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Scenic America: This is a Test Poems

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SCENIC AMERICA: THIS IS A TEST

Poems

by

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ABSTRACT

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The stilled moment of a photograph is a type of promise—which we believe because we see—that time cannot be stopped. In this series of poems, I have tried to confront a stilled moment, discarded object, or fragment of a past, and I have found this confrontation readily sparked in an ekphrasis of photography. Etymologically, "ekphrasis" means to call out (or describe) an object, traditionally an art object. However, ekphrasis as a literary genre has attracted much critical interest, complicating the term's definition. I employ an ekphrasis of dialogue, hoping to reach beyond both the poem and ekphrastic object. Given this ambition, the poems examine the loss of scenic America; the impact of popular culture and the media on fine art; and the concept of a lost original over years of standardization. I have tried to express these and other themes less as a critic and more as a passenger in a car, gazing out the window at all that I see.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

A scar remembers the wound.
The wound remembers the pain.
Once more you are crying.
(Mark Strand, "Seven Poems," lines 4-6)

During our waking hours, we can perceive that yesterday is not today, this year is not like the previous year, and time clearly affects changes in our environment and ourselves. Even as I write this, I can associate the moments passing with each completed word. Our present moment is defined by what it is not—it is neither the past nor the future—and we know this from experience. Even though the past has undeniably *passed,* how real it sometimes seems! How painfully we remember our deepest regrets, and with what joy we remember our greatest hours. Mark Strand, in the lines quoted above, reminds us that memory can act as a catalyst for a chain reaction, bringing time past into time present, and concluding with sensible force. In such moments as the one Strand writes about, memories are more than illustrations in the history book of our lives—they touch us and insist upon their own reality.

In considering photographs and the phenomena they offer, the sensible past takes form. The stilled moment of a photograph is a type of promise—which we believe because we see—that time cannot be stopped. Photography has strongly influenced the poems that follow. I have looked to photographs for both their literal and metaphorical value. They are physical objects, with a spatial presence (e.g. "On Three Photographs," in which the speaker holds a photograph in his or her hand), and they are also figurative

representatives of the past, with a decidedly temporal presence (e.g. "Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958," in which the white tree trunks transposed against the dark forest in Ansel Adams's image act as a metaphor for words on the page). Although not every poem in this collection references a specific photograph, in all of the poems, I have tried to confront a stilled moment, discarded object, or fragment of a past, and I have found this confrontation readily sparked in an ekphrasis of photography.

Etymologically, "ekphrasis" (or "ecphrasis"), a word of Greek origin, means to call out an object: "a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). However, a brief glance over the literary tradition of ekphrasis tells us that the term has accrued a more complex definition with varying applications according to context and creative need. Generally, today "ekphrasis" is a label for a type of extended and/or concentrated description that vividly engages an artifact or art object. James Heffernan cites Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* as the origin of ekphrasis (*Museum of Words* 175). In such descriptions as Homer's, the clear ambition of the author is to draw attention to an object and illustrate both the image and its significance in the mind of the reader. However, this illustration does not yield a poor reproduction of an original, like a slideshow projection accompanying an art history lecture might. True ekphrasis is autonomous; it does not leave the reader feeling excluded from the first-hand perception that the writer was once lucky enough to have. *Ekphrasis as description* yields moments in language when words recede and the image comes to light.

The ekphrastic approach of Keats in his early 19th-century poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is less overtly descriptive than Homer's. Keats employs an ekphrasis of

questioning, of wondering and speculation. The speaker of Keats's poem searches for and demands factual information from the urn, from the very figures that appear on its circumference—"Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" (line 31)—and he is, of course, left frustrated, confronted with "the inadequacy of fact before artifact" (125), as Murray Krieger puts it. This is *ekphrasis as investigation.*

One contemporary poet demonstrates another ekphrastic approach: giving voice to the ekphrastic object. May Swenson takes the figures of Alberto Giacometti, which appear throughout the artist's graphic and plastic work, as her ekphrastic object. Instead of speaking to the characters represented, as Keats does, Swenson's poem "The Tall Figures of Giacometti" lets them speak for themselves. "Ugly as truth is ugly / we are meant to stand upright a long time" (lines 7-8). The ekphrastic object describes itself, as is true for most ekphrasis of this ventriloquistic mode: *ekphrasis as voice*. Swenson concludes her poem with a surprising, lyrical address: the speaking object witnesses "[...] the scintillating pins of light // that dart between our bodies / of pimpled mud and your eyes" (lines 10-12). But, rather than distance the reader from the object—after all, talking sculptures, like talking dogs, are a little weird—Swenson's ekphrasis makes the unfamiliar and impossible observations (unfamiliar *because* they are impossible) of these warped people recognizable and even universal. These pathetic characters with their impaired movements, who tell us about themselves and their lives, bear a tragic resemblance to us and our daily routines.

Ekphrasis as biography is another category I can decipher, and it entails the poet's desire to trace the impulses or rationale of an artist, sometimes down to the level of a brushstroke. In an untitled poem from *The Quick of It,* Eamon Grennan begins with a

fact-in-question: "*All his life*, we're told, *Chardin struggled to overcome his lack of natural talent*," and from this starting point, the speaker tests what he's been told against his own experience looking at one of Chardin's still lifes. Ekphrasis as biography uses information about the artist—biographical facts or any essays, letters, or journals the artist left behind—as a conduit for understanding the artwork. Grennan's last line, meant to defy the poem's first line, shows that he is less interested in the completed artwork than he is in the artist at work: "[...] you look again, stretch your hand, dip the bristles, risk again the failing stroke" (line 12).

Concrete poetry provides an interesting, modern case of pseudo-ekphrasis. The fundamental tenet of concrete poetry, that quality which is both essential and necessary to the genre, is that the poem convey more meaning through its medium (e.g. letters, words, sounds) than through the meaning of its words, as far as this meaning is governed by grammatical and syntactical rules. As Mary Ellen Solt puts it, "[...] the concrete poet is concerned with making an object to be perceived rather than read" (3). Concrete poetry is an interesting ekphrastic culmination of both verbal and visual representation, and at the same time an ekphrastic contradiction in its visual *creation of* an object, rather than *reference to* or *representation of* a preexisting object.

Concrete poetry owes its principles, in part, to the 17th-century poet George Herbert and the tradition of "pattern poetry," or "shape poetry." Herbert sought a concrete, visual meaning in his poem "Easter Wings" by manipulating the typography into the shape of two outspread wings. This is *ekphrasis as form*. Perhaps even more relevant to a discussion of ekphrasis is Herbert's poem, "The Altar," since the ekphrastic object it

represents is more familiar and tangible, unlike the ekphrastic object of "Easter Wings," which is otherworldly and smells of metaphor.

While shape poetry is not popular today, its echoes reverberate. In "The Tall Figures of Giacometti," Swenson's use of couplets—longish stretches of dark space, sectioned off by equal spaces of negative space—seems to evoke the form of Giacometti's figures. Her "shaped stanzas," so to speak, recall my own experience viewing Giacometti's sculptures. Seeing those dark shapes superimposed against the white wall of the museum, the one-dimensionality of the white stood out to me nearly as much as the textured three-dimensional objects. The metaphorical gesture of Swenson's typography demonstrates how the modes of ekphrasis I have categorized overlap and even blur each other into new, undiscovered modes. The above categories are simply my own ordering of the expansive literary tradition that has informed the following poems.

My own approach to ekphrasis (and this approach, I believe, is a general aesthetic also relative to non-ekphrastic poems in this collection) is *ekphrasis as dialogue*, which is a fusion of two other categories. Why does one initiate a dialogue? One has a need or desire for information (ekphrasis as investigation) and, more fundamentally, one has a need or desire to hear and be heard—to interact with some "other" (ekphrasis as voice).[1] In my view, ekphrastic poetry is not interesting when it strives to make clear only a deliberate comparison, an obvious description, or a typographical trick. At its best, ekphrasis is a seemingly effortless "conversation" between two sources. Ekphrasis does not draw attention to itself, but instead "buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the

[1] I owe my understanding of the poem and ekphrastic object as "self" and "other" to W.J.T. Mitchell. In "Ekphrasis and the Other," he writes, "Ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic 'others,' those rival, alien modes of representation called [...] 'spatial' arts'" (153). Later, I will make a departure from Mitchell's assumption that the spatial "other" is a "rival" or any other sort of competitive threat to the poem's self.

moment it deploys its greatest energy," as Derrida writes about the concept of the parergon in *The Truth in Painting* (61). In its self-effacement, I believe ekphrasis can open channels of communication between poet and object.

I view ekphrasis as a pre-existing term for what I have always found natural, since ekphrasis in the simplest terms entails reading a text and writing about it.[2] Reading and writing occur almost simultaneously in my writing process, whether it is creative or critical. As I read a text, I am compelled to write about it, or at least jot down key passages in a notebook. Conversely, as I write a text, I am equally compelled to read a wide range of relevant scholarship on the topic—to contextualize the text. I could say that ekphrasis in my poetry is really a method of composing—through simultaneous reading and writing—and a method of understanding my "world of becoming," to use a phrase of Plato's, in order to move closer to "being."

