



# JUST THE WEATHER

*Donald Tetto*



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# CONTENTS

## POEMS

Anchor	5	
The Wind in Albany	6	
Nile River Delta	7	
Poetry Written While Riding the Double-E	8	8
On "Having a Coke With You"	9	
Visit From a Dying Friend	11	
Criteria For a Home	12	
Perfectionist	13	
Hackettstown Hill	14	
Grains	15	
Like Matches	17	
Within the Architecture of the Organ	18	18
Hope & Benevolent	21	

## SCALE

For Emilee	27	
Manifest	28	
A Bird in the Hand	29	
snake	30	
Scale	31	
Effigy	34	
wash stand hand	35	
Time	37	
George Street	38	
Concert	39	
Chinese	40	
Off-the-Record	41	
Character Study	42	

## FICTION

Strays	45
Descanso	50

## ETCETERA

Ode on the Sons of Adam	59
The Plum Blossoms	60
Morning, Somerset	61
The Shred of Doubt	62
Bureaucracy Has Committed Murder Here	63
Schooley's Mountain	64
<i>Notes</i>	67

JUST THE WEATHER



# POEMS



## ANCHOR

I asked her to marry me  
but she could not.  
Alas, she said, I've married the sea.  
I doubted,  
she cupped  
her hands on my ear;  
and, indeed, I could hear  
the waves rolling in.

## THE WIND IN ALBANY

Upstate, Amtrak.  
Seven-fifteen and spotlit skylines  
of cities I've never seen.  
Eleven-thirty, cab fare:  
eighteen twenty-five and tip  
and me with bags outside your room,  
surprise in your eyes  
and against your lips —

and one million breaths, compressed,  
lying in your bed under the window  
watching construction paper cut-out stars  
as they dance  
in the wind  
in Albany.

## NILE RIVER DELTA

Sweaty as we were,  
you smelled of raspberry sweet;  
and the taste of still buries me  
forever in that place —

where the fertile crescent curves  
toward the Nile River delta.  
Trace my fingers cross the surface,  
spreading gently in their wake.

POETRY WRITTEN  
WHILE RIDING THE DOUBLE-E

I study faces and  
study nothing —  
strangers in headphones sing to themselves  
and to me, my mind sings their stories.

While I knead my words  
and glance out the window  
over voices of stuck-teenage girls,  
my eyes meet too often, awkwardly those  
of the boy with bleached hair  
and black fingernails.

I wonder about  
the girl who stares at her hands  
and I write it all, down  
George Street from Douglass,  
alone, early evening,  
cold and September.

## ON “HAVING A COKE WITH YOU”

I called you  
when I was outside  
because it was windy and because the sun  
was orange despite the cold.  
It was still winter but  
the first time in months  
that there were such sharp shadows  
on everything.

I took pictures of them, the shadows,  
but it wasn't enough so  
I called you and the wind  
beat on the voicepiece of the phone,  
so I turned my back to it and stood  
in a sharp shadow and the sun flickered,  
moved behind clouds like tunnel  
lamps flashing between cars  
at Penn Station.

I called you  
and the grass was just regrowing  
and the ground was soggy from  
the rain this morning. But I walked  
on it anyway and pressed rainwater  
from the ground like dishwater  
from a sponge and I called because  
I had just read Frank O'Hara  
and when I caught you, you were on the  
way out the door but  
I asked you to wait and you did and

when I finally got down to reading the poem I  
was breathless from finding a bench to sit on  
and from the excitement of hearing your voice.

The sun was low in the sky  
and I rushed all the lines  
and had to shout over the wind so when I was finally finished  
you weren't sure if I was done  
or if I was unfolding the papers (the wind had wrapped  
around my fingers) or if I was just pausing to catch  
my breath.

## VISIT FROM A DYING FRIEND

Even the sun dies, he said,  
and if you lived a hundred million years  
you could watch every star  
twinkle out of the sky  
like lights in the city below  
(or snowflakes,  
on touching warm pavement).

I told him I'd love him to  
even that moment of full black;  
but he told me that no one  
lives for that long.

We stood on the hill  
over the valley past sunset  
and I loved him  
(though there was no snow on the ground)  
and when he was gone  
the city was dark in the valley  
and I felt a hundred  
million years old.

