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The myth of arrival

Zachary Jean Chartkoff
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THE MYTH OF ARRIVAL

by

Zachary Jean Chartkoff

Bachelor of Arts
Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
1994

Master of Fine Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

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Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

The Myth of Arrival

by

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A collection of poems composed between the summer of 1999 and 2003. They are in the tradition of “negative ecstasy,” a philosophy that the poet is nothing more than a void: in order to create, the poet requires a willing release of the ego and self, which in turn allows the poet’s void to be filled with the verse. It is similar to what the Buddhists call “*no mind*,” a method used so that works, ideas and even lives that once appeared as imperfect or failures were, by their very nature, simply unfinished acts.

The process was comparable to what Keats described as “being in uncertainties... without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” It was this viewpoint, inquiring into the metaphysics of “failure,” that brought forth the ability to contemplate the two key themes of this manuscript: “*La morte et Eros*” – desire and death and their contrasting forces.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I THE MYTH OF ARRIVAL.....	8
Myth of Arrival.....	8
somnolent.....	11
Usher.....	16
Rash.....	17
Killing the Fey	19
BCBG.....	24
Extend	26
Cowslip Pips	28
Oil Rig Nocturne.....	29
Starting with a line in a room with Picassos.....	32
Delay	33
The Feygele.....	34
Hungry Ghosts	41
Eurydice's View from a Modish Pavilion	45
Pot-bellied pig.....	47
Ghost Underground (Orpheus' failure).....	48
Narcissus' Lament	49
Tiburón's Wave	50
Pious Tongue	56
Suck in the Shadows with you	59
Syn	62
Temporal, Considered.....	66
Yeti.....	71
PART II THE PSYCHO VAC.....	72
The Wedding.....	74
notebook entry, November 05, 1996.....	76
Middle	79
The Duduk	81
notebook entry, February 16, 1997.....	83
"The Block"	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92

VITA	93
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INTRODUCTION

“Death in Venice. Death in New York. Death
of the text. Death of the author. Death of desire.”
-- fragment from my 2001 notebook

“London is drowning and I live by the river.”
-- The Clash

I composed these poems, for the most part, between the summer of 1999 and 2003. They are in the tradition of “negative ecstasy,” or “negative capacity,” a poetic stretching from Saint John of the Cross through John Keats, Willis Barnstone and others who believe that the poet is nothing more than a void. That is, in order to create the poet requires a willing release of the ego and self, which will in turn allow that void to be filled with the verse. This appealed to me, for I had been feeling like a void on a daily basis for rather long time. Moreover I felt it wasn’t just me; the popular literature of the last quarter of the Twentieth Century I had been reading was rather blue, empty and depressed. Perhaps the realization came when the comic Steve Martin failed, humor couldn’t last and he voluntarily became a sober dramatist? These were perfect conditions to find oneself in what the Buddhists called “*no mind*” or what Keats dubbed in 1818: “*Negative Capability... when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*” (Walsh, 1999) It was a method I could use so that works, ideas and even lives that once appeared as imperfect or

failures, were, by their very nature, simply unfinished acts of construction. It was from this point of view, inquiring into the metaphysics of “failure,” that I was able to contemplate the two key themes of all my work: “*La morte et Eros*.” Desire and death, the two opposite poles, which came about one terribly, hot Las Vegas July evening in a vision I had of being consumed by a great shark.

For years I have been obsessed with drowning. Not my own, mind you, but drowning in art. Writers were always asphyxiating underwater apparently on purpose. Everyone remembered Virginia Woolfe loading her pockets with stone before setting off into the depths. A fragment I recovered from a notebook I kept at the age of twenty-nine illustrated this clearly:

Of the three – Hart Crane,
Li Po and me – Po died
moon viewing in the dark.
Crane died at three and
I was eaten by a shark
– or so they say.

The myth around Li Po’s death says that while drunk moon viewing on a boat over a lake the poet drowned attempting to embrace the reflected moonlight on the water. Could it be argued that since these artists all took their own lives before they had finished their “canon,” that they amounted, in no uncertain terms, as failures? I had no answers, but the drowning/failure that affected me the most was Crane’s. The critics over the years have not been kind to him. A glance through book titles is enough to show there is doubt whether he succeeded in life or not: Paul Mariani’s “*The Broken Tower*,” Edward Brunner’s “*Splendid Failure*,” William H. Pritchard’s “*A Fine Messed-Up Life*.” But, let’s picture Harold Hart Crane, or better yet visit William M. McVey’s statue for the Hart Crane Memorial at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106,

Cuyahoga County. It's in an empty lot next to Kelvin Smith Library. It shows a man in his thirties dressed in a coat, collar up, holding a fedora hat. Crane committed suicide by leaping from the deck of the S. S. *Orizaba* somewhere off the Florida coast just before noon on April 26, 1932. By the time he threw himself overboard, in photographs at least, his once boyish figure was gone. Perhaps his nose had been broken from some barroom fight, but everywhere his facial features were relinquishing their sharpness and tone, his hair rapidly graying. All his work, all his poems written and poems to come meant nothing. I'm not going to try to argue that his choice was a moment of clarity or despair. It has been seen as an act of failing as well as being close to the same mind-set as what Keats described in "*being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*" It was as much a choice in that it was not a choice, or as Alan Watts describes:

The perfect Tao [Way] is without difficulty,
Save that it avoids picking and choosing.
.....
A split hair's difference,
And heaven and earth are set apart!
(Watts, 1957)

The ability to see the world repeatedly was one of the things that drove me to begin writing in the first place. When I was a junior in high school I went one night I went to see Allan Ginsberg perform at Adrian College, in Lower Michigan. I returned home and in one-sitting wrote the entirety of "Black Leather Motorcycle Jacket," a very teenage-theme poem, but still it was my first experience with spontaneous prose, as Jack Spicer put it, "letting the Martians in." This was exactly what I needed at 15; I had just heard Ginsberg read: "America, I gave you all and now I'm nothing" and I was desperately

trying to make sense of emotions that seemed vast and scary and beyond my control (though my friends said they were just hormones). I have not been able to make sense of them then nor now. Works like "*Myth of Arrival*" deals with the problem of having emotions one cannot use, hoping they simply "dry up" rather being tormented by them anymore. "*Tiburón's Wave*," "*Overture*" and "*Ghost Underground (Orpheus' Failure)*" likewise all speak to the missing "beloved" in some way.

