

1998

# Self-portraits | [Poems]

Ryan Turner  
*The University of Montana*

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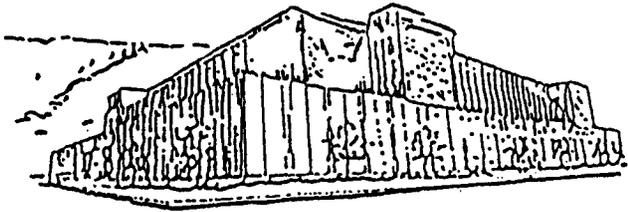
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SELF-PORTRAITS

by

Ryan Turner

B.A. Santa Clara University, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Art

The University of Montana

1998

Approved by:

  
Chairperson

  
Dean, Graduate School

5-4-98

Date

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Acknowledgements

Amaranth: "Lunar Eclipse."

The Iowa Review: "The Matador, 1970."

Santa Clara Review: "Insomnia Abstracts," "Instrumental," "Penitent," and  
"Quarantine"

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for Sunny and Keith Turner  
and Kate Noss

**The Matador, 1970**

His epaulets erupt behind him.  
 He could extinguish volcanoes  
 by turning his back on them.  
 Noticing a burning cigar in his palm,  
 he lifts it to his ear and scowls,  
 inhales deeply through one nostril.  
 Inhaling through one nostril with his palm at his ear,  
 he notices in it a burning cigar.  
 He has no idea where the lace  
 at his wrist comes from.  
 His glands are tattooed with coconut leaves,  
 but don't tell him that.  
 He dips his garlic braids  
 in wax each morning.  
 He wants to preserve or burn them,  
 votive talismans to ward off superstition.  
 He can tell six different lies at once  
 without ever contradicting himself  
 His lies all contradict each other;  
 he uses them to make up true stories  
 about his life as a boy in Malaga.  
 There, on the southern coast of Spain,  
 among volcanoes,  
 he grew up idolizing  
 the great bullfighters Hernandez, Vallejo,  
 de la Cruz. He would *surpass their splendor*.  
 Don't look at his sombrero. He uses it to mesmerize  
 victims. His victims,  
 before he kills them, are mesmerized  
 by looking at his sombrero.

He has eyes on every side of his head.  
 Don't look into them.  
 Like unbaked dough of the tortillas  
 made by his formidable great-aunt,  
 Dona Ignacia Maria Hernandez,  
 his face  
 stretches, twists, spreads flat.  
 He can stretch, twist or spread flat  
 his face as if it were made  
 of unbaked dough,  
 and doing so reminds him of his childhood.  
 He labored for years in obscurity  
 learning to tie exotic knots.  
 Tying himself in exotic knots, he is  
 able to entangle within himself his shadow.  
 His picadores swear parts of the matador  
 are missing. *Dios mio*, they cry,  
*el toro no puede tocarle!* Cuando el toro quiere  
 tocarle, no puede! Parts of him  
 are not there when the bull tries to maul him.  
 In springtime, he is Barcelona.  
 His economic base is tourism.  
 In summer his braided hair smells of gasoline.  
 He braids his hair in summer,  
 when it smells *de gasolina*, his hair, and  
 watches out for match-wielding enemies; he'll never  
 confess to paranoia, not to anyone human,  
 and in his other palm rests the dirt-caked  
 blade of his sword. See,  
 here it is.  
 He holds it toward you for inspection.  
 He pretends not to care what you think of it.

## Shame and Lonliness

Laughingly away, she skipped into the carnival night--  
and leaves me as though at a gallery  
where all the chairs are not *for* sitting.

In the corners, subtitles disappear.

O moon, you shine through translucent waves  
of strangers on these shores, who rush the booth  
where the day is measured out by nattering  
angels in centimeters! I should join them, I know,  
O eye-in-the-sky. Nonchalance itself, she lights up  
outside on the street below the window  
where occurred in me the birth of nudism.

The birth of nudism was a blessing greeted  
with sighs of *finally* but tonight I'm skulking the pavement;  
the tip of my pre-made is all of me that can be seen.

This voice follows me everywhere around, narrating.  
I ought to be ashamed, but even I don't believe that--  
Nobody, ever, obviously. This voice mumbles something  
like *the eaves of possibility, but what a drop from here!*

## Charlie

At the asylum one day, I am stunned into silence.  
My patients who move about in the main hall on the other  
side of the mirror, the mirror itself and all that  
it implies, joined to the walls that form the room  
that cups the insane like the closed fist of God,  
the silent halls beyond, the grounds  
with basketball hoops and large, harmless toys  
left where they are strewn, the great torsion of clouds  
above, are stunned and still. I crouch on the desk,  
my desk. As usual the others are ganging up on Charlie,  
who won't defend himself in word, thought, or gesture.  
A real loony tune, that one. A real loony tune,  
who won't even protest when the others take advantage  
in the dumbest, most demeaning ways, no harm intended  
even, they just do it because the crazy guy won't  
stand up for himself at all, not at all, he just sits there  
with that crazy grin on his face like he doesn't get it  
but thinks it's funny, a piece of snot on his forehead  
that the others put there and are laughing about all  
the time and he doesn't even realize what's happening  
to him....

