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# A Thousand Crowns

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# A Thousand Crowns

The Capstone Portfolio  
of  
Brent Thomas Schnee

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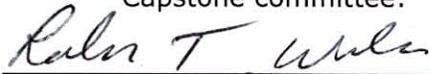
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Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
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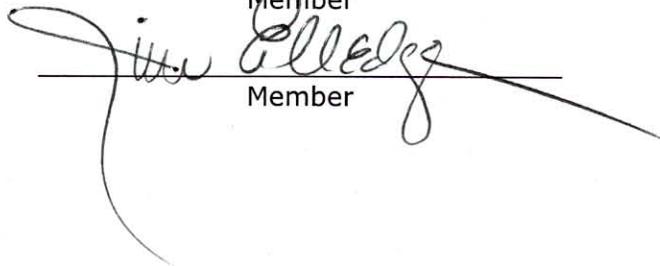
**Brent Schnee**

Has been approved by the committee  
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in  
Professional Writing in the Department of English  
At the December 2009 graduation

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

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*and*

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>Public Service Announcement</i> .....	19
<i>The Piano Tuner</i> .....	20
<i>Wednesday Morning</i> .....	21
<i>Little Prick</i> .....	22
<i>Clocks by Nike</i> .....	23
<i>Bookmarks</i> .....	24
<i>There Will Come a Time</i> .....	25
<i>I Ate Steve McQueen</i> .....	26
<i>House of Cards</i> .....	27
<i>Goldfish</i> .....	28
<i>Pietà</i> .....	29
<i>Before the 7th Day</i> .....	30
<i>Magnificent Bastard</i> .....	31
<i>Mutinous</i> .....	32
<i>The Idleness of Writing to Clouds</i> .....	33
<i>Catastrophe</i> .....	34
<i>Editor's Invocation</i> .....	35
<i>Trophies</i> .....	36
<i>7 Sins</i> .....	37
<i>Normal</i> .....	39
<i>Monologues</i> .....	40
<i>Ave Maria</i> .....	41
<i>Inheritance</i> .....	42
<i>Les Oiseaux de Chambord</i> .....	44
<i>Intimacy</i> .....	45
<i>Igor, Before the Monster</i> .....	46
<i>Nevermore</i> .....	47
<i>Filling the Void</i> .....	48
<i>Sunset in McAllen</i> .....	49
<i>The Zen of T-shirts</i> .....	50
<i>Distracted</i> .....	51
<i>Gross Misunderstanding</i> .....	52
<i>The English Professor</i> .....	53
<i>The Golem &amp; Medusa</i> .....	54
<i>Strong, Silent Type</i> .....	55
<i>Rare Praises</i> .....	56
<i>Night-Moths</i> .....	57
<i>The Harvest of Jupiter</i> .....	58
Works Cited.....	60

# Introduction

### In the Beginning:

When I started the MAPW program, I did so with one intention: to become better at writing. It was a very open-ended aspiration, and one in which I really only sought immersion in constant writing with objective third-party perspective. My views of writing then were a bit juvenile: I was enamored with the romance and power of the written word, of meaning, and the intricacies of syntax and phrasing. As I ventured further into the program, I discovered more critical facets of the writing process, such as a critical awareness and rhetoric. It was my goal to master these aspects of the craft.

### *A Thousand Crowns Defined:*

I chose this title for my collected works for two reasons. Firstly, its context in one of the presented poems ("Wednesday Morning") is representative of what I think to be one of the chief characteristics of poetry: presenting the world in a different way. Poetry, like many forms of writing, allows the reader to see things through the lens of the author, and no successful poem exists that does not illustrate this experience. The second reason is metaphorical: it represents crowning achievement, in that each poem is an accomplishment in itself, and that together, they continually aspire to something greater, in every respect.

Another characteristic I feel poetry requires is ambiguity. Many of my own poems are written so that they hold meaning beyond the literal level. It is usually distinguished by abstraction in the phrasing which lends itself either to multiple meanings throughout the remainder of the piece, or for multiple meanings for the poem as a whole. Simply put, my goal is to exaggerate what is important to the poem, leaving the literal statements

ambiguous. Poetry lends itself very well to this effect, forming each poem into a sort of puzzle. The goal, as previously stated, is to make the poem appealing in a cursory reading, but deeper meaning is available, should the reader wish to explore further. Though I have no specific examples, I know I am not the first to consider using the text in this way, but it is an idea I would like to explore further in my writing.

An additional characteristic I like to explore is form. Rather than reading the text from left to right, top to bottom, altering the format of the text can give the poem multiple meanings. It is what I like to call a “simultaneous poem.” Two such examples are the poems "Magnificent Bastard" and "Distracted." In "Magnificent Bastard," the effect is achieved by interlacing two contradicting sentiments, utilizing the syntax of each line to make them, when paired, cohesive. In the second example, "Distracted," the attempt is made to create a poem within a poem, utilizing indentation and justification of the text. These examples will be discussed later.

Beyond these aforementioned characteristics, a poem interests me most when it presents the world in a different way, particularly when it deals with the everyday. One such example is from Collins' "The Flying Notebook": "With its spiraling metal body/ and white pages for wings,' my notebook flies over my bed while I sleep--/ a bird full of quotations and tiny images who loves the night's dark rooms" (Collins 78). Poetry is a journey, and it is the responsibility of the author to make sure the poem is worth the trip.

### My Influences:

My work is influenced by a broad range of authors, as well as mass media

influences, such as film. In fact, my exposure to several writers originated with their appearance in modern movies. Films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Wit*, and *Finding Forrester* steered me towards the pursuit of writing. They introduced me to literary techniques and critical analysis, as well as authors such as William Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and most especially, John Donne.

