Still

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STILL

by

Lynn M. Drebes

Bachelor of Arts in English
University of Utah
1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Department of English
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Lynn M. Drebas

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M.F.A. in Creative Writing

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Still

by

Lynn M. Drebes

Professor Claudia Keelan, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

A collection of poems, Still, asks and attempts to answer the questions: how does memory function; how do we grieve; and what is time? The poems contend that the one consistent quality of memory is that it is never static; instead, “it comes in waves like nausea,” and that this ebb and flow of memory influences necessarily the process of grieving, a recursive, rather than linear process. Time is a human construct having little bearing on the most significant, either enlightening or devastating, of human experiences. The intention of Still is not to definitively answer these questions; rather, it acknowledges that while they are ultimately unanswerable, the investigation is vital to the search for meaning.
PREFACE

“All writing is autobiographical. All of it.”
--Jorie Graham (from a reading, 1999)

The poems in *Still* are attached to Keat’s notion of the annihilation of self and closely aligned with the Modernist’s inclination to expand the form of poetry beyond the restrictions imposed by formal poetry. In “Bleeding Out Takes a Mere Six Beats,” as the body bleeds, as the scene bleeds, the words bleed across the page, representing that subject cannot always be contained by form. In writing *Still*, I have also incorporated the influence of contemporary poets, most notably Anne Carson who, in part, uses myth not as a mere retelling, but as an integral part of a contemporary narrative, allowing a conflation of ancient myth and present experience. *Still*, too, attempts to diffuse boundaries between past and present in its examination of experience and perception.

Boundaries (including those we place around literary historical time periods and name, including Modernism and Post-Modernism) are, after all, largely artificial and a response to the human need to define the human condition. Although this naming does allow a shared vocabulary, it also presumes exactness in separation that does not truly exist. We construct a boundary of dates in which to contain Modernism, 1918 – 1945, but clearly Whitman was part of this movement in the latter part of the preceding century. Furthermore, the past from which Modernism attempts to break remains an inextricable part of then and now. Post-Modernism begins to address this reality through an on-going
release and re-acceptance of the past (Las Vegas presenting perhaps the quintessential physical manifestation of this process in forms such as a pyramid and Roman palace).

The poems in Still stem primarily from one event that had a profound effect on me. On August 3, 1999, in Salt Lake City, Utah, I was attacked in own my home and, although I survived the attack, I witnessed the murder of my best friend and roommate, Amy Quinton. The perpetrator, currently in prison in East Saint Louis, Illinois pending trial on three other murders, has yet to be charged with Amy’s murder, making “closure” even more difficult. Even without such resolution, one must move past the grief and survivor’s guilt into hope; this process, however, is not linear. Thus, the event itself is not the primary subject matter of Still; rather, the subject is the continual experiencing and re-experiencing of any event and how that process continually changes. Ultimately, we may break free of the event, but can never deny the occurrence and re-occurrence of its reverberations.

I am extremely grateful to Claudia Keelan whose writing and teaching have been essential to the development of the poetics that shape this manuscript. I also wish to express my gratitude to Douglas Unger for unwavering support, guidance and friendship. Dan Ionascu, Jeny Bania, Keith Menter and Andrea Gregovich (whose loyalty is unparalleled) have allowed me to be part of a community of writers and, as both friends and readers, have been invaluable to me.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Amy Louise Quinton who inspired many of these poems and whom I shall always miss.
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I. Happening
Bleeding Out Takes a Mere Six Beats

A knife in this case was the weapon, though it is sometimes words

(Three girls, one man, four hearts – one motion – six heartbeats – two girls, one man
three hearts
one man
six beats...)

Two hearts and sometimes less remain. Many deaths occurred here. I cannot name them all.
Missing It

Rope off the scene to collect
evidence (uncontaminated)
the first step, a misstep.
Tape a yellow boundary –
as if this were a garden here, daisies bordered
by begonias, marigolds by baby’s
breath – an illusion

The scene’s already bled all over
the city into
many lives

The investigator who says the search
for who is gone is useless, she
cannot be found, is wrong.
It is unnecessary, only she remains

Unchanged

among our own contamination
yellow cannot sterilize.
It was a gorgeous lie,
the myth of future.

Searching for motive
to appease the living on
behalf of the buried,
the investigator dies.

There is a worthy search here,
for meaning, not for motive,
a narrative uncontained.
Insouciant Rock

Shameless, she shines –
crescent moon over the shooting on Sahara
over balconies where wine washes grief, and white
ges of leaves frame the trellis with her indifference.