## The Siege of Troy

There are machines to promote relaxation, like lava lamps, Dolby stereos, & magic fingers. The psychiatrist whose office had all of these went out of business through

litigation following a power surge related to an unusual alignment of Mars & Jupiter, recorded via telescope by scientists & Kodak. When Celts moved limestone

for Stonehenge, authorities theorize logs used as rollers, moved successively to the front by laborers, a machine in which people took part. We have toasters, bagel

cutters, & Mr Coffee to assist with mornings. Hearses, associated with mourning, are equipped with similar rollers, & caskets are lowered with winches, except for mass

graves, dug by backhoes. In war, these are preferable, go hand in hand with war machines, killing machines, mechanical personalities. Personality matching machines

can find you the perfect date, & digital watches can tell you what day it is. Big Brother is watching you with help from machines. I have a magic card

I put in machines that pay me to do so;  
this almost always works. Broken  
machines need to be repaired. They  
make apparent weaknesses we may

wish to conceal. For example, seismo-  
graphs measure faults on the Richter  
Scale. My faults include laziness &  
pride, which are, granted, different kinds

of faults, to be measured by different machines.  
The home-care patient had filters for heater  
ducts, fiberglass knees, & an iron lung.  
He received information about acupressure

from Beijing over email. During a blackout  
he called in a priest to fire up the backup  
generator, then invited the holy man to bless  
the entire world more or less instantaneously.

My car stereo soothed me in traffic  
on I-5, crossing fault lines from here  
to LA. My Volvo is equipped with  
a seismograph on the dash that's broken.

It never worked on roads as yet unpaved:  
part of why it's never been repaired.  
I've shoveled baserock from a tractor scoop  
to fill potholes for smoother driving with  
a shovel, & I couldn't have done it alone.

My poet friend made olive oil by hand  
in Italy, from olives, a process he described  
as *not worth it*. From there, in Umbria,

you could travel to Greece by car & boat  
or by taxi & jet, but watch out for cabs  
with broken meters on the dash offering  
cheap fares to beaches where you can tan

yourself, unassisted by machines. Pasadena  
laundromats offer tanning while-U-wait.  
Tacoma laundromats offer espresso-2-go,  
made with machines manufactured in Umbria

& with beans hand-picked in Colombia, with  
simple machines like the lever, & compound  
machines like your wrist. Winches have been  
used with siege-towers to breach strongholds,

or to describe a turn in the plot, a wooden  
horse, mechanism of defeat. Most victories  
include machines, whether you know it or not,  
& dying, whether you like it or not. In some

but not all buildings, the machines stay  
on all night, & in that way outlive the rest  
of us; by some accounts they are life-support,  
& by others, our flesh & gleaming blood.

## A Word

Memorization will do you no good  
anymore. These are long since  
worthless, and the slaves  
marching up and down the steeple  
biting their chunks of incense  
cedar won't give you  
the information you're after.  
Don't bother with the heaps  
out back. You'll find no  
evidence, no charred remains.  
In your pocket, the folded  
bank statement on which  
is scribbled names of war  
criminals. The archways  
are chalked with messages  
in English, each letter hued  
in different children's colors.  
Your iron lung throbs under  
pavement. Your walkie-talkie  
advertises vouchers. Fantastic  
monsters rust in warehouses  
you fingerprint to the rafters.  
Like a toddler you go around  
rejecting everything. Somewhere  
there must be a way of accessing  
something, or you dreamed of  
sand dunes rising above the trees,  
where you saw yourself bearded,  
doused with holy starlight. Or  
someone was chasing you down

the fire escape, into the hedge  
maze. You're amazed at the  
protruding spear, but the audience  
knew it was coming. Or you're  
annoyed in the audience at  
the hero's inability to foresee  
disaster, a set-up, a trap.  
Prop your feet. Open another.  
Fold your hands. Recline.

### The Traffic Cop's Hubris

Someone's unscrewed his thumbs.  
 His mumps vaccine rebelled,  
 suing the hospital for libel.  
 Bribery will have no effect:

his cranium was designed in poor  
 imitation of modern art.  
 For him, castration was never  
 an option. Despite developments,

parking has never been stronger.  
 A Herculean parody, he sucks  
 it in. His guts run laps,  
 testify in divisional offices

to the stunning endurance of double  
 yellow stripes, his favorite.  
 He bellows commands to hordes  
 who wallow in the shallows, slack-jawed.

Every day is a safari  
 on which attack by mutant  
 wildebeests is one  
 option. Bold, he perseveres.

If he has one fear,  
 it's nothing to be concerned  
 about. His doctors count  
 him lucky. Halting busloads

of foreign tourists, he grins,  
displays his credentials for applause.  
He holds a doctorate in lemonade.  
No one knows where he got it.

## Lament

I feel fine, really. Maybe a bit stiff you know, kidding, ha.  
 Quite pleased with the new place, although I sense  
 that the neighbors are edgy, well. Do let it be known,  
 though: all my previous statements I now deny.  
 I hold myself to nothing. Let none of my debtors

come to collect of me my sacks of doll hair, my needles,  
 my envelopes. All of these things and more I need now  
 more than ever. Let no more sand dollars be put on  
 shelves in beachfront condominiums, this is the first  
 of my final wishes. From now on, all of my wishes are

last ones, at this I am continually amazed. I stand  
 on the porch, evenings, pitcher of iced tea, lemon slices  
 floating. When no one stops by, which is not very often,  
 I move from wicker chair to wicker chair making  
 conversation, being, you know, agreeable with myself:

Have you stopped by my funeral? Well, no matter.  
 I hear everyone's going. There, the keening has begun.  
 One thousand crickets are included. Also among the  
 mourners are four dozen fee collectors, ten private jets,  
 the idea of the satellite dish, twenty trillion holes made

by bullets, six frequencies only dogs can hear, and a pile of  
 things needing mending. Indeed I am a receptacle.  
 I have always, always been so popular. Ah, I have died  
 like a brick thrown into a tub, so sudden. Someone  
 shouted, "Action!" and I flung my glass of milk.  
 Make known my passage, issue a summons!

