

Abiding

by

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To D. Scott Ward, Peter Meinke, and Nicholas Samaras with gratitude for being my teachers, mentors, and friends.

For Bryan, with my abiding love.

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## Abiding

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### ABSTRACT

“Abiding” is a collection of poems prefaced by a personal *ars poetica*, or treatise on poetics, titled “Poetic Dwelling: Making Manifest Being-in-the-World.” This piece explores the essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” written by the German philosopher and phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. The essay, which was adapted from a 1953 lecture to the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, explicates three ways in which *Sein* or Being, is made manifest in the world. One of these modes is via *poiêsis*. *Poiêsis*, broadly defined, is a thing made or done that is aimed at some end (*telos*). Aristotle, Heidegger tells us, also defined *poiêsis* simply as a poem.

In his later works, like the above mentioned essay, Heidegger began to focus heavily on poetry and its relationship to *Sein*. He often did so through the lens of the work of Friedrich Hölderin (1770-1848), the German lyric poet known to have been friendly in his lifetime with the father of phenomenology, Friedrich Hegel. It is from a line of Hölderin’s poetry, often quoted in Heidegger’s work, that the title of the *ars poetica* is drawn: “Poetically man dwells upon this earth.”

In “Poetic Dwelling: Making Manifest Being-in-the-World,” the author uses

“The Question Concerning Technology” as her starting point for exploring the relationship between philosophy and poetry in her own work. Trained in both disciplines, the author demonstrates how the two fields are deeply interconnected, creating a kind of mirror which is constantly reflecting back on the other. This reflexive quality is carried through into the poems themselves which often undertake—both explicitly and implicitly—philosophical questions. Included in these are inquiries into epistemology or ways of knowing, the existential nature of experience, and ethics or value theory, as well as references to the work of individual philosophers including Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt.

## Poetic Dwelling: Making Manifest Being-in-the-World

*Poetry must have philosophical implications and must resist them.*  
—Barry Stocker

My first semester in college, I took two classes that conditioned my thought and, subsequently, the course of all of my academic studies since. These two courses were Introduction to Philosophy and a creative writing workshop focused on poetry. The workshop was taught by D. Scott Ward, whose rich accent attested to his study in South Carolina under James Dickey, as well as his last teaching position at Auburn. Scott challenged me to think about how I used personal images to approach universal themes, often pushing me to explicate in detail what he found in my poems. I would answer as best I could, and then go home to write and rewrite, write and rewrite, again and again and again.

Converse to Scott's slow and deliberate manner, my philosophy professor was fresh out of Duquesne's graduate school and aptly named James Quick. He never sat, never even leaned against a desk, as he would fire question after question about the assigned readings. And what he assigned was not the standard introductory anthology material; it was full length, primary pieces. Our

answers were never quite right but, as a class, we came to understand the exactness of philosophy and the nimbleness of mind that it required. It wasn't long before I declared philosophy as my primary course of study and creative writing as a minor.

As I continued to study philosophy, I became ever more interested in existentialism and phenomenology, and especially the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's writings appealed to me because, like good poetry, they addressed the experience of the human subject as simultaneously both universal and particular.

Specifically, Heidegger's philosophy demonstrated that a person has ontological standing as she is part of *Sein*, Being, the *a priori* material of the universe. Concomitantly, she is also present and embodied. Heidegger expressed this embodiment as the always already (t)here of *Dasein*, being-in-the-world; the 'in' of in-the-world implies a relationship of attuned concern, as exemplified linguistically by saying you are "in love" with someone, versus a purely spatial representation such as "the couch is in the living room" (Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth* 125-6).

Since Heidegger's *Dasein* is in-the-world in the same sense that she is in love, she meets her surroundings with the desire that they reveal themselves (*alêtheia*), show the truth of their Being, and be known to her.<sup>1</sup> The purest form

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger states, "The Greeks have the word *alêtheia* for revealing. The Romans translate this with *veritas*. We say 'truth' and understand it as correctness of representation."

of revealing, Heidegger explained in his 1953 lecture to the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts titled "The Question Concerning Technology," is that of *phusis*, the "arising of something out of itself" (Heidegger 293). What Heidegger knows, but chooses not to say, is that revealing is in actuality only half of *phusis*' nature. Bruce Foltz explicates:

*Phusis* is that manner of being displayed by entities in general whereby they emerge and unfold of their own accord from out of themselves—coming forth uncompelled from concealment, and hence making themselves manifest, entering into appearance in an enduring, abiding sovereignty—all the while remaining rooted in the concealment from which this self-unfolding emergence took its origin, and thereby both simultaneously and ultimately receding back into themselves. (*Inhabiting the Earth* 156-7)

In other words, *phusis* is really the process through which a thing reveals itself, but then retreats back into concealment in order to keep the possibility fresh of emerging again. This process is made most obvious to us as a spontaneous and fleeting event such as the morning sun turning the night into a thousand golden pieces of light or a leafless tree budding forth in a canopy of flowers and fruit. Equally part of this act is the inherent knowledge that the sleep state of both night and winter will eventually return. The unending cyclicalness of *phusis*, its revealing and concealing, leads to one of Heidegger's other interpretations of the phenomenon, specifically of "'*phusis* in the narrower sense',

that is, from 'nature'" (Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth* 127).

Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher and student of Heidegger's explained in her book The Human Condition that the relationship between *physis*, which she translates as *physis*, and nature is not just conceptual but also etymological. She states: "It is characteristic of all natural processes that they come into being without the help of man, and that those things are natural which are not 'made' but grow by themselves into whatever they become. (This is also the authentic meaning of our word "nature", whether we derive it from its Latin root *nasci*, to be born, or trace it back to its Greek origin, *physis*, which comes from the word *phyein*, to grow out of, to appear by itself.)" (Arendt 150).

Obviously then, human beings, as natural entities, participate in *physis* and observe it both in themselves and the world around them. However, *physis*, through tapping into the universal aspect of who we are, of Being, transcends our individual finitude. As such, we seek out other modes of revealing which contain the possibility of bridging the space between the universal and the particular, discreet ways that each of us are beings-in-the-world. To do so, is the equivalent in religious terms of representing God—who, like Being, is also understood as infinite, unimaginable, holy and fleet—in a way that is comprehensible to the human mind. Not to do so, is to exist in a relationship of intellectual incoherence with the world that we are supposed to be both attuned and concerned with.

According to Heidegger, we make Being manifest in an expressly human world marked by linear and limited time through utilizing two other modes of

revealing. These modes are *poiêsis* and *technê*. Where *phusis* is the “arising of something out of itself...e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom,” *poiêsis*, by contrast, “is brought forth by the artisan or artist... [and] has the bursting open belonging to bringing forth, not in itself, but in another (*en allôî*), in the craftsman or artist” (Heidegger 293).

To illustrate *poiêsis*, Heidegger uses the example of a silver chalice and in doing so explains that the process of moving from a potentially existing chalice to an actually existing chalice is made possible by Aristotle’s four causes.<sup>2</sup>

Heidegger continues, stating that even though the “doctrine of the four causes goes back to Aristotle...everything that later ages seek in Greek thought under the rubric ‘causality’, in the realm of Greek thought and for Greek thought per se has simply nothing at all to do with bringing about and effecting. What we call by the name ‘cause’ and the Romans called *causa* is called *aition* by the Greeks, that to which something is indebted” (Heidegger 290). Thus, the artisan does not create or cause the chalice, as much as the chalice, as a part of Being that could not reveal itself in the manner of *phusis* (a chalice bush?), is indebted to the artisan for making it manifest. Logically then, according to Heidegger, the most important of Aristotle’s four causes is not, as it is patently assumed, the

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<sup>2</sup> In his text *Physics*, Aristotle names the four causes as material, efficient, final, and formal. The material cause is that out of which a thing is made; the efficient cause is the motion that began the act of creation. The final cause is the purpose for which the thing was created, and the formal cause is the ultimate shape that the thing takes on in order to fulfill its purpose.

teleological or final cause, the chalice's end. Instead, it is the efficient cause, the artisan who helps Being reveal itself within the confines of the human world by combining the three other causes and bringing them "into play for production of the sacrificial vessel" (Heidegger 292).

The second method of revealing employed in order to help make Being manifest in an expressly human world is that of *technê*. Excellence in *poiêsis* is gained through *technê*. Heidegger explicates:

We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word.

One is that *technê* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technê*

belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiêsis*; it is something poetic. The other thing that we should observe with regard to *technê* is even more

important. From the earliest times until Plato *technê* is linked with the word *epistêmê*. Both words are terms for knowing in the widest sense.

They mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and be expert in it. Such knowing provides an opening up. As an opening up it is a revealing. (Heidegger 294-5)

This form of opening up is the one Heidegger is ultimately concerned with in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology." The reason rests in the fact that *phusis*, as self-directed unfolding exemplified by nature, and *poiêsis*, a bringing forth, not in itself, but through the means of the artisan or craftsman, have remained relatively unchanged since the Greeks first coined the terms. On

the other hand, *technê* is no longer the knower who is so at home, integrated, and expert that his knowledge helps to reveal Being. Instead, *technê* is now best exemplified and understood in terms of its etymological contemporary, technology and more specific to Heidegger's concerns, post-industrialization's modern technology. Here, Heidegger asks and answers:

What is modern technology? It too is a revealing. Only when we allow our attention to rest on this fundamental characteristic does that which is new in modern technology show itself to us. And yet, the revealing that holds sway through modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poiêsis*. The revealing that rules modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such.

(Heidegger 296)

In other words, "It is not through attuned responsiveness that technology discloses entities, but through...challenging forth, provoking, or forcing out. What is brought forth by [this type] of technology is not evoked, shaped, or even forged, but rather 'extracted'" (Foltz, *On Heidegger* 328). The purpose of this extraction is not to help Being reveal itself in the human world—as was *technê*'s original task—but instead to force it to be immediately present at hand as, what Heidegger terms, standing-reserve (*Bestand*) or stock, that which is always ready and available for future use.

However, this misinterpretation/misuse of *technê* has unforeseen

consequences:

As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object [i.e.—as that part of Being which is revealed in the human world as artifact], but exclusively as standing reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of standing-reserve, he comes to the brink of a precarious fall, that is, he comes to the point where *he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve*. Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exhorts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way, the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. (Heidegger 308, italics added)

If everything is now forced to always be revealed via *technê* as standing-reserve, then nothing is revealing and concealing, via *phusis*. If we remember that *phusis* in the narrower sense is 'nature', then we have metaphysically dissolved the world we live in by allowing it to exist only as a purely human construct. Additionally, this has also led to us literally dissolving our world via the ecological homicide of deforestation, industrial agriculture, rapid extermination of entire species, ozone depletion and so on. The end result of this situation is, according to Heidegger, that humanity loses its essence.

Although it is not until that point that human essence is mentioned, and although Heidegger goes no further in attempting to define it, I would argue that the essence to which he refers is that of our position as *Dasein*, as being-in-the-

world. But, as I have already said, the world is no longer and we are lost. Needless to say, this is a grave and desperate situation that *Dasein* finds herself in and it caused me to wonder if it is one that that we could recover from. Heidegger seemed to think so, as he posited the assertion that “technology harbors in itself what we least expect, the possible upsurge of the saving power” (Heidegger 314). For many years, when I encountered these words, I found them a laughably incomplete and insufficient solution. How could this be, I would wonder, since modern technology itself is the cause of our alienation? How do I reverse the very trend that I am entrenched in and controlled by, made into standing-reserve myself, while at the same time my world is lost to me? In response to these questions, Heidegger is strangely silent, choosing instead to close the essay with words that always sound more to me like those of a false prophet than a philosophical genius; “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought” (Heidegger 317). Well, if there is anything a philosopher can do, it’s to question. And so I took my inquiry to book after book after book, class, research project and discussion. I asked my way through a Bachelor’s degree and then a Master’s degree in philosophy. Nothing shined forth for me, let alone brightly. That is, of course, until I signed up for a poetry workshop at the University of South Florida taught by Peter Meinke.

I decided to take the workshop with Peter out of a strange sense of

nostalgia; although he had become professor emeriti before my arrival, Peter had founded the very same creative writing program in which I had studied as an undergraduate at Eckerd College. During the course of my semester studying with him at University of South Florida, I went to a poetry reading in which he was participating with several other authors. I heard Nick read a haunting piece titled “Daughter, Learning Fear.” I knew immediately that I wanted also to study with him.

Through their guidance, mentorship, and gentle but astute critique, I was challenged to push my writing to the place where I understood it in a new way: as a methodology for doing philosophy. Poetry does, after all, encourage us to explicate all of the same universal questions as philosophy, while challenging us to do so from our own unique, individual perspectives. It was with this realization that I returned to Heidegger and read this worn paragraph with fresh eyes.