Further east, the snow over the valley in night
blazes hot beneath her, gray horses made phantoms
by her light. Early morning she clings
presumptuous, transluscent over Timpanogos.

Posturing lovely, in the city she waxes
buildings to mirrors reflecting the Angel Moroni,
silent horn to his lips, attempting, at least,
a whispered reminder of the gold in the Hill Cumorah.

The woodbine and firs above the graves
are marble bright. Johnny-jump-ups
and bloodroot defy the cold. And she lights,
among them, contours of a face, carved in stone.
Unseason

Snow covers the valley in August,
shadows sing, birches bow down to depth.
Light blankets heavy as lead.

In summer I freeze into dust,
icy rays scorch my skin and her breath
whispers wait, wild and dead.
Deathbed

How many times do I dig you up
to see if you live again?
I wilt with grief, you rot
for missing me. You dance

with flowers of many colors.
I had marguerites they died on the mountain
I had desert marigolds they died in the dust
I have one rose, thorny and uprooted,
head drooping arrested bloom.
Prayer for the Perpetrator

Too much was not enough
was too much for me
and she and she
(and always now she)
Can you feel this?

You said give she gave
You said kneel she knelt

You held life in hand
for a moment, grip
loosened by fear,
not power

Perhaps one day
the borders placed
around my heart will leak
forgiveness

not for you, for
all of us, in a condition
begging betterment
we can will to daughter,
to son.
Patient Grief

I have days like that -
   knot in the gut
   hoof in the head
   twisted intestine
   impacted system -

when the house is empty
even the wind sleeps
and, sometimes,
the root of the ache.

But the moon, precocious she,
looms long after day has displaced
night, insists on a memory hidden
in a child’s pink plastic suitcase.

Long after I’ve crossed the border into
the abstract, someone might unlock
concrete evidence of you:
   a book
   a playbill
   resume

printed pages rarely
ease the gut.

These are common pains.
Talking with *Insomnia*

I can't sleep. Your questions torment me.
What does the poem do?
It's beautiful, it moves...

*No, explicate: define the metaphor,
see the simile.*

The woman is the moon.

*And form, function? How
does it work?*

Through oppositions: left
is right, body is shadow,
day is night.

*That's smart.*

But how deep is the well,
how to hold the dead? What
I remember is what is unsaid.

Do I miss the device?
Do I fail to mirror?
I remember the meaning -
mere words: I miss you.
Defining Moment

A moment full of nothing
    isn't
any more than any thing
    is
dissipates like fog over a sea
reaching for its burning lips.

The rock, the coral, the shell
are concrete.
Until they are dust.

The fog should become rain
but the greedy sun steals it.
Still, there was that moment when the one
touched the other and that is memory,
or grief.

A small boat bobs in the sea.
A Proper Sentence

What is the difference between a semi-colon and a comma? you asked. A lesson in punctuation bored me, and I did not answer you.

Rules abound:
A comma splice:
    two independent clauses joined with a comma
Solutions:
    replace comma with semi-colon when ideas are closely linked
    add a conjunction following the comma
    fanboys – for and nor but or yet

so much left unanswered, unsaid, un…

    the real yard we both wanted (someday)
    the garden that needs weeding

I am no damn grammarian, but together,
I tell you now, we made a proper sentence.
A comma and conjunction would never have done.

At last, we are the sentenced and grammar a construct.
White Ghost

The white ghost followed her
from mountain to Mojave, moaning
low, close enough to trip her.

She feared the white ghost
until she began not to hear
and to stay still standing.

The ghost became a whisper
in the sand the size of snow.
She longs for the white ghost

now — perhaps it was its
absence she feared — to visit
her home in the city,

but it will not cross the boulevard
to leave its own home,
wind, weeds and joshua trees.

She hears nothing now
but the white silence
the shadow of the white ghost,

who no longer knows her name,
left behind.
II. Reverberations
Memory

The drowned in my dreams saying
my name, Survivor, saying
swim

when what I remember Is the slow sink,
quick stab, the rock
in the heart.

It comes in waves like nausea
but is never quite
the same

(a man in a boat with one oar, a stone
on the bed of a gold sea,
child overboard)

I remember the relentless rowing,
rowing, through the growing
gold sea

or the sea is a desert, the body
a house, the boat boards
the windows.

A child in the desert stirs up sand,
sediment struggling to become
sedimentary,

something more permanent. Though
even sandstone, even limestone
are amorphic.

No lithification for love, no cementation
for memory. Only solids
fossilize:

the tooth, the stone, the bone.

