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## Explaining Poetry to the Open Heart

Matthew Wayne Larrimore  
*Old Dominion University*

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EXPLAINING POETRY TO AN OPEN HEART

by

Matthew Wayne Larrimore  
B.A. May 2010 University of Northern Colorado  
M.A. May of 2012 Northern Arizona University

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Approved by:

Timothy S Seibles (Director)

Luisa Igloria (Member)

Michael Pearson (Member)

## ABSTRACT

### EXPLAINING POETRY TO AN OPEN HEART

Matthew Wayne Larimore  
Old Dominion University, 2016  
Director: Professor Timothy S Seibles

“Explaining Poetry to the Open Heart” is a creative writing thesis of poetry. It makes use of lyric and narrative poems that utilize sound, imagery, and other creative devices in order to communicate the narrator’s relationships with place, others, and self to the reader. A shifting point of view alternately restricts and expands the reader’s perspective in order to direct attention toward the reader’s own perceptions of the narrator, the world, and ultimately herself.

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I



## Modern Creation Story

The sun shucks the void of darkness;  
the empty world shivers in nakedness.  
With ribbons of dashed lined asphalt,  
wide and narrow, I wrap it all in intersections,  
exit ramps, superhighways forking off then rejoining.

The roads weep tears of tar at their loneliness,  
I forge cars and trucks, large and small –  
Red, metallic blue, and pearl, all the colors,  
2 door, 4 door, hatchback,  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton, crew cab  
flatbed, the wreckers, the rigs, the RVs, all of them, everywhere.

No places to stop, to unload.  
The vehicles sigh clouds of carbon monoxide.  
Rest stops and gas stations I erect at intersections,  
exit ramps, dress it all in road signs and traffic lights.  
Around them spring villages, towns, great concrete cities.

Empty and confused the places wonder why they exist.  
I populate them, Mothers and Children in diapers  
holding bottles, Fathers pushing their offspring  
on swings and Teachers with books and white boards,  
Firemen and Mayors, one with her gavel at a wide conference table.  
The empty spots I fill with Lawyers, Janitors, Doctors,  
folks standing in line at the mission, everyone, everywhere.

The people look around at the places, roads, and cars,  
wonder at the emptiness; where is beauty?  
I green the grass, spring flowers yellow and red,  
grow tall leafy trees that stretch to the sky. I pile  
the mountains, furrow the rivers, ladle the lakes.

Then I inspire painted canvasses and walls,  
sculpted stone and bronze –  
compose harmony, melody, lyrics  
strengthen voices, drums, guitar, piano,  
literature, books short and long, plays,  
poems, poems, poems.

## The Bridle of Babylon

*Thus always to tyrants.*

I who surveyed Xerxes: King of Heroes,  
as he sullied the holy temple of Babylon,  
sobbed as he cast down its burning cantors  
of myrtled oil, wept as the golden god Bel,  
protector of the city toppled. Golden Bel stolen  
and melted into a shimmering metallic pool.

Bel's Temple where I held a woolly ram,  
the sacrifice for victory  
as the general chanted the words,  
where I blessed the father as he  
poured out dark gouts of spicy red wine  
for the health of his newborn son,  
and the farmer as he spilled a bulging sack of seed  
for a stand of barley and crops of wheat.  
I steadied the old mother as she offered a dove  
for the marriage of her daughter.  
*Oh god! In this, your day, there is power unrivaled.*

I hid as Xerxes defiled Bel into a golden crown,  
watched as they crowned, not the King of Babylon,  
but the King of all Persia and Medea,  
and plotted as he claimed, King of Kings, King of Nations.

In the end, even this king falls to an assassins' blade.

## Celebrating

The crowd chants  
USA USA USA  
as the news flashes on their phones,  
gathering in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave,  
USA USA USA.

May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1 am 2011 SEAL Team Six  
assaults the Bin Laden compound,  
slaughtering Osama and four others.

I watch students from Georgetown  
spew onto the National Mall,  
celebrating death  
as if their team won a championship.

Across the country,  
people pour into city streets  
to cheer SEAL Team Six's  
success over a sleeping family.

In the aftermath we learn:  
a AK 47 lay on Bin Laden's shelf  
with a pistol. The oldest son,  
rising to defend his mother,  
shot dead, with the rest.

Afterward, facial recognition software  
confirmed Bin Laden's identity.

## Truce

Build a pyre of wood,  
start with tinder. Help me  
pile on dry sticks as fuel

to melt the icy years.  
Lay on the splintered logs  
to light the inky dark that divides.

Come rest by the blaze.  
We'll wash wounds clean,  
wrap them in linen of understanding.

We'll fill the air between us  
with footings, piers, and arches  
over the dark chasm.

Come, build with me.

## Dominican Resort

Michael's smile warms you  
like the morning Caribbean sun.  
He's a "please and thank you"  
young man, *You're nice people,*  
as he checks you in.  
*I'll take care of you,* he does.

Calcium carbonate walkways  
lead from guest rooms to dining rooms,  
coral structures cut from ocean  
form the path, check-in to beach.

At lunch, Michael will seat you  
below blown glass light fixtures  
at tables adorned with golden flatware.  
*Enjoy your meal,* and you do.