## CRITERIA FOR A HOME

When I saw  
the apartment

I wondered  
where warm

and bright panes  
of sun

would fall  
on your bare

back  
and stretch toward

the curve  
of your side  
in the morning.

## PERFECTIONIST

You always tweak  
your poems to death,  
she said  
as I brushed her hair from her face,  
some lint off her shoulder,  
stood her straighter up,  
lifted her chin with my finger,  
and told her  
I had no idea  
what she was talking about.

## HACKETTSTOWN HILL

It was a night  
of smells  
when I showered  
with your towel —  
and you were there,  
clean and wet  
and warm and damp,  
your scent.

Climbing into bed  
stirred up the air  
like smoke —  
it spiraled toward the window  
and into me  
before pooling back  
around my head.

I smelled it,  
like summer,  
like the sound of cars  
on wet gravel,  
like the silhouette of  
a windowpane  
climbing up the wall  
as they roll past —  
your scent:  
like postcards, like foil,  
like Hackettstown Hill.

## GRAINS

I would be lying  
if I said  
I didn't miss  
making love to you  
or day trips to the city  
or splitting dishes  
at that Italian place  
you hate.

I can not see the planks  
but for the grain:  
fifteen-minute naps, the way  
your hair falls in your face, the way  
you can't find things  
in grocery stores.

I want to take a pretty girl by the hand  
and show her to the flour.

My fingertips itch  
and stretch,  
but touch nothing.

I don't so much miss  
your kisses  
as the small pinspecks  
that'd stick  
as they pulled away.

Between us, grains  
of sugar sweet  
and stinging salt  
that linger.

## LIKE MATCHES

do  
not play with  
line breaks  
she said

you'll burn the whole  
thing down

## WITHIN THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ORGAN

There are eight of us there,  
silent and straining  
in the absence of the speech  
we can not hear —  
the organ  
installed one hundred years ago,  
et cetera.

But between these silences,  
the music;  
for lack of seats within the chamber  
we, sitting in the architecture  
of the organ itself,  
many with one ear covered,  
the other cocked toward the door,  
though some do not,  
for even that seashell sound of blood flowing  
could drown out the music within.

Warm here, all of us sweating,  
some fanning themselves with music  
that had been lying around;  
eyes alternately  
closed and open,  
the pale and pretty knees of the girl opposite,  
the wrinkles in the profile of the black woman,  
her bright lipstick,  
the unshaven boy fingering a pack of cigarettes,  
the curve of the banister,

the subtle variations in the widths of its posts,  
the keyhole of the doorknob  
and the wear-patterns of its metal —

and then, eyes closed,  
blackness so like sleep  
and heavier than any tactile thing,  
the music so engulfing we forget  
we can just barely hear it,  
its own patterns, curves, and subtle variations,  
its own wrinkles and roughness,  
its own knees bent as it  
pirouettes, steps, a sweeping half-bow,  
the crescendo applause from within,  
but we, still, silent,  
do not dare clap,  
our hands instead placed to the wall:  
palms flat, fingers down,  
as to the belly of a pregnant woman,  
gently absorbing the vibrations  
of that which so is  
yet is not yet so.

One woman, herself pregnant,  
eyes closed beneath thick glasses  
rocks slightly, as if to sleep —  
and so it is  
that those outside the chamber  
feel the vibration  
while within  
the architecture of the organ itself

one hears,  
if the circulation of blood  
might pause to let listen.

# HOPE & BENEVOLENT

I.

What is autumn  
but a series of smells  
that should remind you of something?

II.

I hate the cold  
and am wearing layers against it,  
but the cold of these days is kinetic, a cold  
that can feel things about to happen,  
that is as filled with past action as with breath  
that had been briefly visible  
before falling away.

### III.

These days are perfect,  
wrought-iron, Sixth Ave,  
speak of day trips to the city,  
or that place where the rusted chain link  
is peeled back to let you through,  
like a seat near the window  
and the heater,  
but the window open anyway,  
because feeling is borne of contrast  
just as we are borne of such things  
as a piano concert the night before or after  
you've come and gone,  
just as if the sun had hit the building  
the way the architect intended  
it would have been too much  
and the shadows texture this space  
with where they will be  
and where they've been.

IV.

Walking alone at night  
reminds you that winter is coming  
and the smell of wood burning  
reminds you it has nothing to remind you at all  
save that its smell is sweet,  
but sweeter burning,  
we find ourselves lost  
but more together  
and are better lost  
than with no home at all.