There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technê*. Once that revealing which brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *technê*. Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technê*. The *poiêsis* of the fine arts was also called *technê*. At the outset of the West, in Greece, the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them. They illuminated the presence of the Gods and the dialogue of divine and human destinings. And art was simply called *technê*....Why did art bear the modest name *technê*? Because it was a revealing that

brought forth and made present....It was finally that revealing which holds complete sway in the fine arts, in poetry, and in everything poetical.

(Heidegger 315-6)

*Poiêsis* is broadly defined as a thing made or done that is aimed at some end (*telos*). Aristotle also defined it simply as a poem. Excellence in *poiêsis* is achieved by skill, by *technê*. According to Heidegger, what we have left of *technê* in the modern world is in actuality a misinterpretation/misuse, which has come to have dire consequences. To rectify this situation, we must remember and reenact the forgotten aspects of *technê*, specifically as personified by a knower who is so at home, integrated and expert that his knowledge helps to reveal Being. Sounds great, but how to do it? Simple: Through the poetic.

In the end, this should not have been a surprising answer, as Heidegger himself spent much of his later years writing on poetry, technology, language and thought, specifically in the works of Johann Peter Hebel and Friedrich Hölderlin. His goal was multi-faceted but included was an “attempt to think through the philosophical meaning of what he termed ‘rootedness,’ ‘autochthony,’ or *Bodenständigkeit*[.] Heidegger did not merely mean one’s geographical roots, one’s national affiliation, or one’s regional sense of belonging. He also meant to convey a profoundly metaphysical relation to the earth as a place of dwelling, to the landscape as one’s indigenous home, and to language as the expression of one’s rootedness in both” (Bambach 268). By reclaiming *technê*, we metaphysically rebuild the world and restore our rootedness, our place as being-

in-the world. Thus, Heidegger draws from a line of Hölderlin's poetry when he pronounces that "poetically man dwells upon this earth" (Heidegger 316). This search for poetic dwelling, draws on the "Lutheran notion of *Beruf* as 'religious calling'...understood as a *Ruf des Seines*, or 'call of being'" (Bambach 278). It is something we, as poets, are *compelled* to do; it is an act of salvation.

I know I feel the draw to create, to make manifest through poetry. It is a compulsion that led Hannah Arendt to explore the idea of humans as *homo faber*, "the builder of the world" (Arendt 135). The world I am working on, the place I am seeking revealment, revelation, and salvation through attuneness with Being can be seen in the dominant themes of my work. Those themes are the search for community or tribal identity, the shifting nature of time, wherein what has already occurred and what has yet to be, profoundly influence the present moment, how love is made manifest in human relationships and, of course, what it means to be a philosopher and a poet living in a time dominated by the ethos of *Bestand*.

## Maybe in Madison

I'm in a city I can't identify, though I know  
it's a memory, not a dream.

There's a gathering, maybe even a festival.  
It reminds me of the parking lot scene  
at a Dead show: white boys with dreadlocks—

girls with gauze skirts pulled low on hip bones  
I want to run my hands over and over.

Winds shift; a graying mist. Their colors  
wash out and pool at bare feet before running  
rainbows into grated gutters.

They stay exactly where they are, unaware  
or looking skyward, twirling *Gaia Gaia Gaia*.

## Chattooga Flood, 1994

The summer I turned twenty-two, the Chattooga swelled; rain washed the road off the mountain, whole pines over the marker at Highway 79.

When the river receded, a dairy cow was up in the oak. After her stench turned ripe and the body full with bloat, we cut the boughs and covered the ground with lye.

We never buried the fawn found on the Georgia side. She was tucked under a low rock ledge. Only her neck, pulled at an angle, told you she was dead.

When I hiked to the river all that season and the next, I watched the fawn decompose, her skin shrinking tight against bone, then falling away until a skeleton remained.

No human, no wolf, no carrion bird bothered her— all of us ashamed she had broken the code: Death hides itself.

## Life in the Prairie Dog Protection Program

She arrived with a bite that showed the bone in her little finger. While they stitched with dissolvable string—should such a thing be made just to melt into flesh?—she implicated Gatsby, the prairie dog who lived down the hall with the self-involved English major. The doctor explained, as he wrote the prescription for antibiotics and ten pills for pain, that she would have to produce the prairie dog; “Otherwise, you’re looking at the anti-rabies immunoglobulin series, which is about thirty shots.” She drove home in shock, her little finger stiff in the air, and knocked on the door of the English major. “Where’s Gatsby?” she asked the man who read too much Fitzgerald and secretly wished he was a dandy. “Somewhere better than here,” he began, and told her how he drugged and drowned the prairie dog, throwing its body off the pier. She waited for him to end the joke so they could pack up Gatsby and go, but when he didn’t budge from his slump at the door, she turned and headed home. The next day she was at the hospital for shot one, unable to shake the feeling that Gatsby wasn’t really gone. Instead, as she looked at the needle, she was struck with a sudden vision: the prairie dog on a hamster wheel, oversized and sullen.