Polyps clustered in groups,  
secreted the calcium that became  
polished stone below your feet,  
swirls of tan, ripples of pink, fans of bone.

After dinner, though oversized windows,  
you can catch glimpses of Michael  
busing half-filled plates and lipstick marked glasses.

Coral reefs occupy less  
than 0.1% of the ocean's surface,  
but provide a home for a quarter  
of all marine species.

It's midnight when Michael boards  
the unairconditioned bus  
for the hour ride home.  
It's the same bus he boards just  
past seven am, six times a week  
to afford his two-room apartment  
in the suburbs of Santo Domingo.

## More than Minutes

Is a day more than a collection  
of minutes one after another?  
Just twenty-four hours:  
the clock, your watch,  
some dark, some light, a bone face  
with silver numbers,  
black hands, sixty seconds  
at a time, 1440 minutes one after another?

Can we let a day be more  
than the things we did?  
A trip for apples and creamer,  
past traffic piled up for two cars  
and an ambulance, stopping to mail  
a smooth brown box for \$12.55,  
dropping off two linen shirts, a red tie  
with a mustard stain.

Can it be more  
than a story you make up,  
Waiting for the elevator;  
the sideways glance  
noticing the tension in someone's eyes?

Forget the hour learning  
how to prepare Chicken Kiev  
from some TV Chef.  
Leave behind the mail:  
bills, and pleas for money to save  
the children or abandoned cats.  
Shake off the yawn.

Awake, stand up,  
Get in the car, catch the bus.  
Do not avoid the soaking rain,  
the cutting wind. Visit family, friends,  
next door, across town, share laughter  
like you did long ago.  
Go find the one that got away.  
Embrace them as they answer the door.  
Do that thing you dread.  
Time flees like dreams in daylight. Do it now.

## They Believe

they live in the fallen down ruins  
of post-consumer capitalism  
they learned about in twenty weeks  
of community college before dropping out.

They sit at home in Hello Kitty tees,  
pound the comments on YouTube,  
tweet their thumbs raw telling  
everyone about the media conspiracy  
to keep the masses stupefied, on their iPhones  
logged into an “open” network.  
They head to their job at Staples.

They think they live in silicon cities  
on data superhighways  
you can't drive down,  
divided by miles, united by  
Tumblr, Instagram, or Pinterest.

They never consider the confusion  
created one nation under pixels  
divided into zeros and ones.  
Their texting dropped their calls  
to Grandma and their best friend  
from grade school.

A neglected blog:  
a post from last month –  
*“taking a break until  
my connection clears up.”*  
A pic of the once-accounted-for cats  
nesting in a grey sweater captioned,  
'purr-furing cotton over wool.'

A few likes, a haha instead of lol and ;)  
a halfhearted status update  
from the dude down the street, a digital  
“how about that weather” or  
“I hate ~~school, work, my wife and kids~~ life.”

Alone, unfriended and unfollowed,  
in their digital ghost town.

## Biology of Longboarding

A young man studies  
a long-boarder cruising across campus.

He doesn't blink as she rides a dip  
in the sidewalk, leans over  
her board into the slight curve,  
the weight of her body  
pulling her down the slope  
before she pushes her hips  
back to finish the soft S motion.

The way her dark brown hair  
whips and flutters in the wind,  
which presses her loose t-shirt  
into a form-fitting drape  
revealing her lithe shape,  
makes him swallow hard.

He tries to imagine the feel  
of her smooth skin under his finger tips  
as it shines in the sunlight  
while she carves down the walkway's crown.



## Cascade of Bricks

After being pillars for each other,  
after what they'd been through,  
he left without a word, suddenly  
like a struck match.

The ember of her hurt  
charred its way to her center.  
hollow as an abandoned factory,  
she smoked and smoldered,  
wore an open window smile,  
laughed like a fan at the front door.  
Burning from the inside, no one knew,  
its blackened insides,  
until a strong gust of wind  
hit her at the right angle.  
Then the bricks fell

from  
three stories  
up, smashing a car  
and mailbox into a smoldering  
dusty heap, that blocked traffic at Colonial and Caroline.

To Guide and Show the Way  
*The Virginian Pilot*  
 January 28<sup>th</sup> 2015  
 Our 150<sup>th</sup> Year

“Pilots” sit in stacks. waiting on wire racks, hyping civil rights and the budget hikes. Grilling great grub for the big game, fights for space below the fold with the weather forecast, and a full color ad, *The Best Bank in Town*, The president shouts, protect what you own with one dollar down.

But we have lost the value of a “Pilot.” Few care how ships reach their port captained around reefs and sandbars. Instead they divest responsibility to the GPS.

Lost are apprenticeships learning bay and tide through years of experience, gained to guide men and cargo safely to their destination replaced by silicon, copper wires, and satellites. The value of what they did taken by time and technology.

We let “Pilots” sit in stacks and wait on wire racks to be recycled. We prefer our news from CNN.com or Google Reviews, a blog post at time, apt for adult attention spans, sound bites fit for space allowed, 140 characters at a time, for the spot next to a banner ad. Local Editors and Reporters, audience and neighborhood savvy replaced

with RSS services, Reuters,  
and AP subscriptions.