In my earlier work, I was stylistically most influenced by Donne. His tone and style were contemporary with Shakespeare, but the subject matter of his poems seemed much deeper than Shakespeare's work. In addition to dealing with love, which is typical of Shakespeare's sonnets, Donne's metaphysical poetry addresses the matters of the soul: "I am a little world made cunningly/ Of elements, and an Angelike spright,/ But black sinne hath betraid to endless night/ My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die" (Patrides 437). Despite being melodramatic (though Donne's poetry is justifiably so), his skills in poetical rendering are apparent. It was from Donne that I attained my love for deeper meaning in poetry, and also that the placement of every last word, letter, and punctuation mark can affect the underlying meaning of the entire piece: "One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more, death, thou shalt die" (Patrides 441). The subject matter of the Holy Sonnets also led me to other writers such as Dante and John Milton, though their works did not influence my own writing in remotely the same degree. In fact, I read so much of Donne when I first became serious about poetry, I heavily emulated his style and phrasing, which does not easily appeal to the modern audience. It was after this realization that I turned to someone closer to the modern age: the transcendentalists.

My exposure to Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman came simultaneously

from the film *Dead Poets Society*, and these authors, by association, led me to others such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. If I gleaned deeper meaning from Donne, then I learned physical scrutiny and observation from Thoreau. His examinations of Walden Pond taught me to consider not just my surroundings, but also their possible history: "As I drew still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens" (Thoreau 149). From Whitman I learned a more secular application of poetry. It was also from Whitman that I discovered the romance of the natural world, and how it could be exalted by writing. For instance, from his poem "Had I the Choice": "These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,/ Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,/ Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse,/ And leave its odor there" (Whitman 431). I was also heavily influenced by Whitman's writing style, especially in the tone of the text and his departure from poetical structure. Many of my earlier works emulate these characteristics, which I eventually found to be cumbersome.

It was only after reading Billy Collins' *The Trouble with Poetry* and some of his other collections that I learned a truly modern voice. Collins' work is much more concise than my earlier influences, and his phrasing borders more on everyday speech than the "elevated" tone of earlier authors. For instance, from his poem "You, Reader": "I wonder how you are going to feel/ when you find out/ that I wrote this instead of you,/ that it was I who got up early/ to sit in the kitchen/ and mention with a pen/ the rain-soaked windows, / the ivy wallpaper,/ and the goldfish circling in its bowl" (Collins 3). Collins' tone is much more conversational, which holds the attention of the reader.

### The Dime Tour:

Here I will go alphabetically through each piece individually, and give a brief explanation of approach, as well as what I hope the reader will gain from the poem.

"7 Sins": This series of vignettes is influenced simultaneously by Donne, in the subject matter, and Auden, in the general tone in its secular approach. The point of view is 3rd person omniscient, which implies an authority on the subject, until it is revealed in the final vignette that the speaker is subject to the same vices as every one else. The overall piece is meant to bring the traditional sins to the mind of the everyday reader, and reveal their ridiculousness.

"A Gross Misunderstanding": This poem addresses irony in the everyday. In this instance, the frustration of an un-witnessed act of kindness pulls the speaker into a state of paranoia. The encounter remains unresolved, leaving the reader to wonder with the speaker whether or not his apparent lack of manners bodes ill for him, and possibly his successors.

"Ave Maria": This poem, as the title implies, was inspired by piece by Schubert's of the same name. It is an experiment in form: the first letter of each line represents the notes on the musical staff, though the scale is reversed to reflect the familiarity of order, rather than position, on a musical staff. The subject is a bit abstract by nature; it regards Socrates' opinion that composers were the only artists who truly created something, rather than a copy removed from the "truth" of the ideal object.

"Before the 7<sup>th</sup> Day": "7<sup>th</sup> Day" is a personification of what goes on in a cathedral when no witnesses are present to see it. Since the act of witnessing an event changes it, there is one way to be certain. I chose to personify the objects within a cathedral with the persons associated with them: The Bible with a priest; the pews and hymns with the congregation, and the cathedral with the human aspect of the Holy Church itself. The tone in the poem is reflective of the austere environment it describes. The number of lines in each stanza are also utilized as a sort of count-down, increasing and ending just before the number 7, representing the day that the "church" is no longer "alone", and must act "normally".

"Bookmarks": "Bookmarks" is a satire on the reverence of books, and the people who fold page corners and mark them in permanent ink. This poem evokes a response from the reader, prompting an internal dialogue with the speaker, who either agrees or wishes to defend his/her actions.

"Catastrophe": This poem was influenced by the poem "Height" by Billy Collins, in which the speaker is constantly comparing humans to ants (Collins 70). While "Catastrophe" does not address this subject, it does deal with the element of perspective (in the literal sense) and how an observer might interpret an object or event in a different way. In "Catastrophe," the speaker coaxes the reader into a different world by describing what ordinarily would have been a calamitous event. With the turn in the final stanza, however, the reader is reassured that no such disaster has occurred, and is, in fact, a situational comedy.

"Clocks by Nike": Here, I was playing with something both concrete and absurd: the concrete sensory details juxtaposed with the unlikelihood of the action. Since the poem states the unconscious state of the speaker, however, the reader does not challenge the speaker's credibility. Like "Catastrophe," I wanted to convey looking at things differently; here, the sound of a basketball serving as a way to keep time. I also played with the layout of the text, using physical space to build the readers' tension before the inevitable end of the action, and the poem itself.

"Distracted": "Distracted" is an attempt at a "simultaneous" poem. Here, reading only the lines justified fully to the left creates a coherent poem in itself. Reading the indented lines adds an extended metaphor and a deeper meaning to the piece, as well as changing the meaning somewhat.

"Filling the Void": The title here speaks to a double meaning: satisfying thirst, as well as a comfort often abandoned by adulthood. It comes from the speaker's rediscovery of this comfort, and the reminiscence it evokes. It further analyzes grape juice itself as the road-not-taken.

"Goldfish": This poem deals with an important, yet often underrated aspect of the human condition: memory. Whether they be facts or learned behavior, people are the sum of their experiences through memory. Here the speaker ponders that very predicament, but is ultimately unable to answer his own questions because he doesn't know if he's

forgotten. His experiences are therefore bounded by his "bowl": the circumstances of which he is no longer aware. "Goldfish" is similar in sentiment to "Statues in the Park" by Billy Collins, in which the speaker's observation of a statue's hidden meanings leads him to questions of his own mortality.

"House of Cards": One of two sonnets in the collection, "House of Cards" is a biblical reference, influenced by John Donne. Essentially, it's a retelling of the story of the Tower of Babel, but from the first person perspective. It addresses the futility of a great labor by what the speaker feels is a divine injustice.

