

4-23-2010

# Votre Polka

Robert Joseph Betz II

*University of Missouri-St. Louis, rjb9rc@mail.umsl.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis>

---

## Recommended Citation

Betz II, Robert Joseph, "Votre Polka" (2010). *Theses*. 155.  
<http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis/155>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Works at IRL @ UMSL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of IRL @ UMSL. For more information, please contact [marvinh@umsl.edu](mailto:marvinh@umsl.edu).

Votre Polka

Joe Betz

B.A. English Studies, Ball State University – 2008

A Thesis submitted to The Graduate School at The University of Missouri - St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

May 2010

Advisory Committee

Eamonn Wall, Ph. D.  
Chairperson

Howard Schwartz, M.A.

Steven Schreiner, Ph. D.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the journals in which some of these poems first appeared, occasionally in different forms, and thank you to the editors who gave time and advice to aid in revision. A big thank you to Paul Muldoon for selecting "Remembering the Prostitute in New York" for the Goldstein Prize as it helped me get by for many months. A bigger thank you to my thesis advisors Howard Schwartz and Eamonn Wall, and to Steve Schreiner, who helped shape all of the poems in this manuscript with their time, teaching and generosity.

*Blue Earth Review*, "In the Sloth You See Yourself and Hope Long" and "Walking by the Airport, I Think of When You Left."

*Blue Skies Poetry* (Canada), "Beard Fields."

*Bellerive*, "Wall Street."

*Berkeley Poetry Review*, "Tap My Defibrillator With Your Good Palm is a Type of Unspoken Love."

*Columbia Review*, "Holiday Poem."

*Emerson Review*, "Pitz, Patz, Putz."

*Michigan Quarterly Review*, "Remembering the Prostitute in New York," republished with permission at *Poetry Daily*.

Table of Contents

Pitz, Patz, Putz..... 6

*Section I*

Remembering The Prostitute in New York ..... 9  
Holiday Poem ..... 10  
Tap My Defibrillator with Your Good Palm is a Type of Unspoken Love..... 11  
The Escape..... 12  
A Trip to the Dentist ..... 13  
In The Sloth You See Yourself, Hoping Long ..... 14  
Control Panel ..... 15  
Three Streets ..... 16  
The Sun Will One Day Burn Out is a Cheap Excuse on Avoiding Love ..... 17  
Dance Hall, Black Shoe ..... 18  
Mirrors ..... 19  
Goat’s Milk ..... 20  
At the End ..... 21  
Reading the Funny Pages ..... 22  
American Primatology ..... 23  
Eulogy of a Face ..... 24  
Wall Street ..... 25  
Spitting in The Bowl..... 26  
Conducting an Execution for The State, I Think of My Sister..... 27  
Grand Guignol October ..... 28  
Belief Monkey ..... 29  
Fruit Stall, Swell..... 30  
Dakota ..... 31  
With Judgment, Prejudice..... 32  
Political Poem..... 33  
Ausfahrt ..... 34  
The Orangutan at the San Diego Zoo ..... 35  
A Thin Novel ..... 36

Your Mother’s Gynecologist .....	37
The Mother’s Expensive Purse.....	38
Constructs in Stockings .....	39

*Section 2*

Chutzpah .....	41
Vernon.....	42
Childhood Red.....	43
Deck Hands.....	44
Polka.....	45
How the Plush Chairs at Yard Sales Easy-Bake Our Afternoon.....	46
To The Giant Panda in a China Zoo .....	47
Winner.....	48
Wanted .....	49
The Old World is Not Better Than Mexico .....	50
While Stocking For Winter, I Think of My Father .....	51
Walking By the Airport, I think of When You Left.....	52
Raccoon .....	53
Stanislavsky .....	54
The I .....	55
The Cold, Deal .....	56
Cottonmouth Hunt.....	57
Sleeping Game .....	58
Line .....	59
Rebuttal.....	60
Beard Fields .....	61
My Day At The Park.....	62
Sock.....	63
The Big Red Dog’s Epiphanic Water Bowl .....	64
Walking to the Poet’s Church.....	65



Pitz, Patz, Putz

It is like watching my mother  
lick an envelope and make a sour face.  
More specifically, it is the postal glue  
I smell when she kisses my forehead goodnight.

I often perplex myself.  
I hold puzzle pieces to the light  
before I eat them. This, I believe,  
puts things in perspective.

An art teacher once drew two parallel lines  
and asked me to connect them.  
I did but he said  
I would never understand. So

tonight I think past my window. I look  
into the passenger seat of vehicles  
stopped before train tracks  
hoping to see someone along for the ride  
violently laughing with bright teeth,  
and sometimes I do.





I.

