

2012-01-01

The Armchair Daoist

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THE ARMCHAIR DAOIST

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Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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2012

Dedication

To my parents, who made it possible

To Lisa and Gavin, who give it meaning

THE ARMCHAIR DAOIST

by

ROBERT WAYNE LUCKY, BA, MA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors of the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared, sometimes in different versions:

Contemporary Haibun Online – “At the Station”; “Running with the Yaks”; “Weary of God and Tourism”

Magnapoets – “Malaria”

Modern Haiku – “Kathmandu”

The Prose-Poem Project – “Instructions”; “Vamos a Uruguay”

Santa Fe Poetry Broadsheet – “Amherst, Summer 2008”

Simply Haiku – “Cowboy”

::

The tanka in “What Aging Feels Like: A Tanka String” first appeared in the following journals.

Atlas Poetica – “the crowd three deep”; “on the verandah”

bottle rockets - “admiring”

Modern English Tanka – “mid-sentence”

Moonset – “a student asks”

Presence – “having a pint”

Ribbons – “she says”

Simply Haiku – “splitting”

3 Lights Gallery – “the elevator shudders”

::

Most of the senryu in “Up All Night: 19 Senryu” first appeared in the following journals, anthology and chapbook.

bottle rockets – “up all night”

Dreams Wander On: Contemporary Poems of Death Awareness (Modern English Tanka Press, 2011) – “death”

Modern Haiku – “dead pigeon”; “cancelled passport”

my favorite thing (bottle rockets press, 2011) – “lawyer’s office”

Notes from the Gean – “I forget his name”

Paper Wasp – “the sound of bells”

Prune Juice – “heading home”; “last call”; “put some life into it”; “new birth certificate”; “selling old cookbooks”; “one-day butoh workshop”; “plastic surgeon”; “yoga’s benefits”; “30th reunion”

3 Lights Gallery – “holiday packing”; “feeling old”

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The *kire*, or Making the Cut: A Critical Introduction

The *kire*, or Making the Cut: A Critical Preface

1. Background

This MFA thesis is not what I had intended to do when I entered the program. I had written poetry most of my life but had only recently begun to publish fairly regularly. Prior to that, I had been mostly working in nonfiction – cookbook reviews and food writing. What else does one do with an MA in anthropology? Before entering the MFA program, I started work on a manuscript that I was very fond of at the time. It was a memoir based on all the things I had not done in my life, especially things I had at one time wanted to do but somehow never got to or abandoned, much like the manuscript itself. It was, I like to think, a kind of anti-memoir. Course work (and my day job) kept me from working on the manuscript, but in my mind, it was always going to be the basis of my thesis. My first course in the program was in creative nonfiction. I was inspired and motivated.

Over a year into the program I took the first in what turned out to be a cluster of poetry classes from Sasha Pimentel Chacón. In the spring of 2010, we read a good selection of prose poetry, a form I was aware of as well as unsure of. But I sensed that here was a form that worked for me. It was also related to haibun and tanka prose, two forms I was regularly writing and publishing. I began reading, and reading about, prose poetry whenever I could. I began trying to write it. In the fall of 2010, I took Lex Williford's class in short short fiction and prose poetry.

I decided I wanted my thesis to be a collection of poetry, and I wanted there to be a preponderance of prose poems and haibun and a smattering of flash fiction or microfiction. I was reading the works of Lydia Davis and Russell Edson and the cuentos atómicos of Umberto Senegal and trying to divine the line between short short fiction and prose poetry. I've come to the conclusion the line is not always.

2. Framework: Reading and Practice Makes Poetics

I'm not as confident to proclaim as Dean Young does that "your originality will come from your inability to copy well: YOUR GENIUS IS YOUR ERROR" (48), but a part of me that believes he's right. Poets don't work in vacuums. We read other poets. Some works we like; some we don't. We pass judgment. And we do copy and scavenge for inspiration, which is how we stumble onto what works for us or, more honestly, what we can pull off with any luck.

Our first foray into writing poetry, at least as I recall elementary school, is an exercise in copying. Here is a list of words that rhyme, we are told, and what we get is not as interesting as *blood* and *mud*. And *blood*, as Viktor Shklovsky points out, is only to be used for rhyming with *mud* (Young 9). It's our first lesson in artifice. That model continues through graduate school in more sophisticated ways, but still, we read and write. We use language to construct poems or we construct poems out of language. Or both. There is a kind of literary double bind in operation. Is language the tool or the product? Or both? We're not medieval copyists hoping to reproduce a manuscript faithfully but rather emulators and imitators trying to pay homage and bury a tradition all in one stroke; we want to become the next tradition, break free of the past, shine a light on the future, and maybe get a grant or a publishing contract. The worst that can happen is that we fail – that is, we sharpen our pencils and wrangle another Shakespearean sonnet out of a miscommunication at the water cooler. Why? Because we have to. It's what we do. It's who we are. We may, like Emily Dickinson, write more or less for an audience of one, but we have to write. It's part of our identity and partly the way we identify ourselves. As Octavio Paz remarks, "A poet is one who ... writes because he cannot help it — and knows it. He is an accomplice of his fate — and its judge" (qtd. in Joseph). For me, poems are more than mere reports on the state of the world or pure descriptions of some moment, and they are less than grand philosophies. Poetry is not the search for a Truth; it is an untangling of truths. As the

threads unravel and re-twist and unravel ad infinitum, we start to figure out whose autobiography we're writing.

Dean Young's rambling essay *The Art of Recklessness, Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction* almost makes failure look heroic. It is possible to see literary history, the movement of trends, as built from and on failure. At some point, a tradition fails to resonate with its time: has anyone read a good contemporary Norse saga lately? The Romantic Movement felt that all that cold reason and logic espoused by the Enlightenment took the heart out of things, so to speak. And then when some poets decided that meter and rhyme were strait jackets on the imagination, critics considered their free verse compositions crude affronts to the poetic canon. Things haven't changed. In 1978, Mark Strand lost out on a Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Monument*, a quirky collection of poetic prose (Lehman 11). Versifiers weren't ready for the so-called prose poem even though it had been around in the West for about a hundred years and a variation of it, the haibun, for several hundred years in Japan.

Change is hard whether one is trying to prevent it or make it. The dialectic at work in the field of poetry seems to be that for each individual poet, tradition either fails to meet his or her needs or it encompasses the aesthetic realm of the acceptable. Haiku poets today, for example – in English, Japanese or Brazilian Portuguese, to name a few of the contemporary haiku traditions – still face off over syllable count, literary technique, and content. Cross the line and you're on the other side. The online journal *High Coup* calls any three-line poem following the 5-7-5 syllable count a haiku. Submission guidelines for many haiku journals stipulate no 5-7-5. Other journals such as *Frogpond* and *Modern Haiku* are willing to look at a variety of formats and syllable counts – one-line, two-line, three-line haiku and four-line. Some editors want a season word. A simile in an English-language haiku leads to rejection. Metaphor is questionable but under discussion.

At one extreme, it would appear there are as many traditions as poets. Most good poets, by which I mean the poets I enjoy reading, it's fair to say, straddle the line. It is impossible to break entirely from tradition in literature. If a reader can't see the break, the connection between the old and the new, then she has nothing to hold onto and falls into the chasm or loses the trail. Ralph Waldo Emerson was well aware of this perception problem when he titled one of his prose poems "Woods, A Prose Sonnet" (Lehman 29). Readers in 1839 were going to need something besides "A Prose Poem" to get a sense of what he was attempting. There is no irony in his title; it's an invocation of tradition. Similarly, in the late 20th century, Mark Strand's title "Chekhov: A Sestina" (Lehman 114) clues the reader into the poetics of that particular prose poem.

