1985

What we bury: poems and epilogues

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WHAT WE BURY: POEMS AND EPILOGUE

by

James Harry Nicholas Martin

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1985
Abstract

The manuscript, What We Bury: Poems and Epilogue, consists of two major parts. The first is comprised of eighteen poems, selected from the thirty two that I had written by the end of March. Included in the eighteen, in accordance with what I had stated to be one of my aims in undertaking this project, are three poems written out of inherited forms: two, "The October Wind," (p.22) and "Wandering By the Sea For the First Time," (p.23) are sonnets and one, "Brewster Station," (p.10) is a sestina that in the final draft was broken. Also adhering to one of my original aims in the proposal, three poems are composed in an iambic meter: "The Song of Shadows," (p.18) "The October Wind" (p.22) and "A Letter Found Near the Ashes of Archangel." (p.25)

The second part consists of the epilogue. A prose piece which is both a culmination and a synthesis of the prose work I had been writing throughout the year. In it, I attempt to articulate my own thoughts concerning three aspects of poetic construction: the advantages and disadvantages of a short line compared to a longer one; the use of meter to animate a poem; and how an inherited form such as a sestina or a sonnet can mold a poem's emotional content. Throughout my discussion of these three concerns, I use the work of other poets such as James Wright and Robert Frost, in addition to my own, to illustrate and illuminate the more abstract and general points made within the epilogue's text.
Acknowledgments

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The Pequod: "2043 Haviland Ave.," "The Path," "The October Wind"
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Even the sea sings one octave in the past.

-David St. John
Leaving For School

A boy opening the door
Of his house, early
In the morning, makes
The same sound as when
His mother punctures
A coffee can; the wind
Seems to escape in.
And it seemed right
To wear the key around
His neck as if it were
A cross. Right that
The shoelace it hangs by
Was rubbed black from
Holding his foot in.
And it seems no hurt
Could come in climbing
(For he's wearing sneakers)
The black bannister
To look in through
The brass mail slot
At the foyer trapped
With shadows. The pat
On the holster: the mitt
Strapped to his belt
Is a reflex like
A knee kicking.

Do not make too much
Of the fear that made
His parents give him
One key for two locks
On a single door.
He didn't. Standing
Before the white door,
The key catching sunlight
In its teeth, he looked
Up at the blue and knew
The sky would rain baseballs
After school. The key
Swung sharply towards
His chest, landing
With a flat slap and he
Turned his back on the house,
His mother still moving like
A shadow in the sun parlor.
He climbed down the steps,
The mitt beating time
Against his thigh,
Thwack, thwack, thwack.
My last summer spent
With you, Mother, sweltering in concrete heat. Weeks
Wasted tarring the roof, hanging pictures your chiropractic back
Wouldn't let you reach.

I never let you forget
My promise to depart this house peopled with his black
Recliner, an empty den. Its roofs once tarred by matrimonial hands.
Dad left his trowel

Fingerprints in plaster,
I believed I couldn't live here anymore and you shouldn't inhabit
A memory. "Go on with your life, get out," I said.
"But we built this house

Tacked, plastered, nailed
A life together; raised tomatoes in the yard, stayed
Flooding thunderstorms. My age promises nothing but broken hips,
Buckets of denuded soil."

Last week, you took off
For Spain's red, porous soil. Leaving me
Postcards of your progress. One arrived today:
Goya's Maja; the nude.

On its back, in your hand,
"I saw the real thing, returned home in time to go
To dinner. We had duck, went for a walk. He
Is a very good guide."

Now I am the one
Walled in. Duck was a meal we shared
Only on Easter. I want to know if you slept alone.
I am the one making

A mausoleum of my loss.
You are just "enjoying thoroughly." I live within my words
To shut out the world. You live in the world and use words
To propel you.

Stay as long as you like, travel as far as you can,
The roof won't leak, the pen and ink elegies will stay centered,
Stay dry.
Watch Repair

In my closet, in a yellowed cigar box
Are the jeweled screwdrivers, a caliper,
Scattered watch parts: springs, hands, crystals.
After the war, my father took a course
In watch repair. But he became a bookbinder,
The money was better.

When he would come home late, clocking overtime
For the third week in a row, he would tell
My mother how much he hated American Press.
She would fix him a strong drink and he would sit,
A book he'd read three times idly open,
Staring into the walls.

He never spoke much of the war.
But when we stayed up late watching
Old war movies, I would see his hands flinch
As whitewashed Chinese tanks cut
Through ranks of Marines. Once I asked him
To tell me about it. He said
That his buddies brought out hunks of jade
And he returned penniless.

Sometimes I would see him
Use the screwdrivers to fix his glasses.
See him take the frame apart slowly, placing
Each screw on a page of white paper.
Through the lens framed in his hand,
My father's face looked scarred.

The day I lost his silver war watch,
He sat silent in his recliner, the glow
Of his cigarette filtered through a crystal
Ashtray like gunfire seen at a distance.
Finally, he spoke: "It's okay, we all lose things."
I wanted a caliper to measure everything
He'd sacrificed. All I could offer
Was my forgiven face
And the movement of my hands into his.
The Path

To this day whispers of you
Frost the panes of the Maine house
Where I was raised. I tip-toed
Through my childhood, past
A half-filled double bed,
A dresser where a picture once stood.

