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A BARE, UNPAINTED TABLE: A MANUSCRIPT OF POEMS

by

Gladys Cardiff

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
June 1999

## A BARE UNPAINTED TABLE: A MANUSCRIPT OF POEMS

Gladys Cardiff, Ph.D

Western Michigan University, 1999

The poems in this collection reflect Cardiff's bi-cultural Native American and Euro-American inheritance. The book title comes from a sixteenth century chronicle in which the native peoples of the Americas are seen as "simple gentiles" living under the "lawe of nature". These narrative poems refute the Eurocentric notion that American Indians can be likened to a "bare table" or "a blank sheet of paper to be written upon". The poems celebrate her Indian heritage and also engage allusively with Western and Asian traditions and conventions. Sometimes edgy, sometimes honorific, the juxtaposition of traditions in these poems is characterized by integrative acts of consciousness and lyric imagination. Cardiff's investigation of her role as an active observer of place, human nature, and artistic work is a major theme.

~

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In memory of my sister Frannie



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The Seattle Review: "Pantoum" and "Zones of Energy"

I have been exceptionally fortunate in the support of my friends and family and would like to thank Don and Diana, my cousins Frela and Mollie, and Dick Wickline in particular. Also, I am deeply appreciative for friends, fellow poets, and mentors Beth Bentley, Rick Kenney, Nancy Eimers, Bill Olsen, Shirley Clay Scott. I gratefully acknowledge the members of the Thurgood Marshall selection committee for awarding me a fellowship.

Gladys Cardiff

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## AMERICAN *FIN DE SIECLE* POETRY AND A CONTEMPORARY BAROQUE

The two developments that I think are most noticeable regarding the poems I've written while completing doctoral requirements for a creative dissertation at Western Michigan University are the use of a longer line in longer poems and the liberation of allowing myself a fuller allusive play within English, American, and Native American traditions. The ability to broaden my use of allusions, and to use them with some degree of confidence, springs from my creative and scholarly work in a doctoral program which emphasizes the candidates' achieving both breadth and depth in their knowledge of English and American literary traditions.

I would like to express my grateful appreciation to the faculty here whose influence has been immeasurable in broadening the scope of my knowledge and whose support has been exceptional and generous. In particular I thank poets and scholars Herbert Scott, Nancy Eimers, and Bill Olsen for guiding and inspiring me. I am extremely fortunate in having Herb Scott as the chair of my dissertation committee. Herb has been instrumental in helping me consolidate my dissertation through his crucial insights, the care and deliberation of his critical judgment, his high standards, and his unflagging generosity. I want to express my high regard and appreciation to Shirley Clay Scott who brings brilliance and clarity of intellect, warmth of heart, and the hard work of dedication to her mentorship as educator and Dean of the Graduate College. My work here

has also resulted in a deeper understanding of how the historical relationship of Native American experience in America informs the development and reception of Native American literatures. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to do research under the guidance of Dr. Donald Fixico.

The central focus of this preface is to consider the use of an American contemporary baroque style in terms of a *fin de siècle* cast. I will constellate this discussion around the work of Jorie Graham using works primarily from this decade. These are The Region of Unlikeness, Materialism, The Dream of the Unified Field, and The Errancy. I've selected Graham because I find Graham's poetry intriguing and difficult in the way she extends her meditations and narratives through the use of thickly elaborated lyricism and allusions.

Whether centenary or millenarian -- and arbitrary as they are -- arrivals which mark a large swath of time are conducive to meditations on where we've come from and where we might be going. Richard Ruland, in From Puritanism to Postmodernism, wonders about the general state of literature as the century draws to a close when "there is no reigning theory of literature and therefore no dominant theory of criticism or agreement of a canonical tradition". He ascertains that we live in a world of symbol systems in which we are artists of our own realities, but now provisionally adequate, never "supreme". He muses whether we are living "in a moment of creative exhaustion, of labyrinthine aesthetic pluralism, of critical mystification, an age of decadence" (427).

Humans, intuitively and ratiocinatively, look for form and pattern

as a way of ordering complex data. Jorie Graham is a philosophical, meditative, highly allusive American poet. Materialism is embedded contextually in a wide ranging multi-disciplinary selection of materials. The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems maps under one cover an increasingly intensified investigation by Graham concerning temporal processes, the continuum of history, and her struggle as an individual woman and a poet to place herself as a participant. I'm interested in Graham's search for patterns or figures for understanding unwieldy concepts such as the processes of perception and thinking, and the individual's relationship to temporality and history. The impulse to seek out shapeliness is a search that results in a psychic struggle for her with ethical implications.

A central operation in Graham's poetry is the necessity to "unhinge" the plot of history, "the Age behind the clouds", a necessity that, for her, requires living in a state of alertness and presentness that is intense and urgent. Because a condition of placement and rootedness is crucial for me, I find this struggle particularly poignant. I will consider Graham's poetry in relation to Simone Weil's formulation that "to be rooted is perhaps the most needed and least recognized need of the human soul" (Weil, 43). What rootedness is, of course, is difficult to define. While it is more usual to discuss rootedness as a concept involving sociopolitical or anthropological identities and national, local, or ethnic identifications, I will focus on Weil's formulation of our possession as humans of traditions and the past as the most vital form of rootedness. Weil says:

It would be useless to turn one's back on the past in order simply to concentrate on the future. It is a dangerous illusion to believe that such a thing is even possible. The opposition of future to past or past to future is absurd. The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past (Weil, 51).

How the past provides "the living sap" from which Graham can "build" a future is a primary drama for Graham's poetry.

I will also make liberal use of critical commentary on her work provided by Helen Vendler. As Bloom is to Ashbery, Vendler is to Graham. For the most part, I find Vendler's criticisms enlightening. I also notice as Vendler makes a claim for Graham's motivations in one book, Graham will change her focus in what sometimes seems to be a counter move in the next. For example, in an essay discussing the End of Beauty (1987) favoring Graham's poetic enterprise over Adrienne Rich's, Vendler remarks:

The sheer freedom involved by Graham's poetry is liberating. The downtrodden Benthamism of most ethical poetry – wedded either to the pragmatic claims of the oppressed or to the totalitarian claims of some ethical system – has no poetics by which to rise to the full-winged reach of untrammelled meditation (Soul, 239).

Graham's next two books, Region of Unlikeness (1991) and Materialism (1993), however, transfer attention from a matrix of Greek mythology and personal history to a matrix of historical voices and the personal voice. Both books address the "claims of the oppressed". Though Graham is more inclined to critique "the totalitarian claims of some ethical system", I

will argue that the baroque “full-wings” of her meditations are hardly “untrammeled”.

Materialism, in particular addresses historical, spiritual and verbal colonialisms. I do not mean to imply a reactionary stance for Graham but to emphasize how one sees, collection by collection, Graham experimenting with lineal arrangements and patterns of thought as the compulsions of each volume develop and expand. In fact, I would recommend keeping in mind the image of a net, perhaps even the vertical and layered meshes of a trammel net, when thinking of her work, an image she refers to in the epigraph for her latest book The Errancy (1998) : “Since in a net I seek to hold the wind”. Vendler saw “a new speculative abundance” in The End of Beauty. She described Graham’s style “of spill and hurry” as a conscious eschewing of “the ideals of shape and closure” for “contemplative thought”, “the roaming cinematography of the mind, which pictures and replays the necessary decisions of life and keeps them perpetually in question”. What the “end of beauty provides is the beginning of wonder” (Vendler, Soul, 237). I will argue that Graham’s poetic asserts provisionality as a corrective. The “roaming” of its most recent guise, posits the condition of a “reformed narcissism” which installs an ethical system of errancy with the poet as a childe wanderer.

Graham’s use of direct address and the personal “I” emphasizes language as utterance. By this I mean speaking consonant with Hugh Kenner’s description of the use of language by seventeenth century poets, not as communication,

but utterance, and not the mere cry uttered, but the inarticulate inchoate fact rendered articulate, its structure disclosed, intelligible:



intelligible to its utterer for the first time. [. . .] Fully to articulate what we do and suffer is to understand its structure part by part and so fully to experience it (Kenner, xi).

The act of writing which transforms the dynamic experience of utterance into stabilized texts is both a problem of style and a problem of the poet's role as recorder for Graham. William Gass's quite cheerful acknowledgment that the poet "struggles to keep his words from saying something, although like the carrot they go to seed" becomes an ethical question for Graham of epic proportions.

A brief review of developments during the last two decades for long poems written in long lines will provide a frame of reference for some of the issues circumferencing Graham's work. The importance of Graham's third book The End of Beauty (1987) has been noted by Helen Vendler in her essay "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess" because it is in this collection that Graham begins to employ the long line, a change Vendler identifies as extremely consequential in its implications. Graham concurs that "the taking on, only apparently arbitrary, stylistic devices" and "changes in technique" is significant because it reflects "changes that occurred in my life: I became the person I couldn't have otherwise been by these small devices, habits" (Henry, 286).

Certainly during the last two decades, many contemporary American poets are considering what a longer line can achieve as lyric meditation and narrative. Whether poetry is "Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate" or avoiding crispness "in favor of a density/ Of strutted opinion doomed to wilt in oblivion: not too linear/ Nor yet too puffed and remote", John Ashbery's many

experiments from 1956 on have been ground-breaking tests of the limits of the poetic line in both short poems and long (H.D,49; W. 70). As Vendler notes:

It is our wish to isolate the line as touchstone which makes us at first find Ashbery baffling; once we stop looking for self-contained units we begin to feel better about our responses, and soon find a drift here, a meander there that feels, if not like our old beloved stanzas or aphorisms, at least like a pause in the rapids" ( Music, 233)

The stylistic and textural use of a lengthy line in a long poem is as varied as the poets who use it. A. R. Ammons, commenting on his poem "Motion Which Disestablishes Organizes Everything", a poem selected by Ashbery when he edited The Best American Poetry of 1988, sees the long line as a strategy for correcting himself when his poems are becoming too highly compacted:

When poems get too skinny and bony, emaciated nearly into the left-hand margin, so highly articulated their syllables crystallize, I go back to long lines to loosen up, to blur the issues of motion into minor forms within larger motions (Ammons, 116).

The long line for Ammons, or any Ammons line for that matter, is not a vehicle for literary allusions. In an interview with David Lehman in 1994, Ammons responds to Lehman's assertion that he is a "distinctly American poet" whose "idiom is American" and whose "relation to poetic tradition" is American. Ammons wonders aloud if his poetry isn't "too extremely non-cultural". He states:

I have tried to get rid of the Western tradition as much as possible. You notice that I don't mention anything in my poetry having to do with Europe or where we came from. [. . .] I really do want to begin with a bare space with streams and rocks and trees" (Ammons, 105).

Mei Mei Berssenbrugge published Empathy in 1989, a collection requiring a special format to accommodate the length of the lines in poems which, according to Jackson MacLow, are “startlingly non-rhapsodic”. Joy Harjo, Creek, and Sherman Alexie, Spokane/Coeur d’Alene, are noticeably relaxed in the way they merge lineal poetry into prose sections in their works.

Extended meditations, however, are often associated with the “lush, Rousseau-like foliage” of the baroque. In 1987, Richard Kenney celebrates a formal strategy in which “the muscularity and amplitude and grace of the long iambic line” sustains “a fluid course occasionally stretched through moments of high lyric intensity” (Lehman, 116). In 1993, The Invention of the Zero, Kenney presents four long embedded stories in an iambic hexameter line which is highly baroque. In 1989, Charles Wright allied himself with the baroque.

Some years ago Octavio Paz called for what I seem to remember as a ‘Baroque-abstract’ in painting. A kind of Mannerism. a non-pejorative Mannerism. I think that has happened in the work, say, of Frank Stella. I think it is also happening, here and there, in poetry. One could name names – Ashbery, for instance. It is a position that interests me as well (Stitt, 181).

Peter Stitt places Charles Wright and Ashbery at “the far edge of contemporary style, the edge that favors floridness, curlicues, and complicated thinking” (Stitt, 182).

A baroque elaboration characterizes various signature moments in Graham’s poems such as plumbing the significance of seemingly random actions – of leaves in wind and birds in flight – and then contrasting them with points of singularity. In “The Dream of the Unified Field”, a flock of

starlings “the black bits of their thousands of bodies swarming”, their constant repatterning, is seen as a black, shiny “river of leaves” that

scatter, blow away, scatter, recollect –  
undoing again and again the tree without it ever ceasing to be full.