A haiku is the first poem I remember writing. My fourth-grade class read some haiku – and no doubt Basho's frog made a splash – and then we wrote haiku rigidly following the syllable count of 5-7-5. That was a haiku as far as the teacher was concerned. Pedagogy trumps poetics in fourth grade. Maybe she stipulated a nature word or *kigo*. I know mine had the sun in it and my grandmother liked it. My grandmother was also fond of quoting Ogden Nash, so my first exposures to poetry were interesting – brevity and comic verse. Haiku stuck for whatever reason, and as an adolescent I read all the standard anthologies and translations I could access. In high school, I kept a haiku journal of a trip to Mexico, Monterey and Saltillo. It is mostly awful and adheres to the rigid 5-7-5, which by most English-language haiku dicta is a bit wordy. There were only so many things I could say about cactus. I would love to say I was influenced by the Beats, but that is a movement, or moment, that slipped by me.

I caught up to the Beats indirectly through the works of Richard Brautigan, whose work I probably ran across in my grandfather's copies of *The Whole Earth Catalog*. This was the grandfather married to the Ogden Nash-loving grandmother. If educational research is anything to trust, without those two I would probably be a semi-literate insurance salesman in a Houston suburb. In the *Catalog*

I discovered writers such as Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ken Kesey, and Wendell Berry. Though I didn't know it at the time, in my adolescence, I found myself in the thick of the zeitgeist, well, the zeitgeist that contextualized the counterculture. An obsession with Richard Brautigan led to a love affair with images, slightly surrealistic images and absurdist metaphors. In the 1970s, "the image was the coin of the realm" (Hoagland 71). How can one, especially a teenage boy, forget an image like this one of Brautigan's: "At 1:03 in the morning a fart / smells like a marriage between / an avocado and a fish head" ("December 30"). The simile is unforgettable. Reading poems like this in the early 1970s, as well as the short short stories in *Revenge of the Lawn*, was inspiring. It was a license for anyone with an imagination and ballpoint pen.

The walls of my aesthetic ghetto are probably built on English translations of haiku and the works of Richard Brautigan. In *Real Sofistikashun, Essays on Poetry and Craft*, Tony Hoagland writes about the misfortunes of aesthetic fate. Poets of his generation, in the 1970 and 1980s, were indoctrinated in the confessional mode and the plain style, "a style conceived in reaction to its own predecessors, New Critical irony and formalist verse" (190). As a result, many poets of his generation "inherited or acquired an allergy to grandeur, flourish, and most special effects" (189). As a young student, I was unaware of plain style, not reading W.S Merwin, Adrienne Rich, James Wright and others of their ilk until much later. In the 1980s, I was distracted by cultural anthropology and Clifford Geertz. In the 1990s, my family and work took precedence over my literary endeavors. My informal education in literary history was more of a collage than a jigsaw puzzle. I took the pieces and jammed them together, not worrying until later if or how they might fit together. And, honestly, though the history of poetry interests me more now, I'm not terribly interested in how my work fits, or doesn't, into any aesthetic canon. As for many writers, publishing is a personal and professional goal, and for that reason I raise my wetted finger into the wind of aesthetic trends and fashions. Unless one is established like the Scottish poet Don Paterson, the chances of publishing rhyming

haiku, for example, are slim, about as likely as cracking a Zen koan with a hammer. One has to know one's audience, as every writing guide tells us, and that includes the gatekeepers, the editors.

I clearly remember as an undergraduate sitting in the special collections room of Baker Library at Dartmouth College and holding, staring at more than reading, Brautigan's chapbook *Please Plant This Book*, a handful of so-so poems, as I recall, printed on packets of seeds. I felt I had exhausted Brautigan as my muse. As he ends his poem "Haiku Ambulance," I too began to think "So what?" I began reading widely then from world literatures, everything from the Icelandic sagas and Tang Dynasty poets to Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges and contemporary Indian English poets such as Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes. I was fortunate to take a couple creative writing classes with the poet Jay Parini, to go to informal poetry readings at Richard Eberhart's house, and to attend poetry readings by several poets. Marvin Bell stands out in memory.

However, you can take the writer out of his aesthetic ghetto, but you can't always take the aesthetic out of the writer. Haiku and Brautigan instilled a love of brevity in me that is characteristic of almost everything I write. On the negative side of things, I have to consciously fight the urge to be clever. You can teach an old dog new tricks if you can get it to forget the old tricks. That's the hard part. I was young and impressionable when I read Brautigan's poems. Poems such as "Karma Repair Kit: Items 1-4," with its three items, and "Nine Things," with its single declarative sentence poem "It's night," seemed thrillingly anarchic and rebellious. Clever. In earlier versions of this thesis, I broke up the poem "22 Aphorisms and Observations Regarding the Nature of Reality All on One Page" so that the twenty-second aphorism would be widowed on the top of the next page. Too clever. (The poem is now down to 20 aphorisms.) Again, much depends on who you are and where you are as a poet. Paterson's poem "Unfold," in memory of Akira Yoshizawa, is a blank page. At first glance it seems so 60s, until you discover that Yoshizawa was an origami master, and that Paterson was a wee bairn in the 1960s. Then the title becomes a wonderful one-word poem in itself and the reader

gains a little respect for the poet's reaching back in time for an aesthetic frame in which to capture Yoshizawa.

3. Poetics Come Out of the Framework

Perhaps the most difficult task a writer faces is critically reading his own work. It's so much easier to see the weaknesses and flaws in the writing of others. Workshopping, such an integral part of a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, is one way to correct this faulty vision, but only if, as Young says, you consider that "the least important time in any workshop is when your own work is being talked about.... What you say about someone else's poem is really exactly what you need to hear about your own" (90). For this reason, reading critiques, commentary, book reviews, and other forms of poetic analysis and interpretation is valuable. But it's not without its hazards, especially reading positive reviews of one's own work. Some of my work appeals because of my wry humor (Kacian and Evetts 97). The editor of *Prune Juice: Journal of Senryu and Kyoka* describes me as the "Werner Herzog of senryu" because of my visually stark images and painterly eye (Wilkinson). There's a part of me that wants always to be wry and paint stark images with words. Going down that path will only cut a deep rut. It's best to ignore praise of any kind.

On the other hand, I suspect that many poets are literary hypochondriacs. As any hypochondriac reading about the mysterious nodding disease of Uganda will immediately note that he's been having a hard time lately holding up his head, so some poets reading about the inadequacies of another poet will feel their line breaks crumbling and their images blurring. I succumbed to these hypochondria while putting this thesis together. Not only did my poems appear to suffer every possible poetic malaise – including self-consciousness, verbosity and abstraction – but also in comparison to the good works of others, they didn't quite compare.

The obstacle for me was the fact, so I learned, that I'm a poet of two distinct poetics – broadly speaking, haiku poetics and western literary poetics. Haiku, with the exception of visual imagery,

generally eschews most of the literary elements that Western poetry often celebrates – metaphor, rhyme, and meter, for example. And I spent a good deal of my time writing and studying poetry in the tension between those two poles, finding a middle ground in prose poetry, at least for the moment. I complicated the issue by more or less keeping the poetics of haiku away from instructors and classmates, other than to talk about brevity and occasionally mention that haibun was a type of prose poem, pointing out that even Robert Hass, John Ashbery, Mark Pawlak, and James Merrill had written haibun (though with a sensibility somewhat removed from what the haiku and haibun community were advocating). My original intention was to leave haiku and tanka out of the thesis except as they appeared in haibun or tanka prose pieces. Ultimately, I found that intention impossible, though I did end up grouping individual haiku and tanka in titled strings. I felt I had to include them if my poetics was to make sense, to have meaning.