Like William Carlos Williams' "*Spring & All*," Ezra Pound's "*Cantos*" and T.S. Eliot's "*The Wasteland*," Hart attempted an epic poem, "The Bridge," a loose hymn to America. I have no epic, but two of my own poems feature the anxieties that were shaping my life in Las Vegas. "*Killing the Fey*" is an ode both to the mistreatment I received from other men for being less "masculine" in appearance and the victim's of Hitler's Paragraph 175 program. As I told an audience at a poetry reading in the winter of 2002, "It's hard being a man in this city especially if you have a lisp." I had been preoccupied for months after a boy in a locker room at my gym called me "faggot" for no apparent reason. Apparently my speech patterns did not meet up to his standards. "*The Feygele*," a retelling of the Jewish folk story "The Golem," was the counter piece to the "*Fey*." I wanted to create some sort of superman to protect the effeminates of the world from the mob outside, an effeminate god if you will. Of the two "*Killing the Fey*" is much more assertive in its stance, since the narrator of the poem come to terms with his nature. In the "*Feygele*," the mage cannot bring life to the lump of clay, there is no salvation, and the poem is cut off like a radio dial. They are, I argue, like thwarted desire, meditations on failure as well.

Salvation is not an option in any of these poems. Orpheus, Narcissus and Eurydice all make appearances but not to enlighten or salvage, rather to interpret their own shortcomings. They are the soundtrack I listen to every day (every day needs a little musical drama, I suppose, Monday being no different). Not only do these myths allow me to mumble along as I stand in front of the bathroom mirror shaving large swathes of flesh from my gristle but it also puts me in a curious mood face, more so than, let's say, reading the morning paper. "*¡Aiii, More People Die!*" the paper is always declaring. If not that then our economy is destroyed or some pro-life nut has bombed another clinic, killing a nurse to prove that killing is a sin. Music and mythology, on the other hand, do not bring me down. I have heard that it is irrelevant to document the music one was listening to as their work was composed, but I believe all outside influences are interesting. The last three years' mythological soundtrack would go as follows:

Dylan Thomas reading: "If I Were Tickled By the Rub of Love."
Charles Mingus: "Better Get Hit in Your Soul."
The Max Roach Quartet: "Drums Unlimited."
The Seatbelts: "Tank!"
Miles Davis: "Move."
Hart Crane reading: "Voyages II."
Charlie Parker & Dizzie Gillespie: "Shaw 'Nuff."
Robert Johnson: "Cross Road Blues."

I showed this list to a friend and she said, "no wonder you're forlorn, get some happier music." This got me thinking, however, of one of my first introductions to the concept that I could write poems instead of just listen to them. It occurred in my sophomore year in high school when one day in our American Studies class Kim Thomas' father was a guest speaker and recited his work for us. "The poem is mightier than the switchblade,"

Richard W. Thomas, a Nigerian poet and scholar of African American history at our university declared. It was my first glimpse at poetry as form of radical militancy:

They think I gonna smuggle...
some dynamite in my pencil.
I'm just gonna read some nice poems...
and you can put a trigger on them
if you want to.
(Conrad, 1976)

I have since then gone back to reread his work and now believe what blew my mind was not so much what he said, the poem itself holds few surprises, rather it was how he delivered it. It was 1984 and Run DMC's self-titled album was another year away from reaching East Lansing, Michigan. Dr. Thomas was an orator, a fantastic one, and I was beginning to sense the possibilities of what oral poetry could do. My American Studies teacher Mrs. Lawrence, who brought in Dr. Thomas, also embedded Blake's motto in my head:

I must create my own System,
or be enslaved by another Man's.
I will not Reason and Compare –
my business is to Create!
(Ostriker, 1977)

Like Crane, poor diseased and wild William Blake was looked upon by his contemporaries as mad. As for myself, though, I have created no new system, no new worlds. I believe the collection before you, though artistically strong, is no more interesting than the chipmunk scampering back and forth underneath the bird feeder outside the window as I write this. At first it looked like it was going to rain but didn't, just like one of those Pablo Neruda poems where he talks about not much happening then goes on a walk and not much happens and visits a fruit monger and not much happens and goes home to bed and not much happens and then the poem is done. Or Thomas

Gunn getting into print by saying: “You know I know you know I know you know.”

That’s it? That’s as good as that guy who won \$10,000 dollars with his poem: “ribbit *
ribbit * ribbit.” One whole poem, except that it looked more like this:

“ribbit *

ribbit *

ribbit.”

That’s worth \$10,000, isn’t it? And they say that today’s audience is losing faith in modern poetry. Oh, the poem was entitled: “*Frog*.” That’s the tricky bit. That flies in the face of Medea’s final words in Euripides’ play: “Nothing is possible anymore.” As long as I step aside and let the void in, anything is possible, it might just not be new.

PART I

THE MYTH OF ARRIVAL

MYTH OF ARRIVAL

Blue is my belly intestines entwined,
I have been a poor father to my desires;
I wish to cut them out.

Recall Queen Mab's Mercutio,
striding energetic erect — a boy sold,
never to be enjoyed; stopping,
something flashing across his vision.

Tybalt's cattish steel unlacing his belly
(let's not trifle, let's believe in double-sight).
Do you recall day break, Mercutio
at midday and evening?

Walking with fingers lacing his belly together

crossing pent-up rivers, source of sacrifice-all
with indigo-wasps in his hair,
these green airy eyes, given that all is desire,
all — and this, yes, all this splendor
seething.

Give way, make room, chum,
for the goat-god
useful as a mucilage knife,
a yak with cravings.

The goatish-kid in the airy green,
waking to the apparitions he's seen.

Have you delighted
in being mistaken for the burning tower,
the crazed fool? Here is the head,
the heart, hands and tendons,
the blackened shoulder
that beats and breathes its reign.