In the woods beyond our house
My mother taught me to find a path
In the forest by looking
For the absence of the forest.
I asked her where I could find you.
Hand stroking my pony tail, she said
Some things should be left unfound.

But your absence was always about
Like breath on a winter's day.
One Halloween, nearly smothered by time,
I held a man's ringed hand. The picture,
Hid under my mattress, was of us;
You dressed as a ghost, me a witch.
Mother had already seen it
And cut out your sheeted face.

How many nights I've lain awake
Filling in that face, how often
I thought you real and me the ghost.
Days I flitted through construction papered
Hallways, not hearing anything
But the seven letter word you left
As your inheritance. Later, weeks later,
I heard muffled talk of getting her
Some help, some time to get her head on

Straight. I thought they were going
To send me away. I imagined you
Would hear of it and come get me.
Finally I'd exchange unveiled words with you,
Trace my hand along your unsheeted cheek.
I stayed. Though one night, awake with cramps,
I heard mother on the phone. She talked all night;
I couldn't make out the man's name
Because of the pain. I grew up.
My blouse unbuttoned by boys
Who left in the morning; my eyes
Hid in the attics of their lids;
My fingers ran red with polish;
I believed all men left. One didn't.
Now on better days I think I've found
The path that needs no absence. Still,
Nights I wake with a vision of you
Shacked up in a trailer
Nursing a need that never went metric,
That is up to a fifth before noon.

Then I turn to him, cradling my head
Against his chest, canting into flesh:
"I don't want to find him."
Brewster Station

As the voice in the receiver rose, emptying
Its hollow news into my ear
I knew I'd lost someone. You closest cousin,
More brother than cousin, you never crossed my mind.
A T.V. camera man stationed himself above your deathbed;
Filming a torso lying legless pressed against a rail
Of Metro North. Were you, back spined by rail,
Very cold? Or when life is emptied
Into a camera and you can watch your death
Reflected in the lens, did your mind
Forget the cold; see those who'd watch, did your ears
Drain of voices; one your cousin's?

I need to know these things, cousin.
I have walked along Brewster's silver rail
That now runs like a needle through my mind,
Wondering if you emptied
Any words into that syringe of a tunnel. My ears
Heard nothing but oncoming death.

Because the dead don't account their death,
I must remember times, cousin,
We colored books--then brakes fill my ears--
I think of the travels we made by rail,
My hands wrapped around a Brownie, yours empty,
Palms turned up as if to question in your mind
What you were doing in this picture. My mind
And hands can't answer, they only know how to flip
Through albums of the dead. By three, this station has emptied
And though I can plead out loud, cousin,
It does no good to turn crayon blue, to rail
Against the shriek red signs. But I have ears.

Yet even here, your voice like an ear's
Cold lobe has drained of color. My mind
Is warping, bending the brittle rail
That was the backbone of your death.
Will you slip again from sight, cousin?
Will the fixer, memory, bleed your life from its picture?

In my mind, the rails are emptied of people.
I'm behind the viewfinder. Your death
Crosshaired. Talk, Gregory, talk to me.
But he could never tell her all the rest, how many other living things, birds, nights smelling of grass and rain, sunlit moments of simple peace, also gather in what she was to him.

—Thomas Pynchon

II
Visiting

(1)
I arrived as the sun and ducks
Rose in thin streaks of color
In the sky above the lake
Beyond your cottage.
Looking through your window,
I saw you wrapped
In your grandmother's quilt;
Prints and strips from every dress
She loved stitched into a canvass.
You ran into my arms
Shouldering a history.

(2)
Here, in this canoe, chasing loons
Over the still surface of your lake,
I try to paint for you the faces
Of my grandmother, father, cousin.
But they are faces in the lockets of bubbles
The canoe leaves behind and you can't
Turn around in time before they sink;
Drowning so swiftly even the loons
You love couldn't retrieve them.

(3)
As my feet dangle, off the bed, touching
Yours, you tell me I remind you
Of the round-shouldered boy
In Seurat's Bathing at Asnières.
I have never seen him. And your gallery:
The lover who died before you could reach him,
The father seen once are still lives
That neither my questions
Nor my brushes of your cheek
Can flesh out.
On the day I must depart, the rain
Drips down the windshield
Like paint on a palette.
The loons have stopped diving.
Hours into the night, I see myself
In the rearview mirror and can’t help
Thinking of Rembrandt’s late self-portraits:
A man driven to record himself
But whose past, whose background
(Flat, heavy strokes of muted brown)
Is unprintable, invisible.
Sleeping

It's a curious mixture of beauty and despair
To rub one's nose in another's hair.

Try to understand. I drag a hand across a cheek
Reaching for both the union and thrill I seek.

Why are mine the fingers curled in your most private mane?
What makes you whisper the mantra of my name?

In pleasure's rumpled ruin I watch the moon rise
As if to hint at the galaxies beneath your closed eyes.

I will never know. Not even why your sleeping touch
Singes my chest. At morning we wake scarred— that's enough.
What We Bury

The snow outside my window
Has almost buried a young pine.
I think the flakes
Stopped talking to their kin,
Their lovers ages ago. Now they wheel
In the wind, keeping the slopes
Of their fall to themselves.