In *Real Sofistikashun*, Hoagland describes contemporary American poetry as split, almost polarized, between referential and compositional writers. “On the one hand, some writers speak of experience and representation; honesty, necessity, thought, and feeling. On the other side, writers think in terms of method and text; speak of ‘poetic projects’ and ‘discourses’” (131). Elsewhere in the book, Hoagland contrasts narrated poetry with associative poetry. Compositional poetry is experimental and decorative, though not necessarily in a bad way; it’s about patterns and words detached from their significations. One example is from Gertrude Stein’s prose poem “A Box”: “Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same questions, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful painful cattle” (qtd. in Hoagland 130). As Hoagland notes, the poem is largely decorative, a repetition of patterns held together – and holding the reader’s attention – through the familiarity of syntax (131). Referential poetry is narrated poetry, a poetry of continuities; compositional poetry is elliptical.

Although Hoagland admires many compositional poets, his affection clearly lies with the referential poets. In a world of information overload, he finds comfort in “poems that locate, coordinate, and subordinate, that build up a compound picture of the world” (164). It’s partly a desire to connect, to make sense of a world blithely and blindly running amok. In his view, contemporary compositional poets are not inventing diverting disorientations as the early modernists such as Guillaume Apollinaire did but are using many of the same techniques and methods to highlight detachment as a way to disconnect from the world. From a psychological perspective, connecting and disconnecting from the world both have their place. I think Hoagland’s point is that it’s difficult for readers to connect to many compositional poets who’ve apparently forsaken perspective for “the realm of conceptual excitement and linguistic fabrication” (165). This is the aesthetic nihilism Octavio Paz refers to when he speaks of the Futurist poet Filippo Marinetti wanting “to free words from the chains of syntax and grammar.”

My poetic tastes are similar to Hoagland’s. Most every poet I read is primarily a referential poet. Strong narratives and thematic elements make poems and stories memorable. And though at first glance, it may seem a contradiction, I agree with him that “poems don’t necessarily need a lot of substance; it’s not the *substance* that makes us want to read and read them again; it is the *management* of the substance that gives it intensity and dimension, which makes a space for our imagination and feeling to inhabit it” (96-7). Nevertheless, in the reading and writing of haiku, I share with the early modernists a reverence for the fragment and juxtaposition, and a disinterest in closure (though I think at some level even when striving for openness I’m trying to close some door or tuck a loose end in a pocket). Describing the aesthetics of Apollinaire and his contemporaries, Hoagland writes,

For the sake of fixing a usable terminology, one way to put it might be this: fragment is the unit, juxtaposition is the method, collage is the result. When you juxtapose two

fragments next to each other, without a transition, you get a collage. In fact, when you place any two dissimilar units side by side – even complete sentences, even paragraphs – they acquire the quality of fragment because they are not completed by their surroundings. The fractured poem may be relatively linear and continuous, or it may be radically disjunctive, but when transition is removed, relations become implicit, not explicit. Content may be whole or partial, or it might even be deliberately absent, to be provided by the reader. (147)

In another context he could well be describing haiku and various types of prose poems.

According to The Haiku Society of America, “a haiku is a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition” (Haiku). It is a purposely vague definition because lines tend to get drawn rather quickly in the haiku realm. However, many prominent haiku writers would be in agreement with Jim Kacian, editor of *Contemporary Haibun* and founder of The Haiku Foundation, who argues, “the single most identifiable characteristic of haiku is the *kire* – not 5-7-5, not three lines – the *kire*, the cut, which not only identifies relationship (and all haiku are about relationship) but also removes the haiku from linear narrative. The *kire*...is, in fact, anti-story” (28). A traditional haiku (which isn’t necessarily the type one reads most often in many contemporary journals) is usually the juxtaposition of two images, one of which contains a season reference. The two images, in Hoagland’s understanding, are “connected” by “no transition”. The *kire* or cut is where the transition would be in linear narrative. In English, the cut is often represented by a colon, em-dash, or ellipses – or nothing. That pause created by the *kire* is where the reader feels the resonance between the two images. Or

doesn't. Just as many readers don't feel or get compositional poems, they don't get haiku. But unlike the radical disjunction, the unmoored feeling, of some compositional poetry, the haiku is rooted in experience. There is a story; it's just not told. The reader provides the story; the haiku is just an incident. In Kacian's explication, the *kire* is like a cross section of the linear narrative that surrenders the dimension of time for depth (28); it's what distinguishes haiku from "merely descriptive short lyric" (29).

Most of the haiku in this thesis are technically *senryu*, the satirical cousin of haiku. The traditional haiku are predominantly part of the *haibun* included, which I discuss below. As an example of *kire*, I'd like to use two examples of my own, neither of which is in the thesis. The first, a standard three-line haiku, has a very clear cut.

cold drizzle –
a goodnight kiss
on my bald spot (Lucky, *New Resonance* 6 103)

The relationship, which Kacian reminds us, is what all haiku are about; in this poem it's between the weather and the nature of the kiss. The *kire*, represented here by an em-dash, cuts across the relationship, cuts across the story. Time stops and we are given a cross-section of the narrative, an incident that, if the haiku is successful, resonates with the reader allowing him to furnish a story out of his own experience.

The other example, a one-line haiku, has more than one *kire*, a technique that forces more than one reading.

halloween spider man pees in his pants (Lucky, *Modern Haiku* 78)

One reading would put the cut after the season word *Halloween*. The second image is then of a child costumed as Spider Man peeing in his pants. (Ostensibly one could read the line with no cut, but then the haiku reads as a complete sentence, something generally frowned upon.) Another cut can be read

after *spider*, in which case there is a child dressed up as a spider and some man pees in his pants. This particular haiku also illustrates the thin line between haiku and senryu, a line many practitioners ignore. To some, Halloween, the season reference, makes it a haiku; to others, it's mildly scatological nature makes it a senryu. I'm among those who rarely make the distinction. What would ruin this as haiku or senryu would be to supply it with any sort of transition, to remove the cut: 'during halloween spider man pees in his pants' or 'a man pees in his pants when he sees a halloween spider' effectively eliminates any claim to poetry or haiku.

In putting together the manuscript part of this thesis and in reading and thinking about and writing this preface, I've come to the conclusion that besides a fondness for brevity and an occasional lapse into reliance on paraprosochians for humor, a general notion of *kire* is a method that characterizes my poetics. Not only is it often essential to my haiku, but also it informs where and how I insert haiku into haibun, how I organize certain types of prose poems (especially those that are aphoristic or are comprised of lists), and even where I break lines in free verse poems. I may be saying nothing here. What sonnet writer doesn't appreciate the volta or what short story writer the climax or Joycean epiphany? Nevertheless, for me, the *kire* (in some form or another) is my volta and epiphany. It's that moment in a work when time stops and the reader gets a glimpse of something in the depths or perhaps has a vision. It may not be as overwhelming as what Arjuna saw when he looked into Krishna's mouth, and I may not always employ a cut or effectively do so, but the idea of it is there.

