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“thefts & lies”

Joseph Calvasina

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“thefts & lies”

by

Joe Calvasina

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Professor Laura Mullen

Department of English

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
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gustav of hearts

when I am queen, my throne
will be here amidst
the fallen trees—lords

underground no more—
behind red tape marking

danger
sticky on the roots
bloodsap oozing from

overthrown tendrils
taking power
down

leaving entire courts
in aggravated chaos
when I am queen,
when

I am queen,
cities will lie

in pieces
of broken bridges

crumbling affluence,
unmarked, merciless graves,
loyal subjects all.

thefts & lies

log trucks lumbered by
hauling off branches,
brambles, once claimed “mine”
while we ate strawberries

frozen from the snow—no,
in my Alabama, there is no snow—
they were in the icebox
one after the other they vanished

we picked them in Granny Jean’s yard
we ate them at her kitchen table
red traced our lips, oozed
down cheeks, chins, fingers

the tiny, wild fruits—
not frozen, that was a lie
they were ours—
vanished like stolen trees

we wiped away the proof
the stain in the white bowl
fruitless memories, made to be lost
our hiding spots, the empty lot

dream: pa roy

grandfather's bed was empty
where was the man who'd wheezed
within earshot weeks before?
there is no sound like absence

even in sleep, his room waited
I stepped in, saw through the night
cigar boxes, a half-emptied bottle
the sooted terrycloth robe still in place

"don't worry man, I'm all right"
a tongueless voice, an apparition
the rasp of tobacco and whiskey—

nuclear family

“That behavior is not acceptable
in this house.” My second-grade mind
didn’t understand the fallout,
two naked boys in the shower,

what the hell are you doing in there,
water dripping to the floor, whispers,
what do we do? I don’t know,

we were just trying to save
water, and soap, and towels,
and that behavior—
honest—maybe that’s why

she doesn’t remember “that behavior”
when this fag tells her why
after detonation, I thought
I wouldn’t have a home, father,

mother,
only that behavior.

Paradelle for Mama

I once bit my mama so hard she bled.
I once bit my mama so hard she bled.
Dad wouldn't give her the car keys because she was mad.
Dad wouldn't give her the car keys because she was mad.
Mama wouldn't give her because, so I bit her. Once.
Hard. She was mad. She—my dad—the car keys—bled.

That night I bit her, she forgot.
That night I bit her, she forgot.
She came back: who screamed? Who left?
She came back: who screamed? Who left?
I bit her. *She* screamed. *She* left.
Who forgot? Who came back that night?

Doors slammed, but Dad didn't speak.
Doors slammed, but Dad didn't speak.
He knew she said anything, and she hadn't bled.
He knew she said anything, and she hadn't bled.
Dad hadn't bled, didn't speak, and he *knew*
but she said anything, she slammed doors—

That night, Dad knew who came back—
he said she was mad but I bit her
once hadn't I? because the car keys
left, wouldn't give her doors Dad who? She left, Mama,
she slammed my anything, didn't speak—*screamed*—
she forgot so hard and bled bled bled bled bled

so what?

I knew before you said
'we' was already dead.

talisman, transformation

a plastic flower bead
in a beer-soaked gutter
found after a parade
is not trash—it's a door
out of a city with no one
who knows your name, no one
who invites you to her two-story house &
shows you her persian cat & hermit crab

the hole in the center, meant for string,
now for child-as-rabbit's path
to billowing capes & laser-beam eyes,
little girls & skyscrapers in danger—
no one knows your name
but they will, oh, they will
thanks to your hero's luck & super-speed
thanks to the bead

Polaroid

You're not supposed to shake them, you said.
I know, I said, but I always forget.
Matted, gray, slow, the film faded in.
Anxious, I stared at you.

You asked, why did you even take it?
I don't want to forget, I said.
You smiled. Forget what?

an outline: two heads, four shoulders, one bed

in a block of gray: eye contact across the bar, a phonefull of you're-it-call-me-back-and-
forth, dinner and drinks downtown, you singing with your guitar, strewn piles of books,
boxes of background noise you can't sleep without, pants by the door, empty bottles,
soiled sheets, dial tones, ex-egos ex-boyfriends that left the whatever-it-was inevitably
timelessly brief

Exactly, I said.