Last night I felt you slide
Away from me like the car on our ride home;
Curling yourself in a far bank
Of my bed. What began in a flurry
Of words has come to this pane
That contains one reflection.

What did I say, while wipers arced
A field of vision through the snow?
Could they change the bread and wine
We ate on that bench atop the harbor,
Watching the snow and that single pine
Crowning a schooner's mast
Sway in the breeze? Could my words
Stale and vinegar this?

This afternoon someone came up to me
And asked if the rip in my Army jacket
Was a bullet hole. I didn't answer,
And he walked away muttering something
About a wounded flake. But walking home,
It seems my breath like the trees
Has grown heavy: I know I didn't ask you
If you loved me. Nor did I begin with my love.
Outside my window, the snow
Continues to fall, to bury.
The Rain

I pray
for rain while
she lies by me,
with me.

I think
of her face
earlier,
when I entered;
two pure
white teeth,
a mouth
open to pleasure.

At times
I wonder
if we aren't
animals
performing.
But her breathing
is deeper
than my questions:
strong enough
for two.

Morning rain
wets
the lips
of curtains.
You rise,
wake me,
whisper words
so wafer thin
I am awash
with belief.
Twelve Days Before Christmas

On the ride home, we listen
To the splintered voices
On the radio slice at the night
Until distance dulls them into static.

Turning to you, in the silence,
I wonder what else I can offer
Besides these few details
That the night forgives:
How a paper factory lights
The horizon and is, at a distance,
Almost beautiful; the way a house
Wrapped in blinking lights,
Wears a halo for a second;
How the bridge girders are pocked
With rust and the promise
That all that links corrodes
And falls under the weight
Of too much travel; and the way
The cut Scotch pines lie in a row
On the roadside—left by a trucker
Long gone.

Stopping to gather one
Of these gifts into the trunk,
I can see the lights of a passing car
Alive in your eyes. I do not want
To kill that light
Through distance,
Or a voice that repeats its love
Until distance is bled from repetition.
Rather, let me leave this poem
Like a pine by the road
And trust you'll find it.
The Song of Shadows

That day we took your parent's skiff
Far across the lake and anchored it
Under a tree whose branches trailed out
Over the water like a sentence whose end
Need not be spoken. We watched
A couple on the stern of a Chriscraft
Raise their drinks in light so clear
You could almost hear the ring as the lips
To their glasses met. I pointed to a ray
Of sun that scattered into a rainbow
When she curled her hand around the railing
And then they were gone.

You leaned near me
To speak, the waves of their wake moving
Under your words like chords and I couldn't help
Watching your breasts sway to that music
As the light stripped bare your thin t-shirt.
You talked of the night before, how the violinist
Danced her bow over her strings and how
Your hand in mine seemed to tremble in tune.
But you never finished, your voice trailing
Like the last bar she played.

Even so I nodded, though to this day
I do not know why we chose to cleave
Drink from glass, spectrum from sun,
Bow from hand, shadow from self.
We did. If you are ever under
That tree again at dusk look
For the shadows we left on the water,
Listen for the dark, thirsting song they sing.
A Lesson in Objectification For Two

I should know better
Having learned long ago
To stop laying
Longerons to a model's body
On a plan's white sheet.

For balsa under tissue
Is the color of thigh
Under stocking.

Now it is too late:
Running my hand
Along the body,
I can feel my error--
You have flown.
Baggage

The buckle of a bra hangs out
Of an unclaimed suitcase, the metal
Catching the fluorescent light,
As it circles in and out of view
As if to call its owner.
It brings back the shallow lust
I felt for you; the way
My daydreams filled out your leotard.

We whispered math away. You telling
Me about being the unknown X
In a marriage factoring out a father.
I never noticed we were surrounded
By stares until someone told me
You weren't drawn to the opposite sex.
Though we traveled in opposite circles,
We kept in touch. Our letters
Inked equations of ourselves.

In my last letter, I wrote
How my father died and how
Respect left unsaid can lay unclaimed
For a lifetime. I wondered why
The first woman who unclasped her bra
Before me, packed and left and why
My life reduced itself to its simplest factor.
I asked for answers. I waited for weeks.

A week ago, almost a year later,
I received your letter. You write
You're amazed someone so far
Removed can press so strongly
For response. Yet you can only answer
My distress with yours. So I learn
You were raped last summer.

Lisa, I am tired of waiting
In this circle of tourists
Who watch and wait only for the bags
Tagged with their reflection.
You ended your letter with your number.
I will call.
Where is my rest place, Jesus? Where is my harbor? Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for, and the window I can look from that frames my life?