As in any work of criticism, one might choose a source based on its relevance or authority in a given context. Or perhaps, as I find is the case when I write criticism, the source chooses me. Like ekphrasis in general, my writing process is associative. In the course of developing my ideas on paper, I may suddenly remember an essay, poem, article, or other publication I read years ago because some dead-end in my thought process, a few sentences in an old notebook, or other nonsystematic association led me there. In a similar way, I discovered many of the artworks I write about in this collection. As I tried to infuse each poem with the clearest and most forceful expression, an image would come to mind (usually a photograph, for some reason), and as I interacted with it—looked at it, asked questions of it, speculated its answers, and brought it closer to

[2] Here, I am using the word "text" in its broadest sense: any cultural product that can be "read" as an object of critical analysis, including magazine advertisements, road signs, and artwork.

me—the poem emerged. Questioning is central to ekphrasis as dialogue, and it is also a critical means of obtaining "information" in nearly every poem to follow.

This collaborative, interdisciplinary sense of ekphrasis locates a true expression beyond both disciplines. In the type of ekphrasis I search for, the point of the poem is not the ekphrastic object, nor is it the poem itself. The poem collaborates with the work of art, achieving a dialogic symbiosis and not a hierarchical speaking *for* or *of*, which implies the passivity or absence of the "other." From this hierarchical viewpoint and other judgmental viewpoints like it, the disciplines of art and poetry are placed in opposition to each other, situated within a hostile environment. Ekphrasis becomes nothing more than a frame for the poet's own performance. The ekphrastic object is the center of the show, but the poem holds the microphone.

Literary critics are not slow to detect this weakness in ekphrasis. Just as some ekphrastic poems discuss the object in hierarchical or oppositional terms, many scholars have used oppositional language to discuss ekphrasis. For example, in James Mirollo's essay, "Sibling Rivalry in the Arts Family," the language of opposition begins with the title and continues as he writes: "[...] ekphrasis involves image envy, turf-guarding, and job security" (39). Note that the context of his essay deals with ekphrasis in the classical period and the Renaissance, but even so, Mirollo does shed light on the context of ekphrasis today: where it came from and where it is going. Grant Scott, without using language of opposition, establishes a hierarchy: "Ekphrasis means to 'speak out,' and [...] the poet's challenge is to give the object precisely the words that it lacks" (324). This type of language clearly establishes the poem as the complete self, challenged to fill in the object, which is the incomplete other. I don't believe that lacking words is a

qualification for incompleteness. In fact, sometimes, images "speak" to me much louder than words ever could. This is literal silence, but not figurative.

Although my views on poetry often coincide with Mark Strand, who probably has had the most fundamental influence on my work, he assumes a perspective in writing about Rilke's ekphrastic poem, "Portrait of My Father as a Young Man," that feeds into the hierarchy of poem over object. He writes generally of an ekphrasis of photography: "A photograph cannot describe what is not there. But language can [...]" (25). This statement is undoubtedly true, though I would question whether description is the ultimate aim of a photograph in the first place. It is Strand's next point that I cannot say is true for me; he writes that, since a photograph cannot tell us the whole story, there is "the ultimate dependence on the speculative properties of language to supply" the missing information (25). Again, I sense a hierarchy: if the poet is somehow dissatisfied or displeased with the ekphrastic object, why does he try to mend the artwork's supposed gaps with verbal sutures? I maintain that the artwork's inability to tell the whole story is not a blank line that the poem tries to fill in. The artwork's silence is not an invitation for the poem to speak, just as a poem's lack of visual aids is not an invitation for the artist to create illustrations for it, to better it.

Perhaps what I condone is a type of synesthetic ekphrasis, blending visual and written texts, as well as the senses we use to perceive each. On a fundamental level, I believe that ekphrastic poetry can express and communicate ideas without trying to oppress, overcome, complete, or erase the work of art it calls out. Again, I stress dialogue—a two-sided conversation (in two different languages, granted) and not a one-sided lecture, during which the poem informs, while the work of art gestures or poses dumbly.

Ekphrasis as dialogue makes the relationship between the poem and ekphrastic object more manageable for both poet and reader. I have never viewed the ekphrastic poem as a boxing ring or jury stand, which are sites of failure or victory. Ekphrasis has always seemed like a bridge where two can meet at a point of mutual understanding. Ekphrasis, in the capacity that I look for it, crosses the boundaries of self and other in order to gain a face-to-face, through-and-through understanding *and dialogue*. I mean to imply an intimacy—a closeness.

Keats writes in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, dated 1818: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us" (qtd. in Patrides 21). I believe that ekphrasis can become problematic when the poet makes a deliberate, "palpable" attempt at ekphrasis. I don't mean to imply that my particular use of ekphrastic principles is pure or totally free from deliberation and intention; it is not. However, what I expect from my own poems, and what I think produces the finest and most clarifying ekphrastic poetry, is not obvious ekphrasis (I am thinking mainly of ekphrasis as description, ekphrasis as voice, and ekphrasis as form). The ekphrasis that will be best, and thereby will go hardly noticed because of its effortlessness, is the poem that shuttles back and forth between itself and the work of art. The poem which learns from the object and is changed by it, and yet, in its turn, changes the object. The poem which does not imitate or seek to represent the ekphrastic object, but the poem which *becomes* the object (two-part, but seamless)—forming a route between poem and object, imitating the movement of a keen, informed mind—I strive for this kind of ekphrastic poem.

As W.J.T. Mitchell light-heartedly notes about Keats's ekphrastic approach in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "When vases talk, they speak our language" ("Ekphrasis and the

Other" 155). But, the same could be said about any object, any inanimate element of our surroundings, as we try to see it, define it, contextualize it, and remember it. As an image moves from without us to within us—from realization to internalization—and then outward again as it is communicated as art, the image must have a language, visual or otherwise. The poet must try to be as true as possible to the unique expression of the visual, since its language, unlike the poem's language, is universal. In his poem, "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name," John Ashbery describes a hypothetical poem that tries too hard to be a "poem-painting," too oppressive in its "desire to communicate / Something between breaths [...] so that understanding / May begin, and in doing so be undone" (lines 29-30). Here, ekphrasis edges towards the worst type of pathetic fallacy. A poem of this sort not only fails to bring the object to life, but also cancels itself out at the same time.

The ekphrastic poems of Ashbery, most notably "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," are perhaps the best examples of the type of poetry I am describing—the type of ekphrasis I expect from myself. In the context of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," I better understand what ekphrasis is and how I can use it to think and write with wider scope, yet more refined precision. Ashbery appears fearless to me. He shifts from poetry to prose to poetry, effortlessly gliding from academic criticism to memoir to lyrical expression. Ashbery samples almost every category of ekphrasis I delineated earlier in this introduction, including but not limited to ekphrasis as description, investigation, and biography. Despite the abstractions in the poem, which are challenging in their intersecting tunnels of thought, there is not the sense of chaos, but rather organization. Heffernan summarizes the thrust of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" in the context of

ekphrasis: "For all the novelty of his approach to this novel painting, however, Ashbery's poem simply makes explicit what all ekphrasis entails and implies: the experience of the viewer, and the pressure of that experience on his or her interpretation of the work of art" (*Museum of Words* 183).

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Different from an ekphrasis which references a painting, artifact, sculpture, or any other form of graphic or plastic art, an ekphrasis of photography epitomizes a dialogue with reality itself, mediated only by certain choices the photographer *must* make (which seem limited when compared to the choices a painter has): vantage point, framing, timing, and "the thing itself," to use John Szarkowski's phrase. Szarkowski, in *The Photographer's Eye,* clearly delineates those "possibilities" available to artists who use the seemingly "mechanical and mindless process" of photography to "produce pictures meaningful in human terms—pictures with [...] a point of view" (2). Szarkowski highlights a critical distinction: photographs are *taken* and not *made.* In other words, the photographer captures a thing, effect, or mood while a painter creates it.

Given this distinction, it seems to me that an ekphrasis of painting or other mimetic object amounts to one representation (the poem) interacting with another representation (the painting/artifact/sculpture). Heffernan cites this as the very definition of ekphrasis: "The verbal representation of visual representation" (*Museum of Words* 3)—reality twice interpreted. An ekphrasis of photography, on the other hand, is more direct, since the subject of the poem is an object, person, or place that was indisputably at one time real. Roland Barthes, in his book-length study of the nature of photography, *Camera Lucida,* explains this promise of reality in depth. The "photographic referent" is a "*necessarily*

real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. [...] I can never deny," he writes, "that *the thing has been there*" (76). The poem and painting are both "optionally real" things (77), but the photograph must admit to its location in reality. This distinction draws me more to an ekphrasis of photography. It is perhaps the quality of certified existence that draws me to the photographs of Davin Risk.[3]

Photographs, in a way, are clues left behind in a scattered trail for some future detective to make sense of. Risk's images are this way to me—they show the leftovers of life, more valuable to us in the frame of the photograph than in the reality of the world. His are images of garbage, graffiti, utilitarian architecture, run-down living spaces, and sometimes oddities in nature. The images are usually exterior, and rarely show people. Whether it's a bizarre statement spray-painted on a wall, or an old suitcase left on the curb, he has tapped into the intriguing nature of those inexplicable, seemingly senseless marks left on the world by other humans.