Now the sun is shining  
Through the tall windows.  
The library is a quiet place.  
Angels and gods huddled  
In dark unopened books.  
The great secret lies  
On some shelf Miss Jones  
Passes every day on her rounds.

- Charles Simic, from "In the Library"

## Remembering the Prostitute in New York

Today I learned some lizards eat baby monkeys,  
and am better for it, because I've been noticing  
some things. Like, the older I get, the more  
I resemble a baby monkey, wrinkled and hairless, small,

and lizards seem to be all around me.  
The special on PBS showed one, a baby monkey,  
get snatched by a lizard. It made me  
feel like closing my eyes a long time.

Next, the camera zoomed to a special, red faced monkey  
safe in a tree. I thought, my wife.  
Next, one with a yellow moustache.  
I thought, me again.

Tonight is part two and I'm excited to make my little connections.  
For example, its preview showed a flat-faced monkey  
with what looked like blue eye shadow. Immediately  
I remembered the prostitute in New York.

## Holiday Poem

Lost in the new city,  
I used karaoke singers  
to guide me while the snow fell.

There was a convention.  
The Japanese vendors screamed numbers  
holding out pink elephants.

I was in Milwaukee then,  
and surprised by a man  
in a wheelchair who said

You're in the wrong place, my friend  
as he rolled back and forth on a little hill  
to a pet store, closed, but with shadows

of parrots and lizards dancing on the walls  
in a play titled "If These Bars Were Chocolate."  
Yes, I said

and sat my pink elephant in his lap  
as a sign of love for the less fortunate.  
Merry Christmas.



## The Escape

The earthquake shook the city buildings' foundations  
to sand. Those walking with weak bones  
  
had their legs broken and pulled themselves  
to the nearest parking meter rattling out change.

The blind men on their weekly stroll  
lost their canes and moved in the city  
  
like zombies, grabbing at  
the ponytails of little girls.

I was drinking coffee in the halfway house  
when I noticed the first ripple in my cup,  
  
then the doors blowing open  
where everyone rushed out before the building crumbled.

You were in the street with the car alarms,  
rolling in ecstasy between potholes. I called  
  
and you looked at me, or past me into the helicopters  
like a flock of birds that were calling our names.

## A Trip to The Dentist

A dark man enters the novena; manholes  
cover our stink; words tangle themselves  
in pasture barbwire, and are put down.

The dentist says *open*  
*your mouth* so he might see  
the nuclear winter of our thoughts.

And I do: I gargle saltwater  
at his advice later in the day  
after I've shaken everyone's hand I know.

Our language on nuchal plates  
or knuckled napes? A closer look:

darks hands marry his day  
to the sandstone along the bread rind; sewer  
workers dance alligators to the rat den; adjectives  
sleep with your mother, and are put down.

*How warm were my fingers*  
*in your head? What*  
*is the number theory backwards*  
*if only one fist will fit?*  
*Open your mouth.*

In The Sloth You See Yourself, Hoping Long

Think of the time it took the sloth  
to escape from its Florida zoo  
then settle in a peach tree  
to claw soft fruit.

\*

How long  
before the farmer  
whispered

*...the hell...*

then settled the rifle  
into his shoulder?

## Control Panel

Many post-its surround a red button  
reading do not push.

The night guard  
asleep as in a spy film.

Mice dance over his shoes  
in a prom of rye crumbs.

The brave at the ham bits  
in his moustache,

and now the fat mouse smelling coffee  
climbs his clothes to the countertop and overturned cup.

In his dream he is clean shaven  
without a cleft lip and makes love to many women

while his father counts them with nail scratches  
on the prison cell wall.

Most of the mice are asleep now too,  
some curled into the warm pocket

of the man's hand he softly opens and closes,  
most nesting in his crotch.

The fat mouse shakes and prepares for a run.  
In his dream the women are endless.



### Three Streets

The street named after a famous poet  
was covered in yellow leaves,  
as if 100 legal pads had been shredded.

Along the curb women sat tying scraps  
into loose bracelets the youngest  
could not stop licking.

On the street the governor has just made  
his own, he stands on a horse's back  
passing out buttons and religious paraphernalia.

Cars that circle wear their bumper stickers  
like the yellow stains  
in his underpants.

The street called Love  
has been graffitied so often  
the girl with red nails

points me there with her middle finger,  
which when I start to thank her  
she slips in my mouth and moans.

The Sun Will One Day Burn Out is a Cheap Excuse on Avoiding Love

This morning I woke up ready  
for a fight with an orange.

My wife turned slowly on her side  
and said in her sleep,

Potato, then Digging, and I fell  
in love again because I love digging potatoes,  
with her, then slicing them for frying.