I shook it again out of habit, stopped,
looked up – your smile had changed to
Give me that, you said,
before you ruin it.

A final shake with that grin
I trade for being an asshole
before putting it in your hand.
Developing? I didn't know.

I didn't say so.
Maybe that's—
Your phone rang. You had to go.
Soon, you said when you left.

ten years later

your letter & photo, still buried in my desk
you're still naturally tan with sandy hair
you still call to whine—15 minutes is too long to wait
for afternoons of Power Rangers & Nintendo

you're still in your dorm at Auburn,
waiting for me to apply, like we talked about before
we said goodbye,
we said we'd write

free speech alley

i do not want SINNER YOU DESERVE HELLFIRE
i do not want to be saved from sodomy
i do not want wives in long checkered dresses
i do not want children in suits begging with their eyes

i do not want children on welfare begging with their eyes
i do not want sprawled urban decay
i do not want crumbling classrooms and gang violence
i do not want my students picked off night after night in front of the circle-K

i do not want disease-bitten students who shit themselves to death
i do not want to vaccinate a continent
i do not want to pump water free from bacteria
i do not want to level the playing field

i do not want free-range fields or meat process byproduct
i do not want stalls of chickens and pigs packed tight
i do not want severed beaks and pigs collapsed in their own vomit
i do not want male chicks tossed live into the meat grinder

i do not want the pamphlet

my father tries to make things better

we can do a letter by e-mail
better than my face-to-face passive-aggressive style

a career is going to take time
you might want to try

you are not much
of a burden

that's just me

I've said more
than I ever would in person

cheer up. I love you.
—Dad

Success

“Sorry, Mom. I know I said—”

Another long drink. Stop talking.

Was it worth it?

Nine years on the honors track

and all I got were these lousy escapist tendencies.

Was it worth it, after all?

my mother conquers the internet [with assistance]

the blue clippy thing or the black one?

[the *ethernet* cable.]

what the hell is that?

[the clippy thing—the blue one.]

put it where?

[in the computer.]

is that the one on the floor?

[yes. the silver box on the floor.]

and I put the blue clippy thing in there?

[yes. go from the modem. take it out
of the router. put it in the silver box
on the floor.] where?

[in the computer. on the floor—]

no where in the— [there should be
a hole for a clippy thing in the back.
there might be a yellow or a black
one in there already.] there is

no fucking yellow one! [that's ok!

it doesn't have to be yellow!]

you sound mad, are you ok?

[I'm just looking for something.]

ok. hold on.

now what? [it should work--

where the fuck are my keys?]

is this a bad time?

we're both frustrated—

[well, does it work now?]

no. [well it *should*.]

ok. bye.

found: January 23, 1977

when I ask my parents about the 70's,
Mom remembers hot pants, her haircut, her Volkswagen;
her teacher (whom she refused to wait
to date before the end of term) my father
begins a lecture on post-Vietnam politics; he is cut off
by bell bottoms and a wedding-day-rain-drenched-dress

there is no mention of my sister
 there is no answer
but tears & *just don't ask your father*
he gave me a diamond ring to leave that house

my mother chokes and dissolves, remembering

instructions for my father following the death of my sister

31 photos, 4.5"x3"

Begin with a long shot of the open casket.
Take close-ups from at least six angles.
Capture her face, the yellow rose in her hand,
the patterned blanket pulled up to her chin
to hide what her missing skin spilled out
into the operating room.

Go home. Go to the nursery.
Photograph each piece of furniture:
bassinet (brown, ruffles)
crib (oak; pink, blue, and yellow pillows/blanket)
crib (yellow elephants, blue rabbit, red checkered dog)
rocking chair (patchwork quilt bear)
dresser (3 turquoise bottles; 1 yellow whale)
stroller (brown and white box pattern; wire carrying rack)

Go back to the casket.
Take more angles to get the detail—
the blue and yellow stripes on the blanket,
the way in the soft focus they almost make green.
Focus on the hand holding the yellow rose.

Before they start, photograph the service area in long-shot
(green awning, 6 floral arrangements).
Close-up on the closed casket. Note the contrast.
White, open, inside. Gray, closed, outside.
Medium shot on the closed casket
to include the six aluminum rods holding the box above ground.