"I Ate Steve McQueen": This is another poem influenced by Collins' "Height," only rather than a comparison of people to ants, the comparison is made to blueberries on a sandwich. The main personification is of a single berry to Steve McQueen, noted for his action and escape films. The reference to his body of work gives an air of strife to an otherwise comical event.

"Igor, Before the Monster": The other of the two sonnets, this poem discusses a well-known, but relatively unimportant character in the western consciousness. Despite his appearances as an often superficial character, Igor has become a sort of pop icon in the public consciousness. The goal of the poem was to give him a background and a personality: someone with a misguided (though not necessarily sinister) curiosity.

"Inheritance": This poem addresses the speaker's growing disconnect with his father due

to a malignant brain tumor. The speaker attempts to re-connect with his father posthumously by subjecting himself to the same habits his father had (namely, smoking), hoping they will be somehow connected by the resulting cancer. The poem builds with sensory descriptions, intended to portray not only the physical effects of smoking, but simultaneously the malevolent nature of the carcinogens, as well as the speaker's emotional pain from the loss of his father. The poem ends with the inevitable disconnection portrayed in two ways: the exhale/ release of the common trait, as well as the emotional disconnect as the speaker moves on from his loss. This piece is heavily influenced by Donne's Holy Sonnets, particularly the irony displayed in sonnet IX: "That thou remember them, some claime as debt,/ I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget" (Patrides 440).

"Intimacy": This piece explores the love of the unknown. The speaker praises the awkwardness of new aspects of a blossoming relationship. Despite being a bit sentimental, the poem deals with a subject many readers are familiar with, though not necessarily under the same circumstances.

"Les Oiseaux de Chambord": This poem uses an extended metaphor to achieve rich sensory details and imagery. It reinforces the sensory details with elements from *The Wizard of Oz* to create a strong emotional impact on the reader. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with the film references, the poem still creates a powerful visual and sets the reader's imagination to work. The overall image is fairly static until the final stanza, with the action of the swallows. Through their description, the speaker further conveys his awe

at the scene, tapping into the emotional impact of one of Vincent Van Gogh's paintings, *Crows in a Wheatfield*.

"Little Prick": "Prick" is the verbal attempt at diffusing frustration over a mosquito bite. Tonally, it is similar to Collins' work, but the theme is similar to Donne's "The Flea": "It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,/ And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;" (Patrides 47) It plays with the notion that the insect has taken on, along with the speaker's blood, some more human qualities uncharacteristic of the species. The text in the final lines is arranged in a playful way, intended to depict the offending device.

"Magnificent Bastard": This is another "simultaneous" poem. In this instance, the speaker takes two contradictory, self-contained stances toward his late grandfather. However, the juxtaposed lines use very similar language to bind the two sentiments together. It illustrates the frustration of mixed emotions regarding a loved one, especially since the subject of the speaker's musings has deceased, and no confrontation is possible.

"Monologues": This poem deals with the concept of celebrity. Specifically, how inadvertent the circumstances might be to attain it, as well as how insignificant celebrity is in the grand scheme. The subjects of the poem are Mary Phagan and Leo Frank, since they were both victims of circumstance and what made them famous was largely out of their hands. I compared their celebrity with that of contemporary actors, along with the notion that every person is merely filling a role and that which ones are famous is not a conscious choice. The poem's form is fairly simple, but deliberate: The justified lines

represent the cosmic stance (represented by a personified night sky), and the indented lines are the primary subject, lessening the poem's abstraction.

"Mutinous": "Mutinous" begins with a quote from Carl Phillips. The quote is meant to be seen as a more spiritual voice, and the poem does not address the speaker of those words. Rather, it sets the tone of the speaker's struggle. The speaker (personified in the pond in the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza) is discouraged by routine. The poem is an expression of that frustration, and that what might seem like disruption is merely the speaker's self-reassurance of choice and free will. The language of the poem is deliberately restrained, as if the speaker himself is exhausted.

"Nevermore": Like "Igor," this poem deals with a well-known character, but one what we know little about. It uses intertextual references to Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." The raven's singular line indicates little beyond what the speaker of that poem implies, but the line (in the speaker's mind) evokes so much meaning, it could be argued that the raven has knowledge beyond that of an ordinary bird (Poe 773). In "Nevermore," the raven is given a motive, and a purpose beyond annoying Lenore's survived. The poem was crafted around elements in the last four lines: a group of ravens is called a *conspiracy*, and a group of crows is called a *murder*. The tone of "The Raven" is also mimicked throughout the poem.

"Night-Moths": An attempt at slam poetry, this poem is an experiment in tone and readability, playing with the meter to emulate jazz music. The language is ambiguous

throughout, playing with several themes: it compares musicians first to architects, and then to spiders trapping prey with webs. The musical audience is described briefly in a more human setting, before insect reference takes over again, and the encounter is finished by a flight into morning: an inevitable end to nightlife.

"Normal": This poem is the direct result of listening to "Now I Let It Go" by Moby. It is entirely a surrealistic poem, challenging the reader to imagine if "normal" (pertaining mostly to stability of gravity and object density) was not what the reader is used to. I attempted to draw exact opposites, especially with references to mass and solidness of objects, and though interesting, this gave no "turn" to the poem. This is solved with the "fact" that humans still walk and only leaves plummet to the ground; it works because it is illogical, which is the focus of the poem. This is another poem that leaves the reader to continue the scenario even after the encounter is over.

"Pietà": This piece was a real-life observation of an elderly man in Old San Juan, in Puerto Rico. He sat in the same position day after day, interacting with no one and almost blending in with his surroundings. His position was reminiscent of Michelangelo's sculpture, and was also indicative of the strong Catholic presence on the island. This poem is a photograph of the scene and the subject. The poem is also ironic, since the man, despite his association with religion, is not the one in the poem associated with faith.

"Public Service Announcement": This poem is centered around a play on words, and the

ridiculousness that results. Like "Catastrophe," it is influenced by Collins, and is an exercise of the imagination: the focus of an odd pilgrimage, the attempts at sanitization, the gift shop; all of it amounts to something quite absurd, but the manner in which it is presented gives it an element of realism that the reader can visualize, and ideally perpetuate on their own.