SCALE



## FOR EMILEE

I see a friend  
on Sunday  
and cannot tell  
if I'm falling in love  
or if it's just  
the weather,  
but I do like  
the dress  
she is wearing.

## MANIFEST

I came here  
because I am not a thinking man  
but one who can appreciate the sound  
of a shovel sifting dried earth.

This is not to say I don't believe in progress.  
I do, but only that which can be seen.

Take not of the tree of knowledge,  
but take to it with an axe.

God's curse, his greatest gift  
for man: labor.  
For woman: labor.

The mind is the devil's wheelbarrow; it  
carries us down to the mines.

## A BIRD IN THE HAND

The bold-faced entries  
refer to Volume I,  
a used copy of which  
I do not have.

## SNAKE

the door opens  
its own accord

a row of flyers flap  
up stairs

## SCALE

I.

We take the subway,  
she and I  
talk about the future.

That day,  
small in the city,  
skyscrapers reflect  
everything. She  
doesn't want to talk  
of love.

Later, in the park, we  
watch planes fly overhead.  
She lies near me  
in the grass  
but that is all.

II.

The zoo.  
Children's room,  
plastic dinosaurs hang  
from ceiling. I  
ask her what we are doing  
tomorrow.

“Did you know?” she says,  
lifting the wooden  
flap, “An earthworm  
has five hearts  
and breathes  
through its skin.”

I watch her in the glass.  
Earthworms move through dirt.

III.

Later, I drop her  
back at her house.

We kiss  
a little  
but talk  
even less.

What to make  
of these things  
in a world  
where everything  
is a scale model of  
something else?

She is studying  
to become an architect.  
I am trying to become  
a worm.

## EFFIGY

A woman  
climbs stairs,  
corner  
of eye,  
an effigy  
over  
parade.

## WASH STAND HAND

wash stand hand  
right and left and right  
and faucet and soap and  
flow and song —  
Greek key is awake  
before it goes to bed  
and electric  
electricity, blue tile  
washstand ahead, a head,  
around, a round washstand  
and

an age of heads of busts of  
Roman, Greek, a song  
of water, one  
looking into a mirror like  
an elephant head

the sink stands  
on marble base  
erupts from tile  
unexpected  
and fixtures, pipes  
greening with age  
(copper, oxidized)  
half an oval

climates of inscription  
climates of the radiator  
wicker furniture in panic

washbowl and washstand  
three, I wish for three,  
for four

and human heads  
human heads broken  
opposed a poem  
to my washstand a poem  
to my shoes to eyelets  
which my shoelace may thread through  
to the holes in the sweater to  
the Book of Songs to the  
frieze at the Parthenon  
to the speed of recital from  
which shoulders may become  
smoothly visible

the washbowl is an oval in a square in  
a hot and cold  
to a wash  
wash wash  
stand warsh stand  
welsh stand well stand  
wash stand

to silence to the sound of  
people breathing to the  
deafening sound in which we  
shift one leg to another  
to the girl who leaves the room too early  
to the man who leaves the room too late

# TIME

I keep forgetting  
whether time  
is all we've got  
or the one thing  
we don't.

## GEORGE STREET

Walking back,  
there are onlookers  
round  
an ambulance  
on the corner.

The stretchered body's  
bloody but  
there seems to be  
no rush.

It's nearly 60,  
after all,  
and, for once,  
no wind in Providence.

## CONCERT

Wearing a dress  
that falls loose  
around legs

if her coat  
slides  
from her shoulder  
again  
I am hers.

## CHINESE

I'm hungry but  
he doesn't want  
to go out in  
the rain. Let's

order Chinese,  
he says, and even  
though I'd like  
vegetable fried

rice, the truth is  
the portions are  
too big. Refrigerate  
it, he says, and then

picks up the menu.  
Look here, a cup is  
one twenty-five.  
I say, how big

a cup? Do they  
mean a cup-cup?  
I cup my hands  
to show him. Don't

know, he says, but  
for one twenty-five  
really  
what do you expect?

## OFF-THE-RECORD

She speaks  
of a Russian film

a scene  
in which  
some character  
of minor note

takes an egg  
to her cheek  
for a full  
minute

minute

feeling  
its cold  
and its smooth.

## CHARACTER STUDY

She is short  
but like the Biltmore topped  
with red letters  
four stories tall.