Then, a crow absorbs her attention, a singularity which contains within itself “something that cannot become known”, the crows iridescence “stages of black but without graduation” :

All of this happened, yes. Then disappeared  
into the body of the crow, chorus of meanings,  
layers of blacks, then just the crow, plain, big,  
lifting his claws to walk thrustingly  
forward and back -- indigo, cyanine, beryl, grape, steel . . .  
Then suddenly he wings and. . . ( Field, 177, 179)

The crow reappears in the poem “Thinking” from The Errancy, Graham’s latest book, which, as Henry notes, shows her at her most baroque to date:

. . .  
me still by this hedge now, waiting for his black to blossom,  
then wing-thrash where he falls at first against the powerline,  
then updraft seized, gravity winnowed, the falling raggedly  
reversed, depth suddenly pursued, its invisibility ridged –  
bless him – until he is off, hinge by hinge, built of tiny  
wingtucks, filaments of flapped back wind. . . (40, 41)

The thick verbal impasto is Hopkinesque in its intensity of vision and the free-footed use of accentual rhythms. Describing the poems in The End of Beauty, Vendler says: “One follows these poems as one follows music – not a music like Ashbery’s, which eddies back to its beginning, but a music onwardly purposive, obliterating its past” (“Married”, 242).

Graham’s music and the treatment of the line, however, is not always consolidated around the horizontal axis and expansiveness of the

long line, but also incorporates the tension and pull of the vertical axis. Part of Graham's technical virtuosity, noted by Helen Vendler and Brian Henry, is how she introduces "Dickinson's abrupt syntax and cadences into the sprawling Whitman line" ( Henry, 283). Her work has been described as a form of Action painting in the way the poems enact and perform precarious experience as it is being undergone. Mark Tansey's oil painting called "Action Painting", shows a painter at an easel, who is in the process of drawing a car accident. As she carefully measures the angles with her paintbrush, the car is suspended in mid-skid and its tire is caught sailing off in midflight. Tansey underscores humorously that representation of action is necessarily a matter of technique and artistic agency.

Brian Henry elaborates on Graham's most recent lineal effects. He notes that the left-justified lines vary dramatically in length, often include hangers or outrides as minilines, and that these outrides are sometimes doubled. These changes in treatment of the line are contiguous with a change in syntax by which the "kinetic flow" achieved by the shorter lines of earlier poems is disrupted. Henry contends that the grammatical disruptions and the disjunctive lyricism of these new uses of the line signal instances of a conflict which "creates one of the primary dramas of her poems", that of the "poet visibly working against her own music and eloquence" ( Henry, 284). It could be argued that rather than working against her lyricism, Graham is experimenting in free verse with techniques to achieve heightened aural effects. The outrides in the following example from "The Turning" work to slow the poem's forward roll with short mini-lines that are doubled. They noticeably employ



an individual line as a “self-contained unit”, one might say these lines are not working very hard to justify themselves as separate lines.

Definition of a literary baroque poetics must struggle with the imprecision of transferring a term more commonly used in music and art to literary works. The baroque impulse in English poetry generally refers to a style tending toward ornateness, even over-decoration.

Architecture’s ornamentation emphasizing curved rather than straight lines, and music’s embellished melodies and contrapuntal forms, find expression in a baroque use of language through lushness of sound, stylistic complications of rhythm, internal harmony, and sentence structure. Works often demonstrate a love for parable and rhetorical devices. The baroque makes use of extravagant images and bold, difficult metaphors which tend to establish identity rather than likeness. Through wit, these conceits have the power to excite wonderment for the mystical within the physical or material world. In England and America, baroque writing is associated with the intellectual and metaphysical meditations of writers such as Hopkins, Donne, Vaughn and Edward Taylor.

Interestingly, as more poets work within a baroque style, this style has come under fire as decadent and antithetical to moral writing.

Vendler’s description of Graham’s lyric enterprise brings her within the company of those who inspire the kinds of criticisms Karr raises:

Her music is that of the traditional lyric in its highs and lows, its accelerations and retardandos, but the new poems are so long in themselves and so stretched-out in their elastic and ‘illogical’ lines that it is difficult to master, measure, or enclose them, especially at first reading. Eventually one can map them, connect the dots, see the “coil” – but by their arabesques of language on different planes they frustrate this desire both at first and in the long run,

however much one grasps the underlying map. The reader must, to remain "in" the poem, stay with the poet, going deeper and deeper down, not knowing whether or not the labyrinth has an exit ("Soul", 233).

Mary Karr appends her collection of poems Viper Rum with one of the harshest critiques. "I always thought that poetry's primary purpose was to stir emotion, and that one's delight in dense idiom or syntax or allusion served a secondary one," Karr states in her essay *Against Decoration*. She places the revolutionary project of free verse poetics as the beginnings of a particularly American form of writing in which "the free verse advocates sought--among other things-- to iron the aristocratic curlicues from poetic diction in order to make poetry sound more populist, less elitist, and, therefore, more American"(Karr. 64). While much of her essay addresses the work of formalists such as James Merrill, Anthony Hecht, and Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Karr includes writers who employ free verse as well such as Ashbery and his "glib meaninglessness" ( a particularly tiresome descriptive that somehow maintains its own glib longevity), the disjunctive Language poets, and Amy Clampitt and "her purple vocabulary" and "overuse of historical references".

Frustration infuses the tone of this essay. Generally disparaging and categorically polar in her moralizing, Karr identifies various "sins" of over decoration and the "high-brow doily-making that passes for art today". These include the overuse of meaningless references, metaphors that obscure rather than illuminate, obscurity of character and the rendering of a foggy physical world, and poetry as an academic game which requires interpretation by code-breakers and explicators such as Vendler and



Bloom. She laments the loss of clarity, depth, emotional thrust in which the poet acts like the content matters. She worries about the memorability of overly long and overly dense poems. She wants to see the Horatian ethos of *dulce et util* , poetry that is sweet and useful, that delights and instructs. "The linguistic and decorative experience of a poem should not outweigh the human or synthetic meanings" (Karr, 71). She contends that the over decoration of the poetry she is critiquing at our *fin de siecle* mirrors the end of the last century: the Swinburnian purple prose of the pre-Raphaelites; "art for art's sake" which removes itself from moral responsibility; the elitism, difficulty, and the highly allusive impulses as a new installation of High Modernist modes and a "reactionary lunge back towards our poetic roots" as a defense against the new century's uncertainties. (Karr, 65-67). While Karr states that her refutation of ornamental poetry is "on aesthetic, rather than theoretical, political, or social grounds", she foregrounds issues of class in which a tiny coterie of smug insiders celebrate their literary jewels while the populace goes hungry.

Criticism of a baroque style is not new. Remembering that there is no clearly defined theory of a baroque poetics, it is useful to keep in mind the historical development of baroque as a literary term in English traditions. The first application of the term appears in a treatise by H. Wolfflin in 1888. Based on the opening stanzas of *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* , Wolfflin outlined a stylistic contrast between Ariosto and Tasso which delimited them in terms of literary periods. The former was described as High Renaissance and the latter as baroque, the

period after the High Renaissance. A major difference Wolfflin perceived was a movement away from clear visual imagination toward mood and atmosphere. The political and religious contexts for aesthetic theorizing were no doubt influential in that these literary movements roughly correspond to the two episodes of the Renaissance in England with the High Renaissance occurring during the reigns of Henry the VIII and Elizabeth, and the baroque origins linked to James I. Perhaps one could generalize that the strong emotionalisms of religious and political factions of the Renaissance have been replaced by the socioeconomic and political context of class in contemporary criticisms such as Karr's.

Alex Preminger, in The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, notes that "baroque poetry often attempts to cover the enormous range between religious sentiments and libertinage, beauty and ugliness, egocentricity and impersonality, temporality and eternity"( 68). Traits associated with the baroque include its relationship to wit, ingenuity, intricacy, the use of conceits and unusual similes, extended metaphors, and rhetorical devices such as the verbal compression of asyndeton and verbal ellipses which maximize attention to each word in its semantic distinctness.

When poetry is considered as a communication in time, baroque poetry also exhibits a tendency to manipulate time and exploit its paradoxes. Rather than the clear expression of an attitude and then its elaboration, baroque works tend to offer more tentative attitudes, to amend and modify them through their accretions, and then end in a new attitude or a transitory resolution. The inventive faculty addressing the

ineffable, what Pope called “the grace beyond the reach of art”, is vulnerable to claims against its ornamentations. Ornamental invention becomes a pejoration when defined as a local achievement, in the sense that Karr is also protesting, in which the verbal and intellectual effects seem to be independent of the total poem and “outweigh the human and synthetic meanings”.

Karr’s questions do echo the questions Ruland raises regarding American literary developments at the fin de siècle when he wonders if we are living “in a moment of creative exhaustion, of labyrinthine aesthetic pluralism, of critical mystification, an age of decadence”. What comprises an American idiom? Is the baroque a movement away from a distinctly American idiom? How global can a poet be in their allusions and still be an American poet? Is poetry at the fin de siècle decadent?

A more interesting way to think about a baroque style and its relationship to decadence and exhaustion in our time is to go back to an essay by John Barth, written in 1969. In *The Literature of Exhaustion*, Barth says: “By ‘exhaustion’ I don’t mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities -- by no means necessarily a cause for despair” (29). Barth is interested in what might be called a contemporary baroque, an attitude described by the writer Borges as “the style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust ) its possibilities and borders on its own caricature”. Barth suggests, for example, that the execution of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony today would be “merely embarrassing” because this work symbolizes a kind of “ultimacy”.

He is speaking for artists being technically up-to-date. He does not foreclose that "it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature --such farout notions as grammar, punctuation . . . even characterization! Even *plot* ! -- if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to" (31). The role of the artist is not to exemplify an ultimacy like Beethoven's Sixth, but to employ it, to transform "the felt ultimacies into material and means" for his or her work. Alluding to Homer's story of Menelaus on the beach at Pharos, who disguised his own identity in order to ambush Proteus, the god who "exhausts the guises of reality", Barth states: "But Menelaus on the beach at Pharos, for example is genuine Baroque in the Borghesian spirit, and illustrates a positive artistic morality in the literature of exhaustion" (34). Menelaus "has to hold fast as Proteus exhausts reality's frightening guises so that he may extort direction from him when Proteus returns to his true self.

Barth reverses the pejorative connotations of exhaustion, and exhausting acts, by describing the baroque sensibility as one in which the artist is not helplessly being operated upon by her precursors. The artist as Menelaus has the agency to find a new direction from old possibilities and to create through conscious artistic technique and cunning her own artistic effects. What Karr sees as a "reactionary lunge back towards our poetic roots" is in Barth's view an heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object.

In this context, the "use" of contemporary baroque, is to confront what is felt as an ultimacy and accomplish new human work. Integral to Barth's formulation is the idea that the contemporary artist's mode is a

metaphor for the artists's method. Rather than a repudiation of her precursors, "not just the *form* of the story, but the *fact* of the story is symbolic, the medium is the message". Barth broadens the contemporary baroque project. It is "a matter of throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby" in an effort to transform, exhaust, and create works which include their own metanarrative or metaphoric enactment of process.

I will use illustrations from poems by Rainier Maria Rilke, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery in an effort to illustrate a contemporary baroque attitude in the use of allusions and literary traditions. Springtime is invoked in Rilke's first Duino elegy. Here someone is talking about the "mission" of attentiveness to the things of this world that call to us, the transience of vivid experience, how this mission is like an expectant lover's search that is full of longing, how even the desire to affirm the world gets displaced by longing as the inner solitude fills itself:

Yes -- the springtimes needed you. Often a star  
was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you  
out of the distant past, or as you walked  
under an open window, a violin  
yielded itself to your hearing. All this was mission.  
But could you accomplish it? Weren't you always  
distracted by expectation, as if every event  
announced a beloved? (Where can you find a place  
to keep her, with all the huge strange thoughts inside you  
going and coming and often staying all night.) (Rilke, 151)

Ashbery, in the "The Wrong Kind of Insurance", complicates these themes as he alludes to Rilke and to Wallace Stevens. Ashbery's poem responds to Rilke's questions in what I take to be a grave self-irony mixed with regret. The speaker's wistfulness stems from a lover's longings. In

this new theater, the poem is possibly reinvoking Rilke's puppet-world where wooden dolls passively accept a child's love. Ashbery's version also reflects the skepticisms of modernity as expressed by Stevens in "Of Modern Poetry". The Rilkean "distant past" can no longer be remote or repeated like a script because "the theater" has changed. (Notably, one of the modern "ultimacies" Steven's lists is that poetry now has "to think about war".) In Ashbery's "comic dirge", springtime becomes August, the violin becomes musical evenings, the natural landscape is now a theater with stage machinery and clouds "pulled along on invisible ropes". The poem closes with this:

Try milk of tears, but it is not the same.  
 The dandelions will have to know why, and your comic  
 Dirge routine will be lost on the unfolding sheaves  
 Of the wind, a lucky one, though it will carry you  
 Too far, to some unmanageable, cold, open  
 Shore of sorrows you expected to reach,  
 Then leave behind.