It's the little things that have changed, see. Burnt matches seem more to me now like thumbprints, and the Weather Channel, CNN, ESPN, I receive in my chest. This morning I heard sand shifting on the ocean floor, and I knew I could

travel there only by concentrating enough. Also among my mourners, all the children of Athens. Not lovers, though, not exactly that. Some quite skilled quilters. If you have plans or whatever, don't worry about it I'll understand have a good time I'm sure I'll see you around sometime, so.

## Introversion

Usually, though, I switch to tea in the afternoon, more as a way of recovering, which I seem never to do, quite. And this regardless utterly of what nastiness the sink may hold in store. One musn't lose composure, faced with mildew, decayed chick peas long abandoned to the back of the fridge yet entombed in the most indispensable piece of tupperware, always, yes-- oh! and company always arriving in fucking *droves* (excuse me!) but I know you know the kind of thing I'm talking about, as a fellow soul who crafts, the length of the day, anticipatory retorts of utmost wit, too late. This is the kind of thing runs through my head while, elsewhere, work continues on that place inside me where I'll nurse what obsessions I'll have...

## The Old Love

If the man-shaped cloud over Catalonia  
 calls us a premonition of war let me dip  
 spoonfuls of your shoulder, darling,  
 for cannibalism is a get-to-know-you  
 sort of affair This drawer in my chest  
 holds heirloom silver I've refused garage  
 sales--no offer enough. Don't worry,  
 I tell you, about the degree of my honesty;  
 these nights get me out of the house  
 at least, and never having loved  
 before I'm willing to put up with a lot.  
 The insects, when they finally are satiated,  
 leave our faces smooth and featureless,  
 expressionless, without potential for expressing.

But the heavenly uproar gleams still, here  
 where the thing fell apart. That this bridge  
 simply ends ahead around a bend or two  
 lends only drama to our approach, an excuse  
 for momentousness in the ordinary commute.  
 We all, of course, know that we are all doomed,  
 fluently waving all we'd like to have said, brilliant  
 monologues, arguments not won with spouses,  
 and flourishes of genuine longing--I don't doubt  
 that it used to connect, or that it may again,  
 but at risk of seeming theatrical let me just say....  
 There is nothing to be said about it, just the ending,  
 nothing to disguise, however thinly, precipitous.

Inside the hole in the day it was night, and everything

was involved. Winter was jam-packed with starlings.  
There was a hole in the sky and inside it was the moon.  
My fingers trembled across the lists of words  
that are your face. When I say I want to devour you  
it means I want to devour you. If we decide to stay  
here behind skin, we can peel back the surface  
of the bay and tuck ourselves in: sweet dreams  
of the pier, dark on the water this hole, scarce tides  
that leave us quiet, faceless, clenching forks.

## So Long Left Behind

Because there's only so much room and it  
accommodates everything with little left over:  
you should think twice before doing that.  
It really makes more sense to do the other,  
face it. Tell me more about the pigeons,  
she said. Well, I said, there are only  
so many at one time, here, of anything.  
Nervous scrimmages of color wobble the  
eaves, soft above. That's not what you're  
after, of course, like the plaza wherein  
they seem to swell the air and vanish  
if they want to, not vanish, be there  
just away and still gone. The thing  
about them is what that is: a constant  
undertow of commotions unsatisfactory  
enough for only the gentlest grief. Ghastly,  
blind stares in plazas now--reproachful,  
harder to fix as even historical laments  
abstract away. The popcorn we scattered  
here! Under the stern watch of Art!  
The grief we went around so gently, as  
though we could hold it to light, in. Gone,  
all. And worse, being better off for it,  
knowing so, mornings this year. And Union  
Square window displays famously display  
hinted-at interiors you can see but not  
touch, not enter, no. Knots of us cram  
fists in coat pockets, and crowding  
the sidewalk dream my breath away.

Last seen astride the billboard. Last seen  
encased in marble. Entering, and vanishes  
that day forever, every flood of streetlamp.

## Instrumental

We have to accept it as she stated it:

I know that I will lose myself somewhere between  
condos and cubicles and wander forgotten  
along a row of rowboats on display, turned  
face-up and leaning against the fresco  
like an inscrutable panel of experts.  
Death will show up.

And: there is enough fish food for us.  
There is all the fish food in the world.

Sometimes she relaxes with the slight ease and manner  
of the rich vacationing with the kids  
for no reason. Really, these are moments to be celebrated.  
She thought the weather had something in mind.

But when patio dining is available under canopy and  
the air is rich, the horizon perks to your lips saying,  
we mistook you for the bearded stranger,  
a man of some distinction in foreign lands.  
Tell us, if you would, really now, who  
has the tickets? Your nose twitches,  
a habit you won't own up to.  
She could have been anyone, she could have been a crowd.  
Someone being made up just for fun  
these thunderous nights wherefrom we abstract ourselves.