On Thayer Street,  
she stows a keychain  
in the hollow  
of a tree.

She keeps an old trunk  
near her bed;  
smells its mildew  
when she's lonely.

She says she is 1/16  
Cherokee  
when she's wearing pigtails.

She says it's okay just  
to go for coffee,  
right?

She does not own  
a bicycle but shows me  
where she'd keep one,  
in the space behind her door.

She cuts  
her hair,  
again.

# FICTION



# STRAYS

The three soldiers assigned to carry out the execution were unremarkable. They walked three abreast, spread slightly as they'd been trained to, but not interested in talking in any case. They had not been trained to handle a prisoner and took turns awkwardly shoving him forward, so that he careened headlong across the stubble field, kicking his feet into and off of what soil there was as quick as he could in order to keep up with his torso. His hands were bound behind his back. Because he stumbled so, sometimes the soldiers had to jog to keep up, but sometimes they'd let him slip a little ahead because he wasn't going anywhere in the evening heat and they'd all been trained to use their rifles anyway. They made good time, had been trained to make good time on foot, and before long wordlessly reached a consensus that they were far enough from camp that a quick crack of gunfire wouldn't rouse the interest of the journalists who, though few, may as well have been as many as the dogs that scavenged around camp looking for scraps.

The dogs were innumerable, strays. Though the soldiers had been trained not to be surprised, they had been when they learned that the people of this country kept dogs for pets, just like at home, halfway across the world. The dogs around camp were no longer domesticated except in the loosest sense, in that they cohabitated with the soldiers for the most part without incident. They had been displaced by the war. In such times, every mouth is a mouth to feed and doors were bolted shut not just on dogs but on all manner of creatures that now gathered and fought over leftovers in the dumpster behind the mess tent, the only place for miles

where there were scraps to spare. Some of the soldiers had taken to sneaking slivers of meat out in their pockets which they might have just thrown out anyway depending on how fresh it was, how many times it had been heated and reheated, how long it had been since the last delivery. When they produced the meat from their pockets, they smiled and teased the dogs before finally tossing it, watching them snarl and snap at each other for no more than a bite. Hunched figures in tattered rags joined in just as furiously, children that had been orphaned or bolted-out, those that had not been taken already by disease or by bad water or by cluster bomb remnants the same inviting yellow as airdropped food parcels. The soldiers — the ones that did not pretend to see only dogs cowering there in the shadows and fighting over scraps — would turn somber and nudge one another, shaking their heads, that's why we're here, that's why we're here. They would shout to the children sometimes, pointing vaguely in the direction of the refugee camps, but those camps were miles to the south and miles more on foot, and for the language difference they may as well have been shouting just to dogs, conveying only the command in their voice.

War displaced many things. In the camp was a government botanist who sometimes accompanied the soldiers on the safer excursions and collected plant specimens to see what the enemy was growing. He kept several plants in a makeshift greenhouse on the edge of camp and was often mailing samples back home. Later, he would go on to write a book of his discoveries, nothing of much significance except to other botanists, but presented as if the volumes upon volumes that had been printed by the foreign scientists did not matter. Indeed, after the war, they would not. The same attitude would be had in the museums, where masterpieces from home would be installed to replace the foreign artworks and artifacts that were already vanishing, leaving behind empty podiums and, on the walls, barren silhouettes just as hollow as the holes from which the botanist uprooted plants. Even the soldiers themselves were displaced,

miles from home and missing it — though there was some argument as to whether this displacement was caused by the war or had caused it.

The tallest of the three soldiers gave the prisoner a rough and final shove, one he would regret as too rough later as he watched the blood seep from the man's dark and matted hair into the ground, where it cried out unhearable except perhaps by the dogs back at camp. The tall soldier was the only one who looked afterward — even the green-eyed soldier who'd pulled the trigger just stood awkwardly facing away, trying to pretend that it was natural to stand staring back toward camp, otherwise the sun was in his eyes, trying to pretend not to be looking away intentionally. With the tall soldier's final push, there was some confusion as to whether the prisoner was to continue stumbling or to drop to his knees but he finally did so, thudding down on the loose dust, kicking some up so it stuck to glaze of sweat on his face. The soldiers did not sweat, were trained not to, save for the green-eyed one, and only his hand was warm and damp on the heavy pistol. They had drawn lots back at camp to see who would carry it — they all carried rifles but a pistol would make less noise now and the pistol was an easy way as any to assign the responsibility of executioner, besides — the green-eyed soldier had lost. He had nodded and picked up the pistol without hesitation, opening the chamber to ensure it was loaded before sticking it in his belt. He had not told the others that he had never killed a man, hadn't killed anything since the war began, in fact, save a tiger at the capital zoo.