Risk suited my ekphrastic interests because I wanted to include the work of a living artist in this collection, and unlike much fine art photography of the past forty years, his images are in color. I was also enthralled with Risk's photographs, not because of what is in the picture, but what is out of the picture. His photographs imply that something has happened or is about to happen—a parade has passed, a fight has subsided, a long night is finally over. Risk's titles often recall clichés or idealisms. For example, *utopia, free birds,* and *america the beautiful* anticipate lofty notions of grandeur and patriotism that no image—especially these—could ever sustain, except ironically.

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[3] Regretfully, I do not have permission to reprint any examples of the photographs I reference in this introduction and the subsequent poems. I encourage my reader to view the photographs at the locations specified in the notes to the poems, page 60.

Yet, in some strange way, the pictures are beautiful. They possess an unpeopled quiet—an assurance that, while the scene bears the mark of man, for now he has deserted it. Risk's photographs draw attention to not much of anything, and in so doing, they beg questions. "Ask yourself," the images seem to say, "how well can you see? Do you know why I am here? How well can I show you what has really happened? How well can you guess at it?" The effect is just as Mark Strand once remarked about the paintings of Edward Hopper: "They are saturated with suggestion" (*Hopper* 23). Strand continues on to say that "So much of what occurs within a Hopper seems related to something in the invisible realms beyond its borders [...]" (37). The poems in Section II of my collection, a majority of which are sparked by Risk's photographs, abide in this "beyond" which Strand describes in *Hopper*. With these poems, I do not seek to fill in a lack that has been left by Risk's eerie images. Rather, the poems construct their own theories and myths through indirect reference to his images and the implications therein.

Risk's appeal is in the truthful angles of his subjects—the composition and underscored commentary on the used-up, the discarded, the outdated, and the lost—the objects and backgrounds from past and present lives. In his photograph *please lift,* a payphone politely issues a request to no one; it is late at night and the streets are deserted. In the picture, no one is coming, no one responds, and no one notices the phone's tiny, digital message. "No one will ever come to fill in what's missing" (line 10), I write in "Plan B," and I envision this poem is also located in the deserted place of *please lift.* I find Risk's work remarkable because of his ability to express something while depicting nothing. By "nothing," I mean landscapes and objects that an average person would walk or drive by everyday and not notice, or perhaps would even try *not* to notice. Risk

accomplishes the reversal of clichés by capturing the unexpected in the context of the typical.

In *Another Future,* Alan Gilbert draws an interesting distinction as he writes about an installation of Martha Rosler's photographs, entitled *In the Place of the Public.* He mentions that she nearly surrenders her "opportunity to adopt outside perspectives in order to better analyze the situation, though Rosler's work is clearly critical" (32). Gilbert goes on to say, "Without these other perspectives, art runs the risk of becoming an illustration of present conditions, instead of critiquing them" (32). This is a very important distinction. If photographs fail as critiques, they will also fail as ekphrastic objects. Ekphrasis, in order to carry on a dialogue with the work of art, must have something to talk about.

Davin Risk manages a clear critique of popular culture, noting how quickly we tire of our possessions. One after another, his photographs catalogue the unsightly residue of consumerism. But, in Diane Arbus's photograph, *Xmas Tree in a Living Room, L.I.*, she comes as close as she ever has to simply illustrating a facet of American life, rather than making a comment about it. All we see in the photo is the typical living room commodities—couch, coffee table, television set—and one awkwardly looming Christmas tree. The photograph is taken from the vantage point of a chair in the corner, and the viewer can almost make out a hand—or is it a draped blanket or sweater?—on the left armrest. Aside from the maybe-hand, there is nothing striking or unexpected in the photograph. It seems, at first glance, to be a simple record of an everyday 1960s living room. As I write in my poem titled after the photograph, "Nothing here too remarkable" (line 3).

However, the photograph is inexplicably solemn in its recording of reality. It strikes me as a sealed vessel of the past—not in the sense of a time capsule but more of a coffin. Also, the photograph is devoid of people (there aren't even family portraits on the wall), and the objects in the photograph, arranged as they would be to accommodate people, seem to have human qualities, as though compensating for the residents' desertion. The furniture and other possessions sit like figures in a sterile hospital waiting room or funeral parlor, which places I am reminded of when I see this photograph of a room that I suspect is reserved for momentous occasions only. The objects in the room actually seem self-aware and aware of time, as well. They must know that one day, they will come to be seen as objects from a past holiday and a past life. This is the two-sided promise of the photograph: it swears that these things were present, but these things will also one day be absent, if they are not already. Barthes terms the "lacerating emphasis" (96) on the undeniably dead moment of the photograph the "punctum of time." Earlier in the book, Barthes delineates another type of punctum: the "punctum of detail."

Barthes's notion of the punctum informs his aesthetic judgments of all photographs, and although I do not subscribe to all his conditions of punctum, the concept has relevance to my concept of the sensible past, which I mentioned earlier in this introduction. The punctum is some aspect of a photograph that first attracts the viewer's eye and then disturbs the viewer's thoughts, affecting a heightened emotional response. The viewer finds the punctum compelling or distressing, but he cannot say exactly why. For example, in *Xmas Tree in a Living Room, L.I.,* the punctum in my view is the plastic lampshade cover. The detail sparks a question—what occasion are the homeowners preserving this thing for?—and compels me to wonder more about the oddity. The

plastic cover lends a glaring sense of irony to the photo, since I wonder how a living room can be a room for living, with such a carefully guarded lamp, flowers that are less than life-like, and two clocks reminding residents to keep busy. I hardly notice the tree. Despite its thick coating of tinsel, it seems less festive and more in the way of whatever polite socializing or time-passing might happen in the room. Because this is what I notice last, I start with this detail in the poem. My goal was to develop the significance of the photo, and actually Arbus's life, from the most unlikely starting point.

The punctum of time is different from the punctum of detail. The punctum of detail is some unintentional point of interest in the photograph that "pricks" the viewer in the same way that the punctum of time does (Barthes 26). (For example, the plastic lampshade cover in Arbus's photograph is a punctum of detail for me.) But the punctum of time is an overall blow to the viewer which is not necessarily dealt by any singular aspect in a photograph. (I also experience the punctum of time in *Xmas Tree in a Living Room, L.I.*) The punctum of detail could spark any number of questions in the viewer's mind, but the punctum of time delivers this guarantee, above all else: "that is dead and that is going to die" (Barthes 96). Perhaps the only relevant, yet futile, question is *when.*

As photographs change us (i.e. "wound us") in the way Barthes describes, they bring us closer to the sensible past, where I locate many of the following poems. Barthes uses the word "prick" to describe the effect of the punctum on the viewer, and he explains that the Latin word "punctum" could translate into a type of a wound, sting, or mark. However, the etymology of the word begins to seem more than just figurative for Barthes. "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). The punctum's effect is a permanent mark that reaffirms some

past presence, and it is felt long after the photograph is out of sight. This is the sensible past, which exceeds nostalgia because it edges towards physical sensation. Just as the sight of the scar in Mark Strand's "Seven Poems" induces pain, which in turn induces emotion, the photograph which contains the punctum of time is not just a representative of the past, not just a memory that we "look back on." The photograph is that ineradicable scar—proof of the past—that we can see and *feel*. The sensible past I have described here best illustrates the motivation or force behind many of the poems in this collection, including those that are not ekphrastic.

There is something else, perhaps more fundamental, that attracts me to an ekphrasis of photography, for unlike an artifact, a painting, or sculpture, a photograph does not lose its presence in duplication. Walter Benjamin comments in his 1939 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," that "to ask for the 'authentic' print [of a photograph] makes no sense" (4: 256). However, the lack of an authentic original does not diminish the photograph's effect for Susan Sontag, who writes that the confrontation of a photograph is surreal "in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but far more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision" (*On Photography* 52). Each photograph, no matter how many times it is duplicated, will be its own world, its own reality. The "here and now of the work of art" (4: 253), to use Benjamin's phrase, is not lost in duplication... unless the photograph has been carelessly copied on a malfunctioning Xerox machine. This is actually true of the image I looked at to write the poem "Clouds on Screen at a Drive-in, N.J. 1960."