"Rare Praises": This poem is very much an emotional exercise. It is the speaker's attempt to empathize with something that is viewed negatively in the public consciousness: hate. The poem is very abrasive by nature, due to the subject matter. It tries to justify an affinity for hatred in a society where love is most highly prized. Because of this, the reader may have a hard time interpreting the conclusion as "acceptable."

"Strong, Silent Type": Like "Filling the Void," this is an ode to a beverage. Namely, tea. The poem is also similar to "Les Oiseaux", in that the film reference to the gangster movies of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century must be understood to fully appreciate the poem.

"Sunset in McAllen": "Sunset" is a purely visual poem. It begins with a visual rendering and comparison to something more familiar to the reader. As the poem continues, the speaker voices his frustration and poor judgment, after a comparison to John Wayne, a film star typically portrayed in a setting similar to the poem.

"The Editor's Invocation": This poem is a sort of prayer for the modern-day editor. It references Michelangelo, who claimed his subjects were already inside the block of

marble, and just needed to be set free. This is a hope of the same sentiment, one which addresses the fear that many writers face, especially when editing their own work and faced with “killing their babies”.

"The English Professor": This poem is a snide reaction to the supposed self-importance of great writers. The speaker is a feared English professor, whose criticism all writers fear. This is a somewhat comical interpretation of Emma Thompson's character in *Wit*, who described herself as “a force”, while students “hugged the walls when she walked by.” It is ironic that the speaker embodies the same self-important trait that is railed against among the writers.

"The Golem and Medusa": Like "Nevermore" and "Igor", this poem references two mythological figures generally devoid of personality or characterization. Medusa is probably the more widely known, though the perception of her is decidedly set as a monster and a killer, without personality or motive. The golem is less known, though his physical nature adds an interesting twist to the poem's theme. Although the golems of Hebrew literature are traditionally made of clay, the implied stone medium is not far off, as far as the poem's context is concerned. That said, the poem is a sort of lament on the part of the speaker (the golem). There is an ambiguity in his words: he has known Medusa the longest, and continues to associate with her (which implies affection), but there is also a mutual indifference. For her part, she has moved on to other “suitors”. For his, it is left for the reader to decide if he has feelings, or if he feels nothing.

"The Harvest of Jupiter": Rather than exemplifying something commonplace, this poem shows the fantastical to be rather ordinary. Influenced in tone by Billy Collins, it addresses the Roman god Jupiter, but portraying him with very human characteristics, and subjecting him to the same weaknesses as those he supposedly reigns over.

"The Idleness of Writing to Clouds": This poem is as much a play on words as it is in form. In the title is the word "idleness", which is usually taken to mean laziness. It can also mean futility, referring in the poem to clouds' inconstant forms. Thus the poem takes a dual meaning. The main purpose of the form is to be illustrative, but it also plays with enjambment. The lines, especially at the end of the poem, amend the sentiment of the previous lines, continually giving the reader something more to consider.

"The Piano Tuner": The piano has one of the widest ranges of any musical instrument, and to watch a piano tuner do his work is reminiscent of the medieval monks who copied manuscripts, and it was with that association in mind that I wrote this poem. It uses religious imagery, citing the schism between the Catholic and Orthodox churches (here representing the string and brass/woodwind sections). The Piano Tuner takes the role of the all-knowing authority, relying on his own ear to do his work.

"The Zen T-shirts": The theme for this poem is influenced by Tibetan sand tables: intricate patterns representing the universe that are made entirely of sand. As soon as they are finished (they take weeks to create), they are destroyed. The poem's point is that it is the same situation with folding t-shirts, and that the speaker has learned patience through

this relentless lesson. This is illustrated by the layout of the text as well, beginning erratically, then organizing itself into tightly arranged blocks of text, until the lesson is given and the cycle repeats itself.

"There Will Come a Time": A moderately successful attempt at a villanelle, the speaker of this poem rails against a compatriot, whose more fanciful lifestyle draws bitterness and contempt. The speaker warns his friend the emotional crutch the speaker provides is taken for granted, and will not always be present.

"Trophies": In this poem, the modern-day critic is directly compared to more aboriginal figures and their cultural practices. Through this comparison, the poem paints a library as a trophy room of fallen adversaries, rather than a center for knowledge. It also plays with the idea of reputation, of that of both the critic and writers in general, and how they are perceived by the public.

"Wednesday Morning": This poem is simultaneously influenced by Whitman and Collins. Whitman can be seen in the association to nature, whereas Collins' influence is more overt, as can be seen in his poem "In the Moment" (15), where the poem begins with the everyday and takes a turn as the speaker's mind wanders, finishing the poem with a sentiment unrelated to the opening lines, but having an impact on their meaning.

Full Circle:

Now, at the end of the MAPW Program, I have learned much in the way of technique and critical analysis. There are many factors to consider which I had not upon beginning this course of study: audience, vagueness vs. ambiguity, sensory details, context, and others. I have also learned the invaluable nature of outside criticism. Too often an artist gets too wrapped up in a project to the point where it can no longer be viewed objectively, and immersion amongst fellow writers is the best remedy.

My involvement in the MAPW Program has also reinforced what I already knew. To become better at something, one simply needs to practice. All that is required to become a better writer is to write. Discouragement is unavoidable, even necessary at times, to come out stronger in the end. It is important to remember that there was a time in the life of every great writer when they were not great. It was only through their tenacity, their drive to master their craft, that they finally persevered.

# Poems

Public Service Announcement

*from a televised PSA: to help slow the spread of household germs, it is suggested that you sneeze into the pit of your elbow*

I heard it in passing over breakfast,  
and though I didn't catch it at first, through the crunch  
of my brittle little flakes, it stuck in my ear like  
    a job offer, or  
    a dessert menu  
...something for later consideration.

It said to help avoid the spread of germs,  
sneeze into the Pit of Yurellbough.

I imagined the footage for such an announcement,  
aerial shots from a circling news chopper:  
in the British Isles, near the town of Yurellbough,  
(undoubtedly named for the branch of the local Yurell tree)  
a massive hole was being utilized  
in a world-wide health initiative.

It was shown surrounded by droves  
gathering in a pilgrimage  
to sneeze into the massive pit,  
which was complete with an information center  
    and a gift shop  
    (which did not sell handkerchiefs).