The zoo in war was a strange sight and, like the dogs, came as a surprise to the soldiers who were, in a way, more surprised to see a zoo than they were to discover the remains of everything from monkeys to kangaroos that had been killed for food by the starving citizenry. They took in the zoo with the same sense of subtle awe with which they appraised the moon, struck that it was the same moon as back at home, halfway across the world. Most of the cages were empty and it seemed almost as if the animals were merely shying out of the heat if not for the scavenged bones or rotting flesh or cages where merely the guard wire was cut, speaking

of animals stuffed and sold by looters. In one cage there remained a rare tiger, its species endangered by wars and expansion elsewhere in the world but here having somehow eluded the war, and it paced side to side lazily with its eyes on the soldiers. Late that evening, several soldiers returned to the zoo, drinking and carrying on, and some of the drunker ones tossed food to the tiger who merely continued to pace back and forth in disinterest. For the most part the soldiers' interest waned. One soldier, he'd been sent home now, having lost two fingers and his arm mauled, had climbed down into the cage to regather the food, the last of which had been tossed in, so they could resume trying to lure the tiger closer to the fence. Though these tossed scraps had been so ignored, before the soldier's second foot was on the ground the tiger leapt at him out of the dense and artificial foliage. The soldier kicked his feet futilely in panic, trying to climb back up the smooth concrete wall, hoisting himself with one arm, trying to pull the other from the tiger's mouth. Though himself reasonably drunk, it was only seconds before the green-eyed soldier had his rifle at ready and sounded a quick burst along the tiger's flank. They were trained to react quickly. The tiger collapsed but still did not release the screaming soldier, its dead weight pulling him finally down into the cage before two other soldiers leapt in and dragged him out.

The green-eyed soldier had drawn the pistol and held it inches behind the prisoner's head. The prisoner had been selected more or less at random, prisoner seventy-four of eighty-seven, as anyone truly worth punishing was an asset too valuable to execute. The prisoner was a nobody, had to be a nobody so that no one would notice him missing except the other prisoners for whom his disappearance was to be an example. The soldiers did not know all this. They were trained to follow orders. Inside, they had what they had, but externally they were neither cruel nor kind. The prisoner, prisoner seventy-four, still on his knees, had begun stumbling through a prayer and, though none of the soldiers spoke the language, prayer was universal so they let him go on. The youngest soldier carried a spade — afterward, they would bury the body, no more

than a loose coating of dry soil, really, but bodies in the war were numerous enough that they thought it could go unnoticed. When the body was buried, they'd jog back to camp, as rigid and silent as they'd come, trained to move quietly, but somehow with both less and more weight to hinder them. The sun was low now, setting, and by the time they reached the greenhouse on the edge of camp — where the botanist behind steamy glass dissected specimens, specimen twenty-four of one-hundred and ninety, et cetera — it would be dark and they'd head directly to the mess hall. They were not hungry but it was part of the routine that they were trained to follow. After letting their meals go cold on their trays for the most part silent, the three soldiers would sneak the meat out of the tent and spend the rest of the night teasing the dogs with it, tearing off a little bit at a time and tossing it to them, just the smallest bites, enough to keep them expectant, enough to keep them snarling at each other, but slowly enough to occupy them long into the night.

The prisoner, prisoner seventy-four, not remarkable from the soldiers except in role, stumbled through his prayer just as he'd stumbled through the field, his tongue thick and disoriented. The green-eyed soldier tensed his fingers on the trigger but then swapped his gun to his other hand and wiped his sweaty palm on his fatigues. Elsewhere, the dogs at camp were tearing at bits of meat and the journalists were sending dispatches back home. Elsewhere, children crouched in the shadows and enemy military officials hid in dug-out barns. When the prisoner was finished praying, or at least pausing for breath, the green-eyed soldier turned his head and pulled the trigger, the sound echoing sharply off the flatness of the plain, and that was that.