### Choose Your Own Ending (End Times Sestina)

Everything that begins, draws to an end.  
 We race toward it, the end of our world.  
 The certain nearness of the apocalypse,  
 all of it, everything, vanished in a flash.  
 Heed the warnings, leave your eyes open  
 for the end, the coming horror.

Anticipate blazing death from the sky; horror.  
 A mountain of stone, avalanche at the end,  
 seventeen miles-a-second will open  
 a hole in the crust of our world.  
 Blind in an instant, brighter than a nova –flash –,  
 no escape from the coming apocalypse.

We'll cause the coming apocalypse,  
 squabbling toward our own horror.  
 Hate, greed, envy, war will begin with a flash  
 of gunfire, bombs, clouds of gas will mark the end.  
 Humans will evaporate from the face of the world,  
 for others we leave this world open.

In prophesy, the seventh seal opens  
 at the appointed time for the Apocalypse.  
 A final judgment upon the World;  
 at the end God will unloose the final horror.  
 They pray for it, all things come to an end,  
 all of creation gone in a flash.

Still others imagine a brilliant flash,  
 a moment of genius, the flood gates open,  
 white lab coats, petri dishes to usher the end.  
 They herald our end in a viral apocalypse.  
 The last of us witness the diseased horror,  
 The last gasps of humans in a wasted world.

Not bang but fizzle, the end to our world,  
 in the far flung future, no moment, no flash.  
 Stars flicker out; behold their frozen horror.  
 They say the end will open  
 to black sky, universal apocalypse  
 with a whimper at the end.

But the world scoffs at minds open  
 to the coming flash, deny the apocalypse,

resist the inevitable horror, ignore the coming end.

II

### Ode to Bacon Cheese Burger

O' Bacon Cheese Burger I adore you.  
My eyes feast upon your tempting beauty.  
I envy the bun that holds you so close,  
as you lounge upon a bed of lettuce.  
Flames have perfectly caressed your patty.  
Your golden cheese melted so smooth, so sharp.  
Smokey bacon adorns your luscious form.  
I desire to consume you wholly,  
even as your juices run down my chin.

### Oh Bacon Cheese Burger

Oh Bacon Cheese Burger  
I can no longer love you,  
cannot indulge in crispy bacon,  
sharp cheddar, or your flame-caressed patty.  
Do not tempt me with your luscious form,  
you can no longer be mine.  
Though try you may to lure me to your bed  
of crisp lettuce and juicy tomato,  
I must resist. I still long to hold you,  
revel as your juices weep down my chin,  
but my LDLs and triglycerides  
are through the roof. Goodbye,  
cruel meat; cruel, sumptuous, fire kissed patty.

## BBQ Sundae

The pulled pork my brother devoured wholly,  
polished off the last of that tangy goodness  
then with a gaping mouth that watered  
from slow roasting and smoky sauces  
made the chicken vanish too. Who invited him?  
I marveled at his gluttony, inhaling  
a perfectly seasoned T-bone, medium rare,  
our good potato salad, down his hatch.

Then he searched for our dessert; quickly  
I hid the two lattice blueberry pies,  
shuddering at his ravenous maw.  
I spoke coyly to him of Waldorf salad.  
Untempted by apples, celery, and  
mayo he left to pursue a large gelato.



Bend

Bend don't break your mind.

Bend the rules, bend  
the truth, the laws,  
Fort Bend Oregon  
to bend it like Beckham  
then tie a sheet bend in it.

Bend over  
backwards,  
Short Bend Missouri,  
bend bars with your bare  
hands, bend a note  
on your harmonica,  
slow down on that  
bend in the road  
on your way to Big  
Bend National Park.

Learn the six steps  
to bend wood, pipe,  
and tubing by hand,  
South Bend Indiana,  
stop on the bend in the river  
on your way to Bend  
Brewing Company  
so you can bend  
your elbow.

## Washing Machine Repair

She's smoking hot.  
She drives me crazy,  
every time she jerks on,  
I smell her melting belts.

Appliance repair is a joke.  
All they want to do is get  
through my front door,  
charge me \$75 just to come  
out, do nothing but talk,  
and tell me to replace it.  
Screw them! I'm not  
taking it in the ass this time.

I spend an hour  
in a darkened room,  
with the door closed  
surfing the back alleyways  
of the web, looking for what I need.  
Finally, I find just the right stuff –  
a motor coupler;  
three pieces of black on white  
oiled-up rubber and plastic  
with a stout metal sleeve  
so this one doesn't go limp  
before it's done its job.

I leave \$39.95 for Whirlpool  
and don't bother to look back.  
Three days later, a brown box arrives,  
I prepare for my exertions.

The machine sits in a cramped  
sweaty corner of the apartment.  
The laundry room door comes off  
its hinges, I heave the dryer out  
making space for my effort.

Rocking the washer onto her back,  
her feet in the air,  
three clamps  
and twelve screws  
grudgingly give access.  
The parts are a puzzle

that take more hands than I have.  
Eventually, the hoses hook up,  
the cord plugs in, she starts,  
sputters, seizes up,  
as cold as a witches tit.