Haibun are illustrative of the cut on a different level. According to The Haiku Society of America, "a haibun is a terse, relatively short prose poem in the haikai [all haiku related forms] style, usually including both lightly humorous and more serious elements. A haibun usually ends with a haiku" (Haibun). Again, this is a broad definition, but the terseness of the prose seems de rigueur in most publications, and although the haiku, or many, can go anywhere, there is a tendency to place it at

the end, where the haiku is often epiphanic. However, when haiku are interspersed between prose sections, they serve as a kind of *kire* or cut. In other words, it breaks the linear narrative of the prose. The relationship, or the link, between the prose and the haiku is central to practically all discussions of haibun. The position of many editors is that the haiku should not be a direct carry over of the prose or any sort of summary or synopsis of the narrative; the haiku should be able to stand alone, although it should in some way deepen the tone or illuminate the prose (Haiku Society). Outside of the haikai world, however, poets tend to ignore this prescription for the prose-haiku link, as well as playing loose with haiku form.

In James Merrill's "In the Shop" the verse/haiku is syntactically linked to the prose that precedes and follows it:

So that one fine day, painstakingly unbound, this terminal gooseflesh, the
fable's whole eccentric
star-puckered moral –
white, never-to-blossom buds
of the mountain laurel –
may be read as having emerged triumphant from the vats of night.

(qtd. in Lehman 87-9)

Robert Hass in "On Visiting the DMZ at Panmunjom: A Haibun" concludes with a three-line stanza – a complete sentence with two embedded questions. In "Haibun 6," John Ashbery concludes with a long sentence fragment list (Lehman 95). None of the haibun mentioned above would have a chance of getting published in any of the journals that specialize in haibun or in haiku journals that regularly publish haibun. It's primarily because of the "haiku" not being haiku. In Merrill's case, the relationship between prose and haiku is also unacceptable.

Recently, in an experiment of sorts, I sent out a very short haibun that incorporates the haiku into the prose the way Merrill does in “In the Shop” above:

Forgetting how to walk, I glide. Forgetting how to see, I feel

clear skies

leafless trees hung

with old nests

across the silence. A crow etches a caw into my heart.

The Prose-Poem Project, where I’ve published before, rejected it, probably because haibun in any shape (prose + verse) does not fit their definition of a prose poem. The haiku journal *A Hundred Gourds* rejected another version with a stronger haiku. Although I can’t confirm it, I suspect the rejection was based in part on the syntactical connection between the prose and the haiku.

In this thesis, “Running with the Yaks” is a good model for the type of haibun many editors are looking for – a fairly terse prose in present tense with haiku that relate obliquely or thematically but not directly to the prose. From a literary point of view, haibun prose tends toward telling more than showing. Or, like bad travel writing, it’s just one damn thing after another. For the final draft of this thesis, I removed many good haibun for the simple reason that the prose sounded flat in comparison to the free verse and prose poems.

Nevertheless, in my mind, haibun is a variation of the prose poem. In fact, it’s a much older form, dating back to the haiku-studded travel journals of the 17th century Japanese monk and poet Basho Matsuo, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* being the most well known of his works. I enjoy writing haibun very much, but the prose restrictions, through dictate and fashion, are constraining. Some haibun writers stretch the limits in various ways, and some editors – Jeffrey Woodward at *Haibun Today*, in particular – encourage writers to learn the history of the form and to innovate. (Woodward has also been influential in getting the haikai community to treat tanka prose as a

legitimate form. I have one tanka prose piece in this thesis.) I rather belatedly came around to western prose poetry. To be honest, the work of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud kept me away for a long time. It is all a bit ornate to me, over the top, though I can now appreciate better the circumstances. I can understand what they were doing, what artistic freedom they envisioned, but when I read them, it's difficult not to wonder why they didn't just write a poem or a short story. Of course, now I sometimes read Russell Edson and Lydia Davis and wonder what the difference between a prose poem and a short story is.

The courses I took in the online MFA program at the University of Texas at El Paso (and the directions in which they pointed me) introduced me to the prose poetry of poets as diverse as Charles Simic and Peter Jenkins, C.D. Wright and Ray Gonzalez, Roxanne Beth Johnson and Janet Kaplan, James Tate and Colette Labouff Atkinson, Russell Edson and Elizabeth J. Colen. I'm still finding my way as a prose poet, stealing from here and there, rediscovering the wheel, and manipulating words as best I can. And like the referential poets Hoagland admires, I keep going back to experience and memories, my own and those of other poets.

Part of what has led me to prose poetry has been, I think, a mistrust of the line break. I would love to write long lines – like Walt Whitman, David Kirby, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and Lucia Perillo. I would like to rhyme with the confidence of so many British poets, like Wendy Cope and Don Paterson. I'd die to plumb the vernacular depths of David Lee, to slide between the accessible experimentalism and light classicism of Michael Palmer. Many of the free verse poems I excised as I revised this thesis were essentially conceptual pieces arranged in lines to look like verse. Looking at the free verse poems that I've included in this thesis, I've noticed several of them follow a Kay Ryan strategy of hugging the left margin. I think that strategy has a lot to do with my experiences as a haiku writer. It could be I'm intimidated by all that white space, which is why I tend to fill it up with prose poetry blocks.

4. Beyond Poetics

In the title piece of this thesis, “The Armchair Daoist,” I emulate and parody Chuangzi. Like a Daoist returning to the source, I went back to the source of artifice. Of all the pieces in this thesis, this is most likely fiction and not poetry. However, it confronts directly the entire project of creating meaning. It is referential writing flirting with the meaning of no-meaning. And yet, like most of my writing, it cleaves to a need for meaning. I’m both incapable and disinclined to write something that means nothing more than the sound of one hand clapping or shadows lost in darkness. Even nonsense verse signifies. The sound and the fury without symbolism is noise. The noise without an image is just sound. On most days, I’d take Spike Milligan over Gertrude Stein.

I often go back to the comment by Hoagland that it’s not the substance so much as the management of the substance that draws readers back to poems. This partly has to do with form. Why free verse for this and haibun for that? Why prose poetry for this and tanka for that? And are some of the prose poems in here possibly short short fictions? Substance is linked to theme and subject, is theme and subject. Two themes/subjects pervade almost every poem in this thesis: identity and reality (or versions of truths.) In league with most referential poets, I’m in search of meanings and identity. I want to tell a story and this is the best way I know how. This thesis is, like many poetry collections, nothing more than a history of my selves. And like all histories, it is selective, plagiarized, sanitized and faithful in its infidelity to various truths. As the narrator of Amy Hempel’s story “The Harvest” says, “I leave a lot out when I tell the truth” (106). All autobiography falls into the *kire*, the cut.

At the end of any project, or even after fighting with a poem for weeks or months, I think of the filmmaker Jean Rouch and his belief that creating a masterpiece is annoying because you can’t improve it. I’m certain I’ve not created a masterpiece, and I have doubts about some of the pieces in

this manuscript and how they fit together as a whole, but as Rouch says, “Doubts are optimism....
The moment you have doubts, everything is possible” (“Cine Trance”).

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Part 1

I leave a lot out when I tell the truth.

Amy Hempel, "Harvest"

Old School

You've heard of those fathers, hard
asses, tough as nails, unsentimental
fuckers to the core. They exist.

My old man threw me into a pond
of muddy water. Looking back,
I saw the world recede. I inhaled

that sludge and spat it up, puking
like a baby, refusing
to slide backwards into death.