We sometimes talk of children,  
the way we'd have to clean the apartment

So spare change and batteries aren't eaten.  
Soon, we say.

I won my fight with the orange  
and left half on the table  
before leaving for work. I know

She ate it and was thankful,  
reading the paper,

Making shadow puppets on the pages  
with thin fingers in the sunlight.

Dance Hall, Black Shoe

We had stopped on the way  
to the car, and it was uncomfortable.

We avoided each other's eyes,  
played with lint in pockets, allowed

the silence to say again,  
we're done, which was then broken

by taps coming from the dancehall  
where, through the window,

the one-legged man stared out at us  
dancing in his black shoe.

Mirrors

We descended  
to the chamber

of horrors and paid  
our two dollars  
to enter.

A girl was with me.  
She had just eaten

a mint and breathed  
warmly on my neck

in a way I can't forget.

The mechanical  
chain gang of monsters  
at times left us breathless,

with their loud hisses, bangs  
and screams, but the exhibits  
greatest trick

allowed the pulling of a rope  
to a black curtain  
which revealed our reflection  
in broken glass  
and children behind us on fire.

## Goat's Milk

Blue flowers of Stoke's aster  
rise on the slope like synthesis

and the goat fills her stomach  
with a few of the leaves

turning her milk light purple next morning  
when the farm-child fresh

from a greased tractor washes  
hands and quickly strokes milk to pail

with the exhilaration of some fallen  
blessing from God

At the End

There is the line of Kalashnikov rifles  
and a pile of fish

skeletons, but the man  
taking his temperature beneath the banana tree

worries me most. Because he has noticed  
I show him my map.

Ah, yes, the continental shelf—come.

So I do. He offers a banana,  
and I make a joke about the blue sticker woman

and her breasts and how she is a cartoon

and I was a child but so sexy, those lines, but this whole time  
he does not laugh, takes back his hand

that had really been in front of me too long—then

ah, some wind from the ocean, a stunt plane  
writing my name in the sky.

## Reading the Funny Pages

Bitmapped paper plates  
liven up the evening: the paste  
that spreads thin conversation  
to point break or  
Suez Canal, I read through  
the funny pages for quips  
of meaning, disproportionate  
taste, to tell you what color  
and shape said to color  
and shape; how

funny is the last fruit wedge on a plate,  
and how funny is the biotic rock  
in space, if it's there  
add bitters to the drink, sourpuss  
creation at the bottom of a bank,

and the boys along the road  
don't know what to call  
flinging cornflower pods  
into a man-made sink, where  
the katydids rest, dropped

like diphthongs  
on your mother's waist,  
waiting to spring like buttons  
in the funniest cartoon in the world.

American Primatology

Milk tooth,  
we count our fingers  
and toes, romanticize

an uncle's thumb  
in a potato field,  
Lincoln-Log Alamo

war scenes with movie sounds  
and fists. We say:  
but my mother

does it, dropping  
our pants in the classroom  
to stare down a cardboard

scarecrow, inanimate,  
waiting to flinch. We say:  
but he said it, fuck

from the lips at God camp  
praising grace, eating romaine  
in the romp house alone

or with the weird guy, who  
is everyone else, because the semaphore  
of strangers' is a silent stare

two inches above the shoulder,  
the eyes dark flags  
against paper.

Your note is confiscated;  
that drawing  
too many swords;

the black crayon, gone.  
For years you'll keep  
a fat eraser in your pocket.



## Eulogy of a Face

A woman on TV described placenta art.  
It's thrown on a white canvas, she said simply.  
The talk show host swiveled his chair.  
The audience looked at their shoes.  
A commercial with a bear happened, then another  
about cars. When the show resumed  
the subject had changed.

I've thought about this art for a long time  
and will never look at the freckled girl's face  
that I wink at from across the counter  
the same. When I think of all the people I love  
whose skin has taken the sun

in patterns, I hear myself saying, But you lived in that.  
They all seem confused. *What do you mean? But what,  
lived in what?* And each moves back  
when I try to touch their foreheads.

Wall Street

Where is the crowd  
you think  
on this slow Tuesday morning.  
On busses, seats sit empty  
and the bus driver eats a sandwich.

But I want a sandwich  
you whisper to no one, and the driver  
baseball in his cheek  
stares into your face,  
shaking his head No.

Spitting in The Bowl

She looks at her soup  
like a skeptic studying Job,

delicately as a Korean girl  
timing rice paper above coals.

A hair has fallen from her head,  
resting with the tomato red pepper

soup at Vera Mae's  
Bistro on this slow Tuesday noon.

The waiters walk in slow motion,  
traceable patterns, balancing

French presses above bow-ties.  
Their knees bend to tables

and their bodies absorb the pops  
that seem to rattle the ribcage

when one reaches old age. That,  
she thinks, acid working past her throat, and now this.