I stand back take a deep breath  
scrape the grease from under my nails  
look for a cigarette,  
grab a load of underwear  
and head to the Laundromat.

From the Alternate Catholic Book of Prayer

Glory be  
to the coffee bean,  
to its ripening,  
and to the holy harvest.

As it was  
in the picking  
it is roasted, and ever shall be  
heavenly without end.

Glory be  
to the maker,  
to the glass carafe,  
and to the filtered water.

As it is  
slowly dripping,  
and is now steadily pooling  
to be sipped for ever and ever.

Glory be  
to the mug  
to the sugar,  
and to the half-and-half.

As it is  
eagerly poured,  
is now savored,  
soon gone  
until tomorrow morning.

AMEN

Dear Stapler,

Do you remember that stack of papers  
so fat we couldn't push through,  
embarrassedly self-shuffling looking for a clip?

Dear Staple,  
How about that resume?  
Just a few sheets of premium paper  
you crumpled on impact,  
a twisted jumble of silver angles?

Dear Stapler,  
I always wanted to know  
what it felt like to run out of  
the thing that makes you the most you.

Dear Staple,  
Do you care that it's your job  
to fasten parts together  
like some butcher surgeon of cellulose,  
here to save them from nothing  
more than losing pages?

Dear Stapler,  
No more then you care  
sitting there day after day  
doing that same job  
stupefied deaf, dumb, blind.

Dear Staple,  
How can you live with yourself  
knowing that your whole existence  
is forced on you, that your whole purpose  
is to be shaped by and for something else?

Dear Stapler,  
I have to admit, even I prefer  
the soft curves of a clip.  
I never cared to rip and tear  
my way through and around,  
or shred a whole corner as I leave.

Wishes for Lazy Students  
After Lucile Clifton

I wish them written exams.  
I wish them a dull pencil  
and three out of four essay questions.  
I wish them no multiple choice.

I wish them a power outage,  
no battery in their alarm  
and living across campus.  
I wish them forgetting the room number.

Next, I wish them un-bought text books  
and study partners who are misinformed.  
Let the text books be online but let  
the network be down. Let the study  
partners sell back their book too soon.

With time running out let  
them believe they've done  
the best they could,  
and then let them find  
the last five questions on the back.

## III

## Small Place

One ordered corn bread and chili,  
another the grilled salmon  
on a bed of greens, the third  
pretzels with cheese and mustard.  
All three had a dark red draft of the local brew.

But, being disappointed by the lack of beans,  
they bought corn dogs, Mountain Dew,  
a box of wine, and blueberry yogurt.

They climbed a close-by hill  
after sunset to see this new town  
sparkle at night, like light on water,  
to toast it with the box of wine,

but it was a city of darkness,  
only a gas station, a few porch lights  
visible from their vantage.

Quietly they drank in the growing dark.  
Then, the light display began.  
Pin pricks of blue-white emerged  
on the background of darkness.  
One of the three knew where Mars was.  
Another spotted a shooting star, and long  
after the wine was gone, the third  
spied the glowing spine of the Milky Way.

In early morning with pounding heads  
they headed home, but took with them  
their small place among  
the uncountable diamond specks of night.



## Mountain Sunset

A bluish pallor overcomes  
the crowded parking lot.  
Folks look up to watch  
the never to be seen again  
one of a kind, end-of-day  
light show in the sky.

The glow plays along the mist  
of the overcast summer evening.  
Shoppers seem to hold their breath –  
the cars, plastic bags,  
and carts, all freeze.

Magenta, blue, and mauve  
Line the rutted, furrowed underside  
of roiling cloud that stretches  
horizon to horizon,  
curtaining valleys and peaks.

But the evening breeze chases  
camera toting gawkers  
with the scent of rain.  
They've never seen the mountain  
awash in gold just before  
our sphere of light gives way to night.

Phoenix

- *After Sandburg's Chicago*

Blast Furnace of the Nation,  
Blight Maker, Rejector of Immigrants,  
Denier of Opportunity and Dream-spoiler,  
desolated, wasted, languid,  
City of Obstinace  
Pheonix

I am the mad man cursing silently,  
cursing the wind, the reckless brutal sun, sneering at the wasteland you created kept from water's  
saving coolness, arguing across scorched fields of hopelessness over your blast furnace of  
rejection, City of Obstinace.

I call you killing field. Deny me, but I have seen your ruins, walls of brick and iron crushing  
those who seek asylum. You answer with papers to keep me out, do not care to hear the cries of  
those who need you; your own leaders, students, and neighbors.

And I tell you, you are a brutal desert giving only thirst to the burgeoning potential of who you  
reject. I know their faces, the clear light in their eyes even after a day of shouldering asphalt up  
ladders. I watch as they survive on scraps that would starve a coyote and hear their laughter as  
they play with their children on the sandy playgrounds in your wasteland of hopelessness.

You show us other places that sneer and argue, point to other cities that ignore and waste, other  
cities also blind and deaf, leaving your daughters and sons embarrassed and flushed. You resist  
their pleading like a heat struck animal pulling away from the waters that will save you from  
desiccation, fumbling, failing, starting, failing again.