Thus, friend, this distilled,  
 Dispersed musk of moving around, the product  
 Of leaf after transparent leaf, of too many  
 Comings and goings, visitors at all hours.

Each night  
 Is trifoliate, strange to the touch. (Ashbery, 238).

The antiphrasis of the phrase "Try milk of tears" creates a little mental jog, but it doesn't make us turn back for clues. We carry it along with us, sorting out how "tears" has been substituted for "human kindness" as we go. In both poems the augmentation of the narrative comes along in relatively unbroken syntactical and grammatical progressions. The narrative plane is horizontal in the sense that the poems work out their meanings semantically in an uninterrupted combinatorial

progressiveness.

Hass points out how the volatility of Rilke's language replicates the emotion, and how the emotion is also expressed in the fluidity of the pronominal subjects and objects. An often-remarked feature of Ashbery's poems is the way pronouns fluctuate and disperse themselves as entities into the aspects of consciousness that enact the poem's drama. In the introduction to the translation of Rilke by Stephen Mitchell, Hass notes the "incredible fluidity" of the early elegies by Rilke. "It is as if not having a place to stand, the author of these poems is everywhere. Really, they are the nearest thing in the writing of the twentieth century to the flight of birds. They dive, soar, swoop, belly up, loop over". Hass cites the following passage to illustrate his point:

But we, when moved by deep feeling, evaporate; we  
breathe ourselves out and away; from moment to moment  
our emotion grows fainter, like a perfume. Though someone may  
tell us: "Yes, you've entered my bloodstream, the room, the whole  
springtime is filled with you. . ." — and what does it matter? he  
can't contain us, we vanish inside and around him. And those who  
are beautiful, oh who can retain them? Appearance ceaselessly rises  
in their face, and is gone. Like dew from the morning grass,  
what is ours floats into the air, like steam from a dish  
of hot food. O smile, where are you going? O upturned glance:  
new warm receding wave on the sea of the heart. . .  
alas, but that is what we *are*. Does the infinite space  
we dissolve into, taste of us then? . . .

(Rilke, xxxvi)

"The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ what we will suffice" is also  
"the poem of the act of the mind".

Like Wallace Stevens, who thought of the corpus of his works as  
one long poem, Graham's poems, within individual books and each  
succeeding collection, also work in dialogue with each other. Each new

volume shows Graham recombining old patterns and investigating new ones. In the End of Beauty Graham improvises on the figure of the  $x$  as a singularity reminiscent of Steven's "vital, arrogant, fatal dominant  $X$ " (Stevens, 288). In graphing the structure of narrative or the storyline, and the functions of plot ( $x$ ) in relation to time ( $y$ ),  $x$  marks a specific point, a circumstance or condition.  $X$  in the poems in this book also mark a position, often of stasis, repose, or closure. In "Self-Portrait As the Gesture Between Them", "Orpheus and Eurydice", "Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne",  $x$  is directly connected to male figures and a present tense which "slaughters" motion and  $y$  to female figures, change, "this field with minutes in it called woman" (Graham, 58). In "Vertigo" she is looking down on a landscape, a vantage point where "the two elements touched – rock, air" and "the mind opened out into the sheer drop of its intelligence". Looking at the corpus of Graham's several works, I see Graham making many returns that are recursive in the manner of feedback loops, not redos, but as intertextual palimpsests of her own created landscapes. Their significances retained and carried forward from her earliest poems create a rather dizzying density of referential layering. Graham relies less explicitly on the  $x/y$  graphing strategy in her next book as the storylines turn from myth to history.

Beginning with the The End of Beauty and its use of classical Greek myths and the Christian creation story to frame personal meditations, the use of allusions and referential materials becomes increasingly capacious to the point that, in Materialism, the poems are set among separate contextual documents. Moreover, these documents, drawn from many



disciplines and genres -- philosophical, historical, anthropological, argument, chronicle, letter -- have been edited, or adapted, by Graham, and seem to me to be essential commentary rather than secondary supportive source material. As the contextuality increases, individual poems become less local in their statement. Titles, as the markers for distinguishing one poem from another, also are duplicated. There are two poems in Region called "History", a "Manifest Destiny" poem in Region and one in Materialism, and four separate poems titled "Notes on the Reality of the Self" in the latter book. I mean by this, that abstracting a single poem like "The Dream of the Unified Field" from its surrounding contextual materials results in some reduction, or thinning, of the complexities one can infer.

Investigating the analog of the field and the concept of the "coil" as a paradigm for the movement of thought through Graham's poems in The Region of Unlikeness is useful. The book opens with a Foreword presenting a sequence of quotations from Augustine's Confessions, Heidegger's What is Called Thinking, prophetic Biblical texts from Isaiah and the Book of Revelations, and Ahab's stubbornly impenitent remonstrance to his quarry Moby Dick: "Swim away from me, do ye?" Graham is providing the reader with a set of hermeneutical inscriptions for reading the book as a whole. This sequence first invokes Augustine's interior landscape of the seeking self passionately engaged in a spiritual quest. Augustine hears God call him to enter his "innermost being", a place where Augustine's soul's eye does see God's "unchangeable light" but where, as observer, he also feels a profound separation in "a region of

unlikeness". Augustine describes this separation in terms of language, the difference between the sound of words in time "speaking in a fleshly sense" with the Eternal Word. The human mind "intent on things contained in space", that sees only partialities, can only formulate syllables that fill up the space where God's whole sentence might appear.

In the sequence that Graham constructs, the hope expressed by Augustine's desire for the whole sentence is linked, through Heidegger, to the processes of thinking. Heidegger proposes that it is not a question of man not turning toward a thought sufficiently, but that the thought itself - "that which, by origin and innately, desires to be thought" - withdraws. "The thing itself that must be thought about turns away from man". Heidegger finds these withdrawals fortunate. Thoughts may turn and fly away from us as we think them, but this movement is also attractive and pulls us along after them. The act of thinking is a dynamic process which draws the mind toward successive realizations of "incomparable nearness".

The Forward's sequence of quotations then loops back to Biblical references and the rhetorical, cautionary question the Holy One asks Isaiah: "To whom then will you liken me, or shall I be equal?" Within the logic of the Forward's sequence, I understand the question as a rebuke of the simile-making power of the human creative imagination when it strives for equivalence with the One of the Whole Sentence because this creates an equipoise, a stasis where words stand, and any possibility of the whole sentence of the Holy Likeness being revealed is foreclosed.

A scene from Revelations follows in which a woman gives birth to

a son who is favored and taken by God. While the woman is left behind, she receives wings “that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time”. The woman becomes winged, like an angel – a figure Graham uses often – in this wonderful and ambiguous sentence with its temporal paradox.

Graham, like Rilke, Stevens, and Ashbery, writes “the poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice”, poems in which the poem “is the cry of its own occasion./ Part of the res and not about it ” (Stevens, 239, 473). One remembers Steven’s saying, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, that there is no tomorrow for the poet when he is absorbed in the act of writing through the experience of the poem. He goes on to say that the seeking of a “the poem of pure reality”, the “object at the exactest point of which it is” wedded to an “instinct for a rainless land, the self of his self”, the fusion of the self with the subject, is impossible.

Fiction writer William Gass, in the preface to In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, written in 1968, would say that such a fusion is not even desirable. As he reflects upon how the progressions of nature and narrative differ, he delivers a description that is a provocative precedent to Graham’s paradigm of the coil. Gass uses the pattern of a spiral. Though Gass is talking about imaginative prose, he is describing a way of thinking, a movement consonant with many of Graham’s poems and their “storyline”. Gass says:

Nature rarely loops. Nature repeats. This spring is not a former spring rethought, but merely another one, somewhat the same, somewhat not. However, in a fiction, ideas, perceptions, feelings return like reconsiderations, and the more one sees a piece of imaginative prose as an adventure of the mind, the more the

linearities of life will be bent and interrupted. Just as the revision itself is made of meditative returns, so the reappearance of any theme constitutes the reseeing of that theme by itself. Otherwise there is no advance. There is stagnation. The quiet spiral of the shell, the gyre, even a whirlwind, a tunnel towering in the air; these are the appropriate forms, the rightful shapes; yet the reader must not succumb to the temptations of simple location, but experience in the rising, turning line the wider view, like a sailplane circling through a thermal, and sense at the same time a corkscrewing descent into the subject, a progressive deepening descent into the subject, a progressive deepening around the reading eye, a penetration of the particular. . . at once escape and entry, an inside pulled out and an outside pressed in. [ . . . ] The more we observe rather than merely note, contemplate rather than perceive, imagine rather than simply ponder [then will the writer realize they are] in the presence of the Radiant Angel of Inwardness, that radiant guardian of Ideas of whom Plato and Rilke spoke so ardently, and Mallarmé' and Valéry invoked. A sense of resonant universality arises in literature whenever some mute and otherwise trivial particularity is experienced with an intensely passionate particularity--through a ring of likeness which defines for each object its land of unlikeness too. . . (Gass,26-30).

In "From the New World", Graham uses the image of a "coil" explicitly. "From the New World" is a characteristically long and complex meditation. I am, nevertheless, going to hazard the admittedly reductive exercise of briefly discussing it in terms of the Forward's sequence and the paradigm of the spiral. Graham, the speaker in this poem, starts to tell a story about a young girl who was a victim of the Holocaust. The girl's story begins with her coming out of a gas chamber and looking for her mother. Graham interrupts the story to say how she wants the poem to continue, and for that continuation to be a "silky swerve into shapeliness/ and then the click shut", but the story becomes "unmoored". What begins as an act of remembering an atrocity in the past coils into a

personal memory of Graham's grandmother who can't remember who Graham is. It is a time when not being remembered is personally painful. Graham retreats into the bathroom at the nursing home and is visited by the awful apparitions of "forms stepping in as if to stay clean". "They were all in there, the coiling and uncoiling/ billions/ the about to be seized/ the about to be held down" (Field,107).

Graham's description of the girl and " the new stalk of her body" repeats an image that she has used in earlier poems with other young girls and female figures as bodies "where a story now gone has ridden" ( "Self-Portrait as Delay and Hurry"), "this look afloat on want,/ this long thin angel whose body is a stalk, rootfree, blossomfree" ("The Lovers"), "*tomorrow, tomorrow*, like the different names of those girls,/all one girl" ("Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne" ), "the field with minutes in it /called woman" ("Orpheus and Eurydice"), the girl-- "it is 1890"-- in a pornographic painting by Klimt draped in a cloth reminiscent of the woods called Buchenwald ("Two Paintings by Klimt" ), and the young woman "wearing a little piece of gold on her nose" in "The Dream of the Unified Field".

In "From the New World" , we see the corkscrew effect that Gass describes as both "escape and entry, the "penetration of the particular" in which the outside historical story-telling presses in, and the inside "intensely passionate particularity" of personal history is pulled out. The necessity for Graham is to be witness to the ring of likeness, the resemblances which spiral over resemblances, the Jewish girl's historical storyline and Graham's own history and her poetic process which invokes

the immediacies of the dynamic, spiraling present of the mind thinking.  
Her mind thinking.

*like what*, I whisper

*like* which is the last new world, *like, like*, which is the thin  
young body (before its made to go back in) whispering *please*.

Augustine longs for the region of likeness and unchangeable light --"it would please us much more if all the parts could be perceived at once rather than in succession". Graham also longs to perceive all the parts at once, but her ethic realizes that this is possible only to a degree. How to understand the existential pathos, both its terror and hope -- how the present "under the kissing of the minutes under the wanting to go on living" can possibly be redemptive, or reconciled, as it once again "gathers the holocaust in close to its heart growing more beautiful" -- is the mission of her poetics.