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Disassociation

She sees her hands before her,
feels feet move beneath her,
the quick shift of a platelet
rather than her own propulsion –
or perhaps she moves the earth:
take a step, the world turns a little.
Any balance is lost to her.

When did this happen?
She remembers a day,
but not a process.

A tarantula strains itself
against all reason to abandon
its own skin. Now that’s modern!
Do they ever try to step back in, deny
the loss, cross time zones?

Under a tree she stands eating a peach,
juice unchecked, but even this sticky
sweetness cannot keep her in the present.

She remembers abstracts that used to seem
as real as fresh fruit, as satisfying.
Words like happiness, elation, forever…
Now this new abstract, this oblivion
so real it whispers in her ear
something almost audible.

Standing under the tree, she becomes
abstract, energy without matter,
words without form. What can she master
if not her own desires – a family, a mortgage,

love? What can she master
if not her own memory – when
did the tree fall?
Out Gate

I am thinking about shapes,
borders, loss. A poem on a page
permanently, a boundary at least,
if not a border.

Below us, the racetrack
is a perfect border: oval
shaped white rail,

a starting line, a finishing
line, and everyone knows
which is which, even the horses.

In the starting gate they
are pumped up, snorting,
each dying to finish first.
The gun fires, gates open

and Mr. Lightfoot lets it loose.
He leads the pack by five strides
for five furlongs, but they, being more
experienced and better bred,
gain on him until he is last.

Still, he runs his guts out, stays
in the race the longest. He runs
like a victim because he has no choice.
The only shape he knows is forward.
That is his condition.
Mom’s Caravelle

She came the back way
Home that day, with steps, soft steps to
Crunch the snow, hearing cracks like gunshots
Under foot. Carefully she makes her way
Tests the ground, slowly, shifts her weight.
She sees a shape before her, black and brown,
Jim’s hunting dog has jumped the fence, perhaps,
Winter wind has blown some branches low
Her voice echoes hope, “Caravelle?”
Had Mom’s mare found that open gate and run,
Remembering delicious graze of spring,
The damp earth dense with grasses blue
And green, milkweed and cat-tails towering
Ten feet tall, sweet smelling in the summer heat.
Seven feet across, six deep, earth-mounds
Wait, hungry for a foot, a hand, a girl.
Winter blankets them beneath the snow.
She closes in and sees the ice-lashed eyes,
Rooting mane sharp with icicles, hint
Of withers just above the snow, no more.
The rest entombed in careless unfilled ditch.
She kicks a foot of snow on top to hide the head,
    Too young to know alone.
Almost Believing in Love

A girl in a field nearby tosses a penny
in a farmer's well. What is her young hope keeping her perched
on the well's edge staring with eyes
black and gaping? That the sun doesn't flee
the moon but seeks her, his rays
warm, won't burn? Wishes
are not truth, but she stays
fierce and silent above the water, still

and deep. The penny sinks slowly spinning,
copper edges glint in the sun, then down
the well, and up to the top of a sea where
waves caress a prow, where the moon's
gaze observes a small bronze face within
her own face, distorted among the waves.
Lament

Saturday’s ashes, the moon ascending
over the moment before the unseen
where her light kindled a remembering:
the face, the coals, the word. You were between
two fires, you said. I was a fire. I burned
my own soul letting you warm your hands
between my breasts. The moon watched the world turn
half way round on Saturday until sky
touched land, sea met sky. The mad old moon scorned
the sun. He warmed every planet and charred
her to ash. Dimmed and weakened, she mourned
their momentary pass. His heat burned hard.
Sunday’s dusk births a new moon. She will rise
like a widow’s hope, wolf’s howl, a sparrow’s sigh.
Duck Love

I unveil my night I sing
to anyone who will listen.

Crickets sing all night
beneath the under
brush
or
in crevices

Lizards sunbathe in open
air
but never stir
a leaf with sound

Ducks fly low
decked out in
iridescent tuxedos, quacking loud
and off-key,
right
into the scope.

Still, I could choose
to keep my beak
shut and fly
steadily on.
Accusations

An old couple under a street lamp,
Intersection
Under the signs: a maze

You never understood
you were free. To go?
No. Go where?
A way.

Boy in blue dickies
carries a shovel,
crosses the street.

That's not your shovel.
Drops it. Clang.