The news anchor went on to say  
the town of Yurellbough was originally known  
    for its proximity to another of nature's oddities:  
it is situated twelve miles south-southeast of where the sun doesn't shine.

Meanwhile the Pit was being tended by scientists in haz-mat suits  
    with oscillating fans,  
    to help stem any global pandemic  
by blowing air back into the void, preventing  
the largest sneeze ever  
    from landing all over creation.

## The Piano Tuner

He is the harbinger of a clavier catharsis,  
a release from dissonance  
for the wire choirs bound  
and singing from shapely, lacquered halls.

His secret lore tells the history,  
the cause of the schism between brass  
and strings, each tuning to the B flat  
or the heretical 440 A:  
a mere half-step to cleave in two  
an otherwise harmonious union.

But the Tuner is beyond that influence:  
it is he who protects the integrity  
of every sacrosanct pitch,  
carrying his message forth  
with righteous forks  
to those who would listen, and play.

Wednesday Morning

I, shuffling in my slippers, get up to make some tea  
while my better half struggles  
against the new day's consciousness.

I listen to the kettle's hollowness filling  
against the backdrop of rain-claps outside,  
and indelicate snores from the other room.

It was five years yesterday, on a day like today  
that I stared through the kitchen window  
and watched the rain pound  
a thousand tiny crowns on the pavement  
a thousand times over,  
and now, as then,  
I pause a moment, and listen to  
the tiny smiths pelt the surrounding trees  
and tap their leaves in greeting

in the late October chill. It's only  
the leaves of less color, turning  
that draw themselves to the eye,  
as they tug the swelling limbs,  
their palm-like intellect  
pointed, and  
focused, and  
flush.

## Little Prick

Why bite my forehead  
of all places?  
Why not an arm or thigh,  
or a juicy butt-cheek  
(here lies a pun about getting it in the end),  
rather than a poor, fleshless brow?  
Now every blink and facial tick recalls  
that little prick.  
Is he smarter now,  
for draining my cerebral juices?  
I am curious to see the scene,  
were the bite administered  
when I had been drinking...  
Can an insect fly  
with a BAC of point-two-five?  
Could he acquire speech,  
were he to bite my tongue?  
He wouldn't say much if  
he had to bite it as much as I do.  
But he would complain, I think,  
every bit as me, about his woes,  
if only to get his  
mind off an  
itchy little  
prick  
.

Clocks by Nike

I dreamed the same dream three times.  
I dreamed the same dream three times.  
I dreamed the same dream three times.  
But oh, like Bob Dylan talking  
with Keith Richards or Ozzy Osbourne,  
it just didn't make any sense.

We had come to class  
to recite some poems  
and discuss their significance:  
I got the long and tedious one with  
yreve drow nettirw sdrawkcab.  
(you sense my frustration)

Our critique shifted  
to the live music  
the professor had been subtly conducting  
all along, (despite the absence of musicians)  
to the time of a clockwork basketball  
outside: bounce...bounce...  
bouncebounce...

If Nike ever made a clock,  
the gears would squeak incessantly,  
time dribbling  
from a most inconstant metronome.

bouncebounce...squeak...  
shudder...  
squeak-bounce...

swish.

## Bookmarks

Spare your pages the  
irreverence of a  
canine equation,  
ears floppy—  
a puppy pound packed,  
transformed from  
a series of slivered and  
pancaked trees.

Would you have bent them  
in their green,  
their full flourish?  
Stabbed them with a  
pen, perhaps, to mark  
where attention  
ceased, or highlighted the eye  
to something important?  
The powerful passages  
will announce themselves—  
they need no inky pedestal.

So cease your creasing of forests,  
bend your eye instead  
to a scrap and employ that for your  
page's flag, if you  
think it trustworthy.  
Or if not,  
mark it twice,  
as one might fail.

## There Will Come a Time

Your selfish and untilled life goes on,  
a life spent idly and enchanted.  
There will come a time when I'll be gone.

While you're outspoken, and I'm withdrawn,  
you tread the whimsy I recanted.  
Your selfish and untilled life goes on,

while you hunted for a greener lawn.  
You left to live a life transplanted.  
There will come a time when I'll be gone.

Your conclusions, conceitedly drawn,  
and all others' wishes supplanted,  
your selfish and untilled life goes on.

No longer a push-over, a pawn,  
or a part of a life enchanted—  
there will come a time when I'll be gone.

I pray for the day when the thoughts dawn  
on you: that you took me for granted.  
Your selfish and untilled life goes on.  
There will come a time when I'll be gone.

## I Ate Steve McQueen

It happened the other day  
as I was preparing lunch;  
the blueberries staged a prison break  
from the peanut butter compound  
prepared especially for them.

It seems to happen every time—  
that singular attempt off the prison yard...  
Prisoner McQueen runs for it  
at any opportunity, making a break for the floor  
that would sully him, make him undesirable,  
destined for the quarantine of the refuse pile;  
but momentum only carries you so far  
with nothing to ramp you to freedom.

The good and decent ones  
returned to the cooler,  
Steve and his fellow miscreants  
to their sticky prison  
and whole grain walls.

There was no sentence to wait out  
or rescue to expect,  
only an execution:  
death by chewing.

## House of Cards

I, a master mason and bricklayer,  
had labored here these three and forty years,  
a lifetime spent in toil and prayer  
for success of my single-minded peers.  
It was no mere watchtower or lighthouse  
we erected. Atop its lofty crest,  
I hoped to be the very first to douse  
my face in God's brilliance, by fortune blessed!  
But oh, my once-certain masonry failed.  
It succumbed to a swift and potent gust  
that felled brick and mortar with one exhale:  
all that remain are idiots and dust.  
Now my life's work is the babble of bards:  
how stonemasons' dreams are a house of cards.

## Goldfish

The thing about having a 10 second memory  
is that you have to keep reminding yourself  
you have a 10 second memory,

It's said that goldfish suffer from such lapses,  
but since no one has invented fishy post-its,  
(and Cleo can't read anyway)  
it's just as well.

She re-discovers her limits continuously,  
blocked by unseen barriers at every turn,  
turning every turn into another.