Conducting an Execution for The State, I Think of My Sister

Across the room,  
the chemicals blend  
in the blood  
    of the condemned man,

and I take his salty taste  
from the air. It stings  
my eyes, the way  
    the ocean might,

but didn't  
when you said drown.  
Why did you want  
    that then,

when we had lost sight  
of land, and I jumped  
off the deck to cool myself?  
    What doll had I crushed?

## Grand Guignol October

A mechanical snake's hiss  
and the crack of a rope-pulled  
monster. We are being moved  
through the chamber of horrors  
by a man whose eyes  
we never see. Everything  
designed to send the blood  
to our faces, so when we glimpse

the goat lit in brilliance  
through a tear in the curtain,  
head stuck to the block,  
we will yell out for the axe  
not to fall, which we aren't allowed to see,  
having been pushed into shadow,  
but our minds project  
along the wall  
when the dull  
chop comes through it.

## Belief Monkey

When I suddenly feel very aware,  
having kissed my wife and said my prayers  
for the Himalayan children,  
a monkey flicks his cigarette in my eye  
and there is pain.

Currently, it rains in St. Louis  
and my hand presses against the window  
leaving a print that repeatedly dissolves.  
This, I say, is important,  
which makes the monkey cough.  
He continues on to other apartments,  
waiting for eyes to open  
and my ear is against the wall  
to hear what the neighbors might tell him.

fruit stall, swell

where enunciate more slowly  
is a sweet sexual act  
there is a pineapple  
being split by an angry mexican  
recently stung by a jewel wasp.

the way he slices the air in vain,  
the hope of a sweet reconciliation,  
and the terror of his six children  
and the swelling in his palm near popping,

he eyes you so intently at the booth  
with your crumpled dollar bill.

Dakota

The old men are gathered  
with their noses towards  
some storm in South Dakota  
that, by smelling, they no  
longer worry about,

and return to their tables  
inside the glass box

and their papers and their hard  
eyes on the waitress, resting

now moving in a blue cut  
that reminds one

he was so lucky  
to have boys  
as he holds his cup  
near his barrel chest  
just to make her lean a little.



With Judgment, Prejudice

*- After winning a gold medal, Muhammad Ali was refused service at a diner in Ohio, and threw it into the Ohio River.*

When he walks in his fists still ache, his brain  
repairing cells with extra fluid. The farmer

at the bar grips his cup arthritically; the couple

in the corner stop speaking. It is morning  
in Ohio, and this diner creates community with pie

and hotcakes, handshakes and sugared apples.

A recognition: this black man waiting for a hostess.  
With flat-billed caps and the Reds. Sun washes

his shoe tops—he waits—a stillness occurs

as in the recognition of an affair, the hotel note  
in the dryer. With head nods and the local paper.

*What do you want* a voice like eggs in hot oil.

*To eat breakfast* With handwritten menus and malteds.  
*Well can't help you here, might es well get*

The feeling of two dozen focused eyes. With denim

and bright ketchup. He watches a man butter toast,  
and a woman light a cigarette. The sudden ruffle of newspaper.

He feels the metal in his pocket, asks *How far to the river*

With fishing stories and grain prices. He walks  
in the direction of their fingers.

## Political Poem

It is beginning to be easier  
to cross my right leg over  
my left. Do not mistake this  
for politics.

On television a man's powdered face  
tells me  
a women's powdered face  
is wrong.

That is one of those political things.

My legs have been criss-crossing  
awhile here on the couch  
for comfort, and I'm  
just noting

how knees bend,  
hips shift,  
and the time it takes  
to feel numb.

## Ausfahrt

You are the native English speaker  
who reads Ausfahrt for the first time  
above a parking garage in Germany  
and doesn't laugh, today  
passing women in pink hats.

This poem is not your taste,  
passing women in pink hats  
and smelling the chocolate store  
confections that you will buy  
for your mother. Sound:

“A marimba player is called a marimbist.”  
You write that down, fold it into the small  
pocket above the pocket in your jeans.

Perhaps breast cancer  
awareness, perhaps  
Easter Seals.

Many cars stall by the corner flower shop—a red light.  
They have spilled from the parking garage.  
Ausfahrt whispers through your lips,  
approaching the second exit, passed  
the women in pink hats, passed  
English from a car radio, a marimba,  
marimbist, you touch yourself, reassuring,  
pull out the paper, add a note to check spelling.

Perhaps Oprah's book club, perhaps  
World Orphan's Awareness.

You walk slowly and see people laughing in their cars.  
The flowers and the chocolates. You admire business  
placement, admire the window drapery, admire  
the red lights against the sun.