I pick it up. I have no need for a shovel so
lean it against the lamp post,
wait for the light to change
intersection
wait
don't move
(walk)
Evolution

Travel through millennia demands addictions, recoveries – a letting go, a non-grip on the memoir of history Whitman and Ginsberg’s Americas—the same and not becoming impulse as strong as many selves, in protest of stasis

We need a movement are hungry for it Like Weil: not just food but freedom

for a future for a dig down into a world that was that is also now, not to nurture but to know – such that knowing is a need – (a cold fact) for protection.

A world, a word, whispered with scintillating clarity: allow.
Medusa

Medusa was still innocent as
she sat on the steps of Athena's shrine
warming herself in the mid-day sun.

Poseidon swaggered his way around
Athens just looking for trouble. Low tide
was boring. This Big Kahuna needed

a white foaming crest to ride
hard till it crashed, spread thin,
spilling over beach to stony steps.

He glanced up through the sun's glare,
eyes lit upon the white gleaming thighs
spreading under Medusa's mini. Good,
he thought and advanced. Medusa smiled
at his approach. How could she know the spring
in his step was anticipation until he grabbed

her throat, spread her thighs, pushed past
her shocked and whispered No. She recognized
the threat too late. Soon,

he was done and able to relax again. He sat
on the cliffs above the blue-green Aegean puffing
his little cigar slowly, savoring the exhale, while

Medusa scrubbed her skin with vengeance. She tried
to reach inside, clean the wound, scrape
the venom from her womb, but it spread,
sprung from her head
hissing souvenirs
of one sunny
afternoon
in June.

Her punishment — to turn men
to stone, crush them into
particles smaller than sand.

She could never love again.
She wandered in solitude until
Perseus, judged a hero by the city-state, extinguished her memory.

She felt good.

Her death birthed inspiration, Pegasus flew, muses sang and (here is justice) we know it still.

Her body became stone, dissolved to sand wind blew all over the city.
Echo and Narcissus

His reflection unformed,
as if unfinished, arm just
beginning a reach, wanting
wanting an answer.

Often they overlap,
or retreat into shared
words wholly
misunderstood
in the exchange

(Hear the thunder?
   Here the thunder.)

He watching he,
she watching rain
wash his image
out into what
appeared temporary
and amorphous.

Myth is present in love,
in the he and she
where connection
ends in repetition

A woman feels
love like water,
a well,
a perfect circle.

Her answer,
this silence -
the same color
as a petal I saw
once in sunlight
and it shimmered.
Love Reformed

A love has manifested
itself in me,
    intangible
    intellectual
I write and rewrite
the myths
of being.

I wake again
this morning
a form beside
me where
I lie.
III. Re-membering
Bah Bah Lazarus

I shepherd,
drover without a flock
peer down into the deep
dark pit empty. Do
I remember correctly?
Drought-dry irrigation
ditch once flowed
like Euphrates.
Where the fuck

is everybody? Priam
in his farmhouse waits
for my return. Here
I am, blue wood caught
in the stubble

bailing wire in Achilles
tendon...a voice
whispers “I’m back
with blue dyed wool
hair and I eat grown
up farm boys like air.”
Culination

Hands, strong and soft speak
culinary rhyme
my touch a recipe that bastes
itself divine.

Decadent cravings today I
shall not grace,
but delight in spicery with
my own sweet taste.

Lost not in love nor clinging to
fears malicious,
I culinate myself and taste
the blast – delicious!
Corning From the Theatre

Listening to the Vagina Monologues
in San Francisco disappointed
because I already love
my vagina but have never
had an orgasm on a horse.
Never. One doesn’t ride
a horse with one’s clitoris
pressed against the saddle
and stay on.

Why is the clitoris such a mystery
to women? A man, I understand.
He’s used to a penis, after all,
regularly insisting upon itself,
changing shape and size, taking
up space. But women?
Find for clitoris!
If you haven’t, he won’t.
Name it if you need to
(Ginger, Maryanne, the Professor),
give those eight thousand tiny
nerve endings their own identity.
But whatever you do,
don’t let him in the house
until he finds the doorbell
and makes it ring and ring and ring.
Dawn

There is one black night
I would forget. It is not
this night, slipping
away. Only the sun
can steal it.

your breath
my whispered name

desire

taste, touch these dreams
dawn leaves behind.
Infraction

Walking naked on warm cement
light shafts break her step
memory quivers
in the wake

Loving open on warm cement
light shafts shift the line
life, leaf, limb quiver
in the wake

Writing sounds in wet cement
light shafts break the lines
meaning quivers
in the wake
After Early Love

Always a phrase
lingers

and always something
not phrase, not touch,
before knowledge,
before memory

two chairs on the same
side of the same
table – his objects,
her objects – an accounting:
evidence

This has to do with hope
and loss as if physical
means forever – if he
leaves his sweater here,
he’ll return

The problem with love
are the clichés:
   Love conquers everything
   All you need is love

The problem with love
is wanting the clichés
to be true

Through the café
window I watch
a woman walk,
stockings sagging
face falling: her heart
is wilting, it’s clear.