Linus has a longer recollection (as a cat, and as cats do)  
and his yelps are not for loneliness  
when his owner is out,  
but rather cries for attention,  
and attention must be paid in full  
before vengeance is wrought  
somewhere outside his litter box.

(so full of vengeance....)

I sometimes wonder about my own memory,  
if what I know is not learned, but ingrained  
through crucial repetition:

breathing,  
speaking,  
closing my eyes in a sneeze,  
and I wonder at what I've forgotten,  
and the fences that might have been  
otherwise thwarted,  
if I had only known.

## Pietà

Locals passed by, ignorant  
of the icon propped against the fountain lip,  
with his drooping shoulders, quiet weight.  
People and pigeons were scarcely aware

as they bobbed their heads with every step,  
skirting his feet, his arms spread, palms open  
to the clear sky. His neck was twisted, head  
hanging as though heavy, or as if

listening to his own heart, keeping the slow time.  
His weathered face drooped, the folds  
of his eyebrows hanging in sad expressions,  
lamenting his empty arms, as he had no Jesus

to mourn. He removed himself in the evening,  
perhaps to a bench in the local park, surrounded  
by finches, more devout with their delicate legs,  
whose every leap is one of faith.

Before the 7<sup>th</sup> day,

pews and pulpits stand vacant, waiting,  
wanting to receive.

Stale chants and incense  
cling desperately to marble,  
oak, and ritual.

Christ hangs high, presiding over  
his empty hall where currents trapped  
by vaulted ceilings recite from rote  
the Lord's Prayer.

The great columns form their looms,  
weaving shadows and sunlight  
into a mosaic blanket  
of humility and guilt  
(the way only cathedrals can),

and the good book heavily,  
mightily rests beyond secular reach:  
quiet, commanding, watching  
over the pews by night where  
hymnals, bound and restless, wait  
and dream of being songs.

## Magnificent Bastard

Grandpa,

*Grandfather, Colonel,*

you are irreplaceable-

*I am essential to you, your memory:*

I cannot search the world for another one of you:

*your jilted son, a generation late.*

there are no more of you to search for- just a memory to cling to.

*There is no love-loss between us,*

Between us, the thought of losing you is something I never loved,

*evident by the distance I kept, and you justified.*

despite your distance.

*Whenever I soared through youth's imagination,*

You gave me your pilot's wings once (I still keep them),

*it was always you who clipped my wings.*

a relic from when you crossed oceans

*I seemed less important to you than war glories and*

to selflessly free a continent from oppressive tyrants:

*total strangers: I looked knowingly on as you worked your charms,*

it was a light in which I had never seen you before.

*having seen them all before.*

There was always something new and

*You could always find something about me that*

fascinating to learn about you (which was difficult, guarded as you were), and

*disappointed you, and exploited every occasion to air your grievance.*

I took every chance I could to admire you.

*I loathed your selfishness, your stubbornness,*

To you, I attribute my strength of will; you, who moved miracles and led charges.

*when will refused to give way to reason, or courtesy, or even kindness,*

The obituary will paint you heroic, admirable, and most impressive,

*for which I will always think of you as*

but the casual reader could ever know the real you:

A magnificent *bastard*.

Mutinous

*“Rest; let it fall now, this burden.”*

*-Carl Phillips*

Sometimes defiance is merely weariness  
of shouldering others’  
expectations.

I hope you can understand  
this old unrest,  
this small rebellion,  
a must,

like the offering demanded by a still pond,  
of the heaviest stone  
heavily thrown, to remind it

it is still  
capable of motion.

The Idleness of Writing to Clouds

It's easier than you think,  
to see a sea from underneath  
and drown in oceans five miles up,

to get lost in them,  
drifting,  
staring, rapt.

Take a moment.  
Close your eyes  
and design a phrase

to evoke in language  
what the wispy seas provoke  
in you.

Scour your mind to find  
the words,  
the depictive,  
long-abiding words,

before the brief  
and lumbering  
muse

slips  
away,  
leaving you  
with nothing

but a memory of the day.

## Catastrophe

It didn't make the news,  
the face-to-face meeting of a single-engine trainer  
with an ascending jumbo jet.

Roving reporters were not able to capture  
outraged testimonies of the victims' loved ones.  
There was no apologetic statement  
for airlines to give,  
no air traffic controllers  
to decline comment.

Extraordinary,  
the fireball that should have resulted;  
  
but more extraordinary still,  
as three hundred and twenty-odd passengers  
felt a heavy jolt,  
as the 747 flew through a cloud  
of Cessna debris,  
as the captain and his crew were laid out  
with mild concussions on the lounge deck,  
  
an instructor and amateur flyer found themselves  
suddenly, inexplicably,  
steering something larger  
bound for Lisbon.

Editor's Invocation

In this work,  
like nature-created marble,  
    I see an angel,  
with bones of words and wings of music,  
set in an ivory air.

I need but set it free, to shed  
the excess, hoping,  
that in an exodus from mediocrity,  
    I do not render it flightless.

## Trophies

Old hunters  
would collect teeth and bones,  
pelts and ivory antlers to imbue  
themselves with strength  
and the courage of their game.

Old sages and patriarchs  
would place on dirty shelves the skulls  
of their ancestors, and peer into the  
hollows to ponder questions of the soul.

Old warriors,  
pierced with gold and tusks and bright colors  
would prize the eyes of fallen enemies,  
believing they would see the world  
as their adversaries did  
before their undoing:  
    fighting with tooth and nail,  
    muscle and sinew, and all those things  
    which in wild beasts seem dangerous.

Old critics  
now line up in libraries  
the tomes of old foes,  
whose final word once begged  
that they leave the heart intact,  
    and refrain from slaying.

## 7 Sins

### *Pride*

This was Lucifer's big problem.  
Like him, someone just  
forgot to tell you  
you're not God,  
and no one likes an asshole.

### *Greed*

For someone with so much  
money and power, you spend  
a lot of money and power  
trying to gain more  
money and power.

### *Envy*

Green is a good color for you.  
You're too new to realize  
that by the time you acquire  
everything your buddies have,  
it's time to leave it to someone else.

### *Wrath*

Easy, killer.  
It's better to be pissed off  
than pissed on,  
but piss on someone else  
and see what happens.

### *Lust*

Love's cheap-date sibling...  
Fuck around all you like, but  
you're getting screwed more  
than you know.