The Arbus photograph, *Clouds on Screen at a Drive-in, N.J.,* shows a drive-in movie screen, and the drive-in movie screen shows a mass of clouds. In the background,

presumably, are the "real" clouds. Of course, neither the movie clouds nor the clouds in the sky are real, since Arbus has taken their picture. But, there is one more round of duplication that Arbus probably didn't have in mind. I wrote this poem from a Xerox copy of the photograph in a book, and though not ideal for ekphrastic focus, I found a wealth of meaning in this "copy of a copy of a copy of a copy" (line 1). Although the "duplicate world" (Sontag 52) I produced from the photocopier is not more precise than natural vision, it is different from natural vision. It does tell me something.

Unlike photographs, the products of popular culture do lose value in duplication. I find that one prime time TV drama or "Top Twenty" pop song is noticeably similar to the next. They all seem to have the same message or outcome, and the differences between them amount only to slight variations in style or obvious attempts to shock the audience by "doing something different," as is the popular phrase amongst recording artists and producers. In "How to Look at Television," Theodor Adorno writes that commodities of popular culture are designed to satisfy the "selfsameness" and "automatized reactions" of the public. The result is that consumers of cultural products are left with "a kind of multiple choice between very few alternatives" (160-161). Along the same lines, Benjamin writes, "By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence" (4: 254).[4]

My copy of *Clouds on Screen at a Drive-in, N.J.* has lost its authenticity, thanks to my sloppy mechanical reproduction, but it is my feeling that Arbus herself signaled the destruction of the original in the very selection and framing of her subject. When I see this image, with the people sitting in their cars, watching the movie (which Arbus has

[4] Although I was not aware of Adorno and Benjamin's relevance to my work until after I had written the poems in this collection, their ideas flow from the same vein that yielded poems such as "Symmetry," "Where to Wait," and "Multiple Choice."

paused forever), I wonder if they know how absurd they look at this moment! In their arrested state of the photograph, they gaze dumbly at a lifeless copy of the external world (which waits in its real form just behind the screen). These moviegoers remind me of the prisoners in Plato's cave allegory, who live in an underground den and are chained so that they cannot look at true images, but can only see copies, or "shadows," of the truth. Considering the cave allegory further, Arbus's vantage point—behind the people watching the movie—implicates her as the shadow-caster. Her framing of the image also seems to wield power. The movie screen takes up most of the composition, and so the original clouds are mostly hidden from the viewer, just as they would be in the prisoners' cave. There is something in this photograph that cries out against or protests America's general "concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (Benjamin 4: 255). Arbus's comment, simply put, might be that a photograph, though never parted from its core of authenticity, is only as truthful as the reality it depicts.

Some of my poems' speakers are subtly jealous of the photograph's inherent authenticity, because they are aware that life itself can lose authenticity through the mechanical nature of daily routines. In my poem, "Interior of Suzy Frankfurt's Apartment," which references the Andy Warhol photograph of the same title, the speaker is a plurality. The Warhol photograph depicts a composition divided into four duplicate squares, and in each square, the same exact corner is photographed, decked out in the same striped wallpaper, which in turn devours four identical, patterned chairs. It appears to me that one room wants to cancel the others out. "Why are there four of us?" the objects seem to say. "Some of us must go." There is an atmosphere of inner-conflict in

the photograph, especially given the harshly developed contrast of black and white. The four duplicates, pushed up against each other as they are, suffer from a loss of self. They face themselves as obvious reproductions, and the encounter—unpadded by any slight variation, spatial distance, or humorous perspective—is jarring.

The contradiction of lines 10 and 13 is meant to express the conflict of the duplicates, who want to break the cycle of repeated mistakes: was the photographer's choice right or wrong? It is not for any one of the four subjects in the photograph to say. Do these quadruplets fear contradicting each other, or do they fear saying exactly the same thing, as their appearance predicts they might? There is a definite love/hate relationship confined in the four walls of the photograph, and in the poem, while one replica calls another replica "my precious double," words are cheap and easily repeated to another "other." Ultimately, I'd like to think the poem shows reciprocity between self and other. After all, "there is safety in patterns" (line 6).

Another thing that draws me to an ekphrasis of photography, which might be evident by now, is the art form's relevance to popular culture. Photographs permeate daily life, from magazines to billboards to web sites. Marketing agencies use the photograph for its ability to *show* consumers what they *could be doing*: "It could be you on that beach or in that car." In addition, photography is the one art form that almost every American has experienced at one time, if not as the photographer, then at least as the subject of a photograph. Though it is accessible, I do not say that photography is the *most accessible* art form, since that rank must be held by drawing. Unlike cameras, pens and notepads are often handed out as promotional items or given away in hotel rooms and lobbies. It takes less instruction for the amateur "artist" to learn how to create an image (children

draw before they write) than it does for the amateur photographer to learn zooming, exposure times, and other procedures, depending on the type of camera used.

Because of its accessibility, many of us try our hand at drawing regularly, whether we view it as art or not. Many of us doodle during those "lost" periods of our life, when we are obliged to knowingly waste time—on hold with the power company, waiting for a web site to download, or sitting through a droning college lecture, for example. But, the difference between the sketch as pastime and the photograph as pastime is that we often do not, after we have finished with the power company or exited the lecture hall, cut out and preserve our sketches in albums and frames. Even if we make a serious sketch of a vacation spot or a family member, we might hang it on the wall and claim it when asked about it, but we most likely do not carry it around in the plastic sleeve of our wallets. We are proud of our photographs. We want to show them. Others want to see them, or, at least, they are obligated by social code to feign interest. It would come across as arrogant or a little strange to go around showing everyone the sketches we had made: "Look at the picture I made!" works only for children, but "Look at the picture I took!" works for almost anyone.

The photograph is a unique thing because it allows everyone to exercise artistic inclinations. When we seek to perfectly frame that picture of the Eiffel Tower, preserve the shades of color in a tropical Hawaiian flower, or capture the face of a child in perfect contentment, we have discovered the artistic possibilities of photographs that all serious photographers are aware of and seek to refine. Susan Sontag remarks upon the passing of "That age when taking photographs required a cumbersome and expensive contraption—the toy of the clever, the wealthy, and the obsessed" (*On Photography* 32). Sontag had

not yet seen the age of the camera phone, nor photo sharing and social networking websites like Flickr, Facebook, and My Space, which moved photography beyond accessibility and into ubiquity. Thanks to wireless technology, most of America can now take, download, and transmit their photographs at any given time.

The widely shared experience of photography, along with its accessibility, interests me and attracts me to poems about photographs. I hope that my poems about photographs are interesting and comprehensible to a wide audience. The photograph, I would imagine, gives the poem a core of discernible reality that a reader can cling to and use to gauge the successive levels of abstraction or allusion. Experienced readers of poetry can immediately gauge a poem's level of abstraction, and likewise accept that abstraction as positive and in touch with a new expression, or reject it as negative and either too self-involved or too allusive. It seems to me that an ekphrasis of photography could never be *too* abstract, since ultimately, the reader will always have a point of reference—a map leading out of the maze of poetic devices and back into the real, dated world of the photograph.

Photography has not been a part of popular culture nearly as long as painting, and this fact might lead some to overlook photography as a suitable ekphrastic focus. Admittedly, the photograph has no history before 1839, but the spirit of photography existed well before that. In concept, photography is a way to capture and claim things—to *object*-ify reality. The French Impressionists come to mind, who worked quickly and moved their easels frequently, as the ever-shifting patterns of light and cloud directed them to do so. Also, the tenets of picturesque theory, which thrived in England at the end of the

18th-century, demonstrate that the spirit of "point and shoot" is a critical quality in the mobile artist.

William Gilpin, an important and widely known picturesque theorist of the day, taught picturesque travelers how to sketch landscapes as they leisurely explored the countryside. Travelers often collected these sketches in travel journals, comparable to today's "scrapbooking" craze. Gilpin's guidelines encouraged pupils to "adjust" aspects of the landscape in order to create a better picture: "We must ever recollect that nature is most defective in composition; and *must* be a little assisted" (*Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* 67). While Gilpin admired the colors and textures of nature, he found that the natural composition often lacked "that kind of beauty that would look well in a picture" (31). The artist was expected to move trees, dramatize mountains, or create a Hellenistic column covered in ivy, when such manipulation was appropriate to the rugged beauty of a picturesque composition.

Picturesque theory was revolutionary, not only because it gave artists authority to revise nature for the sake of art, but also because it invited a general audience, which may or may not have had formal artistic training, to look for picturesque potential in nature. Previously, there had not been an aesthetic principle quite so accessible. Picturesque travelers ventured out in search of potential pictures, just as today's tourists look for "photo ops" when they take tours in open-air buses, boats, or guided walks. To assist with the capture of compositions, picturesque travelers sometimes carried a small, tinted, convex mirror, known as a Claude glass. The artist held up the device over his shoulder to capture picturesque scenes in the reflection, and then he attempted to "take the picture"

by quickly sketching what he saw in the mirror. This is photography, except that the push of a button now eliminates the need to sketch.