You are lost in the desert under the dusty haboob, cracking lips yelling curses, mouths full of  
sand, rejecting laws that pull and plead you, sun-scoured face yelling curses, spitting, cursing  
under your breath, at a country that will not heed you.

## Aching Hands

I'm grateful my hands type  
poems, scratch out notes,  
pull up my pants, zip my  
zippers, pet the dog, feed the fish.

Lately, my hands power a move,  
fifteen miles one place to the other.  
They pick up box after box, grip the dolly,  
load the accumulation of twenty  
two years, a dozen trips via car  
so I can take my time, "save" the U-Haul rental.

Despite gloves,  
boxes and furniture  
catch, pinch, and bend  
fingers and wrists the wrong way.

When it's sorted, when the sofa,  
the TV, and the dining room table  
have found their resting places,  
after we've achieved feng shui,  
I'll visit storage, Goodwill,  
and this time I swear, the dumpster.

For now, every time I flex  
or make a fist, my joints snap and pop  
like a masochistic bowl of cereal.  
They feel like raw meat hooks,  
open wounds at the end of my arms.  
The throbbing keeps me up at night.

Yet I would not trade this  
for cradling idle joints,  
handling a rifle, busting greasy knuckles  
on a wrench, gripping a pick ax,  
or mending barbed wire fences.

When I've finished I'll cheerfully  
type and retype lines and stanzas,  
grade paper after essay after test,  
smooth the silk of my little brown dog's ear  
and hold my beloved close in the quiet of night.

## Grand Canyon Sunrise

A dish of undefined misty blue yawns  
below as 2 tan and black hummingbirds  
tend to the center of red petals.  
I feel the light recede  
just before our blazing furnace of fire  
breaks the horizon.

Dawn reveals the rim and red and brown  
stone, ribbons like edges of blankets  
laid down over eons. The light unveils  
oblong angular Battleship Rock.  
It has witnessed this scene  
since before even the natives arrived.

The moon fades but never leaves.  
Thousands of feet below  
the winding trail to Bright Angel Lodge  
makes its way among the dark green pinion  
and blue tinted sage.

I glimpse the Colorado,  
carver of cliffs that keep the canyon  
floor in shade until noon. But  
by then I'll have left for the leafy green  
of the east and sunrises over water.

## Obituaries and Packing Tape

We spend hours packing for the move  
carefully wrapping  
lamp after vase after shelf  
in plastic, pour squeaky peanuts  
in nearly full boxes so nothing shifts.

Down to that last of it,  
I resort to old newspapers  
to protect the picture frames.

“In memoriam of Gertrude Williams,  
a loving wife, a faithful friend,”  
swaddles my smiling memories  
of whitewater in Wyoming.

Martin Dorsey shelters  
squinting smirks in the Arizona sun  
“an educator dedicated to the community.”

*Aunt Gert, Cousin Martin, thanks for your help.*

IV

## Raven

1.

Trapped in the body of a black winged bird,  
 I dreamt a curved ragged beak for a mouth,  
 twisted charcoal claws for feet,  
 large graceful wings for arms,  
 covered in sleek black feathers.

Remembering my former self  
 my wife's touch on my cheek,  
 ten fingers, the taste of beer and bread,  
 I struggled to free myself without success.

2,

The Raven a myth to more than one people:  
 bringer of omens, a cleaner of corpses –  
 actor upon the world,  
 shaper of destinies,  
 thief of the Stars and Moon.  
 Trickster, manipulator, gifter of the Sun –  
 even a myth needs the land.

3.

Ravens keep vigil over the dumpster  
 in back of the Mandarin Buffet  
 the keen-eyed, carrion-eaters  
 arrayed in iridescent black  
 croak with a trill that sounds like a laugh  
 when they find a fat treat.

They watch then scatter when approached.  
 I call to them with a click of my tongue.  
 They pay attention once in a while, call back.  
 I find their feathers, long and ruffled,  
 as if they have left them for me.

### Too Early for Breakfast

After a night of camping close  
     to the lake, on a last minute campsite  
 none too level, none to shaded,  
 none to private, in a tent; too small,  
 too orange, and by the hour before  
     dawn too wet to lay sleepless in any longer,  
 I leave the tent, take my sleeping bag  
     for warmth to doze in a camp lounge chair.

Too early for breakfast, I watch  
     pale blue light outline a few pines.  
 I doze for minutes, then hear rustling  
     hurrying up the hill toward me.  
 Looking toward a stand of aspen,  
 I expect to see some early  
     morning camper heading for a pre-dawn pee.

Instead two elk fawn come skittering  
     to a halt as they enter my clearing.  
 As big as ponies, their white spots fading  
     into the cream-brown of their coming adulthood,  
 two yearlings newly emancipated  
     from mother. I surprise them. They sniff  
     the morning air cautiously,  
     their wet black noses twitching.

I freeze, slow my breathing. After a few minutes  
     their stiff tension subsides. I want to call  
     my wife but know they will flee if I stir  
     or make a sound. They begin to nose  
     the ground. One moves off right,  
 the other straight toward me then left.  
 I whisper my wife's name into the crisp  
     morning air. Their heads lift just a moment  
     and go back to their search.