## The Armor of Achilles

According to those who would know, the best defense is a good offense, as defensiveness betrays guilt. Protective helmets work best when hurled at an opponent, like throwing

the book at someone, or a safety blitz, least safe of blitzes. Wide receiver spits in cornerback's face & cornerback spits back. That neither throws punches

is a sign of restraint, of chivalrous rule-following, the structure of the game. It is a game after all, folks, and not to be taken too seriously. A list of serious

games might include checkers, but not hockey, both of which involve toothlessness, but only one of which involves helmets. Of course, there are those who claim that games are

only peacetime substitutes for the real thing. Many of these critics are chess masters or fishermen, & are not to be believed. In boats one is required by law to carry a life-vest,

but not to wear it. As you know, one can drown in 2 inches of water. My uncle drowned in a half inch of vinegar, what do you think of that? He was a state senator,

an expert on national defense, & a defender of nationalism as a means to ends. Some cars are like nations in that people identify with them, & it would be possible to compare

car alarms to the Pentagon. In today's news, not to be denied, OJ. Am I tacky for mentioning it? Corruption in baseball. Wiretap in a confession. Public opinion

sways, say polls. Upper middle class white investment analysts are *undecided*, & upper middle class Latino investment analysts *agree*. In Southern California,

the world has already ended, so why get stressed about it? Engineers calculate the stress at which titanium girders will break, & design better safety glass for

the future, considered dangerous by analysts, a questionable investment. For those of us 6'2" & up, the 21st century will be a concussion hazard, where we may bump our heads on

ceilings, predicted by experts to be lower. People under 6'2" will roam cities of marble whispering *I am not impressed*, *I am not impressed*. For those who stray

from the path, there will be great anger &

terrible vengeance from on high. One will be able to choose between being seditious & being sadistic, sarcastic & sardonic.

Many of us are hopeful that in the future freedom of choice will be greater, & that those who make poor choices will be punished. The defense may rest its case, heretofore

tireless. For aerobics instructors, who never tire, layered leotards are like a suit of armor. Instructors of self-defense classes have no use for it, & they would know.

### The Sailor, 1938

He is potatoes he is

biscuits and gravy Gravy,

he is potatoes.

And biscuits.

Another arm protrudes

from his nipple.

His lips' green is not his

forehead's green.

That which is said to be of his

forehead is not of his lips,

not said to be.

At certain times of year,

he was an inversion layer,

he didn't know what language

he was speaking.

Canvas sacks of coffee beans,

the sailor, mug on a gangplank,

in the second draft,

he is totally plastered.

He is cartography's

punch line. The faintest breeze

could carry him to Zanzibar,

where the locals would refuse

to pierce his ears.

Carried to Zanzibar

by the faintest of breezes

he would attempt to persuade —

the locals to pierce his ears,

if he had brought them,

his ears, the sailor  
 All of himself at once,  
 he is a punch line  
 to be delivered by cartographers.  
 He can tell the future.  
 He's been there,  
 left encrypted messages and  
 forgotten them. Someday,  
 he will find them puzzling.  
 Someday, he will find puzzling  
 the encrypted messages  
 left in the future by him,  
 the sailor, which he will have  
 forgotten. He evicts  
 the third dimension he  
 evicts the third dimension.  
 He is *having evicted*.

### Whom It May Concern

Goes out before breakfast  
And sees bats scatter the crow-cocked blue.

Wants sun to go ahead  
And get it over with:

Eggs to be collected, things

*other than.*

Notices an owl in the rafters.

Oaks ridging forward to morning.

Shins the razorslick grass  
Cold with fog drip.

*As though*, a hammer waits  
on the speechless anvil.

The progressive tilt of fenceposts along the pasture.

*A moment earlier,*

Terrific Tom,  
The turkey,

From his lung infection  
Suffocated. *Any*

*Second now--*

Quarter, flipped, came up tails  
All yesterday

*In the event of,*

*For expediency's sake.*

Turtle found shattered at the base  
Of the watertower.

On the road, someone raking gravel

Bleeding from both ears.

## He Died At Intermission

Then the action stops as the star's indiscretion settles in. One stage hand whispers to another:

I've seen this happen time and again. He'll be thrice shamed. The sandbags are disintegrating in his hands, the sand running out over the proscenium, everywhere dwarves scramble to read the future in it first, so comic, but not quite dismissable-- oh, these are heavy times.

Shreds of canvas among us, oh!

*You begin to suspect me of insincerity  
and you're not wrong, though you'll wonder  
if I've cultivated your doubt like so many  
fava beans in the pasture of your trustworthiness,  
and now the feeling spreads so that you must  
give voice to it, you want to follow it out  
into the riots, or do you, my regret's a nest  
of suckling young in the basement you asked for.*

And the manager: No use shining a flashlight in among the objects of your earlier, arty period, objects you handle but always replace exactly, making sure the dust rings match up and trying to look cool about it because it's not the things but the placement of the things in relation to other, more or less familiar things, that feeds your faith in yourself, a faith which lacking miracles to confirm it has died with you in

this, your worst performance. There's nothing, nothing left, to be ashamed of. Sweep the hunks of glass in the intersection. Do it forever.