Have you ever had a vision?
I, the child of an idle brain,

shook my head to scrap.

This zest for days
is not rare, patience roots in this,
it is hard to slow down these tangled desires
they demand so much;

weary are these times,
these tasks, to do without
making sacrifice,
hoping these cravings
will some day — dry up.

SOMNOLENT

Separate the blinds tonight and this desert's
fantastic birth escapes, muse. The kids over
the wall play hoop, screaming, shamed

often by later liars of the earth, in the parking lot
of The Boys/Girls Club. The way they break,
as in dance, wandering by boastful rills.

What's a rill? A small brook, a long narrow valley
on the moon's surface, a stream. Aluminum

backboards quake, a police siren sighing over
the Luxor's long shrine, where save that feeble
spotlight, all is still. All is still on the pounded rubber,
the foul lines, dribbling, faking between shots.

Do you play hoop? Only between the pages or
under the sheets. They shoot white guys here,
you know. That's what every dime store detective
sings gracing a tale so plain it is a pain to sing.

"Ah me! Ah me!" Screams a neighbor, sounding
like "Ningún yo!" "Ningún yo!" These mornings on

Dumont Boulevard, jovial the somnolent ear
of night, puffing on Camels, or Kools or passed out cold
from riots, the boom-boom bass next door. "Ah me!
Ah me!" "Ningún yo!" "Ningún yo!" We came to
this city for carnal company and concubines, but
found mostly rough and ready revelry and ungodly
hours.

Ungodly churches, too. The Mormons have moved
in. Or never left, it's impossible to say. They call
it rapture and each other elder and before today their
bodies were useless, like yours. This rapture. Somnolent.
It's impossible to know what the kids down in The Club
are screaming. A rancid joke? There is nothing
but opinions make it so.

We are wrapped in declivities, the downwards slope,
low-slung voices, waves that never die, locating song,
a dependent, there are cats on the ground, spaced
apart, mewling calmly, a significance, a lack of cash,
of kibble, of bread. They want to build a Titanic-

themed casino, an iceberg of ice in the desert, *last*
drinks, please? There's a taste in the mouth, some
ether, the upper air, what Wordsworth calls "the
after-vacancy," the changing of ass. Tomorrow
they'll build a persian garden call it *Persian*
Gardens so tourists can see more ass. As in cheek,
as in bum. They've torn down many amusement
parks in this town, gone again.

Staring into the folds in the pillow. Here
comes the longest line in the poem, perhaps
the world. Here come the somnolent that digs
clay coffins, fjords text, eyes lines of rhyme,
blaze on malevolent deeds and makes wholly crimes,
picks a peck from your cuff, nibbles your hang
nail flat, hums your flirt, grates, grazes, argue. Look
back, such a demonstration
of desire and so is the night.

Melons look cool. Onanism flecked
with mud. Animism wakens
with the morning dew. Such repression
baffles commentators. Horns to the rabbit.
Immediately we explain it.

after
moon
view
ing
she
com
itts
sufi
side
over
nippy
grasses

Can you read this now? A body without hands on the wheel, going nowhere, like electromagnetic waves bouncing back from outer space. Lush, lush, nappy grasses. A tea, hardly boiled. “My cat is a Russian Blue and my husband is a Russian Jew.” Who are you talking to the somnolent calls, the room is empty. Is this deep, only a foot. Long after the mouth ceases to perceive it, chai is still in the cup. In Jewish tradition *chai* is both the number 18 and the word life at our door, pastoral forehead of Nevada.

USHER

Does it bother anyone in ballads
when the dead maid sings from the grave
after courtly love and suicide: “*with
the long, green grass growin’ over me*”?

And she is in the grass and she is
the grass and that grass is in
my parent’s backyard. I planted
fox fur near its roots today from
a clutchful of glorious red, that
with a tug, came loose in my hand,
tail and all, from the scraps
on the highway, I had some
scraps left in my pocket.

I bring back bits of dead
stuff to feed to the grass
stems, as if grass eats, as if
a dead girl could use
a fox as a companion.

RASH

A saxophone
fell into the sea.

A shark swallowed
it, but that is not where
this poem begins.
All that is hidden

makes the mind
more abundant. I think
she watches us
from time to time,
the shark with the sax in her maw.

Her maw is a mystery,
viewed from the front
and the back,
then from the side
of her pitiable tooth.
Pitiless tooth.

Teeth imply harmony,
neither good nor evil.

Don Giovanni had
a rash daughter.
She went down
to the sea and sang,
“recundita armonia,”
a strange harmony.
That is where
the idea begins.

I think if
I had a daughter
born to me
she would
remain on the quay
in the early dusk
listening to
this beast’s
consuming song.

KILLING THE FEY [remix]

Yoked to my lisp, I want you to know
this compulsive arching and pulling and
expanding of flesh at the gym burns
my flesh yellow. I live

in a town where lumbering, stiff
postures serve as reference, where
cropped “Are You Butch Enough?”
buzz cuts act as testimonial.

Where the gym’s trainer says: to be totally hot,
to be truly huge, you need this fat burner!
Get jacked! Get slammed!

I hear the body is
our only sanctuary.

Where men at the bars
say: I may be gay but
at least I’m not a queen.
Or fat. Or femme. Where

I feel that stare at my back:
Hey faggot! Hey faggot! Hey!
How do they know if I like
a bit of boy, or girl,
or a little of both? But

I accept, I accept all this.

*

Yoked to my lisp,
I want you to know
Hitler took us Hundred-
and-Seventy-Fivers
to stretch us out. Recall

Paragraph 175 of
the German Penal Code
would have defined me

as one of the “unneeded
consumers,” one of the

men “incurably sick”

with effeminacy.

Is this why I try to reshape my body?

Since I’m judged not by an act, but

rather this sashay? What do I do

with these butterfly hands?

It might still happen.

It will have to happen.

It happened before

(I was scared, I cowered, I swore).

I have studied these men:

“I may be gay but at least

I’m not a queen.”

Did it happen to them? A queen?