Interestingly, Adorno mentions a cultural phenomenon that resembles the liberating spirit of picturesque theory:

> [...] huge strata of the population formerly unacquainted with art have become cultural 'consumers'. Modern audiences, although less capable of the artistic sublimation bred by tradition, have become shrewder in their demands for perfection of technique and for reliability of information, as well as in their desire for 'services.' (*The Culture Industry* 161)

In my poem "Consumers in a Picturesque Landscape," the speakers could be described as discriminating "cultural 'consumers'." As is evident from the poem's title, I had picturesque theory in mind, but in this poem, I wanted to relate it comically or ironically to the American consumer's decorative taste. Just as picturesque travelers went out in search of picturesque landscapes to sketch, the speakers in this poem start out shopping for bathroom accessories, and they are pleased with all the choices they have. But, as the poem continues, revealing that what they buy cannot satisfy, the speakers are unable to sustain the façade of the American Dream. As Adorno notes, consumers today are demanding. We want the best quality for the lowest cost in the least amount of time. In the last lines of "Consumers in a Picturesque Landscape," this production triangle collapses: "Our happy adjustments / Crash and burn our two faces / Lost time everything bought" (lines 22-24).

On a more general level, the poems that follow owe everything and nothing to the truth that human vision is imperfect. Susan Sontag writes, "Humankind lingers

unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth" (29). If we can learn from the cave prisoners, and from the people at Diane Arbus's eternally paused drive-in movie, then perhaps one day we will understand that the things we see, hear, and pretend to know are not always truths. The general conflation of seeing with knowing in daily conversation ("Oh, I *see* what you mean...") has the potential to be extremely deceptive in the information it provides us. Routinely, identities are mistaken, signs misread, distances distorted—things are not always what they seem. The discrepancy between the visible and the actual, between the limited knowledge of our eyes and the unlimited knowledge of the mind's eye (to use Plato's term), has provided a seemingly endless poetic landscape for me.

The photograph is an integral element of this landscape. It vouches for itself as faithful record of the past, and yet, the breadth of its knowledge is held within the square that confines it. A photograph shows us the visible world, to the extent it is visible, as seen through a past other's eyes, or through a past version of our own eyes. In a majority of the poems to follow, the speakers spend their time searching for or coming to terms with the concept of time and its consequences. In my poem, "A Story of Time," the speaker sees that time exists, but struggles to reconcile visible time with intelligible time. Poem after poem, I see the tragedy repeat itself: what we see is not what is. The speakers in "Multiple Choice" come to this realization in the first and last line of the poem: "We didn't see what was always there." These poems contend with the fact that, even with open eyes—even with the photograph as honest witness and the visible signs of deterioration before us—we do not always fully see the truth.

I

Scenic America: This Is a Test

There was a way in and a way out—a stain blocked both.

Spreading on the floor, it struck one as red, then blue, then
It seemed to assume the color of the blank sky or whatever
Was above at any given time. Stars

Beneath the surface of the water, as the wind blew through treetops—
All the dainty blue-filtered light came into its own.

What a sight! Shouldn't we exclaim this to each other,
As we did in grade school, when ice cream was served in a cup, *somehow*
The vanilla mixed with the chocolate?

I can't quite put my finger on it, the fact of the matter
As I stumble through the wilderness—
Only the end of an era could seize me in this way,
To leave me speechless and without an answer,
Even the wrong one.

(no experience necessary)

I don't have it.
It got lost somewhere along the way, in the backseat
among other souvenirs—pieces of pasts I've collected.

As we drive to and fro, let me sit on top of the car.
From there, I can truly see America
blurring by—made pure.

There's nothing about this country that I don't understand
when I'm riding on the roofs
of box cars, motor homes, box cars
derailed.

The air rushes by so fast and so beautiful
in its smearing of landscape, I can feel it turn
me against everything I've ever seen
standing still.

A Story of Time

I learned to tell the difference
between one day and the next, though at first
the vision of fruit rotting in a dish confused me.

Rapidly-enhanced time on a TV screen
sped the fuzz along, the fruit gave up
the juice and fizzled out within seconds.

This is odd, I thought, and knew
how to say good morning, nice new day
& hello nice new night. Let me gather you

into my eyes. Nice that I knew
but still could not learn the difference
between time then time now time to come.

One day I thought, today is one day.
I had finally learned what to say, what to do,
I learned to tell the difference.

Landscape With Television and Cows

One time I tried to tell the difference

That we are all created equal

And there was the sound of laughter

And doors closing.

*

There was a moment when

The spiritual felt drained

And this is not to say judgment

Was passed, but we stood still.

*

Out of the box everything is new

And more expensive than the old

Perception of time and the media

Shallow culture cracks skulls if we dive.

*

In the garden of forks and spoons

A night like steel nails falls

On us all—out in the pasture, nothing

Can stop the sting of the bandage torn away.

*

At some point I asked a question

To which I knew the answer—

Some were displeased and some praised

The snow which fell outside the window.

*

Like J.A. did, I tried each thing, only all

Were clichés enacted

One by one on a drive-in movie screen—

Isn't this how the end begins?

Self-Portrait, After Ashbery

When one is alone before a mirror,
Which hand sits in the foreground?
Which hand touches the brush
In reversed reverse?

In the end, we have all seen ourselves
In mirrors, waiting for something to happen,
To grow older or more beautiful
Or more true-to-life.

There is nothing I wouldn't do to see the sun rise over the ocean
In color. There was nothing I would have done
Differently, had I the chance to save myself from the flames.

The char, the smell, like the word *Joan* tingles my nostrils—
Her hair, her vice, her skin—singed.
Scorched, and that's the way the desert crumbles.

I did not read my history book as I was instructed.

Not past the first pages, there, too many names
No one answers to, too
Much like flashcards in front of me, each recalling…

All that was there was far too clear. Sentence follows sentence
In the linear fashion, it's true, I grew accustomed to, too.

Know nothing but the bizarre something
We admit to, because it is familiar, because we've seen it
A hundred times before.

Wet Armchair in Suburbia

Can we say the same thing over and over again
With different words?

> We live in the same house with different paint.
> We water our lawns. We do it ourselves. We
> Homeowners take pride, take turns, take walks.

Take back the blindfold, slipped over our faces.

The truth is
Always without us.

Without us everything is clear.
Without us thrives
The throbbing world which under our thumbs
Squirms. Clear out
The old stuff in the closet, the old stuff
We bought at a yard sale. Armchairs,
Hockey sticks, lava lamps, stuffed animals. We didn't ask
Why this thing? Was there a need? We had the money
And no use for any of this stuff
We take it out now and throw it to the curb—
The sign: please take away, free stuff.
Nobody wants it—we left it out in the rain.

Our excess is ruined now, more
Damage done to something previously tragic
From the day it was born—our lives,
The task at hand, the blindfold falls to the ground.

Nothing Seen Believes

Knowing that what saved me from the flames
also ruined me—that's what made me stop and realize

nothing is ever complete.

The river is dry, and how can I be unconscious
of a well-worn road?

Forced out of the aperture, I can hardly see.
This must be exposure.

Beneath my feet, a sharp sound feels less than great.

I can't believe how quickly life takes shape
while I sleep, and how ugly in the morning light

it appears to me.

Symmetry

Born into the world, one comes from another, as though climbing
Down from a tree house. We want to see
Identification—
We demand fingerprints, each one like the other,
Though in slightly different models.

In the daylight, there is often a bird, amazement
At the repetition of the chorus,
The repetition of the song, the repetition of the chorus
Of the song on the radio, the repetition of the signs on the road:
Stop. Stop. No
Passing by our old houses, our first houses,
Our childhood rooms, we all feel
Nostalgia—
Though of slightly different degrees.

Now, taken away from the world, temperature rising, flat lining,
Up too high to climb down, we want to see
What others have seen:
Darkness with light, simple light, light
At the end, a twisting spiral, an upward scale,
A big throne, blue eyes—
But mostly, we want light.

Consumers in a Picturesque Landscape

We choose the composition

Of our room—drapes,

Bed, bath, & belief

In the beyond.

*

What is in our heads

We make up (with violence)

For lost daylight

Stretched thin—50% off.

*

Make the road rough

Make the mountain rugged

Make the bathmats match

The towels, the sheets.

*

The pattern we commit

At the highest cost—

Our bedspread fabric's

Stars…stripes…stars...

*

Amidst rush hour's

Dance the delirium waltz

Home to the end of beauty—

The day was good.

*

Actually the day was cruel

Our happy adjustments

Crash and burn our two faces

Lost time everything bought.

Morning Paper

There was nothing mysterious about a boy
On the stairs, with a rope, with a grin,
A puddle.

Before he died, a man held his name
On the tip of his tongue—he cried out to me
In a language no one speaks.

Nothing strange about a tongue,

Nothing strange about death,

Nothing strange about a boy
With no future, with no past—a tear
Through the sports section.

Each line connected above the water—the shape
Was sincere. A weave of cables above an ocean top,
A rippled wind rocks the system.

Sequins fell to the floor—after the dance, the speakers
Vibrated still. Streamer crosses streamer, the AC swings
The tinsel-hung balloon strings.