This poem is not to your liking—you  
finger a truffle bathed in gooseberry liqueur,  
say *three of these* in German with little accent  
leaving below a bright sign.

## The Orangutan at the San Diego Zoo

Two men holding hands stare  
through a glass museum case  
at a photo series titled: *What  
is Gender?* One picture  
shows a man in a purple flower dress  
kicking footballs over tree limbs.  
Another, a woman  
shaving her balls.

A hermaphrodite  
with moosewood shoes  
clops into a women's bathroom,  
pisses standing up  
then changes her mind,  
decides to sit  
and read a magazine article  
from her purse titled "Who Dey?"  
about the Cincinnati Bengals.

Home from a white-collar  
plastics plant supervisor job, Jim  
lays next to his wife  
asleep under a yellow electric blanket.  
He wakes her on purpose  
and she smiles with eyes closed,  
moving her hand to the back of his head,  
rubbing the oil from it between her fingers.

Because Janet says *I love you*,  
Alice says *Kiss me harder*.

An Orangutan at the San Diego Zoo  
sits on his haunches and stares  
absentmindedly over the tiger's den.  
You watch him lean side to side,  
flexing his great, orange arms to the sky before flicking  
a purple lady bug from an arm pit.  
A tiger roars,  
and the orangutan, excited, stands  
expectantly, masturbating with both hands.

A Thin Novel

Watch  
for the point  
where the spine breaks

On what page  
was a mark made by a raindrop  
when you left her  
on that park bench last spring

Where is she now  
you think,  
opening and closing  
opening and closing  
a thin novel.

Your Mother's Gynecologist

They say Dr. Hilton goes to *Koodie-Whose*,  
that he smiles at the thigh skin  
of high school girls serving steaks  
on paper plates, imagines  
what their elbows feel like on tired fingers,  
if their breath smells like bonfire.

During the day, under fluorescents,  
he tells women to relax,  
breathe, it's just a pap smear, easy does it.  
They say: nothing. *I'm nervous. Easy does it?*

Tonight Dr. Hilton's at the corner booth  
by himself smiling into a fresh washed glass  
full of amber beer. A waitress brings him a steak.  
He says, *Thank you—Babe*, and as she walks away  
he counts the steps it takes to reach the kitchen's swing door.

Your mother is across the room.  
It's her birthday and she's celebrating  
with friends and stories and cheap shots of rum  
for her fifty-first. After an hour  
she excuses herself to the bathroom,  
and, passing Dr. Hilton,  
she can't help but feel something  
when he smiles at her like a white-toothed god.

### The Mother's Expensive Purse

The permanent tooth sat in the book of poetry  
before the child stole  
and pushed it  
snugly against red velvet lining.

Back on the pages there was the absence of blood.  
The purse, however, had soaked through,  
and on returning the child was ruthlessly  
slapped on the porch of her house  
that sits picturesquely against  
a field of wheat where, at times,  
deer will be found making love  
in dawn light, or slamming their heads  
like stiff handshakes agreeing to bomb  
the collapsible city.

## Constructs in Stockings

Pieced together  
wooden cube on the table  
You were the brainteaser  
in a coarse cloth stocking  
above the fireplace.  
Mystical and religious  
Your claim was time  
and causality. Tonight  
the rain falls thoughtlessly  
into the street gutter. Tonight  
to be rain. Christmas has been  
over for months, and still the cube  
sits on the table, perhaps holding  
a laugh, or only waiting  
to be dismembered in a move  
where it will call out to God  
as a martyr inside the lion's head  
where sound travels quickest  
and no longer matters.



II.

If you didn't see the six-legged dog,  
It doesn't matter.  
We did, and he mostly lay in the corner.  
As for the extra legs,

One got used to them quickly  
And thought of other things.  
Like, what a cold, dark night  
To be out at the fair.

- Charles Simic, from "Country Fair"

## Chutzpah

As a child, I only liked Peter Pan  
because his shadow had strength.  
I would try goading my own  
into mischief because of this idea.  
My uncle called it chutzpah

but he's still in jail.  
I once asked him for advice. He said,  
When kissing a girl  
from another country  
say Yes when she asks,  
Is that what is done here?

That night I had found yellow ribbons  
in a desk drawer. I tried tying them  
to my shadow. Look what I've done,  
I said, turning in circles around the living room.

My uncle's face was so shiny just then,  
as my mother and sister  
went on sewing little socks.

Vernon

Perhaps, from my youth, the coal  
burning at Vernon  
will give me cancer. Perhaps  
not. Though

today, not far from there, I woke  
to the rain  
burning the road  
and also

the chickens in their coop,  
on this little farm.  
More honestly, I woke  
to something

screaming in the woods,  
from the rain,  
and saw the road,  
the chicken's yellow.