Return to the nursery. The furniture again.
Zoom out, away from the crib, to include the mobile (Little Bo Peep – pink dress, Humpty
Dumpty – blue suit, Mother Goose – infant passenger, a white horse, a white shoe with a red
roof). The bassinet. The chairs. The crib.

Leave and close the door.
Walk down the hallway.
Take a picture of your wife, blanket to chin, surrounded by your in-laws.

Get one of your wedding albums.

The white and gold one that doesn't say "Our Wedding."

Remove old pictures.

Place new pictures in sequence.

Place The Daily Herald between the open casket and the nursery.

Place The South Mississippi Sun between the nursery and the grave.

Place In Loving Memory between the nursery and your wife.

Place the album in the attic.

positive

it is
not my saliva on the swab it is
not my name on the preliminary report it is
not the sting of a needle in my arm it is
not in my arm it is
not my arm that the nurse holds to fill three bleeding vials it is
not my blood they are sending to the lab it is
not friday it is
not a three-day wait for confirmation it is
not my insurance investigating the claim it is
not saturday it is
not lunch it is
not my father staring calmly as i tell him it is
not his dream of me marrying laura (she was my friend when i was 7) it is
not that he does not love me it is that nothing could have prepared him it is
not a gay disease but i am gay and it is my disease and it is
not time for church it is
not sunday it is
not my church it is
not my father leaving me for church it is
not my mother asking what's wrong and what did we talk about it is
not my lie it is
nothing important it is
not the shadows of a night-light it is
not the ceiling waiting stoically it is
not morning already it is
not my phone ringing it is
the nurse telling me i will be okay it is
not

yards

my grandmother's house intact
window unit off
pilot light snuffed
deadbolt locked
screen door latched
paper and mail stopped
water valve cranked shut—

on the way to the hospital,
her headstone, waiting, bought
twelve years in advance

Belfast

the river knows the Troubles
were a necessary waste, but
still no true peace passes these bars,
still a queen's garden offers
no reprise from a skinhead's glare.

the cold river, crowned by cranes,
points to a doomed shipyard
where a tower marks the minutes, the years
wasted on tragic adolescence
breaking bottles outside windows
this river's never-sleeps make no peace.

and hate's paint on punk-prison walls
can't deny that children are dead now,
shot trying to move furniture
their memorial is not enough
NEVER AGAIN
it is too much
NEVER FORGET
it is not enough.

New Orleans LP

1.
but we go anyway
into the bar my parents
would say is “beneath” me
2.
the other kids
wondering what
the opening act is up to
with their drums and
yelling, but when
3.
the band starts
they’re better live
than the tracks
shared in a red Honda
parked on the side of the road
4.
they’re better
and for a while I
forget all the
people I hate
5.
they stop
6.
in the american tradition
buy everything
hoping to keep the hope
they left
7.
back outside, again
out of place –
a man beats his
girl
8.
we don’t call anyone

perfect

doing it right has always been
an obsession of mine

but I can't
focus anymore
when I open my eyes
the world just gets blurry
until all there is
is the spot where
I realize

the punch line—
the right way to do it is
all wrong because the right
way is to fuck up
and enjoy the ride

because—

I'm at the point where
if I close my eyes I'm not
here anymore I shouldn't
close my eyes

like the spirit has overtaken us

you hold my tongue in teeth
you hold my fingers in ink
you hold the bolt on the door
you hold my chest to the floor

you do not hold me
you do not hold him
you do not hold anyhim, anymore
you do not hold a cure:

Joe, you're dead, so come with me—

let's grab your guitar and go on tour
let's throw down our books and trample the pages
let's weave jackets from yellowed fibers of cigarette filters
let's go to one of those dancing pentecostal churches and dance

stray

no I won't leave—
hey, is this bowl wet? hey
it is! hey my water is dirty
and my paw is *soaked*
fix it fix it I want
want want want so
give me give me give me
give me give me your hands
your legs—don't go inside
you *bastard* I'll *follow* you—
put me *down*—don't throw me out!
I'm yours now, you gave
me tuna so what
is this dry shit? It's too late—
you *have* a cat—don't think I
don't see you in there—
where is my water?
open this door!
come *on* I just want
to piss on everything
is that so much to ask?