-Derek Walcott
The October Wind

The wind up kicks across the lake, rippling
its surface like a thought. Do not ask me
what is harbored at the bottom, what
the wind stirs and forces to settle over
And over; nor what the wind brings that pains
the trees to creak and bend as if the touching
Of chafed, raw limbs could seal a promise
To weather the weight of the season's first snow.
Nor why in a sudden gust my eyes leave
This letter I promised you and trace the path
Of newly trodden grass that ends with a spade
Sunk to the hilt in earth fresh and black.
I only know what the wind touches grows cold
And that it blows over this body each day.
Wandering By the Sea For the First Time

I've left you asleep in a cabin, by now
Almost lost among the trees. Here,
Piles of timber haunt the shore; bled
And bleached by the sea, the wind, the sun
Into stone. Running my hand along
The smooth surface of a trunk, it is hard
To imagine once this was a tree--limber
With the give and take of green. Trying
To lift it, I stagger under the weight that
Replaces all that's hurt or hurts with thoughts
That harden to withstand injury's ebb and flow.
This beach is littered with crystalized beliefs:
At the forest's edge, I turn and see the tide
Has covered my steps, then plunge into the underbrush.
Indian Summer Sunday

A crow, stalling on a steepled
Pine, squawks its dark hymn.
A sparrow hides in the shadows
Of a neighboring elm, chirping
A parable that saves nobody.

On the path to the lake,
Every thicket lies fallow.
Thrushes dart in and out,
Searching for fruit, finding
Only thorned branches.

On the lake's surface, blue nymphs
Baptize their nibbed legs
In still cold water;
Writing their last will—
Even fish must eat.

A sunfish meekly looks on
As a group of lean carp
Circle a piece of bread;
Ripping into it as if
The bread were a body, a word.

I am on the scene. The man
In the boat, holding my rod
Between my hands as if
It were an article of faith.
My bobber, attached to the barbed bread

Disappears: the crow flies low
Over my taut line and I believe
Its black song. Christ,
You are the bread.
The carp are rising, rising.
A Letter Found Near the Ashes of Archangel

Time is the mercy of Eternity.
-Blake

Peter—you know, I think, the fear that lives
Inside a bootprint found fresh and sharp;
The way a forest's shelter ends when winter
Freezes the lakes, making travel easy
For Nikon's troops. That day, we sang the last
"Amen" and Ivan laid the loaf before us
As if it were our altar's final brick.
Your Lena turned toward me, from her pew;
Its second rib still stained with sweat that fell
From your face while building it; her face
Seemed to shed its terror like a lake
In spring. I only hope she saw the same
Current of calm break on my face, but doubt it.
She stayed alone inside to murmur to God,
While Mark and I took the wagon down
To the shore to get those planks we'd cut
And carried six miles because you thought
Boards three fingers thick could temper
The current. We brought them to that field,
The clearing father forgot to mow each year,
Where I used to go to talk to myself.
There, I helped Mark wrestle those warped and beaten
Boards into a square. We cut the four
Birches by the barn and nailed them
At an angle, one to a corner. Driving in a nail
To strengthen the pyramid's weak frame, my grip
On my hammer slipped and the handle I told you I carved
From a mustard tree snapped. When we were done,
I watched the pyramid's branches blink and flutter
Like lashes around the sun's setting eye.
I stayed until the sky went blind.
That night, the cold pared the air so thin
Every breath was a gasp. I wish you could
Have seen the sky, ribboned with strips of a purple
Darker, deeper than our Lenten robes.
We gathered, twenty in the field. Moonlight danced
Over the birches' white bark. Nicholas
Staked the cross into ground still soggy
Under the pyramid. Each of us threw
A pitchfork's worth of hay into the pyre
Until the cross was buried. We formed a circle,
Holding hands, singing hymns. The sheets
We wore billowed in the breeze; Lena's white
Like a bridal train. And strung together
I imagine we looked like those figures
We used to cut from paper Grandmother gave us
And hang around the tree at Christmas. Yes,
Think of it that way. We started to circle
The flame, faster, faster, then it was
As if you tore those angels apart and flung
Them into the fire, one by one.
Your Lena was nineteen, I was to be twenty.
Peter, I failed, failed all I
Believed, everything you entrusted. Peter
Your brother is made of paper
And this will be the page you can't forgive.
The subject matter for "A Letter Found Near the Ashes of Archangel" originates in the schism that occurred in the Russian Orthodox Church in the sixteenth century. During this time, the patriarch of the Church, Nikon, attempted to institute a number of reforms in the church service: for example, he ordered the spelling of "Jesus" changed as well as the number of fingers one used to cross himself, from two to three. One group, which became known as the Old Believers, considered this heresy. They refused to accept these changes. As a result, they suffered excommunication and were forced to flee to a rural region north of Moscow which they christened Archangel. There, they were persecuted by Nikon's troops. The Old Believers saw the Anti-Christ, in the form of Nikon, at the head of this persecution. By 1666, a large number of the Old Believers thought that the end of the world was at hand. In order to cleanse their souls, they would hold a final church service and then cremate themselves.
In one sense, the poems that precede this epilogue can be thought of as individual journeys in a fledgling writer's exploration of poetry; each poem a foray in his search for an artistic sensibility. Each piece of work reflects the selecting and discarding of ideas, beliefs and intuitions as to how exactly I believed my work should be heard and how to achieve that result on the page; in short, they mirror the oscillations and flux of my very young and still developing sensibility. This selecting and discarding was largely dictated by the poems themselves; from the moment any one of them was conceived, throughout its writing and rewriting, the poem served to challenge, explore and, in some cases, redefine the abstract, general tenets which comprised my understanding of what a poem should be. Each one forced me to apply the theoretical ideas I had concerning a poem's form, tone, line length, stanza length, metaphors, even the very words I chose to its own distinct and particular terrain. As a result, what could have remained hazy and insufficiently scrutinized in my mind, when put on the page, became sharply focused. The view, needless to say, was not always pretty. Lastly, a poem demanded that all these concerns be fashioned together in a way that made the poem coalesce into a seamless, singular entity.