## Childhood Red

Corn leaves licked dew onto our jeans before dawn,  
until the sun burned them dry, also our necks,  
raw with youth. I detassled corn as a boy  
in a motorized metal basket, my fingers  
timidly entering the plant  
and grabbing hard what I was

paid to remove. At lunch we swallowed white bread  
sandwiches in the shade of the bus that brought us,  
its two tone seats a reminder of our smell  
masked by pickles and salt—someone  
always licking their fingers, touching their arms  
to watch the blood flash to the surface,

and my knuckles, guessing a cut's depth  
after a sudden realization of skin,  
how I questioned missing it  
after my first paycheck paid for gloves—  
and with each day at its end, my walk  
home, occasionally in a sweet rain,

how I'd flatten my hand, hold the back  
of it to the warmth in my neck  
while asking God, once the skin peeled  
and the softness recalled his red hair,  
to remind me of my father's face,  
please remind me of his face.

## Deck Hands

Old ships on fire in the middle of the day,  
that's sunlight this afternoon.

I watch children play with a rubber ball  
on the concrete. They lose it in the grass.

I've never wanted kids, and I tell you this  
every time I forget to buy gas for the mower.

You are baking sweet things, *For them*, you say coyly  
passing me to the lawn with a plateful of colors,

shifting your hips in that special way,  
taut sails on a windy day, just for my eyes

while the ships burn themselves into evening  
and I whisper *Goddamn it* as the children smile.

## Polka

My fiancé and I are huddled in a crowd  
pressed to a railing that, by faith, we all take  
as a measure of safety, here in the St. Louis Zoo.

We are looking at a sun bear's best attempt  
to kill a black plastic ball.  
The man to my left whispers  
yeah, yeah, kill that fucker,  
feeling for his camera. His child,  
face painted like a tiger's,  
jumps in place. Others  
eat their various ice-creams.

I pull the woman I will marry closer  
to say something severe, like, wow  
can you imagine a sun bear  
boxing your face like a play toy,

but she speaks first and says  
can you imagine  
a sun bear boxing your face  
like a play toy,

and I felt love then  
as we guessed at the length of its claws.

How the Plush Chairs at Yard Sales Easy-Bake Our Afternoon

I cannot stomach gingerbread.  
I cannot Machiavelli the toaster oven.

I will cook our walks spent alone  
measuring curbs for children  
we don't know but place  
in Catholic schools to keep face  
with the Carlson's.

How wild it all seems,  
the smell of buses rusting  
behind their houses. What  
to make of the rabbits  
in the engine—What to make  
with the telephone poles collapsed  
beside it when the unrelenting realness  
of a FedEx truck brushing your shoulder  
means we'll be OK

You say  
The air chooses our greatest  
shuffleboard mistakes. This  
stalls me for a moment

To The Giant Panda in a China Zoo

I know you've just bitten your third victim.  
Maybe it was a child trying to feed you a leaf  
and you thought, *arm*. Or a man backing up to your cage  
for a photograph by his wife  
and you thought, *shoulder blade*. But hopefully  
it was some asshole poking your eye with a stick  
and your stillness was misinterpreted as sleep  
instead of, your emotion, quiet rage. If this is the case,  
good job giant panda of China, please teach me your ways  
of dealing with criticism.



## Winner

I learned today that baby eagles are called eaglets.  
I also learned that they sometimes kill one another  
in what the birdwatcher called Cain and Able Syndrome.

Sometimes the parents decide the winner  
accidentally, stepping on a head when they fly  
into the nest. I'd like to believe

I'd luck out somehow, if I were an eaglet.  
That I would instinctively fly away from the nest,  
snap a fish, look interesting in the sky, be confused

as a chicken hawk even, just for the fun  
of a gunshot late some afternoon by two brothers  
betting on who will have sex first,

who's the better man, and watch what happens  
when they both miss, when their father watching  
from the truck bed calls them pussies.

Wanted:

a word that begins with you  
baking pies over campfire  
and we'd talk of dragons  
inside our tent for two people  
smaller than us and how hot  
the summer was back from school  
like dragon's breath you said  
yes it was you and you laughed  
when the berries were stolen  
by raccoons.

a word that equals nights removing  
diphthongs because accents were like coats  
to us then with copies of dialect maps  
you threw into the river because the ocean  
is our universal tongue you said  
philosophical and suspicious of love  
for particular cadences.

a word that has hands to cover buried items  
your winter hat with the red ball  
and you said it didn't matter you  
just wanted to feel reassured  
something stayed but not me.

a word with ends.

a word that ends with.

a word meaning kettle.