The nearly identical yearlings  
     inspect patches of mountain wildflowers  
     munching as they go. I watch one disappear  
     behind a bush. Moments later the other pauses  
     perhaps realizing he's alone and  
     heads after his sister. I hear them crashing  
     through the brush as I look for our frying pan.



Alone with the Parakeet  
For Kebab

A slice of pumpernickel, a napkin,  
a spoon, my steaming bowl  
of split pea soup, the perfect pick-me-up  
on a cold winter's evening.  
For company, my winged companion, Kebab,  
the eight year old bird watches  
snow pile up outside our window.

Despite his habit to chew on the chair  
and steal keys, I parole the yardbird.  
I make him a place, a plate of silky, black millet,  
nothing but the best for my friend.

The expert at splitting,  
and spitting picks a seed  
with his curved grey beak, but loses interest.

The table top j-walker waddles over,  
considers me with one shiny black eye.

*Yes Kebab?*

As if taunting, he turns away  
hops into my bowl, and back out again,  
scalded by my steaming soup.

Fearful for the bird's health,  
I scoop him up, clean him off  
check for injury, but he's just startled.

I return to my dinner.  
pull my chair up to the window,  
place the bird in his cage,  
and gnaw on pumpernickel  
as we watch the snow fall in silence.

## Doggy Dreams

After a day of barking at joggers'  
ankles, rolling in bird carcasses,

after sit and stay or just protecting treats  
from the cat, claiming Mom by laying on her feet,

after stashing gloves between the cushions of the couch,  
guarding the apartment from Pizza Delivery,

after a windy walk to sniff the mail box,  
a dinner of kibble and hoovering lost crumbs,

after walking circles again and again,  
what disturbs your sleep, little brown dog?

Do you dream of getting the new "sit pretty"  
trick just right as you whine in your sleep,

maybe swimming in the waves at the beach  
as you kick, or finally catching that fat squirrel

just before he makes it to the old red oak.

## For Pippen

She dozed in her bed the day before  
in front of the patio door  
looking outside, watching  
the high grass she once stalked.

Last evening she lost use of her hind legs,  
the legs that used to set her soaring  
after an unlucky robin.  
Then, her front legs  
went limp around midnight.

I made a nest in her favorite chair;  
she purred and napped.  
Her keen eyes that once glowed  
in darkness went dim.

She was calm  
as long as she felt me  
rubbing her ears,  
and reading the paper out loud.

When daddy called,  
I put him on speaker,  
and she perked up,  
a small swish of her tail.

I counted two decades of mornings  
Pippen kept me company  
while I sipped my Peco.

There'd be no one  
to nuzzle me awake for breakfast,  
to groom the back of my fingers  
as if they were hers too,  
no one to greet me at the door  
to lead me to her empty water bowl.

No more wavering meeew when hungry  
or purrr as she nosed my fingers  
for a scratch, no tap at the window  
when it was time to come in, no unlucky mice.

No standing in the cool night air calling her home.

## Killing Weasa

Last year I hand fed her barley  
keeping her weight up through winter.  
Her gray-spotted sticky tongue  
touched my hand. Her breath  
and black and white mass  
held off the cold of the February barn  
like a low banked fire.

For 18 years, she endured  
my rough cracked hands and gave  
milk so fresh you could taste grass  
in summer and alfalfa in winter.  
Three and half gallons a day, every day  
until this season.  
She hardly filled a bucket  
the last time I milked her.

Named after Aunt Louisa,  
her daily gift made our house  
a home. She gave milk for ice cream  
every June for my wife's birthday,  
cream for the butter churn  
and my coffee, milk bottles for my children,  
only asked for a pitchfork of fresh hay,  
maybe some leftover green beans  
from our dinner table.

Her hip bones and ribs  
protruded by the end.  
The butcher came with his son,  
brought his shotgun. I could not watch.

I stayed in the house, scrubbed and washed  
everything in sight, recalling  
how my little Jessy tied a blue bow  
around her neck when she was 7,  
and taking a belt to Bill's ass  
the time I caught him  
trying to ride the poor girl.

There'll be stew meat  
in our freezer that I won't eat.

V

## Beauty and the Beach

The Rayleigh effect  
scatters high frequency light,  
colors the sky blue,  
tinges our star red in a sunset  
that highlights her in bronze brilliance  
as if she is the only light  
on this afternoon beach.

Solar radiation warms the water  
more slowly than the land.  
Temperature differences  
create an on-shore breeze  
that flutters her hair  
catching the twinkle of flaxen-sand.

The water reflects the blue-green  
portion of the spectrum  
that matches her eyes  
as if they too are oceans.

## The Sump

I can't hear a thing  
the radio crackles  
as I sit in the car.

I replay our argument,  
relive the words,  
replacing each one  
until the outcome changes.

The curve of your face  
floats under my fingertips.  
I recall our last kiss,  
emptiness surges like  
a stream in a rainstorm.  
I feel your embrace,  
now the swollen creek  
sweeps sticks and branches  
from muddy banks.

The water collects at the storm-drain,  
chokes the siphon. The flood gathers  
into a lake large enough to swallow  
my backyard, to lap my door.

Even after the water recedes, I'm left  
bailing the basement for days.