if i were brave

if i were brave i would tell you
come over here & let's grow old together
let's find a nice house somewhere
or just merge our lives into yours
let's tear down the bricks between us
take our twin beds and make one queen
adopt some starving children in china
change their names to tim and lynn and
who would ever say these things—

i am a man so i'll say hello
would you like to get coffee some time
 (avoiding white picket fences & weekly
 organic grocery stops & picking out
 the *perfect* school districts)
or maybe we could get some sushi
 (but we can *not* go to home depot
 to pick out floor tiles & room colors
 yet)
are there any movies you want to see?
 (would the new romantic comedy in which
 the happy couple is eventually united forever
 after just two hours of witty banter & advances
 be too forward?)
ah—you're busy—some other time, then.

hello again, I say

to the ceiling that never changes whether or not
I'm wary of the new/terrible day sleep always brings

to the jittery twitch
of the only way through the morning

hello to the mood swings
blamed on the phases of the moon
just to avoid avoiding them

my two good weeks are up:
hello, again,

to all those things I should/not have said—
knocking stopped opportunity—

lost now to instants in my doorframe
slammed on my kiss, refused

happy ending

kiss the frog, they said,
and give it some time

fake smiles mutated into
minutes laced with lies

saying “soon” is enough
for some stories; not mine

empty bottles, snorted pills:
a recipe for tripping

between a beginning and an end
there’s a story sleeping in the gutter

kiss the frog, they said,
and give him some time

but he never became a prince
he died.

Sonnenizio on a line from e.e. cummings

one pierced moment whiter than the rest
was the only memento i'd get:
moments ago you'd told me no
number of moments could change
how you didn't feel anything in those moments
we shared in your bed, momentous for me,
altering all the moments afterward—

momentarily taken by desperation, we take each other
in again and for a moment I believe you've changed

but not even the momentum of a good fuck
could thrust you into love, so that moment stayed where
it was among the many moments you've taken
from other boys just like me—moments now lost
that meant nothing beyond the night we tossed.

villanelle for Caleb

I expected to write
tonight: It's colder. It's clear,
you are not the one.

It's colder when it's clear
I'm right; I expected,
though, you'd want to hear

from me by now. It's some fear,
I expect—not wanting to seem desperate—
stopping you. No, you're not one

to think such things. It's weird:
right before I get upset,
you make it clear

that you haven't disappeared.
"At least," the cruel part says, "not yet—"
too many times the cruel part won.

"Dear John"—something heavy fades once I read—
 you are not the one
 I expected to write.
It's colder on clear nights.

dream: 4 months later

you were just getting out of prison;
we got lemonade from a lemonade stand
and I had no time to consider, before we were done,
you were just getting out of *prison*
and maybe you weren't the best person
to get lemonade with—no time to demand
an explanation for prison, your crime, getting out—
but just enough to get lemonade from a lemonade stand.

after I woke up, the other never knew
that my mind had fled to you, man-thought-gone,
to your open bars & cell walls painted sky blue—
after I woke up, the other never knew
that through crusty eyes, I thought, *who*
the fuck is this and *where is my*
why did I wake up, “do you know
where I was, what I was doing with you?”

villanelle for closure

She breathed out the tightness in her eyes
when I told her I wasn't going back. She breathed
the way she must have when I first cried

in the delivery room. Her smooth face lied
about the twenty years since her belly went slack,
since she breathed out the tightness in her eyes.

It's better to avoid the bridge, she tried
to console me with a matter of fact,
the way she did the first time I cried.

How could I ever tell her I am in disguise?
Her darling, the victim, is all an act.
She breathed out the tightness in her eyes.

The man across the bridge was surprised
to receive by mail a letter and his jacket,
to learn, at last, me first, even if he cried.