The Old World is Not Better Than Mexico

I have been watching a Mexican parade  
celebrate with colors found inside a donkey shaped piñata.

People jump out of the picture,  
back in. The camera calls them, pans.

In the kitchen I hear my grandmother cough.  
She is eating blood pudding because she does those things.

The microwave is beeping because she likes all food hot,  
*Don't you want some hot food* she calls.

I've stopped trying to understand, and instead stare  
listlessly at the young man

counting time with quick fingers  
on a costume maker's bench, now folding a tortilla.

While Stocking For Winter, I Think of My Father

1.

Wheelbarrows of old wood  
become heavier when it snows.

The few hundred feet from the barn:  
wet concrete sucking my boots.

There is time to think of this, and stare  
into a tree's face, count the lines,

trace the maze to its branches, heavier  
now, and now, always until it stops.

2.

Pushing through a drift my muscles  
tense, the way I imagine  
an Indian boy's body does

when he dances—until peace  
is the clapped dirt above his feet  
when his father smiles and says *Enough*

Walking By the Airport, I Think of When You Left

You spun up the street  
like a 1940s musical.

We held each other  
like broken toys

and let people put us  
back together with their eyes.

“Look what I’ve made,”  
they thought, with just a little thinking,

then walked around a corner  
able to forget us completely.

“I want it,”  
you said

“to be a happy thing.”  
But today I’ve seen seven goodbyes.

## Raccoon

That whiteness of your page  
scratched by dull pencils  
in summer, night, and the pliant  
emotion within the hook  
of all those J's.

How many times  
will you write her name  
now that you've heard  
the garbage cans rattle  
and the raccoon has climbed

the tree with its bacon-greased napkin  
covered, likely, with your clumps of hair?

Stanislavsky

That name could be a drink's, as in  
give me a double Stanislavsky,  
Mr. Bartender, and the heavy  
glass knob to its bottle held  
like a pool ball in his hand  
would more or less be its magnificent proof.

Names, lately, an issue.  
I have proposed to a small woman  
from a small town in Ohio  
who has said yes,  
she will love me  
tomorrow, too. Soon she will take

my name, and my female friends say take  
it easy for awhile, with the change,  
she is losing something, you know?  
and the shrug in their shoulders means  
she is losing something.

So, Ms. Stanislavsky  
I toast to your name and swallow,  
have asked the bartender,  
whose hands are too small  
and still wet from washing glasses,  
to reach again for your high bottle  
he nudges with his middle finger.

The I

sits like an upright guitar on the page.  
I tell you this in the car  
while we pass billboards  
and giant crosses  
on our way to Saint Louis.  
Don't you think so  
I want to push  
but your focus  
is a steel cage  
the orangutans have stopped punching.

We will take our kids to the zoo.  
We will catch someone eating plastic.

Mile seventy equals one hour  
and the left side of my body tingles  
like that electric fence, and in that field  
a cow plants a strawberry seed with its hoof  
staring at us not aloofly while we pass  
but with the recognition you give bald heads  
to baby bottoms and the scientific method  
to late-night romps.

Now I think what to do with my hand  
so place it on your knee for comfort.  
The classically conditioned cap.  
The sky is out after rain.

We will tell our kids of weather.  
We will one day hide in the bathtub.

The I sits on the page  
like the last beer bottle.

The I  
    like evangelists' arms.



## The Cold, Deal

Seventeen year locusts lynchpin the Pacific northwest,  
underground and huddling.

Tonight I read the weather's machine language,  
which is cold, and therefore Washington state  
on my mind, where I have a friend called Sean  
and a fiancé's hope of living.

It is because of the cold?

Yes, the cold.

She always answers quickly like that.

At times we make promises to avoid  
difficult to pronounce illnesses  
that, genetically determined, may huddle in our blood—  
I promise not to catch lymphosarcoma—  
so we might tell our families years later  
when they ask about the other  
Yes, the cold  
and not look in their faces, which won't then show worry,  
their attention returned to the great melons on the table  
adjacent the empty chair.

## Cottonmouth Hunt

The boy who couldn't smell  
was at a disadvantage in the cattails  
ringing the lake. Our skin browning, throats  
hoarse from whisper, we urged him

further to the shallows—we in our galoshes  
settled thinly in the mud. Looking out  
the sky had started its pink,  
so we knew the time was nearly up

and our chances to see the snake  
perhaps lost in our own shortcomings,  
but then the smell of cucumber  
rolled thick about him there

as we watched his hand shock down into the water  
and him scream out our oldest fear.