Yes, laugh! Is that all I am? Oh,

Bakkhos! When King Pentheus

condemned you all he saw was

a bentwrist polluting the Theban

marriage bed. Here in this suburban
bungalow, behind these drapes,

this cross, this little madonna
(what was it that they saw
in our bodies?) alone in a white room,

my lisp singes the air, infusions
of smoke from the factory.

*

I accept, I accept all this.
There is a word I carry
with me: mannweiber,
“manwoman,”

a word used near Buchenwald,
at Dora-Mittelbau,
where camphor and elms shivered
over lanes leading to the
underground cement factory
where we Hundred-and-Seventy-Fivers

were to be “bent straight.”

My body burns yellow
to recall when we were all
incurably sick. Hey,
faggot! my body burns, their words
branded into my frame:

mannweiber	“manwoman”
mannweibchen	“boygirl”
mädchenjunge	“boybitch”

*

I’ve tried to live anonymously,
I’ve tried to live
with it. I’ve
tried

under the spectator’s stare, and I feel
that stare at my back. I accept,
I accept that at least I am
a queen.

BCBG

A killer for God the rain
has stopped and these
lovers-on-the-lam are
contemplating a hail

of gunfire and little
chance of pulling out
the cockleburs as they
hunker in a lean-to.

It's Tuesday and there
is no "bon chic, bon
genre," no? The villians
in Argentina (1963)
and Uruguay don't worry
about BCBG, why should
we? Job Wanted: a spark

of passion to help keep
the voices in the myth
at bay. Location: cheap
hideout, cheaper bacchanal

at the beach and grind
house. Pay: Color. I love

color and authority made
of paper though it costs
so much. On your thigh,
indulgence wearing a sidearm
branding to kill for reasons
that are not entirely clear,
you don a sleek kimono,
scheme in habits and high-
heeled boots, a little lick?
A little “lèche-moi le clito,
mec” before a cop drums
at the door, cockleburs stuck
to your back; your teeth tingle
when the bite comes. Let
this be your swan song,
instead of just an
anticlimactic comeback,
I have been taken
down into the fearful
darkness by far less.

EXTEND

When you are cast
out, come to my house.

If I don't have a house
by then, knock on
my door. If doors
are too expensive to
lean against a wall,
come to my corner
on the rooftop.

When they cast
you out, mouthy
and bawling
handmaids to
your mistress' heir;
let us laugh at the
prophets. That
guy sitting at the
bar like his fathers
shooing you
away, "back to sea,

little fishies” and
“ugh, the
smell.” “*Who can
find a virtuous man?*”

What masculine tag
equals to that of nag?
I have been an odious
boy so when they
defame your name
we can be slag-
siblings together,
I will save you
a spot on the roof.

COWSLIP PIPS

There are so many beautiful things
in this world, and people look good too.
Maybe it's low blood sugar, but
I'm really excited about pips today.
Just say it: pip. And bears on Schwinn's,
with party hats, going around in circles.
Okay, just bears. A bear by the garden wall
bestowing a cowslip pip to its hairy breast.
Behind it is a curtain of blue.
You mean the sky?
Yeah, and it plucks pips
with its pads – paws – yeah, pips
with its claws.
Ah! See?
Cowslips don't have pips.
Some cowslips don't even have pips.
Sad cowslips.

OIL RIG NOCTURNE

An Open Letter to the CEO of Exxon

Dear Mr. Exxon:

I am writing
in hopes of securing
the purchase of
one of your decommissioned
oil platforms
that are located off
the coast of California
with the aspiration of
turning it into
a wildlife sanctuary
and creative writing colony.

Ever since I was a small
child these ocean bound
buildings have fascinated
me, though locals claim
they are eyesores. If
given the chance, I would

convert the top half
of the structure into a garden,
using native plants found
on the mainland.

I understand that
oil companies have lots
of money to donate
to charitable causes and
activities; furthermore,
they are usually looking
for ways to generate
good publicity. Do not
be dismayed by my profession.

It is true poets usually
try to aspire to laureate
in one form or another;
however, I would offer
a poetic sanctuary to
the general public
through the generosity of
Exxon. I am willing
to pay one dollar,
which in turn would provide

visiting poets and
writers not only
with a place to observe
marine life in its natural
environment, but also
a chance of entering
into California mythology.

I await your reply. Thank you
for your time and energy.

Sincerely,

Zachary Chartkoff

STARTING WITH A LINE IN A ROOM WITH PICASSOS

There are twenty-two of them, replicated, bald,
all in striped shirts
with loaves of bread for fingers.

The Picassos begin to bicker, then bellow,
then exchange blows,

blast-by-blast biting their flesh,
most are drunk, some break their noses.

At 2 a.m. they begin to tire,
making shallow-shallow sounds,

slowing themselves, resting,
but still, all of them awake.

DELAY

There are so many things
to believe in, lopped off bits
of saints that will cure your warts
and bears that blow
their breath, dusty breath
out of their nostrils,
and wishes. “Plinkety, plinkety,
thumb to thumb, wish-a-wish
and it’s sure to come,” and
someday my body
will wait for you
in a bright pool
of embalming fluid,
as if your beliefs
would reveal the mysteries
of my living, as if
tracing a blue line
on my marbled abdomen
would recall the cold
brilliance of my soul.

THE FEYEGELE

Feyegele denotes an effeminate
male in Yiddish, a little bird.

I hold up both hands
so that god will stop
talking for a minute
he likes to chortle, I
thought only on European
television could you
find a fey old man in
fancy coat, enormous
sunglasses, flanked
by two butter bean
angels saying in
Hebrew: "Hello.
I'm God. You really
didn't expect me
to be a woman,
now, did you?"

I am translating.