"The Dream of the Unified Field" is a poem written in seven parts. Like "From the New World", it is composed of linked narratives which spring from a personal anecdote rendered simultaneously with a physical event and an emotional experience. Meaning, for Graham, is rarely contained in the realm of the personal. As in "From the New World", this poem widens into larger identifications and wider responsibilities. In part one, the speaker is on her way to deliver a leotard her daughter has forgotten. It is snowing. In part two, she starts home and sees a flock of starlings. Parts three, four, and five continue to elaborate on the birds, then a crow which stands out as a singularity. Part five continues its reverie into part six, where the image of the black bird prompts a memory

and jump cut back into the past of a dancing teacher, dressed in black, who has survived Stalingrad. The images conflate once again, as remembering the woman in black brings the speaker urgently back into the present and thoughts of her daughter, another dancer, dressed in black. Six explicitly introduces the idea of History, “the Age behind the clouds, The Great Heights” and ties it into the idea we’ve seen before of a new world inside the mind, “new world, possession, gripping down to form”. Section seven takes us to the “new world” of the Americas, Columbus arriving, and the image of captured “very black Indian women”, one of them young and wearing a gold ornament, the decoration that will seal her, and her people’s doom.

Graham interweaves descriptions of four females and makes them vivid, beautiful, disturbing, and urgent. The tension between the reality of the speaker’s forgetful daughter and the mother’s remembering is torqued into the experiences of the Russian dance instructor and the Native American girl. The instructor whose experience as a survivor of Stalingrad also leads her to say “No one must believe in God again”; and the other, an adventurous and curious girl who wants to stay on Columbus’ ship, at such a fateful moment. We know that her future is already “mapped” by the “vast, white geography” of History.

In its original format in Materialism, this poem is preceded by an edited version of Benjamin Whorf’s study of the Hopi titled “Language, Thought, and Reality”. In this essay, Whorf describes the meaning of the verb *tunatya’* as a kind of action in the realm of expectancy and purpose though it already exists, as a class of word that belongs to the manifested

realms of thought, a dynamic state already with us, a realm he says can be most closely approximated by our words “hope, thought, desire, cause” (79). *Tunatya’* seems to me to comprise everything that Graham is trying to enact with her poetry. Presentness, conjoined with the act of thinking and imagining, as an empowered state of desire and hopefulness, “the striving of purposeful desire toward manifestation”(79). Her recurrent image of the girl seems to signal this potential each time, the possibility of hope and purposeful desire.

The poem is followed by an adaptation of Audubon’s *Missouri River Journals*. This is a gorgeous piece of writing and yet its lists of birds and animals that are slaughtered for the pleasure of the hunt, and for scientific study, and with the brief, bitterly ironic, account of hostile, thieving Indians, it underscores and complicates the poem’s reveries on the theme of possession. I must say that I regret that these contextualizing materials are omitted when the poem appears in the Selected Poems. They provide considerable weight and density to the ambiguities of possession. This is a remarkable poem with its allusions to Rilke, its wonderfully baroque description of the crow, its complex argument regarding being in the moment as a kind of possession and the historical frame it counters. The poignancy of a mother standing outside in the dark and feeling herself “attached” so tenuously “to a tiny piece of the century”, of her looking in at her daughter dancing, watching the “vivid performance of the present” and wondering how to make her safe, makes the purposeful desire of the poem resonant and memorable as an ethical accomplishment.



In "The Guardian Angel of the Swarm", a self-described "conversation" with Giles Deleuze's "The Field", a study of Leibnitz and the Baroque, Graham's flattened diction emphasizes the discursive argument being made. The imagery of folds, things folded and enveloped, of unfolding, work in relationship with the title poem "The Errancy". It applies also to the design or pattern of "envelopments and developments" that occur among the women in "From the New World" and "The Dream of the Unified Field":

\*

unfolding is thus not the contrary of folding,  
but follows the fold up to the following fold --  
particles turned into folds that contrary  
effort changes over and again --

\*

and every fold originates from a fold, *pica*  
*ex pica* . . . --an entre-deux, something  
"between" in the sense that a difference is being  
differentiated --

\*

and it is thus the world must be placed *in* the subject --  
in order that the subject *be* for the world --

this is the torsion that constitutes the fold -- (82)

The title poem "The Errancy" alludes to both the Christian story, via Milton's Paradise Lost, with its crystal battlements of heaven, erring man and woman, and the poet's role as reforming the "errors" of earlier story-tellers, and the Puritan dream for the perfected Christian city on the hill of the New World. In this poem Graham improvises on the American literary parentage of Whitman and Dickinson. The "long red errancy/ down the freeways in the dusk light" is a wandering in which the high hopes for creating an exemplary city have not yet been realized:

us still standing here sword in hand, hand extended,  
frail, over the limpid surface of the lake-like page,  
the sleep-like page, now folded and gently driven into  
its envelope, for the tiny journey. . . (6)

Graham's poetic is congruent with Ruland's assertion that contemporary writers generally eschew a role as "supreme" assimilators of the universe or the "all" feeling of a Whitmanian democratic universalism. Many writers today, including Graham, would concur with Melville's observation when, writing to Hawthorne in 1851, he says:

You must have often felt it, lying in the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (Ruland, 165).

I understand Graham as positioning herself in relation to her art as someone who asserts provisionality, the application of these "temporary" feelings, as a corrective. Graham expresses the aim to avoid poems as containers of "stillness, form, law" and understood experience because she believes that the "formulation of hope" is "cause and effect" and requires the attempt to maintain an ongoing presentness (*Married* , 239). Her poems strive for a condition of simultaneity and presentness in which the unfolding of the creative act manifests "hope, thought, desire, cause". It is this condition which is necessary and allows for a "reformed narcissism". Graham's *Notes* in *The Errancy* quote Linda Gregerson's readings of Spenser and her insights regarding how epic action begins with a gaze in the mirror. This gaze Spenser associates with Eros and a reformed narcissism. "Knightly error begins with a gaze." (112). In this sense,

Graham installs an ethical system of errancy with the poet as a childe wanderer.

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

Given an unknown face: first, hair;  
..... then what the eyes are doing; then  
monkey-wise, the covert volley, eyes to mouth, mouth to eyes,  
..... do they match?  
Let's say yes. The hoped-for, pleasurable, reassuring mouth.

But this is a photo, a portrait. Long hair, black eyes—  
my gaze skips the rest.  
..... Whose wouldn't? Except for a necklace, no,  
not a necklace, except for her earrings, she's naked.

Bare breasts, sepia pale, pushing out from the portrait fully,  
contoured against her, plum shadows curving under. How they fall  
a summer's day of leisurely scoops and burdens from shoulders  
..... to ribs,  
plum space where her arm curves in, a last light sash of sepia ribcage  
..... cropped.  
Whose genius is she? How is she beautiful, erotic,  
and yet so like a bare, unpainted table?  
Her hair is straight and long, and parted in the middle.  
Her face is broad. Her gaze, flat. Her mouth, unsmiling.

.....  
But how extravagant her earrings are. Finger-weaving.  
Looped through large hoops at her ears,  
long lattice-work strands drape like braids over her breasts,  
the two ribbons held in a V by a third,  
hooked, one ear to the the other,  
which hangs like a loose chin strap, or martingale.  
The whole of it makes a breastplate.

She's posed as if she's in a mission,  
standing under the arch of a mission window, looking out.  
Almost courtly, the arousals, almost Spenserian, to be so framed,  
..... her neather parts  
concealed in secret shadow farre from all men's sight,  
space pulled up like a high-waisted Empire gown. A Victorian postcard,  
not the racy, raw mementos, the private snaps that came  
in the 1890's with the new handhelds, with the "Facile" and Kodak Falcon.  
The sill is a blank place to nail a plaque with a legend:  
..... Dangers of the Indian Country,  
part of a series. Frontier Exposures. File it backward in time,

archival, colonial nude. Or as, perhaps, a prelude to love.

## LUNA MOTH EXHIBIT AT THE BURKE MUSEUM

Oh, you are beautiful, live and on display,  
our North American miniature, our wonder.  
Surely, it's not too much to think our visions worthy.  
It's a common thought, and you are both living matter  
and the common-day ghost of our expectancy.

Say, twenty-five long-sleeved bodhisattvas  
descending on a cloud to greet a tiny figure,  
or angels from uttermost heaven that hover in an apse mosaic  
in San Vitale, or life rising, mended and new  
from the purple lake deep in the Smokies, that I, too,

may relinquish one stage for another? Should we doubt  
such good fortune possible, our bodies lifted,  
rimmed like your forewings with dusky rose, still dripping  
violet water from the lake where dead things  
are reformed? The sheer extravagance of your long

tailed hind wings, their pale Song Period celadon,  
and every wing marked with its own curvy stemmed  
purple eye, is full of generosity. And, if there's pathos,  
it's gentle, in these filament legs of gaudy red,  
and the paired and perfect-toothed bright green feathers

sprouting from your head. It almost works.  
But, entering the Coffee Shoppe, high voices. Distress.  
I just don't know, you know, she's wailing.  
She doesn't care who hears. I know, you know, I . . .  
She reminds me of my daughter. From my table, I, too,

glance at them. But nobody stares. We want the boy with hernot to lapse,  
the boy, who leans over her, to comfort her, for her pain  
to uncurl the way ferns do, the tight, freeze-dried spirals going frondy,  
his hand caught in mid-air—You-know-I-know, she chants.  
She's volatile. For a minute, I think she's talking to me.

I wonder what she knows. There's a kind of knowing that's felt,  
but not the kind that cranks you into places, all unwitting.  
Swifter: Tumblers. Straight up in bed, a quick hit, then quiet.  
That night, almost ceremonial, a Wolf spider  
fell out from under my lapel, bristled and scritch'd across my nylon gown,

and dropped to the floor.  
Did I feel marooned? Does she?  
The boy is saying I know, I know in little pats.  
Luna moth, eye's delight, now your vestigial mouth-parts seem pitiful.  
What kind of hearing for the tympani bereft?

But, though they'll shimmer and flutter you to death,  
your wings, and that boy's arm around that girl,  
are unassailable, are the solaces we yearn for; we receive.

## THE INVERTED CAMERA IN SITU

### i. black and white

When I opened the book's cover, a slab of satin black,  
the title Harm's Way unmistakable in big Titanium White letters,  
and bent over the photos— institutional and private shots, misfortunes,  
foibles, follies, murder victims, anomalies, Alligator Skin Boy, the girls,  
two girls, one, in thigh-high boots and a harness jockey's plumed hat,  
holding the reins, tightening the horse bit in the mouth of the other—  
I had a picture of myself, too, chin-thrusted, a studious pupil,  
distrusting happiness in a sorrowful world, believing in inflictions  
because ignorance is not bliss, sure that my eyes could never see too much,  
cool as the bright winter day, the big flakes of snow just starting.

But when my new neighbor passed by the window—  
she's doing her laundry, she can't help looking in,  
simple interest, her glance says— but this time, I flinched, and snapped  
the covers shut. What if she's glimpsed what I was poring over?  
What is she thinking? Contemptible. Exposed. No.  
That she's seen something avid, in me, now proved?  
I expected to be masterful, maybe a little sad,  
but not stranded in miserable histories . . . less than histories . . .  
annotations. Who are they?

I imagine her getting her stuff sorted out. I go to the window.  
Layers of white building fast along the plane tree branches.  
Follow their shapely sweep out. Traffic slows. A truck passes,  
Jerry's Stump Grinding lettered on its door.  
All the edges are rounding off, except for the abrupt branch-work of whims,  
errant, erupting straight up, black as whips.

My eyes, drawn and repelled, black:white black:white, hurt.  
Once, my eye doctor, being over-booked  
and juggling patients like mad, put drops in my eyes  
twice, by mistake. Your eyes are so dark! he exclaimed,  
wringing his hands at my wet cheeks, ushering me  
and my stretched pupils, creature-like, into a darkened room  
to wait out the dilation. My eyes hurt like that.

She must be getting her first load in. She'll go past my window,  
which is turning blue. Pink snow. I could close the blinds, but I find I want her  
to look in again. The paper is fine and thick. Care has been taken.



Every glassy morsel of light lovingly called up, every negative,  
 every cracked glossy, each image, buffed and lovingly toned  
 from varnished plates on the best artpaper stock.  
 She's from Malaysia. She's studying virology. She'd know  
 these are the affects we're not expressly accountable for,  
 present at birth: interest, surprise, distress, contentment.  
 Understanding you can be unhappy and still be content,  
 isn't that the beginning of wisdom? I'd ask her  
 would it be—what—less reprehensible to be not so,  
 not looking, to pretend to go happy go . . . ?