To state now, however, that I have reached my destination, that I have developed my artistic sensibility to a degree that enables me to tune the poem on the page perfectly with the one in my mind would be imprudent and presumptuous; if anything,
my work made me realize that I have just begun to examine the inner workings of a poem with the proper seriousness and skill. What my work also made clear was, if a final, complete sensibility could be attained, just how tremendously catholic it would be. If knowledge begins, as Socrates maintains, by becoming aware of what one does not know, then my search took a large step forward when I realized I had no conception of just how large the realm of possibility was for constructing a poem; the multitude of ideas and beliefs and strategies a poem could foster and nurture.

A poem asked, though, a stringent discipline; if it were to succeed, it commanded a test of the integrity of each and every aspect of its construction; faults and weaknesses in the broader, more general can on of beliefs brought to it would show up, sometimes embarrassingly. A poem, in part, is as Robert Frost says, "a performance," a display of a poet's ability.¹

In order to illustrate more clearly the way a poem will test any belief one brings to it, I would like to examine three aspects of poetic construction that, through the course of my project, occupied a large portion of my thought. These are: the advantages and disadvantages of writing poems in short lines as opposed to using longer lines; the use of meter to animate a poem; and the structure an inherited form such as a sestina or a sonnet can give a poem's emotional content.
Before I turn to the first aspect, it is necessary to insert a disclaimer. An element of dissembling exists when a writer attempts a critical examination of a work which he has also authored. I am unable to talk with complete truth about how I constructed any one of these poems because so much of the work occurred below the surface of conscious thought. Tangentially, some of the rationales and explanations became clear only after I had finished a poem; thus, they may not be, in fact, the actual motives I had during the creative process. Undeniably, however, a number of these explanations seem to fit the concerns I had while writing the poem and can, I think, be discussed profitably.

"The Rain," the poem which uses the shortest lines of any of the work in the manuscript, exists in three different forms on one work page. (Please see Appendix A.) All these forms use basically the same words, the major difference between the three being the length of the lines in which they were written. I finally decided to use the short lines because of the visual and rhythmic benefits they afforded the poem's subject matter.

Short lines usually force the reader to slow down, to ponder over single words, whereas in longer lines some words can get lost within the body of the longer line. Implicitly, this gives such words as prepositions and conjunctions much more weight; in addition to providing grammatical sense, they must develop the poem's thematic, philosophical and musical con-
cerns. One of the ways to do this is through repetition. In a poem whose religious themes were so apparent, the incantory effect gained by repetition was especially attractive. Thus, when the "with me" concludes the first stanza and is echoed by the poem's last line, "with belief," the "with" has, to a degree, been transformed, attaining, most likely on a subconscious level, a different and greater power than it had previously.

The greatest benefit of short lines is their ability to draw into focus a poem's tensions. My poem concerns itself with the division between body and soul, the tension between the physical and metaphysical. This concern is as old as Petrarch and Dante, probably older. In order to see how the poem's form makes this division clear, let us look at a number of specific examples. In the first stanza, this division occurs between the line "she lies by me" and the one which follows, "with me." The "by" signifying a physical, spatial description, while the "with me" connoting an emotional, metaphysical linking. In the second stanza, it is assisted by the pun on "two"; letting the line be heard as "too pure." This abstract, metaphysical line is balanced by the physical description of "white teeth" in the next line. In the third stanza, the division is given an ironical taint. The word, "performing," not only helps define the division but suggests that in acting like animals we are in some way diminishing ourselves. On a larger scale, the first five lines of this stanza advance this element of the division,
while the stanza's last five lines serve to balance the poem's division by advancing the metaphysical aspect. As a result, the form of this pivotal stanza conveys, quite palpably, the two opposing forces in equilibrium.

The last stanza breaks this equilibrium. The physical and metaphysical forces compound each other rather than act in opposition. The two lines, "You rise,/wake me," act in conjunction with each other. The poem, thus, has resolved itself. The physical description of the rain blowing onto curtains is linked with the religious act of Communion; the mouthed words become wafers, an answer to the poem's division.

After using the short line in "The Rain," I felt quite ambivalent about it. I admired its ability to focus attention, visually, which is, after all, how many people experience poetry. I also valued the way it strung a poem vertically down the page and rid the work of unnecessary detail. This, in turn, forced a cleaner, sparer unfolding of the poem's action. Moreover, each short line had to grow out of the preceding one and give birth to the next; narrative digression, using the short line, is dangerous: one must go for the heart.

What troubled me about the short line was one of its advantages: I felt it placed too much emphasis on the visual. Poetry, I thought and still think, is primarily an aural art. In this respect, a short line is like a single note fingered on a piano; on an aural level, it must play itself out almost
into silence before the next note can sound. A longer line is much more like a chord, giving one the opportunity to orchestrate not only different notes within the line itself, but to combine these notes into a chord which can then be woven into and with the music of the other lines.