## The Work I Do

People always ask why I do the work I do.  
“Because,” I want to answer, “I enjoy fucking  
with the minds of people like you.”

But instead I sigh, and begin to rhapsodize  
on how fundamental philosophy is. “Do you know  
philosophy gave us geometry, ontology, rhetoric,  
aesthetics, scientific method and law?”

“How marvelous!” they say, backing slowing away,  
or maybe “I took chemistry in college,” then running.

Just in that moment I am left with the truth  
that both Kant and Leibniz knew as vocational doom:  
Maybe philosophy bakes no bread, but it sure can clear a room.

## Absinthe in Israel

The rabbinical students drank together  
their last night in the Old City, then rolled  
with ghosts who rose from uneven beliefs  
and roads worn by too many pilgrimages  
down to the Wailing Wall. Finding themselves

there and unprepared, they dug in wallets  
and pockets for scraps of paper.  
On dry cleaning tickets, lunch receipts  
and bus stubs, earnest, intoxicated acolytes  
penned deep and secret prayers before

pushing the paper far into the Wall. Some asked  
for mighty pulpits from which to be heard  
and others for words straight from Him to utter.  
On the corner of the coffee shop menu  
she too wrote what often she prayed—

*“Let me never come to understand;  
the burden would be too great.”*

## When Faced with Canonical Works

Once I joked that if the good die young,  
the mediocre go at middle age. Less  
amusing now, due to my own slow  
progression towards prime, combined

with finding myself less inclined towards brilliance  
than once hoped. There seems nothing left  
to do but smoke a cigarette, think of fleshy girls  
and ignore the half-read books, impatient as postcards

inside my mahogany desk. They'll still be there  
tomorrow, terrible and taunting. I'll retrieve *Meditations  
on First Philosophy*, feel its stinging critique,  
then relinquish it to the small black dog

who chews it insouciantly at my feet.

## Vocational Considerations

Maybe I will leave philosophy  
becoming a poet instead

It requires much less research  
while you remain equally

unread

## Chimera Turning

Cerebral people dancing in a metaphorical  
way, tracing the rumba as if it's meaning  
instead of movement  
while reading the steps across the floor:

for her, a critical text in which sign  
and signifier don't match—  
    no one leads  
—she's unable to follow  
the rhythm from the page  
to her feet;

for him, a bestiary, where allegory's  
in animal—both seal and gazelle—  
a startling sea creature now lumbering  
the traverse of turns and twirls.

## After Taking My Grandmother from the Bath

I am big as an oak curled around you,  
stroking your face like a lover who  
was once a lover, thinking back to  
a man who touched you with such desire  
it caused fires to glow as far as Omaha.

When faded, he touched  
with tenderness, caressing you  
every night until you passed  
into sleep. Caressing you  
every night until he passed away.

Now it is you who desire—  
tenderness, respite, rest,  
protection from a world  
stranger today than yesterday.

In the hall, your daughter prays  
if you pass away, it's in your sleep.  
I stroke your face; you wake  
long enough to look up, say  
the only words that ever matter.

## Untitled

I want to be twenty. At a concert with my friends,  
tripping on acid, laughing at jokes only we find funny.

I want to be up all night feeling like, aaahhh, I understand.

I want to eat a breakfast of potatoes and eggs and toast  
in a diner next to good people who just woke up.

When they leave for work or to cut the grass,  
I want to get in bed with you. I want you to be solid

in a way that lets me ground my ephemeral self  
back into this world. I want you to kiss me as we fall asleep

and not to wake up until dark.

## Conversation with Dr. Ellis, Professor Emeritus

He comes to his former room, now mine, every Friday for Senior Seminar, and gripes of pain, imagined slights and how our young pupils misspend their nights with questionable bedfellows.

This is where he and I disagree.

I believe it's true our students' time is misused, but not because they're learning to fuck, drink booze, smoke hash from borrowed bongos.