## Infertility

The nursery I never painted green then repainted yellow,  
the diapers I didn't change at 3am;  
no colic, earaches or croup,  
but I see the pink chubby fingers that never grasped mine.

I did not set frogs free from shoeboxes after bedtime,  
nor miss giving piggy-back rides they were too big for.  
We never watched Disney's Robin Hood from the floor or played  
with red Mustangs and black Camaro Matchbox cars,  
nor heard infectious giggles fill my home.

I did not forget to bring her flowers on opening night,  
didn't wait until sixteen to teach him to throw a curve ball.  
I never gave them hints on parallel parking,  
but I can feel the flaxen hair I never brushed from their faces.

A white lace veil I never lifted for her groom.  
The reception speech I didn't stumble through.  
Births, baptisms, first communions, confirmations.  
Speckled pools of evening sky in which I never saw their mother.



## Evolution Practice

As I walk the dog from shade to shade,  
on a sunny July mid-morning, two  
Japanese beetles lie on the sidewalk,  
foundering on their backs. The underside  
of the winged sumos, green and gold armor,  
gleams in the light; legs kick, wings jitter.

Bachelor bugs combat for  
some fair beetle maiden-mama.  
These scarab cousins' struggle  
allows only the fittest's genes to fly.

The first to right himself crawls off  
into the grass. The second flips himself again,  
his bright belly shining in the sun.  
I leave him to destiny.  
Already, the songbirds eye him,  
beaks watering.

## He Calls Me Uncle

though I'm the only dad he's ever known.  
He points to each stone and butterfly  
as we cross the scrub grass field.

Soon I'll leave him and his mom  
in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains,  
make my way south.  
He'll get to know the man  
he will someday call dad.

He holds my hand, my finger,  
pulls me forward insistently  
toward the wood-chip covered playground.

The breeze presses the morning mist  
into a drizzle as he shoots down  
the green plastic slide,  
flashes a smile then runs up  
the steps again, short quick steps away from me.

## Daycare Blues

Oversized ears  
not yet grown into, light in his eyes,  
runs head and arms back  
like he feels like he's flying, Musa.

Polite; *yes 'um, no ma'am*  
Friendly, *you wanna' play trucks?*  
Shares with the other kids.

He wet his pants, during naptime.  
It wasn't his fault, I told him.  
*You were sleeping.*

We left the room. His head bowed  
as the others watched. He pouted  
as he tottered to the nurse,  
for a change of clothes.

*It's not Musa's fault,*  
I stressed to the nurse  
so she could relay it to mom,  
maybe save him the spanking.

Musa played by himself that afternoon.  
He'd turn his back  
when others approached to play.  
Instead he built towers of blocks  
then knocked them down with a whack.

At 4:00 I watched him mope toward  
the grey Oldsmobile his mother drove,  
backpack on his shoulders,  
plastic bag of smelly laundry in hand.

The next morning  
I leaned over, asked if he was ok.

I leaned in closer,  
*Yus, I'm ok.*  
I resisted the urge to hug him.

He poked me in the chest,  
*mind your own business.*  
And so our day began.

## Why They Pray

Today people think of churches as  
stuffy old places, where old people  
go to pray before dying.  
But their church is nothing like that.

It's a place where past and present mix,  
organs, electric guitars, and tambourines,  
a gilded altar, but a wooden chalice,  
a mismatch of churchly paraphernalia  
from across the ages, or so it seems.

They enter the Church  
late for service. The older daughter  
lingers at the entrance.  
As the younger daughter  
moves into the second-to-last pew,  
the father pulls out the kneeler.

*I'll just stand*, she says,  
*I'll just stand you*,  
in a hoarse whisper.  
Quickly she moves in.

The father shuts his eyes,  
but can't manage a prayer.  
Coming to church makes him worry  
more, not less about his daughters.

What is coming here  
teaching them? Will they blindly  
follow some whitened smile  
and designer suit into danger  
or will they develop  
their own set of scales  
for weighing the wages of iniquity?

Not coming to church  
has its own problems.

But being together they share:  
the service, ideas, time,  
they talk, have something in common.

He watches them join their voices

to the congregation's in prayer,  
then lends his too...*Our Father, who art in heaven...*

For the Poet Salerno and His Mom

The love of y(our) mother  
is not a spark of fire  
you bore in a bundle.

But you poured it forth  
the night you held your wife's hand,  
waded into her eyes  
and in that moment knew.

Mother's love is not a blaze  
that illuminated your words in gold.

But in it you bathed your children  
fragile, pink, and yawping,  
as you held them for the first time.

Read them "Scruffy the Tugboat"  
Taught them to swim,  
ferried them and their boxes  
to freshman check-in.

With words you showed  
her love fills oceans,  
lakes, and rivers, rises as mist,  
falls as snow and rain  
for weeds and gardens alike.

## Open Heart

In the spring of 79  
my father's heart splayed open  
on the operating table.

His old silk stitches had slipped  
one by one by one.  
Eighteen hours of surgery,  
twenty-three pints of blood.

Every night, after interrogating me  
about whether I had washed  
behind my ears and gotten my back teeth,  
my mother would implore me  
*Say a prayer for Daddy to come home, soon.*  
I did and he did – a husk of himself.