Dark sets outside without a tremor, but inside  
 I feel something familiar tug, something impossible, pulling down, dropping.  
 . . . . . And they are?  
 I'm waiting for her.  
 . . . . . Already? Shrinking  
 from prominence.  
 . . . . . But the list gets longer, enjoyment, fear, piling up,  
 . . . . . not like fresh snow, something mucilaginous,  
 . . . . . proliferating buds in a Petri dish,  
 ideas attaching themselves . . .  
 . . . . . anger, pity, disgust . . .

ii. . . . shame.

Sometimes seen  
 emerging from its host's cocoon,  
 the antennae threadlike, intrusive, constantly in motion,  
 drawn to the pallor of this light's  
 first weak ministrations,  
 surprised! seeing me here,  
 it's got an idea,  
 held high,  
 steadied by clear wings, veined  
 like cracked ice, No  
 it trills,  
 whipping the slender abdominal tube up  
 over its back, ratcheting by segments,  
 curling c-shaped around, letting down  
 until the tip end is tucked,  
 suspended, a spoon, still gummy,  
 under its belly, as the long legs,  
 a straddle of long legs,  
 stilts, triple-hinged,  
 lock into place.

## iii. albumen silver print

In 1893, Paris, the photographer,  
Alphonse Bertillon, had a job to do.  
Chief of the Identification Service  
for the Prefecture of Police. The photographs of corpses  
were procedural. Evidentiary.  
He took the shots himself, refined the vantage points  
with an inverted camera in situ, and displayed  
his methods at l'Exposition universelle de Lyon.  
From the wet street or the white ticking of the viewing mattress,  
I extract your dark contour whole.  
His intent was punishment, but not yours, nameless,  
under the camera's faceless gaze.  
One looks down, knows instantly,  
then sorts the discrepancies,  
the right shoe toe's off-angle to the knee,  
your vest's odd heave.  
That's how it is. Death, posed and unhistoric.  
But no one, even victims caught point-blank, as you were,  
drops so neatly. I wanted to know who you were.  
I wanted details. Fruitless. From your neat trousers,  
only the white flags of turned-out pockets.  
I wanted to add details, a life's aura,  
to drag you out from under the high crutches  
of any inching tent. I couldn't take you as you are,  
I wanted to think for you, to see your tucked tie,  
not as the plumb line of despair, to see  
your tucked tie no longer docile.

DEFINITION OF SPACE: GIACOMETTI, 1901-1966

That is to say, in 1940, the heads became very small,  
they tended to disappear.

..... —from the letters to Matisse

What immensities of space the Greeks knew.  
To fashion those classical busts—that gross massing of clay,  
the detail of forehead and cheek . . . too staggering!  
The attempt would take more than a lifetime.  
He's working from models in his grisaille cell, in 1935,  
on the Rue Hippolyte-Maindron. The windows, the pans, his hands  
are appalled, blue with plaster. His models the same  
two women, and his brother, Diego. He is a monk by day.  
He prowls at night. One year, two, and then in the Boulevard  
Saint-Michel at midnight he watches Isabel walk away  
between the rows of houses and lamp posts. Isabel.  
She turns for a moment, a figure with eyes,  
pared down, and yet she remains exactly herself,  
even more so, as space encases her, Isabel  
rising, holding the void in the strange way  
memory recalls a presence. He works from memory.  
The figures get smaller. What terror I felt. They dream down  
to the size of a thumb, each its own pedestal. Knobbed. Eroded.  
Impassable space defining the limits a body can bear.  
The ribcage, brought to the edge of disintegration,  
sometimes crumbling into puffs under his knife. For the heads,  
he uses just enough clay to hold them together.  
Like the brain really is, he says. Not one crumb more.  
He flees to Geneva, in 1940. He returns after  
the liberation, carrying six matchboxes: three years work.  
Now the sculptures get taller. The men walk. The women  
stand still, arms against their sides. He pulls  
their elbows in. They seem limbless.  
Spoons and sockets and a memory of granite.

## PAINTED LETTERS

Reading Braque, his Thoughts and Reflections on Art, 1917,  
I hunkered down on this particular sentence:  
"Emotion should not be rendered with an excited trembling . . . "  
in my own voice, saying it, liking it unfinished, this phrase  
like a rule. A good rule? What if, as if on cue, another sound  
. . . . . chimed in,  
or, rather, broke through in what I first heard as the six o'clock  
. . . . . rattling its irons  
at the signal crossing, then as a dissonance, but animate, then a clamor?

Some alarm? —no, not someone to be helped, not someone  
. . . . . crying—  
The view from the front window frame is dinnertime calm,  
a few cars on the freeway passing by in their regular clumps.  
The sidewalk empty. The smell of cigarette smoke and hot peanut oil  
when the door is opened, and, off and up to the left, hundreds of black specks  
materializing into the foreground,

—cawing, flapping parts—a raucous swash of crows,  
dividing into ribbons, into swags: inharmonious, hapless,  
a doppelgänger, wheeling, shapes rendered,  
like storm clouds arced in:

one, then two large flocks of crows, at first, one wheeling clockwise over the  
water tower and the trees and the railway tracks, then falling apart—this sky  
not midwestern, or Parisian,  
but Flemish, a storm-laden landscape in the Netherlands—  
and in the distance a second swarm regroups, like filings to a magnet,

Mr. Wizard's red magnet with silver tips sliding  
underneath a sheet of butcher paper—black dust  
swoops in from the other side, an answering arc,  
but counterclockwise, louder, braque! braque! over the telephone lines,  
over the smoky clusters of leafless border trees  
bushy as hair cells in the organ of Corti.

Crows will chase down the one with a singular prize,  
to make her drop it, or to snatch it away midair.  
They'll hound a scapegoat.  
Too raucous to be keening. No appearance of fun.

They seem desperately aimless. Not like the belief  
we can calm the world with the simple factualities of real sheets of paper  
pasted onto a painting of a book, nor the ironies of painted letters.  
Maybe most like forgotten dialects, untranslatable vocables uttered  
anyway because they are ordinal and necessary.

KHV:NA

Rustling through the leaves below my window  
while I am rising from doughy sleep,  
your pip, pip, falling from the eaves,  
because it is early light, and nothing much is about  
to disturb you—for this little time,  
I like you.

I know how you are.  
You carry yourself like an only book.

Even the grouse, who had a good voice once,  
and who wears forever some of your feathers,  
could not teach you how to enter a field  
with a beautiful victory cry.  
Any noise for you is his drumming.  
A door slam, or dog bark, or lawn mower sets you off.  
You of the gutturals, the bray,  
the nerve-rending screech, go lurching,  
silly as a blown cabbage on stake legs  
the color of burned bone, driving through the underbrush,  
the scalplocks fastened around your neck, bouncing,  
bobbling your red wattles,  
the jut of your powerful neck, your naked  
immune-to-death blue cobbled head,  
your talons ripping wet clods and tossing them out behind you.

Gobbler in every sense, a "lord ful fat"  
Chaucer would say, "that stemmed as a furnais of lead."

I've seen you snatch the cat's discards,  
wagging the small purple lump of bird or mole  
crazily through blackberry trailers and foxglove stalks.

A ruckus of gabbling. You swayed over a hen,  
the hen going quiet, her neck seized in your beak.  
Your bronze feathers cracked and cracked.  
Hers glistened and cracked; some fell out  
as she sank under the freight of you.  
Fan-tail, redness, commotion, quiet.

Khv:na. I am learning to say it.

Khv:na khane:ka. Turkey, he is speaking.  
It is too beautiful for you.

## BEAUTIFUL ZOMBIES

Kanane'ski Amayehi, Fishing Spider, speaks:

There are things more terrible than death.  
To see the turtle tribe swim by,  
huge eyes half-dead yet brimmed with tears,  
following, always following  
some hazy possibility

is to see the manner of my own  
predation magnified. Dim-buzz,  
punching fang and venom volt,  
and all the senses washed away. But theirs  
is a communal self-inflicted bite.

As they were once, they were the watery  
world's artisans. They studied  
the designs of water, the surface tension  
of still pools, wind-dapple and deep  
whorl of moon-called water.

And as they learned, the patterns grew  
upon their bodies so that they and water  
seemed one. Their numbers increased, their forays  
lengthened. If one was hurt, it thought  
into itself the intricacies

of water, and sewed itself back up.  
Everyone knows only a turtle  
can loosen a turtle's bite. They thought:  
"We are living calendars. Time  
and we are one. Time heals our wounds."

They no longer studied water. Their bodies  
thickened, became deeply  
engraved. They slowed down, forgot the trick  
of mending themselves. They live a half-  
life of perpetual noon. They cast no shadow.



## RESTORATION DRAMA

If men had wings and wore black feathers  
few of them would be clever enough to be crows.  
..... —Rev. Henry Ward Beecher

I see him through the levoliars, loitering on the lip  
of the privacy ledge. It's very early. He's all in black,  
of course. On his cheek, above the black surgical mask  
he wears for protection like miniature whisk brooms  
over his nostrils, a smudge of orange marmalade —  
Capella's two stars with a pair of red dwarfs orbiting.  
Clearly, by the double-take, the quarter turn, when he sees me  
he's caught off-guard, and embarrassed.  
So, when he opens his mouth wide, and flings himself back  
artfully, this is the school of plumes and vizard masks  
and platform shoes. It's a move I recognize. He's buying time.

In a kind of retracted lunge, throwing oneself off-balance  
cunningly, the step back is a miniscule loss of territory.  
An excellent trade for a large psychological edge.  
I've done it. Putting one over on another.  
When asked a question about what I was up to,  
I took that posture—the mock fluster, the baffled moment—  
and replied "But you must be tired to ask that."  
"We are poor," he tells me. He droops,

his head sags low. He wipes his eyes.  
And then he pulls himself erect, flings up his head, and laughs.  
He's a fop. A tinsel-lover poking through the plastic bag  
I left outside my door. Last night it seemed too heavy.  
He finds what he needs, and preens the coffee grounds  
from his scapulars. Then, he points to his heart to show  
he loves. And to his head: he thinks. Then, looking straight at me,  
he grips the ledge like virtue, and stretches his right wing out and down  
to point the way to hell.

## LAST DAYS AT PETLAND ON AURORA AVENUE

Today the signs go up in the window.  
As usual, the glass-knife fish, so thin, so shy,  
hums with monkish desire  
behind the thermometer, his even-tempered brother.  
Two matched lines, straight as nails,  
living silver and mercury, are floaters  
in the corner of the tank, maintaining,  
answerable to currents the buried aerator insinuates.  
Like a desktop pattern for 50% Off,  
the drowsy water bubbles up  
the way bankers do their elusive sums,  
their balloons, their inflations, and their obliterating liens.

At the counter, the owner envies the black snake.  
He's the smart one, stretched out along the mend  
of black electric tape. Why should he care?  
The black snake dreams, unaware, in his cracked tank  
of roads that swelter in Baja, of a passel  
of black snakes— thousands— throwing up their snouts,  
weaving like Arctic seals, bracing each other.  
Maybe, if the man at the counter wasn't alone,  
he'd do that. They'd do that. Get out. Brace each other.  
Braid themselves up like a swami's rope—charmed—zzzzip.

Mom and Pop. That's what I hate. They nod their heads.  
The husband and wife are good at courtesy  
over the cash receipts, which she takes back  
to the small office. He talks to the parrot  
and strokes the parrot's cheek. What did the banker,  
in her double-breasted suit, call you, Nervous Nellie?  
Great Amazon! The bird has been busy,  
like some mad typist, pecking the feathers  
out of her breast in rows. F! T! K! P!  
down to the pebbled flesh. Now stop that, Sweetie,  
he croons, or your heart falls out.

We tried, he says. Twelve hours a day, six days a week.  
The wife is always in the back.  
Not much to tally up, but she keeps at it.  
Always busy. Always hopeful. And who can blame her?  
I don't. She's embarrassed. Who'd want to stand out here

and man the counter? Nellie, Nellie, I can't remember  
which went first, the stock or the customers?  
The mice are getting much too big.  
The flies buzz up and down their sunlit bin.  
Oh, this, this, this, is a sad and dangerous place.

FOLLY. ONE TAKES A CHANCE.  
for D.L.