I flailed and splashed like
Tarzan fighting crocodiles until
he plucked me out. Now it's possible

to smile about it, even
laugh. It was abuse
but he called it swimming.

Like a Squirrel

I was seven when
Nazim Hikmet, the poet
with hungry hands,
lover of Turkey, died
in Moscow. I was
picking my nose,
dewberries and flakes
of sunburned skin.
The world was teaching
me the difference
between black and
white, but in my heart
I was unlearning it,
learning to live seriously
like a squirrel. I've been
to Moscow. It's not
a place I'd care to live
in, too cold, but it
wouldn't matter, if
like Hikmet, I were dead.

From the Back of a Station Wagon Looking Out

I was twelve the first time I saw a black man
on a motorcycle. He was wearing an old canary yellow
doughboy helmet that rode high on his Mod Squad afro,
which made him blacker in my eyes, and dangerous
in a good way. He waved and revved his hog
when the light changed. The light changed.

Now I want to wave back,
tell him I love him. The world
never looked the same again.

Cowboy

*fall mist
steam from a pot
of chili*

Going through boxes of photographs with my mother, we come across an old black and white photo of my brother and me. We're dressed in cowboy outfits, chaps, vests with sheriff's badges, five-gallon hats for half-pint wranglers like us, I suppose, holsters with cap-gun six-shooters, and boots. He's mounted on his trusty tricycle, and I stand behind him, the older protective brother.

A few weeks before, on a sweltering day, he had run away from home. He stuffed some clothes into a pillowcase, tied it to a stick, and like a hobo crossed the street and hunkered down in a ditch. I was told not to go after him, so I stood in our yard weeping, begging him to come home, which he did for supper, as my mother had predicted.

*summer night
peeling patches of sunburned
skin off our backs*

Forty years later, my brother sits in his easy chair. Half of his clothes are packed and his good cowboy hat nestled in a hatbox. I look at my mother staring at that photograph and decide it's not the time to remark that he died with his boots on.

The Truth Comes Out

The elementary school principal ushers us into her office. Parents have been complaining about your son, she tells my wife and me. He's been telling the other kids there's no Santa. It's true, my wife says. Yes but, the principal starts to explain and then goes silent while she straightens a paper clip into a tiny pointer. Looking up at me, she says, he's also been telling them that you're the Tooth Fairy. And I say, It's true.

Malaria

I was a submarine
could feel the crew about
their business manning torpedoes
spinning periscopes
but I remembered to breathe
swallowed a mouthful of air
and everyone drowned

when the man
with the ice pick
was almost out of my skull
my wife took me
to the emergency room
and I lay there iv tubed
calling for my three daughters
though I had no children
triplets that looked like Shirley Temple
though I had no kids
calling for my daughters
to rub my feet

this sort of thing
isn't contagious
isn't inheritable
but mosquitoes don't know or care
so my son years later
rolls on the tiled floor
of a friend's bathroom singing
I feel good
though he can't sing well
gasping for air as he is
and I have to ask
do you feel like a submarine
no he says
I feel good
I knew that I would

Amherst, Summer 2008

bar mitzvah
my nephew's baritone voice
strong and clear –
stumbling on a passage
he exclaims, "Jesus!"

after the noshing and schmoozing I take my son on a tour of Emily Dickinson's house though he claims not to like her poetry which is not unusual for a young man but nevertheless we go on this tour with a couple in their twenties mumbling verses as we are herded from one room to the next and three Italians a middle-aged couple and an older gentleman who I find out the next morning at our B&B is an intellectual or poet perhaps because the other Italian man has a book with the older gentleman's picture on the cover to which I point and say Emily Dickinson but he laughs and says no though what I meant was is the older gentleman a scholar of Emily Dickinson because in her house there is a mannequin wearing a dress that the poetess may or may not have worn and the elderly Italian gentleman sees it and says Reina Vitoria and I think that's something one is not likely to say unless he knows something anyway I discover that everyone staying at the B&B except me is a Jew even my son even the Italian couple and feeling a bit self-conscious about eating my bacon I keep trying to hide it under the toast

beneath a tree
that shaded Miss Dickinson
the tour guide
ends her spiel and fans herself
with laminated poems

Wondering

Do the gods ever sit
around the fire and tell
tall tales, wonder what
it would be like to die,
talk about the one
that got away or the time
they came home drunk
and didn't get caught
and then couldn't fall
asleep wondering what
omniscience was?

Aubade
Addis Ababa

Far away through
tinny speakers, priests
rouse the Orthodox
from feasts of dreams,
the gravy of slumber
coating their eyes. And
then I roll off the bed,
gauge the time by
sunlight slipping through
the blinds and muezzins
getting their calls to
prayer inserted into
the Christian chanting,
but after all, there is but
one god, so they agree.
Feeling for the bathroom
switch, I flick it just
for the sound, for power
is always off this time
of day, the glories of
god generated by benzine,
the faithful looking
inward and never
seeing the sun.

Notes Toward a New Theology
Addis Ababa

Soon after the muezzin broadcasts his first call to prayer, the Ethiopian Christians start chanting. The muezzin has a nice voice, though his PA system suffers from electrical emphysema. The Christians form a choir and raise their voices a few decibels. From what I've heard, they need to practice if they hope to get to heaven. When the cock crows, the sun, like an egg out for revenge, breaks the day.

A Christian priest goes on sing-songing like a cantor. I suspect it's a ludicrous promise or a dire threat and I won't be able to go back to sleep. I can't get away from god. No matter where I go, people are talking to him or her, talking to a god who won't reply, an eternally pissed-off lover.

When I die, I won't be here; therefore, I'll be god. And it will come to pass that you won't hear a word from me.

What Aging Feels Like : A Tanka String

mid-sentence
she wanders off talking
to herself –
it doesn't really matter
but it was my sentence

::

she says
she loves me more
but needs it less –
beneath the sheets tonight
grateful and unwanted

::

admiring
bikini-clad mannequins
in a shop window
I catch the gray
sneaking into my mustache

::

a student asks
what aging feels like –
I pretend
not to hear her
and clean my glasses

::

the elevator shudders
as it pulls itself up
to the top –
all the songs of my youth
turned into muzak

::

the crowd three deep
behind barstools at El Quim
when we find two spots
we stare at the menu board
lost in language and hunger

::

on the verandah
a pot of glowing coals
between us
the half moon and silence
all there is to talk about

::

having a pint
at The Hospital Arms
with my son –
in lieu of conversation
we read Spike Milligan

::

splitting
a club sandwich
at the cafe –
the odd feeling of knowing
I can't afford to live too long

Pomegranates

Some days I take the cleaver out and try to cut through the stale loaf of life by slicing a pomegranate in half and watching the red juice run, like blood – you knew I would say that – but this is thin blood, blood that needs a coagulant just like the deadlines flooding my brain.

I eat the seeds, so sweet with just a hint of tang, and I start to forget that my wife would rather do yoga than wrap her legs around me, that teaching has become a penance for some past-life mistake that I can't put my finger on, that the credit cards in my wallet are weeping stigmata

begging me to order the cheapest sandwich, tuna salad, and a glass of water. I feel guilty for under-tipping all the waiters counting on me before their audition call backs, though I would like to tell them discovery can be a curse. Sometimes it's best to stay good and lost because when they find you, whoever they are,

they'll want something and you'll be standing there with a mouthful of pomegranate seeds, the cleaver in your hand and the edge of the counter dripping blood.

One Dead Man to Another
After Marvin Bell

It's hard to stand beneath the sun for long
and not realize what *parasol* means.