It's due to confused belief that their anger is new and inventive; instead it is failure to recognize all they don't yet know.

Nuance is a bitch, unforgiving, unforgetting, and soaked through with this truth: if the answers were elemental, someone before you would have solved the equation.

If I could make it all simple again, would I fix the failures of god and state?

No.

And so I know the ideological fervor of youth is not beaten out of you; it simply seeps away when you'd keep stillness for yourself.

## Sophia Dreaming

I see her alone, dreaming, while in another room he romances Wittgenstein and wonders why she no longer loves him. If he were to ask

she would say, *It is the way you hold your texts so tenderly, kissing and caressing their words, their shape and form—*

*with me you analyze, categorize my words, shape me into form and matter.* But there is no inquiry, so in the other room she dreams

of men who romance the women they love

while he makes stoic resolution to read the scriptures of our Father and exercise financial prudence when purchasing his texts.

## **Lola Following Noren**

How long did I follow you before looking back  
to see how far we'd gone?  
How far gone were we  
when back was the only direction worth looking.

## **Margot in Jonah's Bed**

Making love

if love can be made  
like money or moonshine

on a Sunday in May

she wonders if tiger lilies taste  
like ginger on the tongue

and thinks she'll be gone  
come June

## **Anthony about Ella**

I married a mama with plush  
thighs and a slow temper.

Together, these make her lush,  
not in earthy metaphors of meadows

but expansive like cityscapes  
or fog on linen sheets.

## Ian on Anastasia's Rose

A blossom never blooms so bright  
that it destroys the possibility  
of coming to light next Spring.

So it is with you.

Never so present as to cease to surprise;  
all those things which in you I delight,  
return to me again.

## Nicholas Remembering Maura

The strange nostalgia of photos  
is finding them ordered  
in a fortuitous way—

a psychic who knows what happened  
the day before yesterday.

## **When Anya Warms Aaron**

He brings cold into bed like lake effect snow,  
like stories never told during daylight, and I push  
up against him with my Arizona heat which  
comes when rivers join or canyons meet the skyline.

He absorbs me into his untold stories and suddenly  
they're about multicolored mesas, shrill ravens,  
devastation by invaders with snowy hands, white  
words, ice hearts sent to smolder in hot places.

## Smaller in the Distance

Sometime after forgetting you knew this would end badly,  
tumbling bits of rock dislodged by staccato movements of

bighorn rams wake you to the floor of the Grand Canyon  
and its rough, rambling excuse to shore the Colorado River

as she runs to the lake. Now awake, you think about horizon lines  
and how a point in the distance gets smaller, until finally it slips

over the sloping edge of the earth, out of sight and reach.  
But here the world is girded by two stone walls, millions of years

in the making and you've waited all month for them to frame  
a moon so bold and opalescent the light couldn't possibly

be reflecting another, but instead glows from an inner core  
of molten silver. There are no horizon lines. Nothing can

slip away. It can only move downstream towards the lake which,  
if ever drained, would reveal the skeletal remains of small, western

towns full of half-breeds and dubbed too unimportant to impede  
progress. You assess what lies within you, recognizing parts

of your heart you would surely flood if given the opportunity,  
asking what becomes of memory if everything is worth forgetting.

## Abiding

You are always already there, waiting to greet me when I say goodbye  
And to remind me there are three of us in this relationship:

You, Me and abiding Love.

When I feel a break,  
a moving apart from you,

I am still held sway in a way that means, even if my feet sink  
into the river's silt, the current flows around and through me.

If you are there, it flows through us both and I am brought back.

There is no downstream; the river bends  
to meet itself, so that, at most, it holds open a space

between what has been and will be. Our job is to consecrate that space.

We are in the sanctuary, on the floor, on pillows, on our knees.

We are inviting back the gods, asking them to re-story this place  
that has become so unholy each of us has moved from godchild to

what?

A skill set, an instrumental value, a verb?

Arendt said that those things comprise *what* we are, and can be known to us.  
But *who* we are, the essential nature of our souls, is transparent.

Others see it and occasionally they mirror a bit back;  
it hits our eyes like starlight,  
blurred and turned hard.

I need to grow pheasant wings and beat against that starry sky;

I need you to look at me.

I need you to see me and know who I am. I need you to love me anyway.

## Romancing My Old Age

When I am twenty, I will sit  
in a New Orleans café and sip  
wine with myself at seventy.