*Gluttony*

Easy does it.  
Your black hole of a stomach  
provides enough suction to  
make a Hoover jealous.

*Sloth*

I'm too lazy to write this one.

## Normal

In a coup of illiteracy,  
or a failure of watchfulness,  
someone somewhere flipped the switch  
that's marked "do not touch".

Now everything slowly floats  
in a perpetual aftermath –  
boats, coconuts, high schools,  
everything rootless  
drifts, whittled down  
piece by piece  
by lesser debris.

Only humans walk.  
Only autumn leaves plummet,  
leadenly: a lonely thud  
glancing off the steadfast dust,  
kicking up boulders, cars.

Blades of moth wings slice  
mercilessly though concrete  
and iron scraps of  
buildings, of  
bulldozers, of  
bowling balls, and  
other delicate objects.

Wars are won by multitudes  
trying desperately  
to mend the entropy of  
rival nations.  
Sunbeams rove on the earth,  
turning people pale.

All the while, legless birds peer  
down at the earth, dreaming  
of the day they learn  
the secret of gravity  
and walk as men do.

## Monologues

I perched on the grave of Mary Phagan,  
under that pox of stars that plagues the night  
sky, the moon's thumbnail sliver,  
an incision bleeding light from the black-high catwalk.

Mary was made immortal by  
her death: a brief role  
well cast. She played  
her part wonderfully—the tremor  
of her voice, darting  
eyes set wide, hands  
trembling in the moment—  
and set the scene for the next  
frank misfortune.

But stars will decompose  
and fertilize fields no greener than  
those of the we, the supporting actors.

I abstained from my paparazzi snapshots  
and studied instead the other playbills  
littering the yard, some in line  
for curtain calls. Curious, that they  
are never posted until the actor retires,  
and even then, printed starkly  
with just names and play dates.

And as the divine comedy plays,  
the silvery moon's grin conceals  
a far more tragic face: it has seen  
our every plot, and silently wails.

Ave Maria

Even Socrates,  
    Father to philosophy,  
Gave deference to the  
    Art of composers—to the  
Blending of sounds, emotions—  
    Creating love and yearning, by  
Dropping in every heart,  
    Each ear, a spirit distilled  
From the very air.

Each silvery line, every voice  
    Frames a melody in itself, but  
Gather them in chorus  
    And see what craft can be  
Beckoned from the prison-like  
    Constraint of those  
Damned pinstripe bars:  
    Even philosophers pause at the  
Full rendering of perfect pitch.

Emotion and longing are  
    Forced from the heart like a  
Grapefruit squeezed.  
    A desire to expire in such a state of  
Blissful contentment  
    Could support the lunatic's notion that  
Death by music is possible. That's an  
    Easy commitment to make, when  
Falling for something like

Ave Maria.

## Inheritance

Mom seethed when  
you smoked--  
what would she say if she saw  
me now, the heir  
    to your looks,  
    to your mannerisms,  
    to your vices?

A brain tumor is never announced  
nonchalantly.  
Ironic, that it had nothing to do with your  
stack of spent filters,  
    settled into an ashtray as you  
    settled into your easy chair and  
        the evening news.  
Your present predicament  
is all in your head, you had said; but  
humor doesn't change fact.

    Now at the mention of you,  
cancer  
    is the first thing that comes to mind.  
Cancer—  
    no longer an astrological sign  
    or a heading in the horoscope column,  
    but a word defining what's left of you: a  
cancer—  
something caged, devouring, eating  
its way out, erasing your  
    mind, of  
    sense, of  
    knowledge, of  
    memory of  
    your only son.

Now I have nothing left but this  
    habit, this inheritance, to relate to you.  
A deep inhale, and  
    the tongue sizzles,  
    the throat sears,  
        and lungs fill with a sensation of  
what it was like to be you.

Clutching this fume

between my fingers,  
under my breath, it feasts  
from the inside,

warming my chest, my heart,  
held as long as can be suffered  
(sometimes I watch the clock, count the seconds),  
but sooner or later

I  
have to breathe.

Les Oiseaux de Chambord  
*The Birds of Chambord*

To call the scene scarlet would do it no justice:  
ruby, crimson, vermilion, blush,  
fiery, rosy, bloody, rouge...  
all inadequate.  
As if any permutation of "red"  
has meaning in a sanguine world.  
I saw the outlying roads so thickly lined with poppies.  
The worn and mosaic pavement pried away might  
    (I'm almost sure of it)  
reveal a road of yellow brick.

The chateau against the blue backdrop of summer  
was a fairy tale eroded to reality,  
the stale and ashen towers glowered somberly--  
not quite splendid, not quite strong--  
out over the emerald lawn (having melted  
and puddled around some wizard's former home).

It would be easy enough to mount the walls of this  
once hunting lodge, expecting to see  
what a wall-top sentry's sight digested every day:  
an etched horizon that my memory assays to keep a shadow of.

Birds! Swallows! Les Oiseaux!  
An sentry would never have seen a thing approach,  
so distracting was the scene:  
the brushstroke figures darted to and fro--  
flitting, turning, spinning, dancing,  
rushing, rolling, circling  
in ever-tightening wheels:  
a swarm of black churning  
against the colors of May--  
the painting Van Gogh neglected  
to set on canvas.

## Intimacy

Who sends letters anymore?  
It'd be easier to send an e-mail or a text  
to the folder marked "instant gratification"  
so you'd know I was thinking of you at  
    that  
    exact  
    instant.

Better to wonder, I think,  
waiting for the hand-written sentiment  
that took three days to send,  
and longer to write.

I like the awkwardness  
of something that requires nerve  
to do  
or say  
    because you mean it,  
or hear  
    because you know I mean it, too.

And I like your laugh when I  
kiss your smile  
in those fumbling moments.



Nevermore

You didn't ask the right questions, poor soul.  
Lenore got it right, guessing the password  
of quick admittance to heaven or hell.

She bade me settle on Athena's bust,  
that gift of remembrance given to you,  
when your love requested you remember  
her whenever your glances found the stone  
and wizened face. It would seem in your grief  
that memory of her was forgotten,  
and with that loss went the very last hope  
of you, poor scholar, flocking to your love.