# DESCANSO

The year the spic boy died on his lawn was the year they killed Kennedy up in Dallas. A drought had hit hard that summer, not a long one but with vicious heat, and the riverbed went dry for the first time since '57, cracked like your lower lip after a day picking cotton. Will knew that feeling, dust on your skin, lint in your throat, even your tongue gone dry. He'd felt it for years in the fields of Arkansas, but down here and since the war labor was all Mexican, thirty cents an hour under the Bracero Program or half that with no documents.

Gonna sell that place?

He was in Laredo, signing off the last papers for the house. It was all his father'd left him.

Don't plan on it, he said.

Reaching across to take them from him, the lawyer shuffled the papers into a stack and straightened their edge on his desk.

I been out that way. You're near the barrio.

Yep.

Ought to move closer to town.

They don't come 'round.

The lawyer stood up slowly, shaking his head as if it were any business of his. Will grasped the arms of his chair and used them to push himself to his feet.

I'll do.

He was young yet, scarcely forty, but his knee was already going. Too much strain in his youth, or not enough since. It ought've been just a few hour drive to Laredo, three tops, but he stayed the night because of his knee. His frequent stops made a day of the trip each way, parked outside diners or just pulled to the side of the road. He kept dried apricots in the glovebox and would lean over to get the bag and eat them slow, watching the folk in the diner or feeling his car shake as others sped by on the highway. If he was on a quiet enough stretch of road, he'd open his door and put his left leg out of the car, giving his right enough room to rest for a quarter hour before moving on.

Hit and run, his neighbor said, standing outside like he'd been waiting to tell the news. Tossed 'im right off the road.

Spic boy?

Yeah.

Well. Thank God for that.

Died before any 'un could help. Right there.

There was a halo of dead grass on his lawn around the patch the police had torn or trampled up when they came round to get the body. The spot was muddy and a small gully had eroded down toward the road.

They used your hose.

There's a ration on.

It was needed.

How long's this been here? Will walked toward a trio of crosses planted at the side of the road at angles just off straight. Below them, a statuette of the Virgin Mary was lying on its side, its paint sun-faded and chipped. There were some flowers, but they'd already wilted to nothing worth mention.

Since this mornin'. One of 'em came by and put it down.

It's on my property.

Let it.

Since the riverbed dried up, the spics had been crossing it on their way to work in the fields from their crowded cluster of lean-tos and hovels. The land was ranch-owned, mostly, but the unregistered and wetbacks had spilled into the brush. This was of little concern to the owners, who got the work at half-rate or less, though by year's end most of the illegals would be rounded up and sent home. If not for the drought, they'd have had to take the long way round, down the other direction and back over the county highway bridge, but for the few weeks the bed was dry they passed by Will's house on the way to and from the barrio.

When Will woke he could see them from his window, passing slow and lazy as always. Looked dirty. Some of stopped to cross themselves in front of the makeshift memorial before going on. It was early still, but Will slept fitful with the river gone quiet and couldn't fall back asleep past sunup. It was a habit that came from the youth, his father waking him early even on Sundays, when they didn't go to the field. The braceros that moved past Will's house worked the week through, but up in Arkansas the labor'd been white.

His bedroom, like the rest of the house, was near bare but for the boxes — boxes of his things he'd never unpacked, and boxes that his father had packed away. The room was just dimly lit by morning and Will stood half between the bed and the window, studying the descanso. Resting place.

He was struck most by its finality. It was nothing much to look at, but the crosses stuck sharp in the ground like stalks that had erupted suddenly from it. All Will knew of death was of his parents who had gone over months the way the crop comes and goes in the field — something you don't see it happen no matter how hard you look, but somehow it gets three feet high, then four. Harvest. The descanso, despite its slipshod crosses and fallen Virgin, was an instant. It stood like the precise moment of death.

The morning was hot and Will spent it in the kitchen, going through

boxes. He had moved in months ago, when his father could finally no longer look after himself, and found the house filled already with boxes his father'd started to pack. In the weeks that followed, Will finished packing his father's things, but never touched his own.

He made slow work of it in the heat, turning each bowl or each glass over in his hands before setting it down. He went back to the den window often, thinking on what to do with the descanso.