I hold up both
hands so that god
will stop everything
especially people
with neuroses
other than my
own. I am ravaging
new words. How does
“a filthy pleasure it
is, and short, and done,”
get translated and
come across? What if
“filthy” is rendered:
“dung” and “pleasure”:
“that which the gods
hand down”? “Dung
of the gods”? But
shouldn’t words, darling,
bring to life the thing,
complete? The length
of craving must rest
in c-r-a-v-e? Is this

cabalistic? Is such
power to be found
in every language?
Even those who do
not go the tempo,
whose poets write
only of curtsy-lips
and the gospel tree,
songs never intoxicated
with the word? I say
the word and you
want to go home
with me – I say
the word and we
set off for high Barbary,
lustful beasties all
and adventure.
Since the word
will shelter me,
the word will
shelter me.

I hold up both hands

so that god will stop
the word – utter
these compounded
consonants and
vowels and suddenly
sweet, sweet, sweet,
O Pan! O Christ! O
Yahweh! Whatever!

We all like to chortle
in the face of malice,
even an old man
with enormous glasses.

(since no one ever gonna make god in my image – a gany-boy with an enormous
ass)

I hold up both
hands so that god
will stop the
translation it is
still new – a punching
doll to protect us

created by Judah Lion,
Rabbi of Prague,

Loew's word will
shelter me, his word
will shelter me, my
word will become
the golem Feygele:
the Yiddish *emeth*,
"truth," scribed on
the river lump clay's
forehead. Emeth the
Name. Emeth the Key.

"Behold my dun moves."

The aberration asks: "Am I
now?" "Yes, congeal,
little bird, they come
with truncheons, pickaxes,
handles, flames."

Feygele, you have

an ear, in your mouth
a white stone, and on
the stone a new name,
and if the name let slips
its terrible syllables,
little bird, (Emeth on
the temples) then this
word will be you, you
clot. Congeal! Rabbi
Loew, *Herr Prospero*,
do you hear?

They come for the
shrill, the lisp, the gany-
boy. I hold up both
hands so that god will
stop the boy with
uncircumcised lips.

“Dear Feygele?” “Am
I now?” Nothing and
nothing and nothing.
Utter this word, a

translation in my mouth of

.....

the Yiddish “death,” cross

out the “e” and the stone

reads *meth*. “Am I—

HUNGRY GHOSTS

On the last day
in America, before
we board the jet
airliner to fly to
India, Dharamsala,
where the Tibetans
wait in exile, where
my daughter-to-be
waits to be born
in an orphanage,
black crows will
be crying, “cala,
cala.” Hungry
ghosts fill my life.
I am told I will
have a daughter,
Tashi, all hollows
and dancing.

II.

Hungry ghosts
have told me
things before,
of crimes I
committed in older
lives, of places
I had gone, they
fast forward or
rewind through it
all, taking notes,
laughing at these
foibles.

Here ghosts, I should
say. Here is food and
water, take what you
want. I believe it is

the promise of food
that preoccupies
them; to be squeezed

back into flesh to
sample sweets.

Bring more! Ah,

and more! It is
some unspoken
deal; tell me
what I should
do all for handfuls
of greens and
crumbs. “Go out
and buy a lilac
gingham dress,”
they say. “Cut it
for a one-year-old.”

I wonder if
the ghosts will
talk to Tashi
when she arrives.
For both of them
will have been
on long journeys,

things I cannot
even conceive.

EURYDICE'S VIEW FROM A MODISH PAVILION

First you will see her as
silk tied to a woven gateway.

Her pavilion
stands in the field, islet

experiencing no passion. Then
she rises, clad in nightgown and mud

-spattered boots, night-worn lines on
her face, her long bright halo

illuminating the
pavilion's dazzling banquet.

Saying: "suck early
morning light from my

forehead—" Saying:
"Follow these atonements

of devotion—” Saying: “Otherwise
I will hear you elsewhere—”

POT-BELLIED PIG

Virgins shudder for all this first-
rate fat, the rolling skin, the grunting.

The Angel of Pot-bellied Pigs flies
above their heads, a black car
with striking driver, and they,
strained, cut off, stare
at the heat lightning gone
green around them. No sky.
No form. Only steam.

GHOST UNDERGROUND

(Orpheus' Failure)

I tried — oh, so I tried to bring

this air, form

lessness

to form this air

lessness

out of the dark

nothing comes back from the dark

the dark

lessness

nothing came back but I

NARCISSUS' LAMENT

You can't look
at yourself in these
waves, everything
moves so fast, my
face marred
by floating
sea flowers.

TIBURÓN'S WAVE

Tiburón, Spanish for Shark

I.

Tiburón's
waves, rising,
falling. Your
body the only
warmth
in miles of
ocean.

II.

This should be
a movie; then
we could open
the doors of her
face, a beastly
flower. For three
days the fog
shut down the

coast, winds increased
to a gale. Waves,
not Tiburón's, rose
high among the
waters, a pulse
in the sea. This
is the binding
syntax used
to say this:

III.

If only her belly
did not hang. A
still-life: Pup
with yolk sac.

If only she wasn't
shy, a wraith at
ease with herself;
wraith-boned
from hunger,
the pregnant shark

passing below
and a boy; one
who will leave
the beach and
his fellow
swimmers far
behind. There
will be a bay
he crosses, it
will be like a river
flowing out
from the tide
and in turn,
drawing out
the sea and
pushing back
the lagoon.

For six
months I have
been thinking
about this boy,
this belly-heavy

shark. It is a
long time to
be infatuated by:

IV.

A pregnant
shark that comes
up to a drowning
boy, sometimes
swimming ahead
of him, sometimes
behind, sometimes
swimming around,
finally under
the child. Do not
get too attached
to her, fishermen
will hook her,
slit her belly.

They are only
concerned with

the bent fins of
her history, the
armory of her
smile. Saturated
with color, they
stand on the deck.
One will be a great
healer. Another,
a poet who rejects
melancholy. A
third with a tiny
camera, click:
damp obscuring.
Absolute, superb.

V.

The story will
spread through
the town. Everyone
will rush down
to the quay to
see the boy as if

he were a vision,
to ask him his
story. You will
listen to him, and
make him repeat
it. The next day
we will all sit on
the shore and
watch the sea
to see if there will
be anything like
it in the waves.
Anything at all.

PIOUS TONGUE

Late at night,
repulsively sober,
the kitchen bare;

we “argue” the
dogma of fatality.