1. Rain

A slurp  
and  
tick. A ruffle  
mish,  
a rod drawn mish  
and mish  
through slurry.  
Drops not yet unstymied,  
and thoughts about a friend's distress,  
iterate in my ears  
imaginings like photo plates  
of chaos' beginnings,  
the stages of a rod  
drawn mish and mish again until  
a siphuncle  
pulls  
out, phased squid-like curlings trough  
and crest into an eerie  
hammerhead with veils.

Rain. I'm feeling bad.  
Small cuts breathe slow.  
Swish oily-eyed peacockeries  
bulge and cruciate,  
cross-vault,  
and roll their shapes  
into themselves,  
and roiling, complicate. Fitful,  
Rain,

she feels a tick, a ruffle.  
"My little friend," she says.  
She finds a private place and banks herself with cushions.  
Drawn tight into herself for when the seizure comes.  
When she awakes her blouse is crazy-striped with red felt pen.

Nature favors some,  
like you, Rain,

pulling order from disorder.  
 I want a drenching version  
 an overriding sobbing cedar-dripping wet-to-the-bone  
 communal rain no one evades.  
 I've overheard her ululating,  
 and meddled, scolded, coming at her, at her with a stick.  
 Extravagant Stirrer,  
 I'm giving up the stick in this hand, and the stirring.  
 I'm giving back the foist on the open palm of my other.  
 I need to hear you squander everything,  
 thrumming out Seattle, Tacoma, tacoma, tacoma, tacoma  
 in Michigan.

## 2. Ice Rain

Some pranking Queen passed through town in the early hours.  
 Much puffing and twirling of blowpipes accompanied her.  
 Now the walls break protocol and crack their gum, the brassy  
 deadbolt jangles its change, chings be careful what you wish for.  
 Ashes jump like fleas from ashtrays.

My neighbor Yap is photographing our tree.  
 It is ecstatic, parsley-crisp, flash annealed into a saturated grade of brilliance.

Leaning over the ledge to zero-in. Each fair-blown node and twig's  
 a fillip of tiny knob heads, a miniature prance of cruppered tails,  
 . . . . . and knees.

Where there was grass, a beach of bearded chitons, fantastic,  
 their matted hair rolling in mounds, dull, like Cherokee abstractions  
 paddle-stamped on sandy clay, gale waves reduced in C's  
 to the commotion of ripples. Ice-coated metal rails lay down  
 their casing tubes, obedient to a note rung at daybreak.

But how we see the weather is more than foisted fancies.

Folly.

In the iced rock's speckled sculpin spell  
 one step might break and scatter.

The barest pressure from my boot is enough to see  
 a faint unfocusing. The whole surface gives  
 a warning shift.  
 I take a chance.

## 3. Inside

When I came upon you copying papers,  
 shoveling them in, stiff-shouldered,  
 and saw you reaffirm in the way you turned,  
 a customary and unattested hurt,  
 how your back absorbed the routine of lids,  
 permitting only the sound of mish

and click, mish and click, between us,  
 the small copy room and squeezed light  
 redolent with seizures and replications,  
 more afraid than ever, I thought, perhaps  
 this is what is meant when people say abyss.

## 4. No Weather Zone

..... The intention is not to hurt.  
 ..... Who does it hurt?  
 ..... Who doesn't it hurt?

..... Is it the body's hurt surging through  
 the diorama of its making,  
 cranking the small joints of body and tongue far beyond  
 the margins of the nerves, that convinces the will?

..... Abyss?  
 ..... It is the uttermost human  
 fiction made true because we say so.  
 The will hiding the mind's tools,  
 arms wrapped tightly around the desperate body,  
 careening and whacking through endless branches,  
 banishing all else in a plunge so thoroughly  
 down through the self toward a weatherless, fabled,  
 false-bottomed zone.

## IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH FINAL WORDS

a newspaper, glanced at by chance,  
..... the real event transcribed out of wreckage,  
..... 21:24 That keeps—that's come on .  
..... What's happening? A light has come on.

These are minutes and seconds. At  
..... twenty-one minutes and twenty-four seconds  
..... a light had come on, and at 22:20  
..... they'd passed transition altitude one zero one  
..... three.

It's 22:30. The pilots are puzzled. Wondering about that light.  
..... What's it say in the manual?  
..... This is what it says.

..... Additional system failure  
..... may cause in-flight deployment  
..... except normal reversal operation  
..... after landing.  
..... (I don't get it.)

Additional system failure  
..... may cause in-flight deployment  
..... except normal reversal operation after landing.  
..... 24:11 OK . 24:36 OK.

Shall we ask the technical men?  
..... 25:26 Just, ah, just, its, its, its  
..... 30:41 Jesus Christ (Sound of snap)  
..... (Sound of four caution tones) (Sound of siren)  
..... Wait  
..... a minute.

Damn it. (Sound of bang)  
31:06 (End of recording).

\* \* \*

The newspaper headline reads PILOT'S FINAL WORDS.  
I'm sitting in a window seat in a café  
in Seattle, where the plane was made,

and the co-pilot's mother lives.

..... Outside, a cube of day school kids,  
 ..... colorful as Iceland poppies  
 ..... are waiting to cross the street.  
 ..... Their teachers have captioned them  
 ..... in red cord to keep them safe.

The site was difficult to find. Difficult to get to.

..... The traffic light has changed. The teachers bend down.  
 ..... "All hold hands," their teachers say.

Most of the bodies have been found, but not all  
 and many are identified, but not all,  
 and the black box was recovered so we have  
 their words and a piece of paper with the word  
 FIRE scrawled on it. The write-up says the wreckage  
 is being carted off, bag by seat by panel, steel plates  
 from wings, shed roofs? a water trough for carabao, maybe.  
 The jungle canopy is already sliding over.  
 Shimmying vines, then, and wide spatulate leaves  
 spreading their folds. I think of how sea creatures  
 settle down over jagged edges, and of the laying on  
 of hands. I think of how I have to make a choice,  
 of how to put this down.

\* \* \*

Each time it's a choice. Knowing what to say  
 is difficult to get to. And things can be looted.  
 Words are such slight threads

and something always, (something  
 not always love), grows up inside.  
 You can say too much, or too little,

or not say it well, or put it aside.  
 It has taken me a long time to remember  
 what I thought I knew.

There are things so awful  
 and powerful that you call them  
 by another name.



There are some things you know,  
but do not say.

There are words so old  
they must be honored when you come to them,  
and only then  
can they do their work.  
Fire, circled, is like that.

## REPATRIATION

Paul's Dad, grey braids, ribbon shirt he's led by the sleeve of,  
"Miigwech," into the spotlight, stoops, centerstage,  
and makes over his eyes a shelf with one hand as, out here,  
the anonymous dark shifts, murmurs. I'm stung, seeing the image,  
the tableaux vivans of an Indian lookout, and stung again.  
"And miigwech, thank-you, for coming," he's saying,  
moving out of the limelight, taking a few steps nearer.

"Excuse me for staring," he says, "but I'm legally blind . . .  
but the NASO students, ya-hey, who knows, they invited me,  
anyway," said on the beat, smiling at the lip of the orchestra pit,  
"to talk about NAGPRA, the Graves Protection Act." He knows  
where the edge is, how far he can go, where people are,  
because he backs up and turns to introduce his wife and sons,  
the way it's done. Where we come from is also who we are.

He's Rankin Reserve, up north, Sault Saint Marie. "While some hear  
Chippewa," he's saying, "we're Ojibwe. Anishnaabe," which is a whole  
sentence in a single word and comes from anish insubag, spontaneous man.  
He means to do more than explain the law. There are horrors enough,  
this ancestor's skull on a desk, bones in alien places, in displays,  
in file cabinets, numbered, in bags. But here are these students,  
and loved ones, and these council members, miigwech, and scholars,

Huron and Seminole, Potawatomi, Odawa. And you've heard this before,  
how when a feather fan, or an ossuary bowl, a cake of red ocher,  
reappears, a pact has been broken. The families are grieving.  
"Dead as dirt? We do not believe it." A woman raises her hand.

It's not clear why his people would want to obstruct scientific inquiry.  
"But don't you want to know your origins?" she asks.

"We know where we come from." She can't believe it.  
His people can respect these investigations, he says,  
the desire to examine, to measure skulls, to make charts,  
to do Carbon 14 tests, but, sometimes, all you get are the answers  
to the questions you know how to ask. He's quiet. We wait.  
She shakes her head. He takes a risk. He gives the benefit of the doubt.  
Perhaps, if she knew what "isolation" means. What "lost" means?

"The spirit attaches to the bones, and the bones to the earth,

which is also living, and, therefore, you see how removing the bones is theft of the spirit?" Next to me a long-legged boy wiggles his foot. He puts it up on the seat in front of him, the shoe toe's dirty half-moon beside somebody's ear, which makes me look down and think about my own feet, and how far they've come. We're shivering like trail-savvy horses coming out of the woods, tongue-thrusting the bit. We want to go home.

"Bones aside," she says, "what about the artifacts?"

Our speaker looks up at the flys. She looks up. From the back, a bark, bhergh, like a dog cut off mid-sentence. "The celts?

The conch-shell gorgets?" He shrugs, a little epitaph having nothing to do with sackcloth and ashes. She's eloquent in a great pan-Indian sweep, the soapstone pipes, the labrettes and salmon skin capes, all the inventive fragile things, the two-sided baskets and ivory barbs, the copper infused pots, what will you do with those? Treasures. Art and methods. Proof of ancient, far-reaching . . . really, sadly, haven't too many things disappeared forever? Angry hands shoot up. "There will be tears", our speaker says, "when they return to where they belong." "In the ground?" she asks.

Miigwech he says. He thanks her kindly, and I think he means it.

He thanks those to the left, and to the right, and everybody, for coming.

## ZONES OF ENERGY

No souls came from Hiroshima you know  
Earth wore a strange new zone of energy.  
..... —James Merrill

For Fred—10/14/36-6/24/74

Count Rumford has placed his hand  
on the cannon barrel  
off and on all morning  
while the brown horse plods  
in a circle.  
The horse-drawn drill is boring  
a hole in the brass cannon  
which is red with heat.  
There, in a green field,  
he realizes that heat is motion,  
is energy transformed.

Our bodies feel your absence  
with their blind and deaf interiors.  
They persist in the detection of warmth  
where there is no warmth.  
Sometimes in the exchange of energies  
a shocking and peculiar shrinkage occurs.  
Could you return to that country of foothills  
and impossible distances,  
you would see how the hills have moved  
quietly through the mist, close to the treeline  
where you used to be.

Niccolo Tartaglia,  
called "The Stutterer" because of the wound  
gashed in his mouth, measures the angle best  
for cannons, composing in his mind already  
a book on ballistics.  
There is no bottom yet to this long arc,  
to this deep place,  
not even through the dripping trees  
exploding in gay shards of light.

Owls and rattlesnakes  
foot soldiers and satellites

know the unseen luminosity  
closest to what you've become  
beyond the grace of light  
beyond fear  
beyond the arrow of time that struck  
rich water into its long flowing  
of warmth to cold  
massive and present there in the dark halo  
surrounding this passage toward disorder.

LESLIE'S DANCE  
for Sheila Boyd

The dancers move in a certain arc  
across the stage. They lift the music  
like a cloud over their heads.  
They leap with abandon  
knowing the air is ready for entrances,  
that music and their own strong hearts  
pull beautiful shapes out of gravity.

I watch her for you.  
She is going through the motions,  
keeping time to the jazzy beat.  
Last year Leslie didn't dance at all.  
Last year, you, in the final stages of your body's  
timestep, stunned us by your virtuosity,  
by how you stretched the limits of your fate.

Arms poised in the outreach of a long beat.  
Her hands, like yours, are sturdy.  
Her brow wrinkles in your same gaze,  
thinking made visible  
like water running clear for an instant  
of curved green rock.  
But to see her open arms as the extension of grief  
is to believe that space emptied  
is the same as space filled.  
She's dancing.  
She's dancing for us,  
turning fully toward the black.  
She's dancing for dear life.

## YOU, GRIEF

He feels it is as a shape in his own brain, an embryonic form of an idea which cannot be formed in words, or even in a diagram . . . it is sort of a form of a thought-not-thought.—

A.S.Byatt, Babel Tower

My sister just called me. The news is bad.  
We know this without saying bad. But not to  
lets you, grief, always be about,  
to be endured on a dry plain,  
a lie, because you'll pretend to be only faintly dangerous,  
not quite a tendril of smoke, unformed and distant,  
only a rumble of hums and knockings on the ties.  
Left alone, we know your thought-not-thought will grow pervasive,  
a morass under more ground  
than any one person can cover.