You were with me,
together we sipped
our latte’s longer
and later than necessary

Why then this
ache, as if her loneliness
is mine?
Departure

The scent of lavender still lingers in my memory and though the sun shines bright today, for me it rains all days in Paris, cleansing my fractured voice, filling each day a bit more the fissures left by souvenirs and nourishing – what? – A story to be sure, but whether it has ended or I’ve merely read the preface I cannot say. As I leave Paris, as Les Jardins de Versailles and Champs Elysees become my history, I leave you too. Does it rain for you today? You hold a whole drop of rain in your palm for minutes before it dissipates, or rolls off bit by bit to become part of a larger landscape. This is the story of a garden and a house. The garden has good and necessary affection for the rain, but the house is large and nearly empty. The residue of home still covers the floorboards here and there but does not weigh enough to stay forever. I see the particles even now floating out the screen and up coating the chimneys on these close and ancient buildings. The house does not speak to me. How can I tell the story when I have only one perspective? I cannot know what it is to be both house and garden. I do not know if you are gardener or architect. The dormant house waits. It cannot sustain itself forever without some presence, some fixture. The city has completely faded though I know a small garden in Velizy remains. The house is in the country now, among rows and rows of sunflowers planted carefully as tombstones between each fallow field. Where will the rain fall next?
Absence

"You are a beautiful man" this thought she gives into without the usual compulsion for definition.

Between the him and her, eight hundred miles of desert, mountain and highway -

though there is sometimes an exactitude in between - a brilliance.

She thinks she may have a second set of vocal cords, like cats, theirs for the pleasure sound we call purring (though I doubt they name it), hers for white space allowing between to be

then back again to the original thought, manifested almost primitive, you are - is enough.
Hope

Odd, these two loves.
One dead, one lost.
Both not, regardless.

God cries for this city
in the desert. Charleston
a river now below
the highway bridge. Pigeons feed
in puddled gutters where worms gape.

My horse drenched and dirtied runs riderless
in the storm. I watch him buck, body twisting
in the gray air, no one on his back.
In my cold, human condition, I fail

at first to recognize it -
lighting a point in his pasture –
joy.
Seeking Outside Ourselves

Winter withering
cracked bark
like sun
bleaches paint
the tree beside
my balcony
blooms suddenly
one pink flower
then bursts
thousands -
such physical
presentation
of hope, in poetry
we call metaphor,
nature sustaining
itself never
needing
definition
Words

are one thing, you say,  
war quite another

The war is on the page  
I am armed, quiet  
but insistent

Can you taste the whisper?  
Can you hear the verse?

I am seeker and seer  
(you are too)

Look

The knife in the heart  
the arsenic  
are self and must  
be (simply)  
seen

Put your voice inside  
my mouth  
I will sing you

Am I too loud? I can sing louder

Listen

You are weeping, a word  
away

Ask.
Naming It

Though I say I would rather
know and I would rather
know, knowing is never
really.

Outside is becoming
colder. Yesterday I mistook
soft flurries of snow for
sand blowing in the storm –

the wind was violent
in the desert, nothing
blocking its path. I stood still,
exposed myself to it, my clothes
and skin available.

In the end I remained
intact, all flesh
and fabric there between
me and the outside.
There was damp and I realized
my mistake.

Your house is becoming
familiar to me, the hallways
and arrangements, where the lights
switch on and off.

I have often mistaken
this for knowing.
Her name was Fair,
his Forever.
It hardly matters now.

I can leave your house.
I remember the path.
In the quiet place where
day and night are almost
indistinguishable, the city
allows an innocence.
I am awake

driving through each
next new light that paints
an outline, creates
a skyline.

I am sometimes
baffled by this physical
world. Outlines blur
without a canvas,
and definitions change
like slang.

(I have slept with words for years,
made lovers of them. Yet I cannot
name this even as I let the dampness
in.)

I know a blizzard
when I’m in one.
All is at once magnified
and muted. This is neither. It is
on my skin and inside me. It is
in the air where I am
and not. It is not
smaller or
larger than
it is.

Words like “snow” and “sand”
provide merely.
What can your name be
but Now –
is brief and always only
actions alter.
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