In addition to this musical reservation, it seemed to me, on a thematic plane, a longer line would allow not only dangerous digressions but also fruitful qualification. A longer line, by extending both a poem's aural and thematic range, raised the stakes of what it could risk.

The first poem I wrote after "The Rain" which attempted to incorporate this thinking into its construction was "Watch Repair." The poem contains three major words around which the poem is constructed: "watches," "book," and "war." These words act to unify the poem by providing a linguistic thread, or a vernacular comprised of words which are related in some way to the major ones, e.g. "watch" and "clocking," "book" and "page," "war" and "tank." What a longer line enabled me to do, to a degree not possible in a short line, was narrate a story while at the same time weaving the vernacular of the three major words into the poem in a way that was understated and unobtrusive.

To illustrate this I would like to trace the vernacular of "watches" through the poem. The first stanza lists "the jeweled screwdrivers, a caliper ... springs, hands, crystals." These are echoed in the second stanza by "clocking overtime"; this
continues in the third with "watching" and "hands flinch"; through
the fourth with "lens framed"; and concludes in the fifth with
"war watch," "crystal ashtray," "a caliper," "my forgiven face"
and "the movement of my hands into his."

While the vernacular of "watches" exists throughout the
poem, the references function in different ways. By being verbs,
"clocking" and "watching," or adjectives, "crystal," or nouns
describing a human body, "face" and "hands," these words first
advance the narrative, help tell the poem's story, and only
secondly call attention to their being part of the vernacular.
A long line, because it allows narrative qualification, promotes
the use of motifs in this subtle fashion.

While a long line can contribute to a poem's complexity,
it also demands that the poet pay much more attention to the
cadences of that line, its rhythm. A poem constructed of long
lines in which the poet has failed to pay attention to their
rhythms will sound like a cacophony complete with a dissonant
overture. This revelation marked a definitive point in my
year's work. In order to reveal just what a difference a rhythmic
concern in a poem can make, I would like to compare two poems:
"Thinking of Seclusion" by Robert Bly and "Lying in a Hammock
at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," by James
Wright. (Both these poems can be found in Appendix B.) I
chose these two poets because they share many of the same
poetical concerns; to such a degree that they have even col-
laborated on a translation of a book of George Trakl's poems. There can be found, even in a casual comparison of their work, differences: one of the most important exists in their handling of a line's rhythm; Bly tries to deny it, while Wright works with it.

The line that opens "Thinking of Seclusion!"—"I get up late and ask what has to be done today"—has a deliberate declarative flatness. Instead of working with a line's rhythm, the way stressed and unstressed syllables fall within the line, Bly places all his trust in the line's rhetoric. I am using this term as Jonathan Holden does in his article, "The Prose Lyric," to mean "the purported contract—between the speaker and his audience: the question of who is speaking to whom, through what mask, and for what ostensible purpose." Bly's first line firmly establishes the ironic mask of the speaker; reading the title, we know something will be done today, but the first line seems to diminish the value of this act, to strip away all the romantic pretenses we might normally associate with contemplating seclusion. The element of play in the line's whimsical tone hints that our normal expectations will not be honored; moreover, it serves notice that the contract we, as readers, hold with the speaker will be filled with unexpected turns, hidden clauses.

The last line of this contract, which the poem's text comprises, reveals rhetoric's power at its greatest. The
The poem's last line is "prepared" by the three in the stanza that precede it. These comically provide the domestic reality one ignores in partaking of contemplative seclusion. The final line contains the rhetorical move that makes the poem: the tense changes from the present, "is," in the three lines of the second stanza, to the past tense, "haven't," in the last line. This tense change is the poem's hidden clause, its fine print, and it transforms the entire poem. In light of it, we must reevaluate the "wasting" of a day thinking about seclusion. The speaker, in the terms of his contract, obviously believes it is worth it. Thus, not combing one's hair for a month becomes an emblematic flouting of social responsibility. Responsibility imposed by a society tainted with, in line seven, monetary and, implied, superficial concerns. At the same time, one cannot deny the very human price of forsaking these concerns, the turning of one's children into radishes. (Although, the humor tends to divert us away from the statement's implications.)

Without a doubt, Bly's tense change is brilliant, but I have come to question the ability of a poem built solely on this power to resonate. Rather, Bly's rhetorical felicity seems more like a good joke: it gives the poem a brief, powerful spark. The light, though, dies after the rhetorical move is "figured out" and like a joke on retelling, one finds the poem, on re-reading, much less rewarding.

Juxtapose now, two lines near the middle of Wright's poem:
"Down the ravine behind the empty house,/ The cowbells follow one another." Lurking in these lines as in many of the other lines of the poem is an iambic meter. Instead of suppressing the rhythms as Bly does, Wright utilizes them, gently and subtly. This, in my mind, makes the poem cohere in a way that Bly's never quite manages. The presence of a loose, yet calculated, rhythm provides an aural link between the visual images—the butterfly, the cowbells, the horse droppings, the hawk—that enables these individual details to coalesce into a landscape.