Doomed fool, ignorance denies you ingress  
to a clement raven's conspiracy,  
love's company, and entry to heaven.  
You acquiesce to a wanton murder,  
joining instead the crows that pick your bones.

## Filling the Void

Most people move on, forgetting  
that childhood staple,  
a virgin wine from  
a virgin past.

It's been a long time since  
The Welch's called to me  
from deep nostalgia  
and the bottom shelf  
of a grocery store aisle.

I make a point to look for it now  
in my jaunts to the corner store,  
seeking ways to fill a perpetual vacancy.

Call it unrefined,  
a satisfaction with  
something so simple.  
It was the final issue

of what could have been—  
a wrinkly raisin's soft flesh,  
or the youth of something  
more spirited.  
Instead it substitutes

for the blood of Christ  
and renders stains on  
table-cloths,  
unadorned lips, and  
clean white shirts:

a niche most juices overlook.

Sunset in McAllen

The clouds,  
the sky,  
the shadows,

    everything is bright and white, like an institutional space  
        begging for a gesture  
        from Mondrian or Dali.

Black ribbons of road are made searing and pale  
by the diffusing light. Driving  
westward at sunset forces a squint  
or a hand-over-brow, or a reassessment  
of westward motives. The Duke knew better  
than to trot on the black-top, if only to avoid blindness  
from asphalt and a ridiculous sun.

## The Zen of T-shirts

A table of shirts,  
the cycle of the universe  
begins with chaos:

tags asunder, stacks askew,  
sleeves groping everywhichaways.

Students require  
diligence, patience,  
focus, to achieve

the goal of placing  
a universe in order.  
But perfect angles

and sizing are not for this  
life: chaos and customers  
teach them harsh lessons  
of impermanence,  
again,  
and again.

## Distracted

I watched a bluebird dart and dance  
past my window,  
cartwheeling into the swimming pool  
    like a Sopwith Camel drops into the sea:  
    an inglorious cliff diver trailing a corkscrew flame into hell,  
    tagged by the Red Baron before he ventured  
    into frozen pizza.

I heard the  
baleful splash,  
the resulting panic  
    of backpaddles and butterfly strokes,  
    of the photo-finish swimmer who is tired  
        of being  
    declared the loser.  
        Immersed in context,  
he endeavors to break the surface,  
to escape  
    from a barrier that shouldn't be capable of such a jealous grip  
    or preventing the rise of a species  
    that prefers a cloud  
over an ocean.

The bluebird  
disappeared  
under the pool's concrete lip,  
    a child in the bad part of town,  
        the ghetto,  
    the nature of which destroys  
    innocence, bliss,  
    ignorance of other circumstances.

I did not witness the bluebird fly away  
or sink,  
but instead I heard  
    a silence, which runs contrary to  
the usual chatter of spring:  
    the season  
    disrupted,  
disturbing my own reflection.

## Gross Misunderstanding

I dropped my silent bill  
in the tip jar, just  
as you averted your attention  
to make my chai.

It seemed less fulfilling that you  
didn't notice,  
or even pretend to,  
despite the fact  
that real virtue needs no witness.

It would have been better  
if I could remove  
from my head the image  
of you, spitting  
in my fresh latté,  
while I glanced back to  
the next unfortunate  
bastard in line. He should follow  
my lead, and diligently check his  
cup, for extra foam.

## The English Professor

There exist poets who shout from their clouds;  
who personify nature, detail lives  
spent in bliss; who, wooing adoring crowds,  
depict in free verse or half-rhymes what drives  
them all to suffer for their life's pursuit,  
wanting conspicuous works to announce  
them. Unlike those asses of high repute,  
I let my nature speak more than an ounce  
of dried and crusted ink would ever dare.  
Through those loquacious ranks, I loudly tread—  
and comfortably. Listen for my footwear:  
my soles' character will speak in my stead.  
With each step, my gravity's presence speaks  
in the voice of pregnant metronome creaks.

## The Golem & Medusa

I knew you  
long before serpentine hair  
was the all the rage.  
Turning your houseguests to granite,

your glances made men  
mobile as mountains,  
though your bestial slide has since  
made the tryst more petrifying.

As for me,  
I count myself unique  
in your foyer of trophy suitors.

My heart was cold  
already.

## Strong, Silent Type

Tea can be a little haunting,  
in the way the wispy color  
slowly creeps through  
a tiny cauldron's hot translucence.  
It's hypnotic,  
    arresting, even,  
with its sultry steam,  
expressing a drama  
that's often reserved  
for cigarette smoke  
    curling in film noir.

If tea were in a movie,  
    it'd be a gangster flick.  
He'd be the quiet one in the corner...  
    the one you're not sure you like  
but you know has something to say  
If Little Joe ever showed  
his ugly mug  
in this joint again.

Or maybe it'd be a supporting role:  
the scene opens,  
Bogart stands half in light,  
half in shadow. The door flies open,  
and Bogey squeezes off his tough-guy rounds—

the poor schmoe falls dead,  
    then a close-up:  
a tommy gun's breath mingles with the steam  
    of Earl Gray.

## Rare Praises

Love— everything  
    has been said about love,  
while hate seldom gets its due.

No one claims it— it is  
    disavowed,  
    outcast,  
    shunned—  
yet it exists, litmus to all things taken  
    as good and fair;  
but it remains a child of tantrums, to be kept locked  
    under the basement stairs.

Love can be a contrivance, a lie. Hate is honest—  
it is never subject to  
    self-doubt, to  
    jealousy, or  
    a national holiday.

Revolution most often comes from contempt  
for the oppressor, not affection  
for the oppressed.

## Night-Moths

They always hear you from down  
the boulevard:  
you, the melodious architect playing bridges,  
building chords, putting an honest spin on  
bar improvisations.

You trap them with whiny riffs,  
your spider-like fingers flying over frets  
as the night-moths flick character and conversations  
into ashtrays  
through the wee hours  
to the sonorous cheese of a soft-jazz saxophone,

to the slick vanilla of your blues guitar. They need  
to leave the door half open, just enough to let in the cool  
and bleed off the excess soul,  
entwined with shadowy  
shapes and neon,  
as the buzz follows barflies  
through the gloom and into  
morning, that extension of night  
plus light.





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