Late afternoon, a woman came alone from the barrio. She had gaunt features but her stomach was swollen. Pregnant. Kneeling before the memorial and righted the statue of Mary. She brought with her trinkets, which she scattered around, and a sad wreath of flowers. From his window, Will watched her pray for several minutes, each of them motionless. He waited. Watched her sink from her knees to the ground like watching the floral wreath wither in the heat, already half gone by the time she got there. His knee began to ache, sending pain up the back of his leg, and he moved finally from the window. He returned to the kitchen chair and sat carefully in it, steadying himself on its back. He opened the nearest box and began to rifle through.

When he had emptied those, he dragged the chair into the next room, to the next set. He opened one that was filled mostly with books, their spines tattered. In one corner, a watch and a kit of tools to fix it. Some of his father's things. He closed the box. The heat was oppressive and he sweat heavy despite the dimness of the room. Went to the window to open it. The woman was still there.

When the braceros returned to the barrio that evening some again crossed themselves at the descanso, though many now paid it no mind. Will pulled his chair to the window and watched them, and after they'd passed went down to inspect it. At the base now were a wooden armadillo and a set of rosary beads, and an alien work permit with a photograph

of a boy affixed to it, maybe fifteen at the oldest. Next to the photo, a smudged fingerprint. Its paper was discolored and the ink of the various signatures and stamps had smeared and had faded. Mary was again on her side.

Next day, the woman returned just as she had. Will had dragged the kitchen chair to the bedroom and spent the day, again, slowly unpacking. He had put the descanso out of his mind for the most part, but his knee began to ache him so he went to the kitchen for ice. Passing through the den, he saw her. She sat on her knees before the crosses, head bowed, eyes closed, hands clasped in her lap. Didn't move the slightest. He continued to the icebox and then back to his bedroom and sat with his knee stretched out so he could hold the ice against it. He was sweating in the heat but closed his eyes and held still. The woman was still there when he got up to fix dinner.

Come evening, as the braceros flowed back past his house, he found himself thinking again on the descanso and what to do with it but couldn't make his mind. To break from it, he went back to the box of his father's books, but ended up setting the radio down upon it. He first found some parlor music but tired of it quickly, and turned the dial to the news. A black church had been bombed in Alabama. The drought was near over. Immigration planned to crack down on unregistered and wetbacks.

The migrant woman kept returning through August, adding additional trinkets and flowers from time to time. Fewer workers crossed themselves as they passed, and finally none but the woman noticed the memorial at all. Early fall, the riverbed went muddy and the braceros again had to take the other way around, so he saw nothing of the spics but for the woman, who still came to the descanso daily.

Will was restless in his house while she was outside, so by this time had taken to opening the front door and stepping on the porch to watch

her. His progress unpacking had slowed to a trickle, but he was finally near done and allowed himself more and more time with the woman. At night he would walk down his drive and stand over the memorial, thinking about uprooting the crosses and raking away the pile of dried flowers. The grass in the spot had scarcely grown back, not with the heat what it was. He studied it hard and then went back up to the house. Sat in his chair in the den but had grown tired of the radio. He moved it to the floor and opened the box of his father's books, but sat over it without going through them.

In November, she was no longer pregnant. Will brought a shovel down to the roadside and stood it by its blade in the dirt. Considered it. The river was roaring, now, and it drowned out even the noise of the cotton harvesters just across, stripping the last of the field. Standing there listening, his knee began to ache. He decided to leave it for later, went back to the house, and set down next to a box of his father's things.

A week after that, Will stepped outside and the woman, for the first time, looked up to make eye contact with him. Held it hard but didn't move otherwise.

Three days, he said to her, loud from his porch.

The woman did not move.

Three more days. Tres. He held up three fingers. Then I'm taking it down.

She gathered her dress about her legs and stood up, heading back down the road without looking back. Next day, Will dragged the kitchen chair onto the porch, and sat out even before she arrived. Her visits continued unabated and after a week he dragged his chair halfway to the street.

My father died, he said one day while she prayed. In winter.

The woman looked up at him but said nothing. He dragged his chair back to the porch.



ETCETERA



## ODE ON THE SONS OF ADAM

How much does the full moon weigh  
upon his sibling, Cain?  
And does the burden wax each day —  
ever will it wane?  
Ever will it wane?

Haunting him, night's trinity:  
the stars, the moon, the deep  
plague him all eternity  
so he will never sleep.  
So he will never sleep.

Fallen brother's blood may cry  
screaming where it spilled —  
his telltale heartbeat is reply  
both sounds, rising, build.  
Both sounds, rising, build.