A fascination with the ancient art of fake tattoos—
Has it ever been about "mom," who is dead by now,
Or a girlfriend, who must certainly be ex?

No one can tell.

Only one thing crossed my mind as I described all that I saw:
Life cannot continue this way. The suspension
Too fragile, too weak. Watched by us, below.

Xmas Tree in a Living Room, L.I. 1963

after and for Diane Arbus

Can you see to the top?

Do whatever it takes to fit into this space—the tree top,
chop it off if necessary. Nothing here too remarkable,
the view across the vast stretch of carpet—

not too black, not too white,
no crowds, no grins, no bare skin. Nothing
Too lived-in, nothing too clear.

When you took our tragedies down,
did you feel a part of them? Pictures you preserved
for some future us—did you ask if we would be grateful? Still
the image

you could never develop
haunts us.

Your coroner types:

ADRENALS: Not remarkable.
PANCREAS: Not remarkable.

Nothing too remarkable, years from now,
although some would disagree.

From your seat in the living room corner,
did you see the end of things?—things
covered in plastic, things hung on the wall, things trimmed
all around to hide the flaws

which you saw—which you saved?

Relief

Is there something in the way that the light ceases to fall
Into the eye sockets, parted lips, inner ears of statues

That could indicate a kind of wretched self-awareness
Of their inability to blink, to form and hear words—

Is there something?

There may be something in the way that figures placed
In high relief seem to move away from the wall

Which holds them still long enough for the passerby
To forget that something lies beneath—a mold, a core, wire

Bones might be nothing.

There may be nothing in the way that caryatids crack
Over time at the neck and ears, crumbling ancient weight

All for the moment when from marble will come words
That may beg for mercy or sing for joy or scream to us,

There is something!

There is Something to Be Gained Here

for Jean-Michel Basquiat

You came here alone
drawing great lines
and now you've got a moment,
big moment.

You showed up already
trying to fill blank space
from the first day out of the box
hey, you shouted, WAKE UP.

You passed crumbled
brick walls and thought
something of them, walking around
in a misspelled delirium.

And now the truth
be told, you are really something else
and all your bleary-eyed perceptions
make you of use.

Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958

after Ansel Adams

Slender aspens grouped together—
What I saw in the photograph

Reminded me of how delicious
Is the figured curtain of metaphor.

The white lines transposed against the dark
Forest backdrop—all is half-light.

*

I took your half-broken smile to heart
And winced at the sun's rising

Lazy in the early, frozen hours of winter
A grip so tight as to shut out movement.

*

These things I have tried, each of them,
They remind me that what I hold in my hand

Is no more real than a poem's words
Meant to mean more than what they are:

Typescript, ink, black lines transposed
Against the white backdrop of what I see.

Love Letter for My Opposite

You: experience the most delicate gust of wind,
Find form in it, hate chaos.

Inspired by the pang of bottled guilt, right from the source,
The French Alps in plastic containers:
The world flows from one open wound—

I imagine it on your chest as the medics scramble
From night to day, and the contrast, red on white, bears a resemblance
To us, to what we used to be. So unlike

You: recognize the color, the clash,
The sharp pain of me. I am not—
What I once was. Time out of time

Has set us free after all.

After flowers grow in winter because you watered them,
After all is said and lost, because we disagree,
Opposed, I write to

You: are clarity, objectivity
As I obscure, subject
Myself to my opposite, to my love.

Riders

When you came,

I was waiting for the dream about the cowboy—chaps and all

lost like the ark

the arc we made in the sky as the sun fell and we along

with it, a long time, alongside the broken back of a horse

with no wings

although we both knew how to make it fly.

Where to Wait

Sometimes I wait for a bus that never comes.

Hold out my ticket
To the night.

The book speaks of itself.

Discusses the square root of all evil
Taken to the empth power.

This is not to say math,
But a streamlined philosophy
Forced from calculators.

Down the road, brakes squeal.

*

Can't we wait somewhere out of the rain?

I loved you in spite of myself.

I read the ending first.

I wrote the letter
Although I could not see it.

The dark proves too much,
Layers on itself, calculates—
Collects my ticket.

I still don't have a ride.

*

Please hold.

*

This is not the sensuous touch I remember.

Something was like a rock, like a drop
Of hail, a hammer.

I stared up at the ceiling, leveled.

Waited for the dial tone, the sound

Of the pounding of the mallet
Drives spikes into stone.

Erected in 1908, this historical landmark
At the bus stop corner

Matters more than poetry.

*

That is not a valid option. Please try again.

*

To begin again, I began on a violent hill

While the sun cut the new day.

Mock Epic

One story without a setting
Took place in anger.

Antagonists flourished
In this hollow climate, a no-man's land
Of emotion, a pool drained for winter.

The hero felt lost.
There was neither map nor plotline.
He knew nothing—others were omniscient.
But we all wanted to avoid an ending
Without the *fin* in script.

In the time of post-optimism,
One story without a setting
Set itself up for tragedy—
For, in fact, the place the hero sought
Was nothing like he imagined. He had hoped
And his hamartia is the disaster of our day.

Dream of Fiction

In the veins of the book
A blueprint past runs
Swiftly past scenic plots
Of grass where girls sit.

A wood plank abridges
The image of a stream
Which has stood too long
For endless love and life.

Beyond narrative there
Forms an original dream
Of fiction stirred up from
A no-name child's memory.

Shared Spaces

I found what I wanted
and I found love for it.

The it of my heart, the it
of my dreams. Between us,

the object without which
I would sense every emptiness.

*

Cornell's boxes are filled with things
to love: paper bird, tiny spring—

Everything old, but made new
in form, a close space, my experience

hinges on my entrance
into it—a museum

holds my hand
for I cannot cross alone.

*

All we want is an object to love
not because we found it, but because it found us.

I spy something red.
My little eye bleeds out of love for it.

*

I can say I am full of surface
or I can say I am empty.

I know without discussion.
The fact of the matter, spelled out

on the wall. The mark
tells me I see it. Say it. A snail.

Knowledge

known: so much of it
to take. Touch
its gentle body, if you can.
I am afraid of it.

I must contribute
My seed, its legs splayed open,
Surrenders the self, open
To the world, for deposits

At all hours of the night,
A dark figure waits around the corner—
Around the next corner, another.
Around the next corner, another, but slightly

Less ideal. Do you have a long ponytail?
Do you have on a dress? He hopes
& hopes & hopes ad infinitum. Ad nauseam. Add
Something to the pile,

And you have been used (knowingly
or unknowingly?) by some
Body (it has no sense of right or wrong).
Add to it. Drink of it.

Know without discussion

This breaking point, suspension
Denies us, but we admit nothing to ourselves.
Although, the day is clear
And we can see the pillars of smoke in the distance.

All is well, and we blow out the candle
Before the murderer moves into the light.
Knowledge is what little we have
Revealed to us as nothing more.

Interior of Suzy Frankfurt's Apartment

after Andy Warhol

One stripe running into nothing
Says to the other stripe:
We are not the same after all.

My precious double: there is no original.
The same mistake more than once.
But there is safety in patterns.

Nothing about the room stands
On its own two legs—apparently
things need walls to live in.

The choice was wrong:
To deny space color, worse
Than denying color space.

The choice was right:
The stage set for more than one of us—
Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

Clouds on Screen at a Drive-in, N.J. 1960

after Diane Arbus

A copy of a copy of a copy of a copy.
From the sky to the screen to the photograph to the book
Which I photocopied into harsh contrasts,
a poor reproduction—

At the Xerox drive-in, clouds
Obscure into white paint spilled on pavement,
White skin on a black backseat. An image
Mass, produced

More of itself. Took up space, then time.
"We oppose each other," say the clouds.
How do they know?

They can see themselves
Through a mirrored screen.

One cloud references the other—
Separate but equal. *E pluribus unum.*

Somewhere between the many, the one
Waits around the bend, armed—I turned in time
To see my shadow, just hanging on the wall,
Strange because there was no light in the room
to cast it. (The machine was low on toner.)

Figures thrown up on the screen:
Fragments from a recurring dream
Of lost directions, driving in circles, never done
Packing, lost lists, forgotten commodities, landmarks
From the past all rearranged—
Drive-by memories, once trusted,
Now tense, dying cornstalks.

The moment of address catches me off guard:
"Is everything okay in here?"
Fog clams up the window—a flashlight shines in.
"Everything's fine." Sight interrupted
Goes unnoticed.

What did I miss?
Hold my head in my hands, track
My train of thought, lost
forever in duplication.

Theodicy

I dream that I've lost the touch

The touch that creeps down into the marrow

And what a bad word everything is.

Struggle to be brilliant—neverending

Explore the guilt we have

At the climax of an ending with no outcome—

The causes lost in the effects

A stay against the changing times that chase us

Through narrow alleyways, ballparks, deserted lots

This pang on pang noise frightening

(it's everything) In its everywhereness.