My mother thought it was the last goodbye
to a man, and hoping I'd find a nice girl instead,
she breathed out the tightness in her eyes,
breathed, and hoped, and cried.

dying young—how *banal*

Today they'll shove a camera down my throat
they'll look at my insides
to find what's burning in my gut
they'll go down the wrong hole and puncture a lung and
I will probably not breathe despite a Golden-Globe-
worthy attempt at revival

if they find something they'll cut a piece
they'll send it to Alabama or Tennessee
to be analyzed (I always wanted to visit Graceland)
they've asked me to remove my shirt
and I'm waiting now with my mother
(we are quiet)
she and I with all the things that could go wrong
my brain will forget to beat my heart
once the drugs put me to sleep
or my heart will be too weak to start again
like an engine turning over and over for nothing
(I have been having dizzy spells)

my impending soap-opera death tells me
I should tell my mother I love her but
before I can she has said it I love you
she has imagined the very same things
only in her version the Oscar goes to
the weeping mother!
(after all she is my mother)
the nurse wheels my bed away
my mother is crying in the waiting room
dabbing a tissue to catch the running mascara
and then to wipe her eyes

Workshop

We've got a great show for you tonight, folks. A double magic act! Our opener's an amateur; he'll get you warmed up for the real deal later on – and he's trying, really, he's giving it his all – so give him a hand, yeah?

Applause. An awkward boy
walks onto the stage and pulls a
stanza out of a hat.

Now wasn't that cute, folks?

The announcer offers a patronizing smile.
He leads the crowd in perfunctory applause.

Next, the tuxedoed boy juggles a few parentheses with one hand
while pulling a tercet from behind a stranger's ear.
With a flick of his wrist, he
enjambes it to make a quatrain.

Would you look at that! And he's just out of high school!

The crowd,
moved by the arbitrary line breaks and the
addition of the naïve metaphor and the trite rhyme,
aww's and applauds politely.

I tell ya, he just steals hearts every night.

The boy performs a perturbed bow. He's wearing what was
once an expensive suit, but it's borrowed and too tight and frayed at the seams.
He shuffles off stage-left.

How adorable was that?

This next guy, though, he's amazing, he's just amazing. None of these parlor tricks. He really speaks for himself. Needs no introduction. This guy is the real deal – real magic. Aw, hell, you'll see. Now, here he is!

A tall, lanky man walks onto the stage.
He's not wearing anything
fancy: brown shoes,
blue jeans,
white shirt.
Un-tucked.

He looks out at the crowd, arms dangling
limply at his side. The spotlight shines on his face.
He looks bored. He glances at the floor.

The boy has left his poem:
a forgotten stock prop. It's a
handful of lines about a teddy bear.

Some of the lines end in the same syllable.

In a moment of divine
inspiration, the man takes the
paper from the ground and hangs
it in the air from his fingertips
above the middle of the stage
as if he were putting it on a laundry line.

The man lets go of the poem,
moves stage-right, and turns to face center-stage.
He fixes his eyes on the paper; it's still hanging.
He nods his head once. Slowly.

The poem, fixed steady in the air,
supported by neither wires nor hooks,
suddenly begins folding over itself:
with just a few clever angles (and, of course,
some magic),
the paper has multiplied ten times in size
and taken the shape of an origami bear.

With an amplified crinkling sound,
the folded paper inflates into three dimensions
and takes on a life of its own – still hanging in the air,
the intricate paper bear looks around
like a child opening its eyes for the first time.

It spots a young girl seated in the front row.
It clomps down toward her as if going down stairs.
She is awed and excited and unafraid.

The bear arrives. A great burst of smoke startles her.
When it clears, the paper has turned
into a giant white mink teddy bear
with a red silk sash tied around its neck.

The crowd offers heart-felt applause. The room recedes into silence.

The man blinks,
and a host of seraphim
appears. They clash.
One side emerges victorious.
The other is cast into the orchestra. No smoke. No mirrors.
It is an epic of carefully-crafted
heroic couplets and truth and irony and hidden meaning.

Angelic entrails
spatter those lucky enough to be in the front row.
The man blinks. The angels and their insides
vanish.

The people in the front row are relieved that the
vivid allegory left no stains on their dinner jackets and evening gowns.
Some of them briefly wish the
vision would return because they missed the—

The man moves his hand a little. Another blink.

The holy grail appears. The man does not move.
The cup slowly levitates upward, no strings attached.
The crowd is blinded. The light from the grail dims.
They're silent.

It's not shock, they just don't get it.

The man gazes over the crowd for a minute
and exits stage-right without a word or a bow.

The announcer reenters stage-left.
He wears a nervous smile.
He is speechless.
He is the only one clapping.