Wright's poem, though, retains its rhetorical aspect. The simple declarative of the last line is stunning; even more so, when one remembers the title. The rhythmic presence, combined with rhetoric's power, fuses the preparation and the final "twist" into a seamless entity one remembers almost as if the experience had been one's own.

In my poem "A Letter Found Near the Ashes of Archangel," I attempted to use, as Wright had, the benefits that both rhetoric and rhythm can give a poem. The subject matter of my poem had fascinated me for a long time, but it presented a number of difficulties that I was unsure how to overcome, most notably how to infuse an event so far removed historically and culturally with an immediacy; how to take the subject out of the history books and turn it into a poem whose language would inject the event with life.

The answer I finally found was to combine an epistolary
strategy with a loose iambic pentameter. I felt this combination would enable the poem to transcend the historical and cultural gap that existed between the poem's epoch and the present day. It seemed if the poem were to succeed it would have to lie its way to the truth; to be so made up that it stopped being made up and started feeling, to the modern reader, real.

The epistolary strategy—a man writing a letter to his brother describing the events he had seen—gave the poem's rhetoric a chance to reflect such a deep intimacy that it could fulfill one of the obligations I felt integral to that "purported contract" between speaker and reader that Holden maintains rhetoric's strength stems to make human contact between the two. Moreover, this strategy permitted a characterization, a "fleshing out" of the narrator that would not have been possible otherwise in the narrative.

Alone, however, I did not believe this strategy could sustain, to use Coleridge's term, the "suspension of disbelief" I felt was especially necessary for this poem. As I mentioned in analyzing the Wright poem, constructing a poem with the rhythms of each line in mind can help immeasurably in synthesizing individual details of a poem into a coherent whole. Thus, I decided that the combination of these two strategies would act to reinforce each other and contribute to the poem's success.

This interplay between rhetoric and meter is evident in the poem's first line: "Peter—you know, I think, the fear that
The line's "stutter," the pause dictated by the commas in its third foot, does two things: it begins a characterization of the narrator, suggesting an unsureness, an indecisiveness of a man who does not know how to begin to relate what he has witnessed. This use of rhetoric starts to bridge the gap between speaker and reader; after all, who would not be a little unsure about how to tell his brother that his wife killed herself while he stood by and watched? This same "stutter" also establishes the iambic meter.

As rhetoric assists the discovery of the meter in the first line, so meter can assist a poem's rhetorical power. I think this occurs most effectively in the line after the congregation has been likened to figures the writer and his brother used to cut from paper "And hang around the tree at Christmas. Yes, /
Think of it that way." In the line ending with the "Yes" the narrator finally ceases stuttering, he grasps the metaphor that will allow him to relate what he saw. A rueful irony exists in his choice; he knows that his metaphor will be, ultimately, inadequate, yet it is the best he can do. As such, the poem's meter reinforces the rhetorical strength of this affirmation; the "Yes" is the stressed syllable of an expected iambic foot broken by a late, heavy caesura. Transcending this caesura to maintain the integrity of the line, the syllable gains much more stress. This strength is accentuated further when we realize that the four lines before have ended on unstressed syllables;
by being the first line to end on a stressed syllable, the "Yes"'s stress is compounded. Thus, the pivotal moment when the speaker finds his voice both to his brother and to the twentieth century reader is reinforced and made bolder by the poem's meter.

Just as the long line furthers and enlarges a poem's scope, I feel the combination of rhetorical and rhythmic power also extends a poem's range and, consequently, enables it to move the reader. But again, an integral part of the Archangel poem was its epistolary strategy; it, in part, gave rise and validity to the poem's language, its rhetoric. The same can be said of the two set forms I worked within during the year: the sonnet and sestina had an analogous effect on my poem's emotional content; as the epistolary strategy imposed certain limits and constraints on a poem's language, forcing it to reflect the intimacy of two brothers, so a sonnet imposes its own restrictions. Because of its length, fourteen lines, and the fact that a "turn" usually occurs between the octet and sestet, the form can test the inherent structures and meanings of an idea.

One can see the sonnet's constraints molding Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent." (This poem can also be found in Appendix B.) Frost's daring choice to use only one metaphor, in a single sentence, with which to compare his lady is aided by the sonnet's length, which restrains the metaphor from breaching the point where it breaks down.

The accepted practice of turning a sonnet between the octet
and the sestet also contributes to the sonnet's ability to refine and focus its emotional content. Frost begins his poem by comparing his lady to a tent. In the opening eight lines, Frost uses language descriptive of tents and applies it, through the opening simile, to his lady. The turn in Frost's poem is indicated by the clause that begins, "But strictly held by none, is loosely bound." At this point the tent becomes peripheral to the poem; it exists to provide an idiom for Frost to speak about his love. The sonnet's turn forces the poet to confront the real emotional core of his poem; and the vernacular the tent metaphor has provided sustains the emotional abstractions of the last six lines. The image, however, remains, helping to consolidate the poem into a whole.