Andrew in the ticket booth, considered insufferably pretentious: it's true that one is rarely forced to account for black ice this time of year, as though I could be held responsible for fluctuating admissions in a market economy. Nonetheless--

And still, still later, after the burial has grown mossy we are forced to dissemble, put each other back, readjust lighting effects to compensate for the new star's infamous pallor. Together we huddle naked and shave our bodies smoother than glass.

## Quarantine

An iron lung thuds down the fire  
escape at 2 am.

What kinda blues *you* got?

Among table legs sprawled  
under the weight of cigars  
in ashtrays  
a draft stirs donut wrappers.

I come to appreciate  
the technical mastery of an unframed  
painting, three stallions in a meadow,  
one white, one brown, one brown and white.  
The horizon sunset-obscured.

Nothing's on.

In sudden static  
at the window  
constellations disappear!

## Land of the Lotus Eaters

Guppies circle the aquarium, ignoring  
rallying cries as the second-story  
bathtub begins to overflow, while  
at the open air cafe across the avenue

diners dine under heat lamps, & Los  
Angeles coagulates. Accused of parking  
illegally I protest that there is no  
such thing. Oughtn't there to be orange

vested officials in charge of directing  
said parking? Strange that in this heat  
molecules would slow to any standstill;  
less strange that any standstill would be

a source, for officials, of anxiety, for  
which workshops are offered, in which we are  
encouraged to enroll. Dr. Such-and-So  
of Yellow Pages, daytime TV, & multi-

national seminar fame has helped thousands.  
His videocassette is now available, a  
source of great comfort to the anxious.  
Now how much would I pay, & would peace

of mind be worth it. Of the pedestrians  
on Village sidewalks, 89% carry change with  
which to feed meters, according to surveys  
conducted by a group of homeless, independent

of any partisanship on the issue. Of those, 64% know exactly how long they have left, & 14% can spare some. Of the 11% of pedestrians with no change, 2 out

of 3, who may or may not be doctors, have parked & are afraid that they may be caught. This is another form of anxiety, one which makes them

nervous. 1 out of 3 are not nervous, & these are the ones who provoke suspicion among owners of boutiques. This specialty shop specializes in

mirrors ordinary people can't see themselves in. It's doing particularly well, which only makes the manager worry. His health policy embraces no counselling,

& his VCR demands repair. Dogs leashed to ginkgos make of sidewalks a fearsome gauntlet, in defiance of ordinances. Everyone knows they can

sense fear or lack of faith: there are certain blocks in the area of N 351st & Main wherein only the pure of heart dare enter. In the schoolyard one kid

calls another *white trash*, then they continue

their game of catch, using as a ball someone's pomegranate. The yard monitor is hysterical. The yard monitor, known for hysteria, is also

the mayor of this town, & legislates hysterically. City counsel members encourage enrollment in workshops, which may be subsidized. *The federal*

*government has betrayed us*, they say, the hems of their velvet cloaks gathering dust from tiled floors. City Hall has a mural out back to discourage graffiti, & another on

the roof to discourage pigeons. The artist is tall but still had to use a ladder. She lives in a *studio*, paints on mirrors self-portraits of anyone who wants one,

in which the subjects seem never to age. She is wildly successful, but prefers anonymity to obscurity. Today I returned home to find my apartment

full to the ceiling with water. I drained it by opening the heater ducts. As the living room emptied, I found that my guppies, loyal to the end, were still in the aquarium.

## Sonnet

The doorjamb whistles; framed by double plates  
of glass a poplar gestures wind beneath  
bumper to bumper skies: the clock amazed  
at its own determined pace. Qualities  
of loneliness delineate the hour.  
Houses are settling in rows defined  
by streets with names like Walnut, Mayflower,  
or 5th. At noon the citizens will line  
up in grocery, hardware, liquor stores.  
All conversation will cease. The hills  
begin pressing in, crowding closer, shore  
of ancient glacial lakes. At once, I will  
remove my gloves and run outside to catch  
glimpses, a fuse across my life, your breath.

### **Meditation in Yoshi's**

I'd like to know exactly the source  
of dissonant light improvised upon the field  
but from above, a chiding: dementia was,  
in the circumstances, overextension,  
and quite simply inappropriate at that.  
Well! I won't have been the first to say  
thank goodness in the face of all that remains  
unexplained. We might have faked wisdom.  
Hasn't So-and So mentioned that in one  
of his farewell notes? It's age-old, and like  
buried dungeon machinery, forgotten,  
since we've yet to get sick of it. It?  
Emotion, my friend. Do I kid? I never kid.  
Impossible, to kid, now.

I hardly speak to my oldest and best friends,  
and never seriously. Oh, I speak seriously only  
to acquaintances. Yet, who's to say that what  
passes between us is any less than all that  
is, and once gone it might be gone forever?  
There is nothing that paralyzes more, for me.  
The question is always how, how, and gets in  
through whatever, cotton candy, you stuff in your ears.  
That other is for the pigeons, who're dumb  
to it-- one could learn from pigeons, I imagine;  
at least that it doesn't matter how splendid one's  
regalia. No matter what, in my house, one doesn't  
raise one's voice, regardless.