We talk for a long time. We talk a lot.  
We recount again how our father awoke to you with a list.  
How his last, and worst, sorrow became a catalogue,  
the one loss confused with every loss; for the only son,  
the wife who sent him away; and his beloved mother;  
and the bellowing father who sent her away;  
for these Straits of Juan de Fuca, coated with ashes,  
the far-away Oconoluftee. When I heard it,  
I tell my sister, I felt like a grotesque,  
like Frankenstein's creature, bent-kneed,  
cheek pressed to the wall, perplexed and thick-headed.  
Afraid. I tell her now I know it was an entreaty.

Grief, we've seen you close up.  
Remorseless, our mother's painstaking fingers  
on the arm of her chair, a table, any ledge, starting up.  
Methodical. Toneless and empty, a Czerny finger exercise

going awry, punishing, demonic variations.  
We both remember watching her.  
She'd lay you down, then pick you up.  
She kept you for a long time.

Not resting on the butt of her palm, drumming.  
 A pianist's wrist, high, hand arched, the fingertips felt-tipped,  
 dropping like little hammers.  
 Not a sleep. Not a peaceful efference.  
 Not solved like an equation.

Not a composition.  
 A taunting, I say, of your hammerhold,  
 having nothing to do with consolation.

We talk about doctors.  
 My sister doesn't mind or think it so odd,  
 even now, that I go on about Samuel Johnson,  
 how he could detest without despising.  
 He knew how you shut up the passages of joy.  
 I tell her I'm grateful for him the way I am Deganawidah,  
 "The Thinker," protesting you, your affliction.

They speak against you, calling to minds,  
 calling minds in unison against you.  
 Pungent speakers, their words medicinal,  
 sharp, like incense and cloves,  
 sweetgrass and sage,  
 incense and cloves and sweetgrass and sage, and cedar.

You calamity, they say,  
 and name what you do,  
 how you diffuse the tuneful  
 lenitives of pain, stopper the ears,  
 blind the eyes, choke the throat, put  
 yellow spots into the body,  
 confound minds and moieties,  
 break, remove the sun from its place.

Here you are again, now, in this room.  
 You may think it is from respect  
 that we think it is proper to greet you  
 as our little friend, that it is hysteria  
 that we were laughing.

I'll tell you, grief, what we know now.  
 You are interested in us.  
 You want in. This is my room. These are my pictures.  
 My books. Baskets. My sister is in the room  
 next to mine. She will be there always.  
 You want us to make a place for you.  
 We have no room for you. You expect a tribute.



My sister and I, we know we'll have to give you something.  
We give you some time.  
Listen. That's what we were talking about.  
That's all you get.

## MOON DOGS

Our habit was always, whenever we talked, to reach into our bag of memories. Now, though you're telling them the same old way, they have a new urgency. I hear a new version because something terrible is happening. Now, I think before talking. I think what calls this to mind. What called me, then, out of sleep, brought to the window, my cold arms resting on a cold sill while the whole house slept, I don't remember. Maybe, first, a young mother's fear of silences which feel too deep, though then it seemed, as it does now, like an invitation, as if the moon, low and orange, a Harvest moon, had turned his head, and brushing an errant wisp aside, had secretly crooked a finger. Strange doings were underway in the vacant lot across the street. Bone-browed, stiff-tailed, heads low, driven, the neighborhood dogs—our Samoyed Polar Bear and the Black Lab Buster, the cat-killer, and Ginny, Max, some others, Beauregard, all neighborhood dogs—had formed into a pack, and were racing around the pond. Pond. You'd know it was meaner than pond. Not pastoral or parklike, a marshy hollow where drainage, opaque run-off and the seep from an underground rivulet, collected beneath the willow. It seems important to be clear this occurred on the cut-down side of a hill made by the freeway excavation, a few ramblers, rentals, trucked in, a temporary home for the lucky, and not extraordinary. Yet, everything familiar, this night, seemed perilous. Buster in the lead, and the others, whether daytime pal or enemy, following in line. They didn't bark, or gambol, or slow down or speed up to carom a shoulder against one another. A steady running in a circle, their lips pulled back so you'd think, at first, they were grinning, shooting tiny glints of flat red eye when passing near the reach of the neighbor's porch light. Who knows how long they'd been at it? Or how long they continued? They seemed to be working, working something out larger than intoxication, some joint deliberation almost drear in its tenor, but also an absorption, a labor more one-minded than mindless. Their muscular chests, so earnestly bounding to our daytime calls, kept evenly pumping, their legs working without pause, around and around. Frannie, something terrible is happening. We know that. We've agreed, for now, to say how we're changing

is a kind of work, something we intend to do well  
for each other. Now, when we talk, I see what you are doing  
means to reconcile extremes. I am all extremes.  
What to do with this memory, freshly urgent, that is saying  
something to me about work? I watched for a long time,  
waiting to see what next. I was rapt, then, gradually became  
more aware of myself than of the dogs, as I am now, brought back  
to tuck in the covers, to listen beside the bed, to decide to fall asleep,  
feeling then, as I do now, that, for now, this was enough.

## THINK, BEFORE YOU ASK HER IF HOPE IS CRUEL

Everybody agreed this winter was going to be tough.  
But it was the girl's idea to make use of the cold.  
So, in December, the mother made room in the freezer  
for twenty water balloons, and the father routed  
a well in twenty ice balls with his electric drill.

The sky was suffused with pink, the snow sharpened  
its white, she wore a red hat. The birdhouse wore  
its beret and the ice candles stuck to her navy gloves.  
In the gloaming, she lit them while the snow went blue,  
and bluer. Something pretty! Look! Something

that worked! A flotilla. Look what the tide brought in,  
a string of glass floats from the sea of Japan.  
And later, the candles were happy spots in the dark,  
Happy people stood in a group looking out of  
the picture window. When all eyes look in the same

direction like that, it feels like a cause. Stay alive  
stay alive in something rigid and unforgiving.  
And later, in ones and twos, we returned, a kind  
of old-fashioned respect for the cloudy-eyed  
carrying their weight lower and lower to the ground,

or maybe not so mild, a volley of looks the way babies  
check out other babies, seeing if tears are called for.  
Quick, quick, snake tongues are darting. Then, they're out.  
And there's a yard, and a street, and a row of houses,  
and a color to the snow I remember, but can't quite name.

## PANTOUM

She wondered "were they going far or returning—"   
the lines of telephone wire parting the snow?   
Lines giving direction and beauty, black oracles   
showing her how distance falls through the curve of space.

The lines of telephone wires parting the snow   
are scalloped like the fallen slip straps on her white arm,   
showing her, oh, how distance falls through the curve of space   
while the children play their imaginary games.

A scallop, the fallen slip strap on her white arm   
drives him wild, makes him glad for the walls, and door he closes   
while the children play their imaginary games.   
The India ink notes, the neat bones of her hunger

drive him wild, make him glad for the walls, the doors he closes.   
Flute, and clarinet, the bell of her voice soar   
out of the notes. The clean bones of her hunger   
fly out the window, out of the Montana winter.

Flute, clarinet, and the bell of her voice soar   
in the sequences of love and love's consequences,   
flying out the door, out of the Montana winter,   
falling at last like coins on a sheet of paper.

In the sequences of love and love's consequences,   
lines giving direction and meaning, oracles   
falling at last like coins on a sheet of paper.   
She wondered to see how going far means returning.

MOON-VIEWING IN SEATTLE'S JAPANESE GARDEN  
The most dangerous of our desires are those we call illusions . . .  
..... —Francis Poulenc, Dialogue of the Carmelites

Than the last full moon of August—  
what is more predictable?  
A certainty we were waiting for there,  
an arrival that would include us,  
though we were guests,  
in the ceremonial farewell  
sending off that year's beloved.

In the dark, stone lanterns offered  
square reflections to the waterways;  
and paper, gay reveries, exotic wasp-work,  
glowing in the low espaliers  
of pine and cherry.  
Even the most practical spotlight  
in the parquet, lighting a shakohachi player,  
exceeded its serviceable beam.  
His shadow, like his breath,  
amplified, flew up wingless,  
hovered, apsara-like, among  
the sleeves of cedar trees.  
They cradled him.

Yet, it was a dark engine  
moving across the sky,  
black on black, racing ahead  
of its own thunder, gone  
before it was known, that made us  
look up while the roar  
of its aftermath swept the little gravel,  
the breeze, the breathy flute.  
Hanging there, full and radiant, how long?  
In quavers and scoops, the long-tailed  
tremolo came back. The moon lowered itself,  
called the lighted places within  
and without, called the candle boats

into breeze-blown corridors.  
By whose design did they drift  
into the oval of the moon's illusion?  
Even now, I say not the black-sheathed figures  
backing up from the water's edge,  
shipping their long poles.

Heading out, we were charmed  
by the nestled lights, votives, in white paper bags,  
like candled eggs, each  
with its fluttering chick.  
When we crossed the water path home, did  
or didn't the stones rise to lift our steps?

## PAINTING A SNOW MOON

i.

Yesterday it snowed.  
And the day before,  
and the day before that.  
Nevermind that it's Seattle  
where it rains all of the time.  
Everything's white,  
and it's all because  
you've been keeping track.  
You could look up in your notes,  
how long it took for your left ring  
finger to match the right.

It hasn't gone unnoticed,  
the way the corners of your mouth  
turn up when you glance in the mirror,  
saying for every turning forward,  
the way they turn down  
when you look out the window  
there is a turning away.  
How you've taken the language of a decree,  
and made a refrain:  
irretrievably broken,  
irretrievably broken.

Yesterday it snowed all day.  
Last night you listened to a cold wind  
breathing through the cracks.  
It was exact,  
though the moon is hanging around  
obscurely in its ice cloud halo,  
and it will snow again today.

ii.

Start with a fine mountain,  
weighty, steep, its tallest peak  
scrolling up into the distance.  
It's always snowing here.



Now use mists, with variations,  
 to show the fluidity of time,  
 to enhance the scope,  
 —swathing everywhere—  
 grey-wash evanescent sky,  
 emotive clouds passing over snow,  
 dragonish ciphers ghosting  
 across a slate sea.

Reversed,  
 the solid forms  
 and closed space.  
 We don't mean that anymore.

Reduce any figures  
 to a hush.

Sketch them  
 midstep,  
 hunch their backs,

a few scratches,  
 enough,

as they wend up a stone path,  
 —mist above, mist below—

somewhere in the snowy crags  
 at the mountain's base, in the inlets,

sink  
 the houses and boats.  
 Wedge a thicket of bulrushes,  
 close up, jet black strokes,  
 across the bottom right.  
 This is the bottomless edge.

Draw each feathered stalk.  
 Notch the leaves  
 sheaving their stems.  
 Mark every terminal cluster,  
 each little cap of snow.

These lines must be well defined,  
 definite and determined.  
 No one should think of falling

or feel that anything they've entered here  
might slip off the edge.

Now, the moon.

Use ground gold to make the pigment.  
You know how to thin the ink.  
Now, perfect the pooling device, tarashikomi,  
watery drops spreading on wet silk.  
A fading ring,

a blanching moon  
remembering what it owes the sun,  
its yellow blush almost borderless  
emerging from dense mists  
a quickening vocable.

Under this moon, be utterly absorbed.

## UNION BAY

This is the hour when the geese come in to graze.  
Korin would relish the sound of that. Fair game  
in all its lugubriousness. And yet there is such an hour,  
and a not too-patchy lawn, and steps that mark  
the transition from their high-in-the water drift,  
the slow formal frame in the space between the lines  
of the University Bridge and city overpass, the wedge  
of geese approaching, angles that need Kenzan's  
weighty and disciplined brushwork and sense  
of placement to render the drama of it,  
their black feet as they waddle up while the kids sidle down.

The family picnicking could be mine, twiceover.  
As children we came here often, too, one of our "Sunday drives  
in the country" before the shore was a park. There were blackberry  
vines then, and cattails, tall grass to the water's edge,  
and only one bridge. I wonder if these children, if they wave,  
too, at the small window of the drawbridge tower,  
friends with the gatekeeper no one ever sees?  
Now, the mother of adults, I'm a student again.  
reading in Baker's Japanese Art, musing about the Edo  
period. My suit is mostly dry, sitting sideways  
to the sun, I'm content with today.