It's hard to weather a storm that outlasts a picnic
and not shoot the finger at a god you don't believe in.

It's hard to see what isn't there
and not feel the emptiness you can't touch.

On My 27th Anniversary

I doubt I ever looked
like a Greek god, but now on my 27th anniversary
I feel invisible. My wife brings home
a migraine bigger than her head and takes
it to bed with her. Lights go out all over my
world, the shades drawn, so my son and I go
out and get some pizza

and a bottle of Pinotage.
He's almost twenty, just finished his first summer
job. Life's not so bad, I tell him. Things happen.
Decisions beget other decisions. Blah blah blah.
After all, I point out, we're here drinking cheap
South African wine and eating greasy pizza. If his
mother didn't have a headache, we'd be dressed up,
large napkins covering our laps, trying to remember
which fork you stab your salad with so you don't
look like a moron. Of course, I'm a bit sad that I
won't be getting tangled up in the sheets tonight
like some toga-clad god at an orgy for two, but that
isn't something I care to discuss with my son, who
may be a virgin

as far as I know. He's big
on privacy. Next week he returns to rainy old England
just as the rainy season here in Addis ends. The irony
isn't lost on us. I remind him we'll meet in Buenos Aires
for Christmas, sit outside at a café and try to make
sense of Argentinean Spanish, eat a lot of meat, and
play the game of spot the ghost of Borges. He then
gets quiet, maybe even sentimental, or just envious,
and says he wishes he could go to Jordan with us in
October. I ramble on for a bit

about falafel and beached
whales on the Dead Sea, and then he asks me about
Petra. My mind goes blank, except for flickering images
of Indiana Jones sweating and cracking his whip, and I
want to go home, home to the darkness, and crawl into
bed with my wife, have migraine dreams about snorkeling
in the Red Sea and sunsets over

sand dunes. In ruins, I say.

I Talk So Much Because You Don't Listen

You never hear about people going to the zoo on their honeymoon. Maybe it's all these cages. There's nothing like watching a hippo couple bouncing around a murky concrete-lined pond in slow motion to make you think about our situation. Not that I think you, I mean we, are hippos, but you know what I mean. And look at those fucking monkeys beating off. I can tell you there's not a married man who can see that and not think there but for the grace of Darwin go I *and* thank god for pornography. I don't want to go anywhere near the elephants with their floppy ears and tiny eyes that always look like they've been crying. I read somewhere they do cry. I hate the way they rock back and forth, sway, like they're about to apologize for something. I don't know about you but I'm tired of apologizing.

Epicrisis

Sometimes you go away and I don't
sleep well on that stony-hard Chinese
mattress that has over the years developed
a ridge down the middle, our bodies
pushing it up like some Himalayan
range, a natural boundary
between neighbors. It has turned sexual
conquest into an excursion up and over
the hump to the other side, on the other side.
When you aren't there I straddle that height
looking to snatch sleep and dreams from
clouds drifting by and all around,
and grasping beyond my reach I fall off, roll
back into my comfortable depression.

A Little More History
after David Lehman

One day I remember I'm married
to a Jew. Somehow I'd forgotten
about my son's bar mitzvah (he opted
for the safari in Tanzania) and all those
latkes every year at Chanukah. Even
I forgot about my wedding, the
body-building rabbi flown up to conduct
the ceremony because none of those
rabbis or cantors in liberal Seattle, not
even the gays or the women, had the balls
to marry me to the Jew, without a conversion
to chopped liver and a symbolic drop of
blood from the tip of my already clipped
penis. I stood proud beneath the chuppa
and made my vows in Hebrew. I've no idea
what I agreed to, but I made some promises.
I'm still married to a Jew, with a big J,
though Israel can kiss my goyish ass. Sue me.

Getaway

What if one day you get one of those stuffed sweepstake envelopes in the mail and you read through the advertising and the coupons and get the idea that you're a millionaire, a billionaire, and you present yourself to the local media and they put you on television, the six o'clock news, because this is the real deal, the kind of thing the world is dying to know to distract them from the news of a dying world, and they have you look into the cameras and say humbly that all that money isn't going to change your life, that Monday morning you'll be back at the feed store keeping the accounts, but on Monday morning you wake up and realize that your husband is past his love-by date, so you make a note to call a lawyer and begin divorce proceedings, though you feel a little guilty you told him over the weekend it was okay to quit his job, and then you call the feed store and tell them they can stuff their shitty pay and hayseed ways and you go to the bank and your old high school sweetheart Jim, the bank manager, who dumped you on prom night to bang the class slut with a couple of other guys, is happy to loan you two hundred thousand dollars because he saw you on TV and knows you're good for the money, which you gratefully accept and head for the nearest international airport, where, sipping Bloody Marys in the departure lounge bar, you see yourself on the news and the announcer is giving your last known whereabouts?

When Philosophy Makes no Sense

Could be there are many
false beginnings. Homemade
ice cream you dream of
eating but can't be bothered
to make. Kisses wet
and air-dried. Some things
we can't explain. I love
the hoopoe's dip and glide
dip and glide into
a landing and singing
songs in a language
I don't know. What
can it mean? The way
your hand moves up
my thigh raises several
questions that just have to wait.

Orgasm

so I ask her where
she got invisible
socks and what they cost
and she asks me what
I think about the color
and we go crazy thrashing
and straining to see
what we can't see

Vamos a Uruguay
A Prose Poem That Has No Connection to the Spanish Film *¡Ay, Carmela!*

I run into my wife in a bookstore, in the Fiction section. We ask each other how we've been, as if we haven't seen in each other in years rather than the twenty minutes since arriving. I'm tired and want to go home, but she's dying to go to Uruguay. "The Travel section's over by the cafe," I tell her. A woman shelving books in the Mythology section pops her head around the corner – all I can see is one eye – and asks if she can help. "No," I say, "I'm just telling my wife where to go."

Later, at home, I ask my wife, "Would you like the glass of water on the table?" and she asks me what I mean.

Up All Night: 19 Senryu

heading home
the birds never stop
to hear me sing

::

the sound of bells
wishing I believed
in something

::

last call
the pianist adjusts
his tip jar

::

put some life into it,
the director shouts
at Marley's ghost

::

dead pigeon in the handicapped parking spot

::

up all night
any bed can be
a death bed

::

new birth certificate nothing's changed

::

selling old cookbooks
for every stain
I cook up a story

::

one-day butoh workshop
learning to move slowly
in a hurry

::

holiday packing –
the condoms I never used
on the last trip

::

cancelled passport
so many blank pages

::

I forget his name
the neighbor with Alzheimer's
checks the mail again

::

lawyer's office one crooked diploma

::

plastic surgeon
the laminated hours
taped to the door

::

yoga's benefits –
I'm in no position
to comment

::

feeling old –
waking my son at noon
for no reason

::

30th reunion
no grandchildren
to speak of

::

hospice
all the patients
sign a waiver

::

death
at last I won't be
bothered by flies

When the Happy Spell of Strangeness Fades

She said, "You
remind me

of someone." I forgot
who I was.

We pretended
for a while

we weren't strangers,
until we got
to know each other.

A Conspiracy

Sometimes I suspect
a conspiracy to keep
us dumb with information:
the fashion faux pas
of celebrities (mostly
unknown to me), boys
who go fishing and catch
sharks and alligators,
a gay soldier who
comes out to his dad
and the world online. Oh,
sometimes I'm touched,
amused, disturbed, but
turning away from
the screen, I can see
sunbirds have come
to take nectar from
impatiens, and the dog
needs to be fed before
she savages me and I
find my mangled body
buried in the news.