Actually, it was
another’s spirited
conversation I
stepped into.

Kevorkian recorded

his victims at the
moment chemicals
slipped into the blood

stream, claiming, he
said, to capture that
change, that which
will not be measured
when desire

ends, tears end,
great grief ends
and all then will
end and what?

In the moments of
clarity when people
are not yelling at

me comes chemicals,
chemicals and
chemicals ... attend!

Smell this, taste,
be familiar and
comprehend that

great trembling in
the air; something
that must be tutted
out of the recipe
because it remains
out of vision?

Focus? A mysterious
savor the tongue
grasps but the cook
cannot explain?
Perhaps, and a
hundred years
from now we shall
look back and say
how meager was
our food for we did
not have the tools
to taste it – and this
too is dogma.

SUCK IN THE SHADOWS WITH YOU

I. Epistemology

How do we comprehend what – we comprehend?

This much is certain: we're outshining our fascination

with the invisible – a dream of gaining weight signifies

for a man – looseness – honeysuckle – dread of teeth pooling into cupped hands;

for a woman – losing a lover – holyoke – glistening enamel inside an orange;

for the ambivalent – everything at once – the pleasure of our senses pounding to the next order – Plato's thing – the quirks of experience – her name was jeremiad, she was a show-girl – could be something – maybe yes – maybe no.

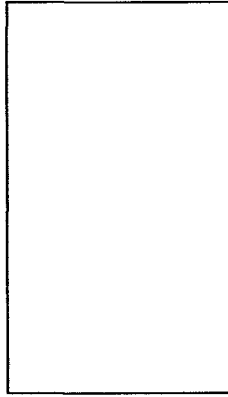
II. Ethics

We – the soft boys – avail ourselves with song – that's the point – you built it in sunshine – this time – you say, you can't resist – the ephemeral smack of flesh – its intensity – is when you are deprived

– cravings, am I correct? – until you reach the age of consent and it all changes to despair.

III. Metaphysics

Archaic acts of thirst:



IV. Aesthetics

Beauty is the purgation of all that is superfluous – get over yourself, girlfriend.

V. And Then

common and works against me and you [overt enough] – we know how our genitalia must be finished – “and he was like, for real? – and I was like, sure. – and he was like, do you really – it’s only if you’re willing and ready; I mean I’m not going to push” –

– another day, and you say [all this] is gnawed down as if “jaded by nostalgia” would turn virulent and suddenly

you get underway.

SYN

After Dante's *Inferno*, Satan's
child, Syn, goes off to seek adventure

1.

Marrowed in the bathroom, she pokes scar-skin,
begins a bit of hymn, her breath fogging
the glass, taking sips from beer and blue gin
mixture: “whack fol diddle ah’ the gyving
doo day.” Her days are of warring royal
tissues, as if all dead, globularly
shaped things could wake alive again. Woeful
dead cells in the juices of the barley
seeding wild seeds of wild grass in her glass.
As if her scars might burst forth queer new wings
the way river boulders spew out morass
tree trunks or the cut tongue recalls lickings.
At her feet – not feet but hooves – flesh, feather
and her sparrows, mortal wings, odd mixture.

2.

In the valley; before the factotum
of God's riot with their rosy, hallowed
slaughter machine; before panzered, darksome
Morning Star's first barrage, she up, rambled
out of battle, leaving her night-fitted
father's yowling machines and the valley's
kilns and grogshops burning. Which one quoted
poorly rendered handbooks that claim furies
do not drive their greedy mouths like we do?
Her name is Syn. This is not Patriarch's
poem; death did not come in the Hebrew
form of woman. Syn left tiny hoofmarks
over the dunes; a winged pear, green as wine
held up before callowed sky's scythe sunshine.

3.

But as Satan's daughter, Death was brother
to Syn. Michael's nostrils blazed out ether,
her twin crumbled, lacking phantom-structure
melted to dirt, crying, "bad cess, sister"
on her two stub-scars where cast wings once beat.
Surely by now you know the yarn: the rules
found in yellow chapels – how white defeats
black, how flesh is bad and how these cesspools
became our own serfdom. First the fog walked
through and upon a hill Syn stood and watched
the flames in the fields; at two o'clock
the last two seraphim escaped the botched
war and both were young and one was pretty.
Strange how angels can kill or die bloody.

4.

Syn's hymns were meant to be raised on the sly,
by lecherous housewives or by brimstone
preachers calling the faithful to deny
flesh while on the Road to Sin. Syn disowned
herself, daubing her face, arms and scar-stubs,
her breasts, bum and backside with hemorrhage
red hexigrams out of renowned cherubs'
blood. Remember her crouching in foilage
cutting pulpy fruit with an odd switchblade
until sugar-sweet sap runs down her hands.
Syn was no winged moppet, no one's nursemaid
baalim. After the rains ruined wastelands
to bog Syn climbed upon a red stallion,
faded among the trees' choir canyons.

TEMPORAL, CONSIDERED

Before Syn's naivete, of what a passion

would ensue; before John admired
the firstfruits of life and called them

boring, after the wife of Potiphar desired
Joseph, calling him —

Syn discovered (as we all hoped
she would) a pleasing passion and
tried

to pursue a quick-
witted godling in

a pleasing shape.
She thought she

spied him once, crossing
on the banks of the sea, painting

under his fingernails,

chalky wings

hung to his kneecaps; but

somewhere

along the jaded strand his

footprints stopped and

disappeared; nobody writes

about Syn's tears but within

her

a strange quivering,

lax and insistent

and among the dew the snail,

wine-

wrought with rampant

desire reared and sighed: "didn't

he hint at sweetness? no figs,
no tears,

no salt on the pavement? If
the heart beats beside

another, it

is because they are perpetual,
this sky is perpetual, so is

the wind, I crawl over

sticky limbs,
ogle the morning

moth, everywhere

I leave my trail, the metaphor is
multiplied and

that stirring? You felt it once

at the Church of

San Domenico.”

Syn recalled

sitting for “*The Mystic Marriage of*

Saint Cajun, Maid and

Martyr” (1501).