## Sleeping Game

I sometimes look at the clock  
to depress myself, but only  
during times of severe desperation,  
like tonight when I've stopped watching  
flamingos trace patterns on an ice rink  
near Florida. I still hear the reporter saying  
Look at that figure-eight Kathy  
but I won't go back to the TV  
because the secondhand frustrates my perception,  
or dimension, or philosophy, or flamingo,  
and the scraping sound of their leather feet  
is in perfect time with the rhythmic silence,  
and that's enough to do it now,  
to help me close my eyes a little.

Line

A child plays with a ball in the park, the sun  
bright on her skin, she cares for its roundness,  
the way it feels in her hand—tossing it that way,

and I want to relate that to your breasts  
but feel the church turn its head, remember  
my mother's face redden when I stumbled into the bath,

so I make a drawing in the sand,  
quickly erased by the wind, of our first hug,  
the way I held you so tightly with reason.

## Rebuttal

I've never been good at insults. I would memorize  
standup routines overheard from corner men  
begging money, only to lose focus  
when surrounded by boys my age  
foaming for the rebuttal, and sputter—

    curse words, gone. The description  
of his mother's mouth, too distant.

Their laughter stored itself  
deep in me, rolling  
enigmatic circles at night  
under my eyelids, after I had  
stared at my mother's face, asking her  
questions about the weather  
to watch its muscles move before  
she turned off the light, thinking  
what is it what is it what is it

## Beard Fields

Spinning clicks of combines have dispersed into ash and chaff  
and red-rusted handles.

They sit in a row, lining a corn field  
that will never feel them again. Around their flat tires, cows eat

brown grass burned autumn leaf orange by rust and midday sun,  
chewing their lips into smiles.

On a two lane road, Amish pass  
me in a caravan of Chevys. Their beards—soothed by windshields

and air conditioning—relax. I enjoy driving in Ohio. I enjoy seeing the passing parishes  
through the safety of my window,

through the danger I create with waned attention given to roadside cats  
and ostrich farms. Forgetting my

speedometer I forget my gas pedal,  
and with this

my truck stops. I stand surrounded by rowed fields ready to grow my lunch  
in months to come, or days,

or now because the seeds dug  
feel fresh enough to eat standing here among dirt and insects,

all of them waiting, too, for the great harvest,  
or death. What a terrible thing to say.

## My Day At The Park

When the fire truck passes with a belly  
full of covered men, children  
smack their ears in pain,  
mothers stop conversing,  
and everyone flinches, if just  
at first, but the deaf-mute  
by the picnic tables,  
reaching past the earth  
to push an angel  
through the sun.

## Sock

My brain must have completed itself  
for now I fear death. To talk  
of yesterday is to say the fallen peaches  
are covered with insects. Today  
the larvae shine and I am happy  
when they fly off. However,  
I remember filling socks with rolls  
of nickels and gravel from the driveway.  
My stepfather took me at dusk to the yard.  
Thinking back on the barn now,  
its open doors stark black  
could be the entrance to hell.  
He wound the sock like David  
and let it go into the air. A bird  
attacked, coming as if by magic,  
and clutched the sock for a moment  
before letting it fall. Not  
a bird, he said. A bat. Soon, the sky  
was thick with their swooping.



## The Big Red Dog's Epiphanic Water Bowl

Caustic like republics  
governing the placement  
of city buildings; the many  
disparate voices; I am  
desperate like the mother  
baking pies sweeter than  
hard candy.  
Cavities in the tooth.  
Harry Matthews.  
Children's books  
like the Big Red Dog  
and Glory of the Magpie Plots.

I remember being seven and breaking through arms  
in a game. It was my first metaphor.  
When someone broke and the game was banned  
with discussions on growth plates  
and the importance of milk for bones  
that became my second. I've looked  
for the third in a school desk but you stole it,  
and that's okay. Tonight I've got a picture book  
in my lap and can't stop seeing new faces in the pages.  
Yours smiles every so often,  
and I think of playtime outdoors in jeans  
so inappropriate for the weather it made my mother give  
her first apology. Pie. The coldest water I'd ever tasted.

## Walking to the Poet's Church

In Wales, I look past the laughter of bricks.  
The buildings, side by side in a gray slick,  
lead me in a straight line to St. David's church,

and I'm reading about his discipline  
from a book found on the plane,  
the way his hands sweated thin beads  
through pink, near transparent palms  
writing his poems and sermons  
in a quiet, candlelit box.

People would come to him, and they came to his doorstep,  
waited to be let in for days but first stripped everything,  
a letting go of the world as they felt it on their naked legs  
and through the laughs of passers to the quay.

Seeing the church, it rises only some, humble like a saint,  
but colored like one, too, in the same slick gray.  
I've only wanted to touch a beginning, so I push the door  
with a fingertip. It swings wide on red wood hinges  
in a slow quarter circle, and looking to the vanishing point of rows,  
I see, faintly, a final black point.