Empathy

I've been the banana far from the top crushed in its own peel, the caper that's rolled off the cracker and down the blouse of a woman who doesn't find humor in that sort of thing, the peanut butter just under the rim that never gets to meet a slice of bread, the beef so rare it bleeds to death, again, or so well-done it's done for, again; I've been the red wine that stains the shirt that can't be cleaned that is donated to charity and sent to Africa and worn by a band of brothers whose mother eventually takes what's left and stuffs it inside an old plastic milk bag to make a ball for the puppy that chases it into the street; I've been the dog that scratches its fleas gently because they're the only friends it has, the mule that really wants to tote that load but refuses because it's expected, the Orca ostracized by the pod because it doesn't play toss the seal, the mosquito out for blood that is hated by all though it harbors animosity for none; I've been you and you know what that's like.

Part 2

Everything one invents is true.

Gustav Flaubert

Instructions

The bookcase came in the mail. Assembly required. According to the photocopied brochure, the pieces were made from a rare tree in Southeast Asia. The instructions were translated into English from 13th century Norse by a cartwright in Tajikistan. We may as well have been trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. No matter what we did, with or without the guidance of the instructions, the bookcase turned out to look like a coffin. So we buried it in the backyard. The following spring we noticed the shoots of a tree coming out of the ground. By fall, we had a full-grown artificial tree that resembled some rare tree in Southeast Asia. It was deciduous, and all the thin wire veins in the fallen silky leaves spelled THIS SIDE UP.

If Only I Could Sleep and Wake Up at My Destination

I buckle my seatbelt and watch the flight attendant on the video tell me how to buckle my seatbelt.

I eat the food I'm given, choosing between fish and chicken or beef if given the chance.

I watch the movie or news without using the headphones or stare out the little window

and have horrible thoughts about how it would feel to be sucked out. I drink lots of water

and do all the in-flight exercises and stretches recommended in the back of the magazine somewhere

between the duty-free items and the maps of the airline's routes. I used to imagine having sex

with a flight attendant, but these days they're so grumpy they can go fuck themselves.

In the Cookery Section of a Bangkok Bookstore

I notice a young Thai couple, late twenties, sitting on the floor with a pile of Thai cookbooks, all in English. I've never heard Thai people laugh so hard. They're crying. Curious, I move closer and see that they're reading the recipes and cracking up, and somehow I feel stupid and guilty at the same time. I want to go home and burn all my Thai cookbooks. But then I feel angry and I want to get an American cookbook in Thai and laugh at meatloaf and casserole recipes, but I can't read Thai, so I go down to the food court and order *khao soi* and laugh as I pretend I don't like it.

In a Strange Land Familiar to Me

I don't have enough ringgit to pay the taxi driver, so he swings around the block, his meter still calculating the value of time and distance, though not in that metaphysical way we humans used to do, and pulls up curbside near an ATM. And I'm just drunk enough to believe I can follow the instructions in Bahasa, but after serious concentration on my part, the machine rejects my card with an unfeeling mechanical alacrity I find offensive. I'm sure it's a grammatical error, so I try again, this time in English. And I'm just drunk enough to find the instructions divertingly entertaining. Someone honks. It's a busy street. I ignore it. I'm listening to the machine thumbing the money, counting out the fifty-ringgit notes, the *lima puluh* notes, but I count them again, per the instructions in English and Bahasa (they're available in Chinese and Arabic too, if you're so inclined), and come to the pleasant sum of a thousand ringgit, twice what I requested. Feeling the hand of Lady Slot-Machine Luck fondling my *cojones*, I insert my card once again. After a while that no machine has been designed to measure, a message comes on the screen giving me the number one calls if the card has been eaten by the machine. It seems like a conflict of interest to me, this machine telling me what to do because it swallowed my card, and I have nothing to write it down with. And I'm just drunk enough to think that if I memorize the number in Hebrew, I won't forget it. But I've apparently forgotten I don't know Hebrew, so I go to borrow a pen from the taxi driver, who's dreaming about breakfast judging from the way he's smacking his lips. I leave five hundred ringgit in his lap and walk back to the hotel. That's a lot of soft-boiled eggs.

20 Aphorisms and Observations Regarding the Nature of Reality All on One Page

A good lie is basically true.

In three languages I know, love is a four-letter word.

If you give a puppy a chew toy, she will destroy your Italian leather shoes.

If you go to a movie alone, no one will sit with you.

If you wake up in the morning, it doesn't mean you're alive.

If a pineapple turns black, you can't make pineapple bread out of it.

After sex, a good dark chocolate gives you ideas you wish you'd had earlier.

The Chinese will never rule the world because their sidewalks are always slippery when they're wet.

The greatest city in the world has never existed.

Bilingual dogs have more than one master.

Ask your housemaid if you can go to her house and cook dinner for her, and then you will better understand Karl Marx.

Not every hot sauce is hot.

If you have a pool, your friends have peed in it.

Roses *are* red, sometimes.

In a basket full of keys, at least one will open nothing.

If you step on a bone in your house, you have some questions to ask.

When the electricity goes off, you no longer hear some things.

A clean tablecloth is supposed to get dirty, no matter what your mother says.

Time zones are a way of making sure we don't all die at the same time.

A goat tied to the top of a car is on its last ride.

Not Something One Thinks About a Lot

I used to be the cat's meow, I say to my students, back in the day when I did my dissertation on homoeroticism in Chaucer. Who's Chaucer? asks the student with ear buds implanted into his skull. Or perhaps I should say he is ear-budded. Before I can answer, someone else asks what's the cat's meow. I know, but it's not something one thinks about a lot, so I take a shortcut and say it's a bit like the cat's pajamas. What's the cat's pajamas? she now wants to know. I tell the Groucho Marx joke about shooting an elephant in my pajamas. Can we Google it? old skull with ear buds asks. Not on my watch, I say. Go to the library and get lost in the stacks. Come back when you've learned something about yourself. What's a watch? someone asks.

Winter in China

across the paper-bag brown
of an empty field sparrows scatter
their high-pitched song into the branches
of leafless trees and weathered shrubs
they call home

false spring has warmed the air
though the chill of winter holds
to the thawing edges of my
heart and that damp concrete block
I call home

the sun slides between glass and steel
high rises blocking the view
of the river wending its wide
and gray way to the sea
it calls home

when the chill of dusk has settled
into my joints I turn
my door with its loose
handle and mount the stairs to the place
that calls me home

At the Station

*traffic jam
a warm breeze in one window
and out the other*

The train T number 7766 is leaving in no time. Will passengers please get on board. I can't catch where the train is going, and since I've already missed one train today, I double-check the number on my ticket.

A large mounted screen in the waiting area shows a travel promotion for Turkey's Blue Coast. A European woman skips in slow motion through Miletus, her white diaphanous dress soft-lifted by a breeze. Later she leans over the railing of a *gulet*, her hair and make up commercial perfect, and gazes across the sparkling water.

I've been there, swum there, and the water is nipple-puckering cold. I doubt the actress goes swimming in her free time. Alexander the Great seized Miletus in a great battle according to historians and brochure writers. I wonder if he could swim. Was swimming a sport or pastime in the 4th century BCE?

Chinese men huddle beneath the no-smoking sign in the bathroom and puff as if cigarettes are about to disappear mysteriously from the face of the earth. These men have the look of men used to slow trains that stop at every station, every gesture calculated to fill the time.