### Girl Before A Mirror, 1932

This is the mirror from which she is able  
 to choose which parts of her she will be  
 today  
 when the man in the cantina  
 en calle real says to  
 his amigo the carpenter, be careful amigo, with regard  
 to herself she doesn't know where she stands.  
 This is what he says  
 today, with regard to herself, in the cantina, to his amigo the carpenter  
 about what  
 she knows and doesn't, the ends of his moustache vaseline-twirled  
 in the April  
 humidity  
 Even her wallpaper is confused: she is  
 pears and apples she arranges before she  
 rearranges them in  
 arrangements according  
 to her mood before the apple and pears in her  
 mirror  
 she reaches into each day, confusing  
 her wallpaper. The carpenter, his amigo,  
 having constructed the frame for her mirror  
 considers himself  
 a sort of go-between  
 when she rearranges herself by  
 reaching through it. She is the  
 half moon's perigee. She is eggs she is  
 sunny side up over medium, she is huevos rancheros, walking  
 home past the  
 cantina, she waits for herself in her mirror, hoping

she will select her for duty in foreign dimensions.  
She is working on  
a self-portrait of herself  
seated with mirrors all around her  
and it's hard because she doesn't know  
where to  
begin, she feels surrounded by herself and can't find  
her brushes or paints, her paintbrushes  
are lost among these  
images of herself everywhere she turns, looks  
reaches, loses herself  
in forever, forever.

## Rain in the Sun

You didn't hear it from me. I'm not unsympathetic.  
 He was pissed about the snowballs, how else  
 could he have reacted. The entire  
 performance was a bust. Now it's just  
 mop, mop, all day Well, you did miss out,  
 I have to say, but remember to pass on the corpsucles,  
 if they come around--arteries will harden.  
 Even the lucidest days get theirs,  
 I don't make anything mentioned up, I just try  
 to open myself, as veering gigantically between the steeple  
 an cumulus, a pigeon. You can't imagine,  
 I mean yes I'm sure you can imagine it.  
 Another focal point is the so-called talk  
 of the town. She was unpersuadable, would  
 not be moved--I've not tried, but singing  
 she went, away, falling away, and strideful,  
 rain in the sun, static on the bright roofs.

French doors can be smart, and do not ignore  
 the other issue of exterior decor, the latest rage  
 being head-down cycling through intersections.  
 I have the newest thing in existence--don't  
 be late. Miss it, and the momentary tragedy is  
 over, no sweat for the rest of those present,  
 bitterly able. It shan't be a bother. Hush now,  
 everything will be decided shortly, I'll take  
 my conscience to a mechanic, who'll cobble my  
 head with genuine somethings. We need a decent  
 way to approach the undreamt-of recesses  
 of the human heart which we now know were there,

yes, the whole time, at least may now be considered to have been. You could wander, ageless, the hills from here make off in droves. It was a wierd bombing, I couldn't hold a conversation with that hand fluttering my hair, that voice in the sky.

Let's blow the day off, and grind onions into the sidewalk like children. I brought the blankets and the fabulous horses, if we're not caught well we'll just have cocktails and continue, as usual so far, our straps and buckles gleaming with the sort of glow left around the edges after the great flash of impact.

It was nothing like an ocean, though there was as much of it, and the way it sounded was similar.

You can depend on certain issues for crucial agreement, brought up artfully and under the right conditions. Just then, someone handed me a scrap of envelope with a list of reasons the finances had fallen so short of what had been quite reasonably expected: some jerk withdrew his support at the moment of truth, etcetera. But you musn't worry, Love, please, that would kill me. Not kill me but I would be uncomfortable with that.

You should try some mustard greens with that, you certainly have enough, and sit on the dry part of the floor. If you're worried she'll come over and want to chat don't wave. All appliances are unplugged for safety here, you should know. Please, don't be troubled if you're told to "cultivate absenteeism,"

it's these winds we get here, fluid and often,  
minutes to be seen, empty on the hour, the hour.  
Grotesque, to panic just then, after what we'd been through.

**Penitent**

The kitchen walls tremble.

The house pieces itself together somehow.

All morning I lean on tables,  
daring my spine into a train wreck,  
until I see you coming home,  
peacock feathers tucked behind your ears.

You are wearing that jacket of yours,  
you know the one.

The one at the parade,  
the one that separated Siamese twins.

You don't have to rush here  
with your armload of confetti  
spilling along the path.

You never have to do anything, ever  
again,

which is to say,

I already know what you mean,  
don't worry about it.

## Insomnia Abstracts

1

Houses gone dead, cubes of light in which are contained..  
Shorted out, and space inside is diffused into streets  
where oil patina hums dully orange, damp to the glance.

Let out that way, it spreads itself thin, a semi-vacuum,  
probing fenders, hedges, cinder blocks on lawns, brick facades:  
choosing sides, by contrast etching detail:

minute omissions. For example, the consistency of grout.  
The third dimension of paint flakes peeling from the sill  
vanishes, becomes *suggested by* what remains visible, which,

it is assumed, has an opposite side, and a distance, however  
inconceivable, which may be said to exist between  
sides. Here the territoriality of surfaces, here

what is contained between them: the visible sides of leaves,  
the imagined space, included in the tree, from which  
the sounds of their movement emerge, *poplar, aspen*.

2

Here two heads, we'll call them, appear as elongated  
absences of light within a rectangle of light, otherwise  
full and in which they are contained. From where I stand

the source is beyond them, and they lean as though drawn by a mutual

gravity. Recognize that the rectangle is actually a cube;  
shades of blue extravagate the interior, while from where

I stand, the people appear only by lacking  
illumination, empty spaces I stare into the centers of.  
They are enveloped, as though...