Backstage, on the left, the boy is covered in divine goo.
He can only think, *hey, he didn't even need a hat.*

Re: “Do You Think...”

after Robert Creeley

one person does always love more, yes
it's one of those trivial things that
adds to the divorce rate
like bathroom habits or mattress preference

I think—yes,
that's a lie, I really just feel more
often than not,
and maybe that's why I loved more,

too much,
 he was right, we weren't
ready but anyway
it's one of those trivial things—

I'm probably saying too much,
but I'm committed again, to
breathing, like the man said—yes,

yes.

Volcanology

When I first started reading poetry, I hated it. I studied it only for school, and my tendency to go along with the group sentiment led me to follow my classmates'—and even my teacher's—perceived disdain for slogging through a bundle of cryptic lines about whatever people considered important in ages past. This experience in high school convinced me that I would never look at poetry again. Even when I got to college, I pulled all the strings I could to avoid studying the form.

Despite my distaste, though, I started writing, because poetry is not like a puppy. If you don't feed a puppy, it goes away; if you don't feed poetry, it eats *you*. My "poetry" amounted to little more than vague journal entries with line breaks and the occasional rhyme scheme. I never considered them great or even good, but the lack of other people in my life to discuss and explore the feelings broiling inside me wrenched the words from me whether I wanted them or not.

By my sophomore year in college, I could no longer avoid the formal study of poetry: I took a workshop to fulfill the degree requirements for what I knew would be a major in fiction writing. The workshop fundamentally changed my views on poetry; rather than being stuck in a room full of people who didn't want to be there, only half the class didn't want to be there. I discovered people who appreciated the value of the form, and who taught me how to read it by looking closely at the process of writing it.

A particular book discussed in that workshop, Kim Addonizio's *what is this thing called love?*, revealed the potential for poetry to stab me square in the chest. But in a good way. The first poem to do this, Addonizio's "Fuck" remains one of my favorites:

Fuck

There are people who will tell you
that using the word *fuck* in a poem
indicates a serious lapse
of taste, or imagination,

or both. It's vulgar,
indecorous, an obscenity
that crashes down like an anvil
falling through a skylight

to land on a restaurant table,
on the white linen, the cut-glass vase of lilacs.
But if you were sitting
over coffee when the metal

hit your saucer like a missile,
wouldn't that be the first thing
you'd say? Wouldn't you leap back
shouting, or at least thinking it,

over and over, bell-note riotously clanging
in the church of your brain
while the solicitous waiter
led you away, wouldn't you prop

your shaking elbows on the bar
and order your first drink in months,
telling yourself you were lucky
to be alive? And if you wouldn't

say anything but *Mercy* or *Oh my*
or *Land sakes*, well then

I don't want to know you anyway
and I don't give a fuck what you think

of my poem. The world is divided
into those whose opinions matter
and those who will never have
a clue, and if you knew

which one you were I could talk
to you, and tell you that sometimes
there's only one word that means
what you need it to mean, the way

there's only one person
when you first fall in love,
or one infant's cry that calls forth
the burning milk, one name

that you pray to when prayer
is what's left to you. I'm saying
in the beginning was the word
and it was good, it meant one human

entering another and it's still
what I love, the word made
flesh. *Fuck me*, I say to the one
whose lovely body I want close,

and as we fuck I know it's holy,
a psalm, a hymn, a hammer
ringing down on an anvil,
forging a whole new world.

(Kim Addonizio. "Fuck." *what is this thing called love?*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004.
pg. 113-115)

For me the brilliance of this poem lies in the image of the anvil – a strong, concrete, recognizable icon that begins as a symbol of destruction and works its way into one of creation, just as the world itself does. Addonizio's words seemed to be written for me; they hit chords that had never been hit before by poetry. I looked at her other books and works by her contemporaries, and my

hatred for poetry turned to love. I cite Addonizio as the biggest influence in my turn to poetry, though there have been plenty of others since that first discovery (and not all contemporary): Nick Flynn, Nathaniel Bellows, Dorothy Parker, John Keats, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats.