During a Horror Movie, a Man Considers His Marriage

What hides between
the lines on the floor
will not let us draw its shape
always
dark
and the storm.

Something waits for us
breathing hard
fogs up the glass
always
past
and the abandoned car.

What climbs into our bed at night
as we lie too blind to notice
the shadows following
always
close
and the struggle.

Something pushes us down
the dark alley
cannot even contain the crime
always
bang
and the distant sirens.

What tells us the outcome
before it fully unfolds
in the end someone is there to roll
always
thunder
and the credits.

Murder and History

In each case, there was the mark of human nature. X murders Y.
Y cries before and during, but not after.
X mourns, pulls it together, calls a cab.
In each case, we see a display of sympathy.

As X explains to his Egyptian cab driver why he lost his religion,
Y says goodbye to everything saved up in his head.
Language, anatomy lessons, fragments of a childhood.

All these things are history. Shored up against time,
We would like to believe, but without the corral of two hard covers,
The release of what's been is the loss of what's been,
Even as it's been in the mind of a man—more vivid than any prose.

In each case, preservation is not of interest. Some paintings
Are 500 years old—they were not meant to last forever
Just like what's left over when a life burns out.
X saves the image of messy Y, in the end, all forgotten.

Coming to Terms: A Guide

I need a truer way to say
my memory's shot to hell.

I dream of dogs like they're weird
but I've owned dozens—

in a forest cabin, I had hundreds.
(Actually, I kept cats.)

What lies
surface in a state
of deliberate confusion?

We all regret—
We do not all forgive.

Forgetting is this easy:
burn the leaves out back

along with the furniture.
Discard her clothes, her brush.

Throw away the conchs, half-shells,
driftwood collected from walks.

Start to gather new thoughts
about new countries, new people.

Visit them in your sleep.

Ocean Trip

Sometimes seashells haunt me—
to think of what was, what I've never read or heard

I've never heard the ocean in the folds of a shell.

The blackest night explodes in white specks
strewn beneath the tide as it rolls back and forth—

I've never felt so tired. No one cares

to touch the slime inside
the soft, porcelain finish which cradled the body

muscular tongue body of what was. I've never seen
a shell filled—alive.

Twenty-First Century Landscape

Did we have a good time?

Burn the bridge to the chorus

Of a million angels on a million riverbanks—

What comes over the water has not yet begun

To take shape

Out of half-carved weight

And this observation is not mine

But another's.

*

Once the havoc wreaks itself

Finally falls into our laps

It was all the same but now repulsive

The fish dangling at the end of the line

Cannot breathe air. He needed…

*

When the past rises up to meet us

We long to leave it in our wake

And the chorus fades to a fall

Off the edge into the river below.

This is not what we intended.

*

Rise up to meet your past.

There's nothing more perfect.

*

Cross that bridge, quick.

*

Come back to the place we started

And raise your hand if nothing matters.

*

The comparison held for a while

And then came the dawn

And something ceased to rise.

Family Bible

In the brief space
Of a hundred years
What hand leads
What body through

In order to place
Delicate brackets
Around our names
Indicating passed?

This paper yellows
Lives but as for us
Nothing so grave has
Yet forced its way in.

Initial Descent

Take back the things you lost: in the backyard,
your contact lens, your glove, your earring. Unpaired

alone in the air, one way flight
from there to there. For now, nowhere.

Above the cloud cover, somehow it's so easy to think
We are closer to what we've lost. Closer to "here

it is!" Is this the case?
Dream of it, anyway. Dream of holding the past.

I don't want to.

I want to create nothing.

In so doing, forget, everything

is circumstantial evidence—circumscribed
along the line of the sun.

Dusk at the hotel—
VACANCY flickers.

Above your head, the blinking wings
of a Boeing 747.

Airplanes flying overhead at all times...
where have I read that?

Anything goes when everything
is broken.

No comfort left for us, we are still
flying above the clouds, our own backyard,
wondering how soon we make our descent.

Avery Rock, 1946

The lighthouse room
fills up fast with light—
each rotation
blinding.

The evening sets
the wind gathers
deep into its gut
itself a thing to see.

Every five seconds—
your vanished hand
on the banister—
some one boxed up.

The morning cradles
the tide claims
a gray dawn
a lost, dizzied gull.

Birth of Venus, Revisited, Fractured

after Botticelli

All across the sea—how much did you disbelieve, how dark
the light fails, how much water was there to cool your skin—
if you had jumped in—nearly-translucent skin

dissolving at the tide's touch. Believe
beauty was past due, the stunning eclipse
of water and sand below the surface of your face, delivered.

This amazing intersection of bone and wave,
the spectacle that binds us all now where we stand
riveted on the shoreline—you're beginning, oblivious, adrift.

On Three Photographs

after two of Davin Risk and one of Jacob A. Riis

In the delicate curve of the lens
Who knows what pictures.

One says to one,
There is something in the way that leaf
Is pressed between the broken bits of that piano.
One says to one,
There is something in the way those iron strings
Are still taut, after so much trauma.

And yet, there is nothing
But the image, which is nothing
If not surface.

*

Because the lights are red,
Because after rain, water stands,
Because time can in fact be stopped,

Red light falls on wet pavement forever.

*

It is because the image is here in my hand
That I wonder when I will die.

A picture of anything asks that questions be asked.

Who and where and why,
The big question, why:
Why this time of day? This girl? This task?
When there are so many other scenarios,
When the course of life places
One in one's way—one to say to one
Something profound, illuminating, possibly
More interesting than a girl sweeping back the ocean
In black and white.

Checklist for Man Ray

☐ See: the delicate, curved lens.
☐ See: the amazing angle tries to speak.
☐ See: the moment still.

☐ Do: take the night train.
☐ Do: take the picture / somewhere else.
☐ Do: stop if you want.

☐ Listen: the wind slips through your hands.

☐ Love: the other / place tears on the model's cheeks.

☐ Say: take the picture.
☐ Say: there is a word for this.
☐ Say: it is to see.

Objects in Mirror

We didn't see what was always there:
The house, the fountain, the rain, and how absurd
Were those merman, with their trumpets,
Blowing water up as water fell
From the sky? Still water falls
From our eyes and into our hands. Cup it,
I said, to save for later.
We could drink it for years, now,
What we have cried over much and for nothing.

Always, always, always
We had what we had and what we had was gone
Always the next moment.
What I actually wanted to say
Passed before my eyes—
The missed exit on the turnpike (too much talking),
The dodged traffic cone, the road kill killed twice…
Good driver, good enough
To find a way home. The billboards
Tell us to stop, next turn, we won't regret it. They assure us
When we cannot do the same for each other.

We backed down easy from the rearview mirror,
The landscape, like de Staël's, choppy up close,
choppy far away—in mirror, objects always closer
To collapse than they appear. Awful to know the distance,
Worse to know the method: Professor Plum in the Parlor,
The pallet knife slicing fields of colors (parts of us)
Stacked on top of each other, rough around the edges,
Angled into depth, succumbed to the violence
Of our knowing each other—the landscape

Was never familiar. Not like the pictures
On the Hallmark calendars:
The month of June, acres of wildflowers,
December, fence line receding into a snowy background.
The simple proved difficult. Dreams failed
To materialize. We searched for a future we could feel.

What was gained, in our search for the real?
A square to sit inside of, that we would know
And that would know us. One morning
in May, after a light rain, I saw
a sparrow land on the telephone wire, and I remember it
to this day. Later you found a snail on the sidewalk (how odd!)
and you plucked it up and set it in the dirt.
We lost that day as we took it for granted, not knowing
We had gained everything. The pursuit of happiness
Is really a prayer for sense enough to know when to stop

Searching for the future, complaining all the while
About the fountain in the courtyard, running
All the time, never enough water to run it dry. Now
Our environment descends upon us, through us,
And we are lost at last.
The loss was always there, ready backstage—
We didn't see what was always there:

Finishing a Novel in Which Only One Character Survives

I kept wanting you to clarify
me—the image in your bedroom mirror.

On television, there are animals
hunting and killing in the African plains.

I had an instinct
about a pair of shoes—the instinct was flawed.

I kept wanting our past
dues to dissolve—member me for free.

You happened
to not notice my feet.

In the newspaper, a boy
dies.

I wanted something more
to happen to the character left alive.

Multiple Choice

Directions: Circle the letter next to your answer.

Driving into Nevada, into the desert, into the light
Emitting diodes, billboards preach to us, hands folded
Over our eyes.

This is not the scene we imagined,
Not the western backdrop we expected
Or intended. Here now is the painted face of the desert,
Its eyes glazed over, a neon glow.

The Highway Beautification Act, October 22, 1965:
Beauty belongs to all the people.
We fail to claim it. On the answer key,
The term LED is confused with a drug that's similar to say.
Similar, too, to see us addicted to it, we all must pass
By, and we all take a taste into our eyes—
Cannot turn away or turn off
The chorus on loop:
Consume, consume, consume.
And avoidance—not a choice

In this year's election, we will run
For our lives.