Ever upward, sans plateau:  
an escalating note  
whose volume will forever grow,  
surpass all mortal throat.  
Surpass all mortal throat.

As long as morning speaks in dew,  
until the sun is fell,  
Cain's guilt will follow him into —  
and scream there even — hell.  
And scream there even — hell.

## THE PLUM BLOSSOMS

*The Plum Blossoms*

by Matisse  
were missing  
for some time

but recently resurfaced  
at The Modern,  
purchased  
from an unidentified collector.

Q: On what wall  
did they find themselves  
all these 30 years?

And whose guests  
marveled,  
the last works  
of a master?

The curator  
at The Modern  
wonders where  
to hang the piece.

We wonder  
where it has been hung —  
above what mantle  
and what works among?

## MORNING, SOMERSET

*"I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!"*

I wake up  
and she is still.

I wake up  
and she is still,  
sleeping.

I go out  
I go out and go  
house to house;  
my friends are  
not about.

The streets are clear,  
I'm the only one;  
clear streets,  
the only one awake.

I wake up  
and she is still.  
I wake up  
and she is still  
asleep.

## THE SHRED OF DOUBT

The body is not a democracy  
but is tyrred by minority doubt.  
Our reticence is our hypocrisy:  
we wear the majority out.

And where the majority clothing  
encloses the voice of descent,  
dissension gives way to exposing,  
contention gives way to consent.

Countenance too may run threadbare,  
born clean through the weave of the shred.  
Look not at the close for the shirt tear,  
but look where it's open instead.

In tatters you will find the traitor,  
in gashes you will find the trait  
that doubt is the body's dictator,  
distrust is the body's dictate.

With doubt you can never be certain.  
Without you can never be sure  
what is obscured by the curtain,  
what scores other doorways obscure.

Feeling is fragile as eggshell.  
(Do eggshells have something to hide?)  
Beware of a crackling eggshell  
for doubt is for certain inside.

## BUREAUCRACY HAS COMMITTED MURDER HERE

His mother was trapped  
in saint bernard nursing home.

And every day  
    she called him  
and said Are you comin son?  
Is somebody comin?

And he said Yeah mamma  
somebody's comin to getcha.

Somebody's comin to getcha on tuesdy.

Somebody's comin to getcha on wednesdy.

Somebody's comin to getcha on thursdy.

Somebody's comin to getcha on fridy.

    And she drowned  
fridy night,  
    she drowned  
fridy night.

Nobody's comin to get us.

Nobody's  
comin to get us.

## SCHOOLEY'S MOUNTAIN

“You are like a tree,”  
she says, “We need to go  
to a forest.” This  
  
seems a strange way to end  
but this is how  
it happened. We went to the park  
but it was cold then,  
even for November,  
and we walked just as far as the bridge  
where we'd carved our names  
five years before. We looked for them,  
my idea, of course,  
and I was sure  
they'd be appropriately  
gone. They weren't, but  
had faded; she  
found them first, telling me  
a story of her mother,  
telling her the news  
of an aunt's death. This  
was years ago on the same bridge. Maybe,

I can't help but think,  
maybe if it wasn't so cold that day,  
we wouldn't have walked back to the car  
and would have instead been in the forest,  
and things would be different now.  
But it was a cold

November. A cold  
November day. Cold  
and windy.



## NOTES

Versions of the poems in the first section of this book were originally collected in the chapbook *Poems* in the fall of 2003 and were written between 2001 and their publication.

The poems from the section “Scale” were first collected in a chapbook of the same name in a limited edition of twenty-five copies. *Scale* was printed in the spring of 2005.

“wash stand hand” responds to a poem by Louis Zukofsky.

“Off-the-Record” paraphrases friend and poet Ming Holden.

The story *Strays* appeared as an artist’s book with letterpressed texts and photolithographs in an edition of fifteen by Heather Nidowicz in fall 2005. She had earlier printed a version of “Visit For a Dying Friend” as a letterpressed broadside in an edition of twenty.

The epigraph to “Morning, Somerset” is from William Carlos Williams’ “Danse Russe.”

Both the title and body of “Bureaucracy Has Committed Murder Here” come from Aaron Broussard’s comments on *Meet the Press* in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Though the story as presented was later proved somewhat inaccurate, it still — in a very real sense — tells a great truth about the tragedy.



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