We will tap our feet to Bourbon Street  
jazz as my older self remembers  
her youth in a South of sunflowers  
and herbal tea sweetened with clover honey.

I will listen as she weaves rich stories  
of her days spent on a rock by the river  
or the wild Turkish writer with a balcony  
overlooking the market in Nepal.

Her eyes will dim with thoughts  
of the man who raped her on that  
sticky Georgia night or the child  
who died beaten and bloody in her arms.

"But still," she'll say, with a dismissive wave,  
"it's been a fine life."

The band kicks in to a swingin' rendition  
of When the Saints Go Marching In  
as I lean forward to pour her  
another glass of Chardonnay.

There my eyes meet those of myself  
at seventy and I will know  
what it is to romance my old age,  
as she romanticizes her youth,  
in a steamy cafe on Bourbon Street.

**For The Poet Peter Meinke  
(to whom I apologize for not writing something better)**

Senior was added to your citizenship  
several years ago, but girls in college classes  
still titter when you stroll, handing out  
sly, impish smiles much as other  
grandfathers give out candy.

What is this power you have, Peter,  
over these apple-taut angels?

It is the grin, the gait of tarnished roguishness  
that tells how in youth you would have  
swallowed us with the sexiness of your words.

Now that sexiness has settled  
into sensual reverberation,  
an oaken and aged woodwind cantata.

Your words no longer devour us whole  
but leave wanton desire in their wake,  
wishes that we be found worthy  
of your poetic turn of phrase.

## Swing Low

*August 28, 2005*

We went for your thirtieth birthday which,  
as anyone knows, is its own kind of cataclysm.  
We went because New Orleans is a good city  
for transition, premonition, resurrection—  
maybe because the dead are so present  
in their stone homes, reminding us  
that even a funeral is a good place to dance.

So we took the moment to eat crawfish étouffée  
and too many beignets from Café Du Monde  
before buying a Tarot reading in Jackson Square.  
Every query coaxed the same two cards  
from the deck: first, the Tower of total devastation,  
then the Chariot of protected travel.

We knew this was the antecedent to forever,  
like London before the Great Fire or the last dance  
in Berlin. But the end is slow and stunned  
and too prayerful to be scared, so we wandered  
zombie-eyed along the streetcar line gathering  
remembrances we'd stored from trips before,  
sheltering them like children from the rain.

Long before a daybreak that never came,  
we took one of the last taxis packed  
with eight strangers to the airport.  
At the airport, we took one of the last planes out—  
an eastbound jet set to lift some to safety  
while other clung to levies that would soon collapse.

From their stone homes, the dead watched  
as their new brothers broke the water's surface,  
before calling old, black men in faded fedoras to  
play Dixieland so floating bodies could find direction  
to their graves and souls to chariots swung low.

## Still Life

I have been trying to still life for quite some time, remaking it into a bowl of grapes—metaphorically full of possibility, though lacking irony or resistance. But metaphor is never right except where irony resists, and so my life is more like

the plain, gray sparrow who lights on a street meter running down. I make believe no one dies on sunny days; no one's born in rain. That there's hope for balancing exultation against the mundane business of a day bereft of possibility, wondering

if futility leads to madness. What drives us to create, if not objects in space, then meaning from time? Meaning is the only thing that stills the relentless movement of light over the rich texture of splintered, wooden benches, over bowls of grapes

and cherries. It suffuses each with enough resistance that we can hold the moment and turn it into metaphor before it rinses away. When I die, I could easily be carried over on moving ribbons of water. Transitions are little deaths

we do so many times in practice for the moment life is still.

## Before Becoming an Ancestor

I.

I think of the in-between from bodily passing until the last memory segues into forgetting. That's when you join the indistinguishable bounty of the Ancestors. I'm comfortable with the idea of being there; it's representation in memory that makes me uneasy.

II.

I dwell in an innerscape, stunned by how little I can say. Every attempt at expression lends itself to clichés like sidewalk chalk in rain or kitchen drains with water spiraling down. And so I know I'll be remembered not as resplendent as lived experience, but only for the little I could show.

III.

I hope to have moved with enough decency and humanity of spirit, someone will talk of me as ethical and good. Maybe I'll have studied enough and shared enough of what I discovered, someone will call me teacher and scholar.

IV.

Hopefully, I was good as a daughter and a mother, although probably neither my mother nor child will say so...

V.

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