What inspired me most about Addonizio is that her work is daring and unapologetic in its bold, irreverent, and sexually charged imagery and subject matter. It's edgy and exciting. More importantly to me, though, the book we used is about love: the difficulty of relationships, the pain of loss, and the escapist tactics that go along with avoiding that pain, just to name a few. For quite a while, I couldn't seem to get away from these topics in a lot of my work, and to see someone do it "right" was invaluable. Before, I'd considered my sappy poems about this or that person unsalvageable; Addonizio showed me that it could work. I just had to make it work. The question, for me, became how.

The mechanics – form, unit of composition, subject matter – are pretty subjective, I find. What works for some people yields nothing for others. For me, enjambment is an important tool, and free verse often makes the most of my words. I should note something about my definition of free verse though. I'll borrow Michelle Boisseau's definition in *An Exaltation of Forms*: "*free verse is not* the poetic equivalent of 'free parking' or 'free beer.'" Free verse isn't just arbitrary line breaks on a page (despite my earliest inclinations)—it still calls for organization and structure of the more technical aspects of the form (enjambment, rhyme, the shape on the page, etc.). So the "free" in free verse isn't about a lack of cost, but a lack of predefined obligation. A lot of my work is free verse because I like to work with asymmetric line and stanza breaks (like in "found..."), my rhymes tend to feel forced as I write them, and the openness of free verse allows me an easier starting point than beginning a poem by trying to jam my thoughts into a

rigid structure or rhyme scheme. In free verse, the form is open, but it's the job of the poet to interpret the content to a point that a form can be created to suit it.

One method of this creation of form comes from Ezra Pound's insistence on using "the musical phrase" in favor of predetermined meter; he argues a poem doesn't need to be constructed solely of perfect iambs, but its words must flow in a way that corresponds to its emotion. I agree with Pound—form must always follow function. That's not to say form must be secondary, but it should in some way enhance the content rather than make it more difficult to explore by acting as some sort of code or impenetrable foreign language. Despite his conviction that a vast number of subjects can't be explored in symmetrical and received forms, he does not discard such forms entirely. (Ezra Pound, "Retrospect." *Toward the Open Field*, pg. 248, 254). In the same way, sometimes I find myself writing a poem in a received or invented form; two of my poems, for example, are villanelles. One is a paradelle. In all of these poems I found that the repetition called for by the form suited my subject well: just as the same thoughts dominated my mind verbatim, they dominate the poem. In "Paradelle for Mama," the repetition of lines created this mind-poem dominance the same way it did in the villanelles; at the end of the poem, though, the seemingly haphazard clump of each individual word of the preceding stanzas gave it the added bonus of a feeling of insanity that I felt the poem needed.

What matters most, then, is the way the mechanics and content of a poem come together in the final result and what that result does to the writer and the reader. A good friend told me that "expressing self without self expressing defines a quality poem." I've yet to find a more succinct definition that so clearly agrees with my own fledgling aesthetic. It basically comes down to the idea of "show, don't tell." In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot argues that "poetry is...an escape from emotion...an escape from personality" (*TOF*, pg.

267). He discusses poetry as a combination of “impressions and experiences” (*TOF*, pg 266) that ultimately form an entity that is separate from the poet. When he calls poetry an escape from emotion, he doesn’t mean it’s without feeling or that it’s a method for the poet to forget or abandon the feeling; rather, he suggests that the poem’s separation from the poet enables the poet to examine from without. This concept of separation requires that the poem have a life of its own in order to recreate emotion in the reader; telling doesn’t quite get you there. Showing, on the other hand, can: a carefully wrought image, something that embodies the emotion to the core, provides a focus for the emotion vacated through the process of writing poetry.

Kim Addonizio does this in another poem, “Washing,” by depicting a scene in which the speaker indirectly addresses universal issues of old age through the her experience caring for her mother:

... I sit her down and wrap her in a towel

and kneel to clip the curled yellow toenails,
taking each foot in my hands,

trying to be gentle, trying to be more merciful
than God, who after creating her

licked her clean with a rough tongue before
leaving her to her life, to suffering, and to me.