1-800-CITIZEN. Feel free

To call anytime.
Except when the dial tone drones
So loud, you can't remember your name,
Your social security number, date of birth…

I could not gather my identity
Into the viewfinder—
a. The square was too small.
b. The view was too vast.
c. The finding was too difficult.
d. The scene was too predictable.

We started driving two days ago, and everything we have seen
Is like the postcards, but bigger,
And with overhead utility wires. Can we go back
To the place we started?

a. Yes.
b. No.
c. None of the above. The farther we go, the
d eeper we fall into the canyon,

where it's dark and quiet at last.

II

Brown Suitcase Outside a Door

with Davin Risk's leaving someday

"Been there for days" someone says about the dead dog
in the street outside the barber shop on south 9th.

Just a stray at first glance
but his teeth are clean there's a collar mark around his neck.

Signs of the domestic—
a woman alone next door who brings in her patio cushions
every night and every morning puts them back

a woman who trims her hedges
and saves the clippings for hand-made wreaths a woman

with no car misses the bus.

Signs of winter—
breath revealed in the air then taken away
the dead don't decay as quickly
and the old couple who live across the street
are all ready to fly to Florida
though their suitcase has been there for days.

1530 A, 1530 B

with Davin Risk's neighbours

Side by side we hear the worst of each other.
Furniture moves at 2 a.m. a mattress creaks at 5.
Yelling at 8:15 breaking a door slamming
shut at 9.

The newspaper tells about two boys who died
tied to a train track gang initiation torture suicide a dare
no one can say for sure except to say they died
side by side.

You get up for coffee and I can set my watch.
I go to a bar after work and throw your schedule off.

You read the headline I watch through the curtain.
You freeze at your doorstep paper in hand.

The violence neighbor could get worse.
Let our nearness bind us make us
ready for what's ahead clamoring through the night.

Coma

The threat of time is often more than I can bear.
Sure it's true that white is a symbol for purity
but watching the intra V drip the tele V fade
in and out the intensive CU ebb and flow
walls floors sheets white means a soiled finale.

Hawaii Postcard

with Davin Risk's i have been 2

From your tiny island you wave at me but from far away
your actions might be a call for help
or a surrender or a tribal dance
or— I can only guess.

Postcards for sale at the gas station show snow
mountains sunsets deserts cypress forests seascapes land
marks the place we met Niagara Falls
World's Largest Ball of Yarn an Egyptian sphinx.
Turning the wire rack I see the world in rectangles.

In the mail there's one from you
the first one in years sent from your tiny island.

There with palms trees and umbrella drinks—
you wish I were there you wish I would write soon
I wouldn't believe the place I'd never want to leave
or— guess again: pictures lie.

I have been where you are.

At the gas station I choose my reply
and on the back of a cityscape covered in snow
my tiny island calls a cab
lights a cigarette floats happily
through the dark streets.

Leaving Point A

A long time ago we started driving.
A long mile ago I saw the city lights fade.

I remember the refracted light bouncing
backlit off the city highways neon signs spotlights lit
up the overcast of fog and rain clouds
in the distance held within the rearview mirror.

A long time ago the city lights disappeared
and to break the silence we had to remind ourselves
what we really wanted was a view and a plot of land
no people and no noise that was point B.

A long time ago that was the point.

Plan B

There's always the Ten Step Guide to Conflict Resolution—plan
to get along, but can't right the wrong

turns—
blame it on your eyesight blame it on the map
its lines too intricate
        creases too deep
                legend too cryptic.

We stop for gas and a drink in a town outside
HOME OF _____ PRESERVE OUR _____ WORLD FAMOUS FOR _____
no one will ever come to fill in what's missing—

imagine someone pointing to the town on a map and saying—there!—
who would?

In the gas station bathroom the light's burnt out—
I find my way by feel.

Town of broken bulbs town of dusty steps town of basement bar and pool table
only here could I see you so at home coming towards me
with a fistful of jerky—2 for 1. Only here you've never looked more beautiful.

Losing time off the main roads but we're getting somewhere.

In the morning we'll grab our stuff adios to Motel 5 ditch No Place, USA

and think none of this was part of the plan—
        nothing is ever

Mary & Carl 4Ever

with Davin Risk's blue ice *and* gangs related

Graffiti touches my heart more than men offer to
write words intended to break the ice
which outside lies in shards like a mirror slammed
on the pavement—

The image was wrong.

Too old too gray too sad to say wrinkles do not beauty make.
The task we all undertake you see it on the dim horizon.

A girl waits a boy gives up
a girls wants forever a boy sweats at the word
take one take two take it all and cut

my reflection from the glass adjust the antenna
'cause the picture's not clear the sound gurgles after all—

Static sometimes consumes the image raw.

Last summer on the garage door at my dad's house
Someone & someone said forever.

Every Heart

holes in every
every heart has
some to call theirs
calls themselves flawed
flaws the membrane
remembers nothing
nothing has holes
but every heart.

Perspective

with Davin Risk's please lift

Come closer to the place you came from
down that road you back away from every time
but now find the place that could either hold you
or break you and might not ever make you whole—

Then where will you be?

There's no answer in postcards white pills collect
calls never respond when you call out
your name to the darkness of the gap
when the river that runs below it through
it forgets your name forgets that you are unlike a fish—

Then how will you breathe?

The map forgets the place you came from the end
is ink bled out into other roads and borders
and other counties look better now
that you have perspective now that you're lost—
and you know it.

Literature

with Davin Risk's are you in doubt?

Read the first page of the brochure you find at the supermarket.
"Don't suffer in silence find a companion in Jesus doubt no more."

Stop reading after the first page of the book you bought
that reminds you of your life but lived by someone else

someone more beautiful more possible someone more past tense
than you climb the stairs now you lie in bed now

you pick up the phone now you throw the phone against the wall.
Now that the book is finished what will you look forward to?

Wash Out

When we are done with the words on the page
We have truly begun to understand what it means to make
An impression without even being alive.
Preservation for some is the ultimate goal.

Only when we first begin we begin to see
Light at the end of the tunnel : a figured curtain
Designed to drop when true form might be revealed.
In the end we see everything and say nothing.

NOTES

"Self-Portrait, After Ashbery": The title, first stanza, and line 21 are in reference to John Ashbery's poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," from his book by the same title.

"Consumers in a Picturesque Landscape": The late 18th-century picturesque theory of William Gilpin, English artist and writer, provided picturesque travelers guidelines for sketching landscapes. His essays encouraged pupils to "adjust" aspects of the landscape in order to create a better picture: "We must ever recollect that nature is most defective in composition; and *must* be a little assisted" (*Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* 67).

"Xmas Tree in a Living Room, L.I. 1963": This poem takes its title from the Diane Arbus photograph. In addition, the two italicized lines are taken from Arbus's coroner's report, printed in *Diane Arbus Revelations*, 2003.

"Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958": This poem takes its title from the vertical version of this Ansel Adams photograph, available for viewing at <www.masters-of-photography.com>.

"Interior of Suzy Frankfurt's Apartment": This poem takes its title from the Andy Warhol photograph, reproduced in *After Art* by Chris Bruce (1994).

"Clouds on Screen at a Drive-in, N.J. 1960": This poem takes its title from the Diane Arbus photograph, reproduced in *Diane Arbus Revelations*, 2003.

"On Three Photographs": This poem references two photographs of Davin Risk, *fallen piano* (12/17/03) and *red light* (1/1/06), available at <www.lowresolution.com>, and one Jacob Riis photograph, *Sweeping Back the Ocean,* which is reproduced in *Diane Arbus Revelations.* All Davin Risk images referenced in this manuscript can be viewed at the web site above.

"Checklist for Man Ray": This poem references Man Ray's photograph *Glass Tears*, available at <www.artchive.com>.

"Multiple Choice": The italicized line is a quote attributed to Lyndon B. Johnson upon his signing of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965. The Act sought to reduce highway clutter, such as billboards and industrial structures, which obstructed motorists' scenic views of America's landscape. Other references in the poem are to the mission statement of the non-profit organization, Scenic America, founded in 1978 to further the aims of the Highway Beautification Act. Today, Scenic America focuses its efforts on reducing LED digital billboards and other forms of outdoor advertising.

"Brown Suitcase Outside a Door": This poem takes its setting from Davin Risk's photograph, *leaving someday* (11/7/04).

"1530 A, 1530 B": This poem takes its setting from Davin Risk's photograph, *neighbours* (3/18/05).

"Hawaii Postcard": Line 16 of this poem is taken from text in Davin Risk's photograph, *i have been 2* (4/19/05).

"Mary & Carl 4Ever": This poems uses imagery and text from two Davin Risk photographs, *blue ice* (11/25/05) and *gangs related* (7/7/05).

"Perspective": This poem takes its setting from Davin Risk's photograph, *please lift* (12/8/06).

"Literature": Line 2 of this poem uses text from Davin Risk's photograph, *are you in doubt?* (4/12/03).

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