Syn (neither) goat-

rouged for her third

beloved, the crass drunkard

Filippino Lippi.

That was in

Lucca,

Italy, sitting in the barber’s

chair, getting her trotters

and nails trimmed, like-

wise her hair, her

shadow and

behind her, against the window

Filippino, drunk

flapped his great oaf wings.

Later, she-satyr

formed, Syn turned

homeward with the morning star

dimming, drifting as mist drifts

clinging

over the gloating water,

hot

with luster, joy and fleas.

YETI

At ten thousand feet

the mountain deer

spots a scant shadow, like

that of a tree on a hill

moving slowly uphill

and the dog wonders

do tonight's footprints

belong to a beast?

This legend moves brimmed

with sadness, blinking in

the frozen heights and

like our myths

goes down

nicely.

PART II

THE PSYCHO VAC

In 1995 I joined Peace Corps and was sent to teach English at the Lord Byron School #10 in the city of Gumri, Armenia, which had been devastated in a 1988 earthquake killing more than 100,000 people. It had never been rebuilt and I lived and worked with the populace in improvised huts on top of the rubble. Judith Mann, a photographer, traveled to Armenia a year before I did and recorded the following:

“The next day we travel north through stony mountains to the city of Gumri, devastated by a 12.5 earthquake in 1988. 80% of its buildings were destroyed. The people who survived now live in small metal shacks, most without plumbing, all subject to the same energy shortages that plagues the rest of the country. It is a shock to see an entire city still in ruins and piles of rubble everywhere; it looks like 1945 post-World War Europe, as if a vast firebomb had leveled everything. Our first stop is an orphanage. The masonry building was deemed unsafe after the earthquake, so the orphans are crowded into little metal buildings, fifteen cribs to a room, tightly jammed together. The nurses do not seem to be particularly interested in them handle them only when necessary. Greek physicians from ‘Doctors Without Borders’ have come to perform an operation on a girl with a cleft palate. What of the other children who had physical defects but were otherwise normal? The cheerful little toddler with foreshortened arms and his sister? What would years of an institutional life do to them?”

I was not expecting to assist in the care of terminally ill children when I arrived in the city; however it became apparent that there was great need in helping the very same state-

funded orphanage Mann had visited. My job also became one of care giving; I washed, fed and played with most of the fifty-odd infants (ranging in age from “0 to 5” as the director of the orphanage joked) and while many were healthy it was the first time I was exposed to youngsters with terminal diseases. There are still taboos in Armenia when it comes to dealing with people with disabilities or disease; I took on jobs many of the nurses who worked there shunned.

THE WEDDING

At the wedding they put
me in the corner with the old
men for I could not speak

their language –the men
formed a circle, dancing

with the sun – their heels clicking,
they held their arms up – drank vodka

and danced; their fingers snapping
their arms held up and drank
and drank and put me in
the corner with the old men I could
not speak their language.

They drank vodka and danced; their
heels clicking the bride
was thirteen with baby
fat, so many toasts for
wealth, for wealth, for children, for

mothers, for mother and

mothers and wealth – then more

music the wooden flutes crying

the sun! the sun! submerged in

the mountains! the men dancing

with the sun drinking their heels

clicking – the groom was

fourteen, fell down twice – everyone

laughed and helped him up – at

the wedding an old man who thought

I was his dead son killed in

the earthquake danced with me

to a slow song in the corner.

Stroking my long hair, moaning,

crying to his dead son, “My boy!

Ah, my boy! Come home with me

and be my boy!”

NOTEBOOK ENTRY, NOVEMBER 05, 1996:

1.

Breaking ice every
slush-gray
morning.

Red knuckles at
the covered pump.

2.

Coming inside with two
slopping
buckets.

Autumn leaves decaying
at the bottom.

3.

Squat red heaters
spat noxious

black kerosene fumes

coating books, clothes, bedding,
your hair, your food, even
the rug. Fumes the HQ
warned would cause, “irreversible
lung damage” if breathed for more
than five hours at a time.

4.

Last year’s New Years
neighbors return
still drinking
toast after toast.

evening blizzard falls, at
the nearby military
base someone fires assault
rifle into the clouds.

5.

Coming home from the market,
you cannot keep things

in your mouth – all day long
you vomit fluids, dots of blood.
A gushing wound.

Coming home, the outer gate curiously
locked, you crawl over the heavy
stone-hewn wall three feet
of snow on the rim &

inside you find your
pillow trimmed with frost –

MIDDLE

Loops of blood curved as
I peeled away the bandages from
the child's tummy – a perfect set
of spirals grilled into his flesh – he is
new here, & despite the salve I
bought in the city's black market, I've yet

to figure out a way of holding
him that doesn't cause those pinkish-black
circles to pull or ooze, that doesn't make
him whimper – in Russian the nurse on
duty tells me the child – no name
given – crawled upon a heating coil

during one of our daily black-outs; when
the generators finally came to life, the child
was still laying on the coils – the same
kind of coils I boil my tea with every

morning in my hut. – later I have dreams of
pulling yarn from my abdomen; green,

yellow, red it flows from the slits I repetitively
cut, until it floods my bed, my hut's
corners, filling my room – later I begin
walking to work with one hand touching
my tummy to make sure I
would not split across

my middle where these
memories rest, so they will not
blow away as if none
of this ever mattered.

THE DUDUK

-- a 9 holed wooden flute.

The sun not half full
but trying
shattered
in the river

The rocks in the river
not half submerged
in the sun

The river running through
arid mountain rocks
under the not half
full sun
submerged in the river.

Running through arid
mountain rocks
under the sun
the old man lifted

the duduk

to his lips

& began

to

cry.

NOTEBOOK ENTRY, FEBRUARY 16, 1997:

Spirit soon
I'll ramble
these winter
fields.

“THE BLOCK”

I.

In a glass case

in the dark

in an alcove

in the dark

in a church in Rome,

in Sienna, in Florence,

bits of saints

mummified

like the monkey’s paw or

Daniel Dravot’s withered head

sat in the dark

waiting for the faithful

to pass by, tourists to gawk

for children of archeologists

to be terrified by.

