  
faucets, cracked mirrors. The bulb  
burned low. On the door  
of the farthest stall, I read and reread  
misspelled admonishments scraped  
with a key, or perhaps a pocketknife,  
into the paint's thin skin. I was  
twenty-seven. It was nothing I hadn't heard  
or seen before: the same words painted  
on a barn or chalked on walls in the town

where I'm from. I'd traveled this route  
many times before—straight-spined, vigilant  
for the deer whose naïveté towards death  
I couldn't fathom. I always made it home  
in one piece and crashed on my couch  
till two. That morning I scrubbed dirt  
from my skin with pre-moistened  
napkins, brushed angry salt from my teeth.  
I spat into the drain, oblivious of that rare miracle  
of being told in the language of another outsider  
what I am and where I'm going.

*DEPARTURE*

White spark in a black field—  
if you were blinking,  
if you were scanning  
that immense, dark plane for houses,  
you missed it,  
that white spark,  
white as scalding water.

                  You were in a plane,  
blinking back tears:  
when I squeezed your hand,  
the rush I felt  
was like the slow,  
reptilian rush I feel  
now that I am  
miles away from you,  
standing in a black field.

*STILL LIFE WITH FENCE AND PRAIRIE WIND*

*(Laramie)*

In which no complete sentence can do its ruined beauty justice,

In which the North Star's a lone headlight roving the night for roadkill,

In which there is too much red, too much of the heart's bitter honey  
To store,

In which the wind's tortured howl lusts after a human ear and the fence's  
X marks the spot  
Where ties bind and, years later, a grown man is driven to his knees

In praise of the tumbleweed crown that's snared there.