Sequestered in our row home  
for quiet recovery,  
I barely saw my father for weeks.  
His gaping wounds  
seemed to fill our home  
pushing everything else, including me  
out the windows and doors.

In the backyard, I made space.  
I dug furrows as deep as my father's scars  
for my grey and green army men,  
placed them for a battle that never came.  
Those little plastic men had sons too.

The surgery saved dad's life but stole  
my first hero, it was months  
before he could even walk up stairs.  
Dad was home resting when  
I hit my only homerun  
in three years of little league.

Over time, his scars lost their crimson hue  
like lava crusting over. Meanwhile  
I got to be his "muscle," took out the trash,  
trimmed the hedges, mowed the lawn,  
and when he was ready  
I was the one to jack up the car  
when *we* changed the breaks.

Doctor's orders kept us from playing catch  
instead we spent long mornings  
as he taught me secrets –  
how to catch bass, blues, and channel cat.

Still all the times we went fishing  
were not enough for me at ten  
to realize that time with family  
is not a given but a gift.



## Nightingale

Mine was a home of throaty whispers –  
In the spring of 79;  
urgent open-heart surgery  
to repair my father's aorta.

I knew hours, evenings,  
and overnights  
in the company of Gram  
coloring with nubs of crayons  
or cutting pictures out of magazines  
and newspapers  
or playing monopoly  
with aunts, uncle, and cousins  
while mom was at dad's side.

He came home still needing months  
of recovery, of nursing.  
And Mom was there,  
taking care of his every need,  
of my every need, getting me up  
and out for school,  
making sure homework was done.  
She read bedtime stories,  
knelt with me in prayerful thanks  
for the blessing of my father's life,  
sang *Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore*  
or *You'll Never Walk Alone*  
to get me and my little sister to sleep  
while dad could do little more than rest and eat.

In July our family of 4  
became a family of 5.  
The day or two mom was  
at the hospital  
to birth my baby brother  
was a blur, she returned  
still Sandy Nightingale,  
and hid more than she should –  
gauze, bandages, six inch cotton swabs  
used for cleaning drainage ways  
that led deep into dad's chest.  
But her hurt too, worry, stress,  
secreted it all away.  
Some wounds cut deeper

than flesh or bone.

By Christmas mom was worse than worn out,  
quieted away with dad, healing.  
Proud big brother was changing  
Saturday morning diapers,  
when the volunteer fire department  
brought a used football,  
a board game, hand-me-down clothes,  
and groceries in two large  
gleaming cans into our living room.

Even now, my mother tries  
to return that kindness,  
adopting families at Christmas,  
seeing to someone else's needs, always.

## Fishin' Lessons

The line goes  
 ZZZZZZZZZeEEEE  
 sinker, hook, and bait plunk  
 through the silvery surface.

My Dad taught me to fish,  
 though I didn't learn so well,  
 a failure no doubt  
 of the student, never still,  
 never in the moment.

*A surgeon's knot is  
 the loop, three twists,  
 and pull the loose end through.*

Before any trip we'd catch our own bait;  
 just after dark we'd soak down the lawn  
 with a garden hose until it was ready  
 to float away. Later, we'd quiet into the pre-dawn  
 with a flashlight and scoop up fat night-crawlers.

*Bait the hook by  
 sewing the barbed tip  
 though the body segments  
 so the fish has to eat the whole  
 thing if he wants a meal.*

After long hikes down rutted woody paths  
 to hidden outcrops of rock and soil  
 shown to Dad by his father, we'd arrive  
 at the banks of the river or reservoir,  
 mist lingering on vast stretches of open water.

*Fish like warm shoreline  
 waters in the morning  
 and deeper cold water  
 in the heat of the day.*

The secret stillness of place  
 held its spell on a boy of eleven  
 for only so long. Seeking out  
 snakes, lizards, or frogs was more  
 exciting than the fish.

*Look for underwater logs  
or rocks and plants.  
Fish like places to hide.  
Above all be patient,  
fish have to find your bait.*

For a long time “our”  
failure to catch fish was disappointing.  
But there were unspoken lessons  
that I did not recognize until later.

*Certain fish, certain bait.  
Bass want something live,  
Crappie like it juicy and wiggling,  
Catfish 'll eat almost anything.*

I recall getting home sans fish.  
Dad would look at me and tell mom  
“too twitchy to fish,” but those lessons  
he taught about what he knew and felt,  
were worth more than any fins, gills, or scales.

## Explaining Poetry to My Father

It's like drilling holes in steel.  
Gather your tools: punch, hammer, drill,  
bit, ruler, marker, and file.  
Measure and measure again.

Mark the spot and strike  
the punch so the bit won't slip  
from the plate as you drill.

Take your time, start with a "pilot hole."  
You can't force it or the bit snaps under  
too much weight, let the drill work.

Don't rush, drill slowly  
or you'll spin the bit  
into a glowing orange  
as dull as a thumb.

Clear the twisted shards of metal.  
You are still not done  
when the hole is through.

File down the edges  
so it won't snag or cut. Polish it,  
making it look good is part of the job.

Step back, admire your work;  
push the piece aside  
as you prepare to drill the next hole better.

Yeah it's like that Pop,  
writing poems is just like that.