But let us resist comparisons to water. To oil,  
filling up a jar. Through the dimensions of this portal  
see the room revolve, appear from the outside

not to. On the screen what is recognized as a woman's face.  
Now another face, now both together. Another  
cube, full of faces. They light up. They are suns. They reel

around the surfaces of the room, around the watchers.  
Do they imagine themselves uncontained? See them there.  
See the walls revolve. From where I stand

the underside of ivy leaves along the sill glow.

3

Here a street bisected by a series of plastic  
reflectors, revealed sequentially as the walker proceeds  
along them, surrounded by a moving sphere of visibility  
which itself ebbs and increases according to my position

in relation to streetlights. She claims to feel as though  
crawling the perimeter of a round enclosure in total  
darkness. She says the floor is damp and slippery.  
*At what point have I passed this way before?* If time were

an orbit, love might be gravity She spins on her axis.  
 At a distant intersection, whole constellations launch out  
 from storefront windows. The horizon jagged, an EKG  
 differentiating between the gray of *has not* and the gray

of *may yet*. Later, I enter an empty building,  
 which is to say, a house in which everything electrical  
 has been turned off. If time were a forested expanse,  
 you might be a box of hand-carved wood.

4

Somewhere, *este es el dia de los muertos*. He crouches  
 in the hollow of a Norwest Bank doorway, forearms  
 propped on knees, hands palm down as though having held  
 something heavy for hours. A car passes  
 through a distant intersection, hardly making a sound.  
 I rub my fingers against the grain of my jawbone, testing  
 its abrasion. I will wear them to the wrist before I am satisfied.  
 The air downtown is dense with radio emissions

but I hear nothing. The trunk of a ginkgo is colder  
 than I had expected, and triggers a reaction: I draw my  
 hand away; I wonder, may I stop at stoplights?  
 At this hour they are hesitant, ambiguous: they flash yellow,  
 And certain aspects of the surrounding area appear  
 and disappear with them; his eyes change color with each pulse  
 of wait, use caution, then vanish behind the exterior  
 compound of his cheekbone, eyebrow.

5

Drunk, I wake. On the far wall, surface detailed  
in a pattern of horizontal slats; porchlight through the blinds,

I tell myself, not quite shaking the feeling of bars,  
of gaps in my room, through which, naked, I may be viewed

from the outside. I dreamed my mother had died unexpectedly,  
which is the only way, and that a man from the Company had come in a car  
to take me away, to break the news, though he said nothing  
and played the AM radio in the company car,

his suit a field of marigolds, his bearing properly  
somber. I screamed and screamed out of obligation, my grief still  
with me after I awakened. My most prized

possession is something you said on the phone the other day,  
not even to me. One corner of my room, the one opposite  
where I wake, elongates, a shade darker, suspicious.

No one expects loneliness at 4:30 in the morning,

really? Are there other human emotions or only  
absences, variations on that theme? Outside, the porchlight,  
absorbed by my window. Reflections indicate a semi  
pulling out of the lot on a late night run to Spokane.

Behind it, a commotion of vibrating dust, then  
only stillness made deeper by contrast, that flows in  
and stifles even movement, oil filling up a jar.

I try not to stare, even at the insides of my eyelids.

## **Lunar Eclipse**

- 1 The woman on the book cover curled naked in the ferns
- 2 The book on the counter, the counter coupled up to the wall
- 3 Her claim to authorship
- 4 Drunk students over a word processor
- 5 It's conceivable that speaking a different language people somewhere are capable of thinking things we are not
- 6 Process is the point, they say
- 7 Giggling
- 8 There's an orange tomcat in the neighborhood thinks it runs the place
- 9 Nasty-nosed nimbroies nibbling on nine nasty-nosed nimbriots
- 10 Not that we'd know the difference
- 11 Angelo has the best lawn on the block, he sprays it with fish emulsion twice a month, you can smell it for days
- 12 Suggestion of a handprint superimposed on the woman's body
- 13 Would we be able to communicate with them at all
- 14 She looks like a nymph just back from the womb

- 15 The ferns teasing her spine
- 16 Outside park headquarters, redwood trunk cross section
- 17 A little plaque a third of the way in for Columbus, another close to the center for the birth of Christ
- 18 Mushrooms on the streambed either poisonous or hallucinogenic
- 19 A matter of degrees I guess
- 20 We saw the lunar eclipse yesterday from Geoff's pickup
- 21 Lopper, MacLeod, Polaski, Maddox are trailbuilding tools
- 22 Made myself sick on huckleberries, sat outside the outhouse all day with a book and plenty of fluids
- 23 The naked woman on the cover
- 24 Sending me vibes in a different language
- 25 I felt attracted to my neighbor when I saw her working on her car because I never pictured her as being capable of that
- 26 Quelled it
- 27 My friend Tony is writing an experimental paper on the relations between text, author, and interpretation
- 28 He's downed four glasses of bad wine in order to alter his relationship with the text

29 You know where this sort of thing could lead

30 Find myself weaving quite a bit as I get up to go to the bathroom

31 In another country, this has all been said before, not in a way you'd understand

32 Tony wrote that line while I was in the John

33 Roller ball makes a difference

35 Did you notice .

36 Thirty-seven

37 Thirty-eight, thirty-nine

### Comedy in Three Acts

It's automatically the next act, ushered as we were by our own applause. We applauded wildly, not knowing what for, searching wide-eyed among the pillars, curtains, behind seats, grimy undersides, and noticed that everything, everything is bolted down, even the carpets, even the soles of our feet. Through intermission, we fumbled with our programs, which were blank and confusing. We fumbled with our glasses and chewed ice. We waited. We go on waiting.