(Kim Addonizio. “Washing.” *what is this thing called love?*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. pg. 65)

The beauty of “Washing” lies in its overwhelming imagery that subtly leads conclusions about life, creation, old age, and death. God, through the “rough tongue,” is likened to a cat, suggesting that though grotesque, this scene is a part of the natural order despite the role reversal of child caring for mother. There seems to be a criticism of God, though. The speaker, exercising compassion where her mother’s creator has failed to do so, is cleaning up creation’s

mess—and although she is uncomplaining, she doesn't seem too excited about it. This subtle commentary exemplifies Eliot's concept of a poem's separate life. This poem could have easily fallen into a rant against old age produced by the hardship of caring for one's mother; instead, Addonizio renders a grotesquely beautiful snapshot that delivers a strong and passionate worldview without ever explicitly stating it.

A recent study of Yeats built on this idea for me; once again, it was in a classroom full of people who didn't want to be there, but this time the instructor and I did. "What does this say about Yeats' universal idea about {love, marriage, politics, the way the world works}?" became a mantra for the class. Her questions about Yeats' work provoked me to incorporate more universality into my own, and as a result, to make it deeper and more complex. I began to attempt to go beyond recording my feelings and memories and to tap into what it was about whatever topic that was worth exploring for someone who wasn't me. Yeats was expressing his personal and universal ideas without saying "The world is going all to hell and it's infuriating" or "Maud Gonne won't love me back and it sucks." But he *was* saying that – through images, through allegory, through mystery.

I attempted to accomplish such a transformation of emotion in the poem "dream: 4 months later." In the poem, the speaker recollects a dream about a former, presumably forgotten lover after waking up in bed with someone else. My goal was to address the idea that memory is stronger than our conscious thoughts; how sometimes, even when we want to forget, we remember. The poem stands on its own without my personal history in that the specific details aren't important to the progression of the poem. Because the figures other than the speaker are primarily described through their placement in time, the "I" is open for substitution. My goal was not for the man getting out of prison to be my ex, but to be the reader's ex, or the reader's

friend's ex, etc., in such a way that the "I" is an invitation to participate in the story of the poem, for the reader to imagine his placement in this situation, rather than to listen to or read a recollection of a personal event. The ambiguous pronouns offer a mysterious specificity to the poem—the relationships are there, but the figures are hazy. This mystery, though, is not one with any single solution; its solution lies in the reader.

Some sort of mystery is a fundamental element of poetry. If everything is explained neatly in a poem, every process of the poem is external, and the reader gives no input other than "I agree" or "I disagree" about the possibility of the emotion. But done properly, the poem forces the reader to see and hear the anvil crashing through the skylight onto his cup of coffee. It forces the reader to experience the terror of the great beast lumbering toward Bethlehem. And for me, that is the point of poetry—not to make a mere observation about the self or the world, but to give that observation its own energy and life, to offer it as an experience to the audience.

This mystery, though, presents an inherent problem. When poems are too mysterious, nothing is communicated, and the intent, the power, and the art are all lost. To explore this issue, I prefer to think of the initial phases of writing poetry as a volcanic eruption, followed by the arduous task of cleaning it up. The cleaning involves a *lot* of ash—but there's a good bit of obsidian in there too. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth refers to poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...emotion recollected in tranquility," and though this idea incorporates the eruption, recollection is not enough. Too often while writing, I've found myself trying to recall in a world where I must create, to figure out how I should say something based on the past rather than on the present. Recollection is too passive to describe this creative process. The poet's task, my task, post-poem, is to take what has erupted, combine

it with what was there before (poetic tradition, my own poetics, received or invented forms, a previous draft, whatever), and thus reinvent what is already there on the page.

To clarify this idea a bit, I'll return again to "dream: 4 months later." This poem has been through what for any biological being would be considered cruel and unusual punishment—it's been reorganized and rewritten, even turned upside down, to get to where it is now. The cleaning-up was long and occasionally frustrating, but for the sake of the poem, necessary. In the beginning, it was melodramatic and overly wistful; in the midst of revision, I struck out too much and lost something essential to the poem along with the melodrama. And now, it's come closer to the essential mystery through the juxtaposition of prison and lemonade while hopefully toning down on the overdone sadness. If it's not there yet, it's closer to being where I need it to be for the sake of the idea and the dream behind it: accessible, relatable, and true to the original intent. The process I've gone through writing this poem indicates what is to me one of the most important lessons of writing poetry. The "spontaneous overflow" isn't enough; it is only the beginning. The true work, the true art, lies in what happens after the poem is born.

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