There were two brothers, the Ogata boys,  
the quiet one, a potter and a monk,  
Kenzan, saw beauty in things the way they were.  
"His style was compelling and reserved."  
His older brother, Korin, usually a little drunk—  
rice wine, plum—gave the motley, noisy crowd prestige,  
for he was sardonic to upper and lower alike,  
equally mischievous to fan makers  
and physicians, and a master of the gesture.  
A breeze has entered saying hush to the youngsters,  
stay low where wet suits in the car can't get you,  
the water's too cold; quietly hoo, hoo, this is the best water, black water.  
And the sun is heading towards a last burst,  
and maybe the hatted oldsters, who've turned their backs,  
(the shadows are lengthening; it's getting late)  
would be amused to be so emblematic,  
the two of them sticking it through all that jockeying,

making a pretty good semblance of dining out  
 among the clutter of coolers and chicken, wet towels  
 and naughty cups. By now, the mother, a little despairing,  
 has sent the father packing. She's decided not to see  
 the children slide in and paddle off to their secret place  
 under the weeping willow. She is looking out across the bay.

To be master of the gesture means that everybody  
 knows there is a mistake in an outer grape-colored brocade  
 robe over a kimono of willow-green, over a kimono of yellow-  
 rose. Once, in a department store, I watched a calligrapher,  
 kneeling hours at a time, writing Happy New Year in sumi.  
 Attendants whisked the sheets away. He has the hawk  
 to thank for that one-motion swoop, the quick, fastidious  
 business of the spine, the flying off.

If there was a need,  
 the lone jet skier, out where the water is blue,  
 who has droned all afternoon in circles  
 for the pleasure of his wake,  
 if she waved, would he tell her  
 how redundancy works?

One time Korin arrived at a picnic, a little drunk,  
 more than a little late. Everyone had admired,  
 then opened their lacquered lunchboxes.  
 Inlaid Chrysanthemums, flowering buckwheat,  
 a playful hare, lead and mother-of-pearl,  
 gold-lacquered lids were scattered in the grass.  
 Korin drifted in, then sat straight-backed beside the river,  
 the angles between shoulders and bent knees formal  
 as if he were sitting on shogun Tokugawa's  
 raised platform. His lunch was wrapped in leaves.  
 It was masterful, the unwrapping, the leaves  
 gold-foiled on the inside, the urbane flick of wrappings  
 into the river where they floated off.  
 The empty boats traditional to summer paintings  
 were all unmoored at once.

On the other side of the bay,  
 tall city buildings aloof as slates before—pink!  
 gold—bronze—Copper flashes off green-black hills;  
 and a little chop's picked up so that everywhere not in shadow,  
 as if a brush were charged in silver and flicked across the wrist,  
 catches. This is the hour when the geese come in to graze,  
 and the ducks with their red feet,

and the white yachts are through passing  
port to port, and are berthed, or lining up  
to go through the locks, their mooring lines in hand.

GOING HOME TO CHEROKEE  
for Donald

It's Don's turn at the wheel. Denise is by his side.  
We've been driving all day, bumper to bumper,  
through Dollyland, Pigeon Fork, the Gainesville bottleneck.  
It's been alien, mile after mile of false fronts,  
bungee jumps, gun and car museums, theme parks  
and eateries, souvenir shops. G. Love is singing, wry  
and gravelly, "My baby ain't sweet like yours."  
The road becomes loopier. We climb up and wind down.  
Even the Smokies are a slog. Except for Clingman's Dome,  
we neglect the overlooks. We settle for glimpses; distant,  
blue wooded slopes, brown scree, black cataracts, yellow balds,  
the white peaks standing like mystics who will remain  
long after the travelers have departed.  
From now on, we'll be on Indian land.  
I've been frank about how the gantlet doesn't end,  
goes right into town, becomes Cherokee skyrides,  
motels, billboard appeals. The water slide is neon blue  
and flaunts a single engine prop plane crunched at the top  
in a simulated wreck, one wing flailing against green trees,  
blue sky. What was tacky and bizarre before  
has a new edge now. We drive past Saunooke Village,  
the Teepee, The Indian Princess. Chief Big Eagle waves.  
He's Cherokee, but his garb is Plains-style; the red tunic,  
black bicycle shorts, the blue feathers, garish.  
"Faux-Sioux," I quip. Like this stretch into town,  
he is what he is but not what he seems.  
"I can't go there," Don says. It's the Bear Park.  
Live Bears! Feed the Bears! My son is shaking his head.  
Denise rests her hand on his thigh. She glances back at me.  
I think how he must love the way her short hair  
curls around her ear. Bittersweet, I think, reminded again  
about the part of motherhood that is reeling,  
reeling out, letting go. We pass Best Western and the Bingo Hall.  
We cross to the other side of the Oconoluftee  
and turn down the drive that flanks Mollie's plot  
of sweet corn. Taller than a man, in rows, the prop

roots mounded, sword-shaped leaves. Green  
 feather-capes, headdresses, gold topknots.  
 We're on Mollie's allotment, Parcel # 12, Upper Cherokee,  
 Qualla Boundary, Swain County, Cherokee, North Carolina.  
 Our side of Rattlesnake is in shadow. Late afternoon.  
 Up, up, up, deep trees. From this side of the river  
 all the way up its slope is Owl family land.  
 Tomorrow, I think, we'll stand on the porch  
 and I'll point up, about there, where a few slants  
 of sun will be angling across the posts  
 of the wood crib, crossed in an X, all  
 that's left of his grandfather's childhood home.

A surprise going in, like a boat. The trailer  
 roomier than it appears from outside.  
 Nook kitchenette. Neat living room, shag,  
 dark narrow hall. Denise slips her hand,  
 small and pale, into his. I remember Mollie's voice crackling  
 through the phone last week. Just calling to chat.  
 I hope the trailer will be okay. I've sent a map.  
 Be careful! The tourists drive so fast.  
 Slow down when you see my corn, the turn's right after.  
 How we talk is what I love. Nuance.  
 A kind of propriety. Ear-work. I was cleaning.  
 I used to work real hard at cleaning house.  
 You know how people used  
 to think in the old days. Thooose Injuns.  
 "Shiftless," I say. And then we laughed.  
 Lace curtains lift. Cool breeze. The master bedroom  
 is sunny. For you, Don; for you, Denise.

We hear the crunch of tires. Mollie's here.  
 How can I say what it is like to see her face?  
 This face is one I sink into, whether it's  
 a stranger's in the post office or a history  
 professor in Kalamazoo. It's my father's face,  
 and my brother's. My sister's broad forehead.  
 Deep mouth lines, slightly hooded eyes, and, yes,  
 chiseled lips. A face inclined to quiet.  
 Things pass swiftly across it. Faces capable  
 of keeping what's thought to the barest nudge.  
 And now, my cheek against the warm flat  
 of hers, I think maybe we look a little silly,  
 a woman in her eighties, one in her fifties,  
 leaning, propped against each other, grinning  
 like crazy. But we don't care. And that's my son

walking, to see him one might say, walking easily, toward us, his hand outstretched.



## TWO PLOTS: QUALLA BOUNDARY, CHEROKEE

Steep, narrow, as any rural mountain road is,  
this one winds up Rattlesnake,  
past cousin Dan's modern cantilevered house.

On the side of this mountain, the space allotted is carved and fitted,  
like the yellow stones of Yellowhill Baptist, Grandmother Nettie's  
small country church. Only the bell-steeple is made of white wood.

Some things won't fit in a photograph, though the sense of things suspended  
would be true. After the car doors and gravel, we were hushed in the grass.  
If there were birds, I didn't hear them. A faint breeze blew across my ears, felt,  
but not heard.

But, here, under the cross, it is the sun that is most fitting,  
laying our portion across our shoulders as we look off into space.  
Here, two little cemeteries are fitted on either side of the road.

On this side, one stands, shelved on a small green apron  
downside of the church. It hardly has room for itself.  
Small, white, regimental wood crosses are packed in rows  
to the verge and open sky.

Across the way, a little bigger, starting right on the shoulder  
of the road, the other cemetery dissembles, yellow and overgrown.  
In the shadows, crosses and headstones, dull bronze plaques,

and inconspicuous flowers strewn like afterthoughts. Members  
of my family are buried here. Their graves are well-marked.  
The nestling hackberry and huckleberry respect the preference  
of others, here, not to be noticed, except by a few, and pokeberry,  
too, tangles, pushing up against the side of Rattlesnake.  
Steep, blue, sheer, thick with trees, stolid, you think, solemn,  
until, leaning back, one notices the tops barely swaying. White pine,

pitch pine, sweetgum, like coming home after a boat trip,  
grabbing the sides of the shower stall so you won't fall down,  
blackgum, cucumbertree, silverbell, and hemlock, and shining sumac.

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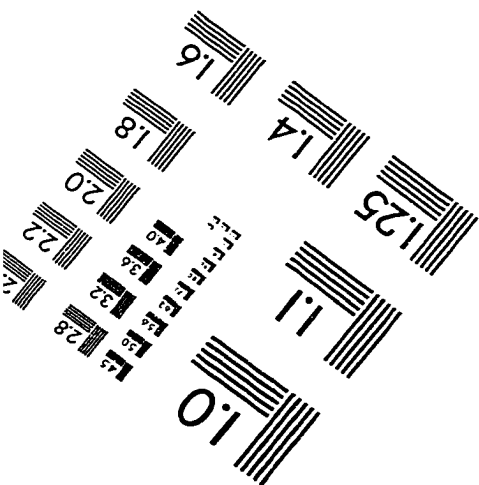
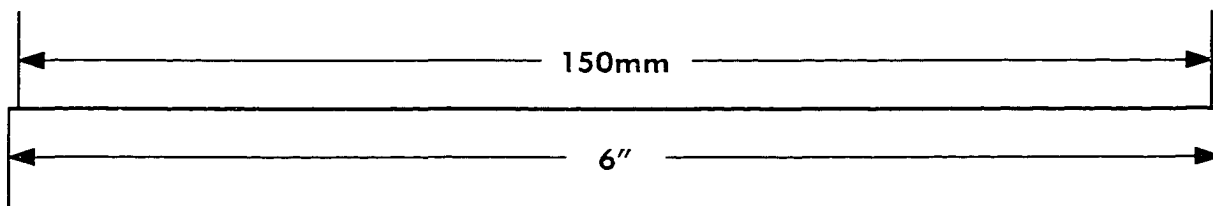
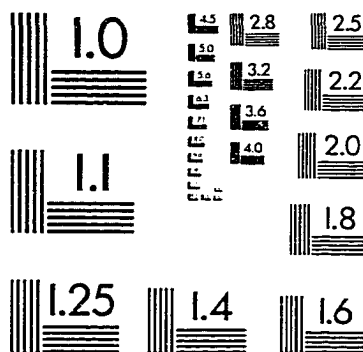
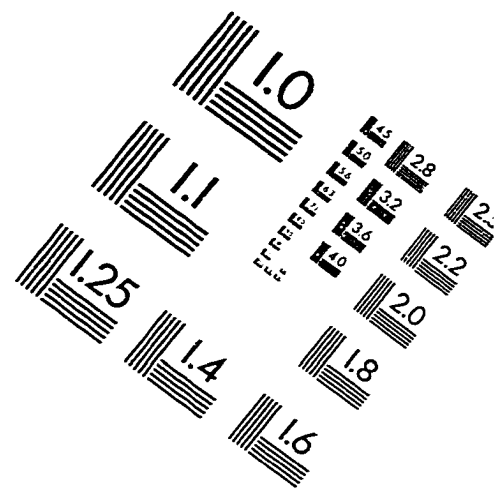
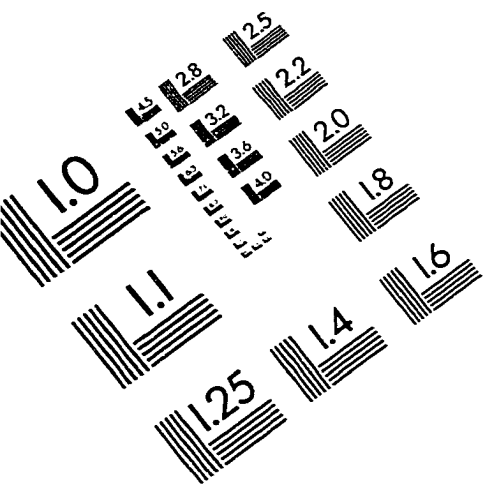
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