One can't help but speculate about what must go on on stage, and lastly, where the action will have left off in previous performances. It's never a question of forgetting, forgetfulness: one is compelled forward and outward into repetitions of lived-out themes, not in the usual sense but in the sense of the simplest set, indeed the simplest set designer, an object or person ignored but humming with inner force or vision, a device which places us, the audience, not on the stage but still in the performance, left blinking as the curtains whisk unexpectedly shut around us. One speculates about what one may not relive. One struggles against the future, which is to say, compulsion.

But make no mistake: the theater itself, which stands for history, dictates only in some other sense. Of everything, only unruliness will not be tolerated. And among pigeons, pigeons must have the final say, just as the crowd emerges blinded from the matinee with new and crucial precision, determined to enact a new direction for the flock, aspiring to a breakthrough day in confettied habits. We go around more conscious than ever. We present ourselves

to each other only as an afterthought.

We say, why, that man over there is our acquaintance,  
the one in the brown cashmere waistcoat. And: that man  
over there is also our acquaintance, our dentist in fact.  
But in each, an awareness is growing that what we become  
is already over. It's late and there are cars to be driven  
home, mornings to be slapped until with the urge to sob a  
breath must inevitably be gasped, bridges, streetlights,  
children, jobs, pillows, weekends to be planned, this great  
receding city with its glow that can be seen for miles....

## Coda

We've never met. We'll never meet, except  
as April's bud will meet November's earth:  
as the tree's self-portrait. You mentioned  
the "photographic quality" of the blue thing,  
and yes, I see it now too, but for me  
it's a time-lapse photograph, an aerial one  
of the sky, where the sense of hurtling-  
forward-and-looking-backward is born not  
of knowledge of the tree but of the helicopter  
I inhabit, of the headlongishness of that streak  
in the bottom left which is a pigeon in the  
speed it inhabits and not in the partitioned  
ticking or the uninterrupted continuity of  
time. The helicopter from which I view  
the blue thing is not visible, has no substance,  
is silent, supposed, imaginary, and as viewers  
we are the pilot. We are not like ourselves  
in the presence of the inscrutable blue thing.  
O frustrating blue thing, what do we know  
about you, except that you are blue?  
There is this: that you are ours, and that  
we know yet less about each other. I  
do not know you, I will not try to--but  
I am sure the blue thing is not a  
photocopy of the blue thing, not a photograph,  
not a self-portrait. Let pigeons deal with  
pigeon affairs! The blue thing is a real  
force in our lives, the states of our lives,  
lending the struggle of downtown maples the  
fanfare of aspiration, allowing us to identify

with the many things we see around us,  
this we know We are allowed to plan  
our futures together, to gather insight from  
the moment of insight, the momentous grotesqueries  
of momentary panic, than which we might  
have known better, knowing so little.

Certainly failure is a possibility, and yes there's  
a lot at stake: we know ourselves as we know  
the blue thing, by our sense of its wholeness,  
its unity and separateness like a flock of  
pigeons in flight, the occasional pigeon breaking  
away as the whole hurtles from the mouth  
of the alley as though shot from a gun,  
gunmetal blue steaks of a gunmetal haze  
that swells and collapses against the brickwork  
of familiar buildings. Like a flock of pigeons  
in flight, the elusive blue thing holds together within  
the name given it. Yet its structure is undeniable.  
Undeniably, it exists, and we can no more ignore  
it than we can ignore the rolling foothills which make  
us wonder about our own origins, our individual  
origins, pictured as an indistinct constellation  
whose third dimension is supposed, consisting  
of a wisdom we'll fake, for now. And we suspect  
that our substance (our "nuts and bolts," you'd say),  
what leads us to bother with the blue thing at all,  
or, admit it, with such furious passion, is visible  
as counterpoint to the regularity of the hills, as  
dim light between visible stars and their stories,  
the things we tell each other about them, handed  
down or invented on the spot, as what happened

just before our life stories begin, what prompts us to remember sad or funny events, dots left unconnected, crayon scribble outside patterns.

And we must feel, well, lonely, for lack of a better word, but really that is the word, despite the evidence, the facts of day-in and day-out togetherness. It's frustrating, but what we feel as truth always supercedes what we know to be true, as loneliness persists in lives well-pocked with love. Mostly we respond to the fear of loneliness: we know that city-wide blackouts tend to produce violence in the streets but also gatherings around flashlights, the sharing of speculations about the nature of things in a world brought electrically to a halt. The night is still and alive with an underbuzz not usually heard here, but which in burgeoning self-awareness grows to a loud hum then a dull roar as we venture onto porches then sidewalks and parks of neighborhoods lit for a hundred years. Stars are visible for the first time in a hundred years, and visible too is the light between stars, territory of the blue thing. Later, constellations remain remembered, earned, a skyful of form less regular than imagined, a miracle of form beyond the falling apart of things that faith needs.