One of the ways a sonnet traditionally ends is with a couplet. A couplet contains an end rhyme that sets it off from the sonnet's body. Because of this, and, as we saw in the Bly poem, the rhetorical strength gained by being the poem's "final clause," the couplet is a particularly effective place to twist the poem's argument one final degree; to push a metaphor to the brink of its destruction and thus, strain the language to a point where it makes contact with the reader. In Frost's couplet, one word, "bondage," takes all the expectations that have been prepared for in the preceding lines and twists them off the page and places them in the reader's lap where he can touch them.

Having studied and, to a certain degree, comprehended how
other poets like Frost, Sydney, and Shakespeare worked within
the sonnet form gave me the framework with which to try my own.
My attempts, however, did not completely adhere to all the
sonnet's strictures. They did not have a rhyme scheme. This
omission was based predominantly on my lack of confidence in
my ability to rhyme in a way that would remain unobtrusive.

The first poem I felt successfully integrated the sonnet's
form with its emotional content was "The October Wind." In it,
I tried as Frost did in "The Silken Tent," to imbue a literal
thing, in my case a landscape, with abstract, metaphysical
concerns. Thus I hope some of the language I chose to describe
the landscape, in the opening octet- -"harbored," "pains," "to
creak and bend," "chafed, raw" and "stirs and forces to settle"--
would also subtly reflect my concerns with love and memory.

The poem's turn populates the landscape with a single "I"
and signifies a particularization of the concerns I had dealt
with in a general sense in the first eight lines. I felt the
discussion of these abstract concerns would gain emotional in-
tensity if they were made particular and personal--part of an
actual, present landscape and speaker. Thus, the talk of
memory becomes the memory to write a letter to one's love,
and the concern with memory's end, death, is focused in a
spade dug into a clump of dirt.

However, I did not want this particularization as well as
the turn to appear too obvious, since this would fracture the poem too deeply and threaten the sonnet's structural integrity. Therefore, I used two devices to maintain the unity between the octet and sestet. First, meter to provide an aural link to help solidify the poem's part. Second, by continuing to fashion sentences that began in the negative, I hoped to join the two parts of the poem more firmly together.

This syntactical strategy also worked to prepare the poem's final two lines. While it is hard to have a couplet that does not rhyme, I thought that two affirmative statements after eleven lines of negative ones would set the last two lines of my sonnet off from the body of the poem much as a couplet's own end rhyme does. Concurrently, these affirmations, which in actuality affirm nothing but the description recorded in the poem's first line, would twist the poem in a jolting, empathetic direction.

In writing this epilogue, I have attempted to approach my poems from as an objective perspective as possible, hoping that I could shed some light on the motives and means I used to create them. Having attempted this, I feel some discomfort; for even in limiting my discussion to a few ideas and concepts, I realize now to an even greater degree just how interrelated these concerns are, how inseparable they are from others just as important. What one does when one writes a poem is give birth to a world; a world with its own laws, beliefs, motives
and integrity. A poem is like, as my tutor once said, "a napkin pulled through the ring of a poet's form." That ring is fabricated from each element of the poet's mind; his ideas, concerns and ability. While the poem is in the ring it is compressed, limited. But when it finally slips through the ring, it unfolds, blossoms. In the course of this paper, someone asked me why I write poetry. I write in the hope of seeing something blossom. At the same time I feel each and every poem fails, that it begins in the perfect infinite and ends finitely flawed. And in a certain sense, all that ever remains to be done is to fail better.
I pray for rain at night
She lies beside me, with me.
Her breath deep, strong
Enough for two. I think
Other face earlier
When I entered; the two white teeth
A mouth open to pleasure.
Sometimes I wonder if we aren't
Animals performing.

In the morning, the rain wets
The lips of curtains and you rise,
Wake me and mouth words
So simple, so sincere that
I am awash with belief.

I pray for rain while
She lies by me, with me.
I think of her face earlier
When I entered; two white teeth,
A mouth open to pleasure.
Sometimes I wonder if we aren't
Animals performing. But your breathing
Is deeper than my questions;
Strong enough for two.

In the morning, the rain
Wets the lips of white curtains.
You rise, wake me,
Mouth words simple, sincere:
I am awash with belief.

I pray for rain
While she lies by me
With me.
I think of her face
Earlier
When I entered;
Two pure
White teeth,
A mouth
Open to pleasure.
Sometimes
I wonder
If we aren't
Animals
Performing.
But your breathing
Is deeper
Than my questions;
Strong enough
For two.

The morning rain
Wets
The lips of curtains.
You rise,
Wake me,
Whisper words
So wafer thin
I am awash
With belief.
Thinking of 'Seclusion'

I get up late and ask what has to be done today.
Nothing has to be done, so the farm looks doubly good.
The blowing maple leaves fit so well with the moving grass.
The shadow of my writing shack looks small beside the growing trees.

Never be with your children, let them get stringy like radishes!
Let your wife worry about the lack of money!
Your whole life is like some drunkard's dream!
You haven't combed your hair for a whole month!

- Robert Bly

Lying In A Hammock At William Duffy's Farm
In Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty houses
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

- James Wright

The Silken Tent

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

- Robert Frost
Notes


3 Ibid, p. 61.

4 Personal interview with Robert Farnsworth, 1 April 1985.
Bibliography


Farnsworth, Robert. Personal interview 1 April 1985.


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