Outside the Uffitzi

one could buy postcards

fragments of Bosch’s

Last Judgement (1504)

reaction against sexuality

that was creeping
back into the faith – every
where lusty, fleshy figures
were being torn apart,
swallowed whole by frog-eggs,
tossed into pits of fire and snakes,
onto pitchforks and trees of thorn.
While the saved the fleshless,
desiccated, loosely built creatures
closed their eyes
and lay upon the ground.

II.

It starts while you sit in an outdoor cafe near the great clock in the ex-Lenin Square, forever at 11:45, while swallows who nest in the ruined eaves dart low, dark sickle-flashes, sweeping, skimming. Your notebook is open, pen cast down. You sip at the tiny cup of bitter coffee-sludge (when you are at friend's house the old woman take the finished cup from your hands and reads the ground-stains, having you press your thumb into the hot residue, always with the curious shapes rimming the inside lip) There is a smell thunder in the air. It starts when you walk down one of the city's mud streets the rain coming down for four days nonstop. You stand in a crumbled doorway, a truck rumbles past full of cabbage heading for the market, spraying mud and gravel into the air.

The wave-like clouds come down off the nearby mountains, things urgent and low to the ground, overwhelming the ruined factories and caved-in apartments, the one-room emergency boxes families of eight or twelve had been living in for the last seven years. It starts as you walk down the street. Under your boots, laying in unmarked graves, thousands of bodies, crushed and buried, their calls bubbling to the surface. Waiting for someone to hear.

III.

After the first baby in the orphanage you work at dies, then the second and finally a third, you go on a walk. It has been lightly snowing, behind the city lays the broken rail yard. Even though there is no penicillin at the rail yard and none of the doctors who refuse to come to the orphanage to heal “things” as they call your babies will be there, you walk without a hat in the late afternoon gusts. You climb up through an abandoned cab engine, the iron sticking slightly to your gloves, its wooden passenger carriages trapped under a fallen wall. The train its olive green and chrome and red 1940s Soviet art deco slightly covered in wet-powder. At your feet in the lee of the cab engine dozens of empty hypodermic needles. Beyond the cab the twisted rail lines; toppled buildings; and other trains; open pits of crude oil sunk in the ground; a whole roundhouse with the roof caved-in. It looks like a temple. Something holy, but you who never believed in the sacred or the holy, who saw ghosts as simply cultural abstractions. When you reach the roundhouse you find nothing inside but rubble and years and years of snow.

IV.

An US Embassy worker, an American working for a Foreign Aide organization and a Peace Corps volunteer run into each other on the street. Soon an Armenian friend walks by.

“This morning for breakfast,” the Armenian said, “I had Frosted Flakes with milk.”

“You had Frosted Flakes?” Cried the Embassy worker, “How did you get Frosted Flakes in Armenia?”

“Oh, I bought them at the black market store near my house.”

“You had milk?” cried the Foreign Aide worker, “How did you get milk in Armenia?:

“Oh, I mixed the powdered milk with water.”

“You had water?” Cried the PC Volunteer, “How did you get water in Armenia?”

V.

All winter long you were in isolation
watching it grow. You had given up
on the poetry brought in the 40 pound
box from America. You had not spoken
English in over three months ever since the first
frost coated your pillow – there was no heat
in your hut, the rains turned to ice.

You wore your jacket and thermals and gloves
to bed and gave up on poetry. Reading
a poet writing about wasted sex no less
in San Francisco was a hateful thing.
Reading a poet in Berkeley, where they
have everything, speculate on her fat
soul was a hateful thing. Under your floor
boards the dead called out your name, until
vodka, Russian water, kept the their
voices at bay. Intolerable, how clear their
voices came in. All of them complained,
griped, belly-ached in a language
untranslatable until your perception.
It was a cross between Armenian

and Russian the old women spoke
down in the market.

VI.

It is sad to see these old people one, two, three generations apart from their children. These haughty, thin old people unable to speak of these things anymore needing always to speak around them as if at the dinner table to speak with clarity would make the magic happen all over again. To listen to them submerge their magic, to protect their children. There was a woman, nearly a hundred, who lived in a nearby village. As a baby she had escaped the Young Turks' Genocide in 1915, had witnessed the USSR rise and fall and had lost eighteen children and grandchildren in the earthquake. You visit her, she speaks in the ancient language, the old Armenian words, "God has forsaken the Armenians" – and spends her time looking for her god among the graveyards where 100,000 of her people died in 4 minutes in 1988. You will be leaving soon, returning on a thirty-two hour flight. Numbers. Something is inside you. Parasite. You will be leaving soon, and she has no more use for the living. Her words drop away, become muddled, confused, a lexicon of secrets, you pass by gravestone after gravestone on the way to the surface, thousands of them, until there is no more room for air.

VII.

Of course, you
take it with you.

It grows hideous
inside you, even
after the Administration's
doctors arrive and demand
that you are Medically
Evacuated – the ol' Psycho
Vac three days before your
twenty seventh birthday you
take it with you. You have
grown thin now, fleshless,
desiccated. They do not
even let you say good-bye
to your babies, such is the state
they find you in. On the flight
back to DC you sit next to
an Dutch ex-missionary woman
who explains that sometimes,
the young men God has sent
to do his bidding, go crazy.

They, who fear for the safety
of their souls above all else,
do not know how to take

care of themselves so far from home.

She knows this, she assures you,
she has seen it happen. As the
stewardess pushes the cart
for the evenings meal by your seat
the thing that rests inside you
gurgles once in agreement
and then is still.

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“Ghost Underground” appeared in *The Madison Review*, (Wisconsin; vol. 23, no. 2, 2002, page 34)

“Cowslip Pips” and “Starting with a line in a room with Picassos” first appeared in *Red Rock Review*, (Las Vegas, NV; no. 13, Summer 2003, pages 84-85)

“Tiburón’s Wave” was published on-line at *The Bathyspheric Review* (Spring, 2004, www.montereybaypoetry.com/chartkoff.htm)

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