Everything is slightly slower than normal, a good speed for propaganda. Too fast and everyone suspects a lie. Too slow and the lie is easily exposed. There she goes, but too fast, her bathing suit a white blur in the blue water.

Around the station several stalls sell Yunnan ham, whole legs in clear plastic cases with convenient handles. On the platform it looks like a convention of ukulele nuts. Or gangsters, the 1930s type, with machine guns in violin cases.

Another train is about to leave *in no time*. Could be mine. I've already seen more of the world than Alexander. I've flown and taken trains. I can swim. He didn't even know what BCE stood for. It stood for nothing. He was a man of his time, but now he's stuck in the past. I'm stuck at the train station.

*tight security
a noodle slips back
into my bowl*

Running with the Yaks

My friend is going blind. He's known this for most of his life. It's genetic and can't be corrected. His father went blind the same way. Gradually the periphery disappears and he'll be squinting at the world through a peephole until finally there's no more light. He's also color-blind, which doubtless explains his sartorial style when I first met him and he was single. He also has night blindness and has never seen the stars.

*Milky Way
lovers whisper
in the dark*

We are on holiday together in Yunnan and take a hike along the marked path in Yak Meadow. It is a cold, clear day. Tibetan prayer flags, shredded by the wind, flap with loud pops. My friend leaves his wife and me gasping for air as he practically runs ahead of us, his cane skimming the surface in front of him. I'm a stroller and am soon far behind enjoying the scenery and catching my breath.

*mountain top –
so beautiful
the view from down here*

Later I meet up with his wife. "Have you seen S?" she asks. I haven't and begin surveying the meadow. There, far below near a frozen pond and walking through a herd of yaks, is my friend. We scream and shout and finally get his attention. He turns his back to us and stares in the direction of the snow-capped mountains for about ten minutes, and then scrambles back up to the trail.

I head back to the cable car terminal, suppressing the thought that he has come here to die, that the last thing he wants to see is the blinding white of these mountains. About thirty minutes later I spot his wife coming down the path alone.

"What happened?"

"He took my camera," she replies, "and he went back down to take pictures of the yaks."

*clear evening –
watching my breath
disappear*

Mongolia

the blue above dung
dotted steppes stretches
so tight that prayers sent
up bounce back with every
turn of the wheel, here, where
the eye is god, imagining all
being in the emptiness, giving
flight to the bird in the stone,
a wiggle to the viper in the stick,
and here in unfiltered moon
light, darkness is nothing more
than weak shadows and wind,
a bark rattling a chain, out there,
where the ear is god, imagining all
that lives in the silence, giving
voice to spirits dead and those unborn,
ringing the heart like a temple bell

Kathmandu, Christmas Morning 2009

My wife is up at 6:30 banging around in the bathroom as she hurries to get dressed. The electricity is off again. A yoga class begins in half an hour, and she's not certain exactly which winding lane the studio is hidden in.

morning haze
cannabis incense
50% off

Rooftops fill with women hanging bundles of wet laundry and separating produce into piles of purple onions and knobby potatoes and red and green chiles. A young mother nurses a baby and clips her toenails.

gossip
the clack of a knife
on a cutting board

The garbage collectors have been on strike for five days, a blessing of sorts for the bony dogs and the destitute who fossick through the rising mounds of rubbish. Later, I'll wander off to Durbar Square and wash down the dust with a glass of fresh pomegranate juice.

narrow lane
a monk clings to
a bouncing rickshaw

In Transit, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport

A flickering fluorescent tube stipples
the faces of passengers asleep in a row
of plastic seats. Drool oozes from
the corners of their mouths, like sap
from broken blades of aloe. *Rush*
kindly, a crackling voice exhorts
a passenger, *to your gate*, creating
a new being from sound sieved
through the public address system –
Abdulla Al-Majed, Albert Majors,
Andrea Melvin, whoever you are, you
are needed now. The passengers stir,
look at their boarding cards and check
their passports, not sure who they've become.

Killings

Stuck in a pre-rush hour traffic jam on Ethio-China Road, fumes and horns in the morning haze, news on every radio station, English, Amharic, a mix. Death is today's theme. Kids playing with a rocket in Afghanistan arrive early in some paradise. Eight policemen in Mexico go out on their last call. Julia Roberts makes fifty million dollars hawking cosmetics. Some cafes are open for business, and a couple of butcher shops with sides of beef waiting to be whittled into meals hang on racks against the walls. People, moving faster than the traffic, dodge potholes, mud holes, donkey dung and sheep shit. The broom-and-mop salesmen hit the streets. Steam rises from the abattoir, and I mistake a hunched buzzard for a twisted street lamp trembling in the breeze.

One Day

I come home after work, step inside the house and slide across the hardwood floor, banging into the wall across the room. The paella pan I've been hanging on the wall to remind me I could cook again one day if I so chose, clangs and rattles to the ground, smashing a yixing teapot on its way. The *mamita* slides toward me doing a squatting kind of pirouette with a broom and dustpan. I thank her and glide down the hallway to the bedroom, deposit my briefcase, change into short pants and slippers, and tune the charango hanging on the wall to remind me I could play again one day if I so chose. The *mamita* calls me into the kitchen to show me what she's made for dinner: biryani, cucumber and tomato salad, and cut-up mango. I tell her it's perfect, because I know it will be, and give her permission to take the evening off. Her smile is as bright as her newly polished floors. When she's gone, I rummage around the cabinets looking for saffron.

Weary of God and Tourism

guest survey
ticked off
no space for comments

After two days of touring rock-hewn churches in the New Jerusalem of King Lalibela, my wife and I pack up and leave, weary of god and tourism. Along the dusty road to the airport, a small boy waves a handmade cross, unfurled condoms hanging from the arms.

mid-day heat
a beggar presses her child
to the window

An Incident on Carrer de Mozart, Barcelona

The man downstairs reminds me
of myself and someone not myself,
banging on the door at five
in the morning on New Year's day,
playing the buzzers to every apartment
like John Cage on xylophone, trying
to kick in the door, blow the house down.
No one lets him in, no one yells threats
to call the police or let loose the dachshunds.
Between a buzz and a booted knock, I hear
a toilet flush, whispers on the stairs, but
after an hour, the siege, if that
is what it is, is over, and he's gone,
has left without a word, leaving quiet
dawn slipping down the narrow lane.
Not once did he moan or sigh or cry
out to be let in, scatter-shoot pebbles
at the windows, like a drunk, proclaim
his love for the girl in 3B, explain to all
of us now awake in our beds,
even if it's a lie, he's lost his key.
That's the part unlike me who
would've been cursing the world.

Part 3

Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words.

Chuangzi

The Armchair Daoist

1. On Happiness

“What's happiness?” Lopsided Tits asked One Nut.

“Happiness is not wanting anything,” One Nut said.

“Then sadness is wanting something?” Lopsided Tits wondered aloud.

“I suppose so,” said One Nut.

“I want some tea,” Lopsided Tits said. “Does that mean I'm sad?”

They went to the Wu Wei Café to ask the Armchair Daoist about happiness and sadness. He was asleep, and his apartment stank of moldy Puer. They sat at a table drinking Longjing until he woke up.

“What do you want?” the sage asked.

“Nothing,” said Lopsided Tits. “We helped ourselves to tea.”

“Master, what is happiness?” One Nut asked.

“It's the thing we want that makes us sad.”

“I thought that was sadness, Master,” One Nut said.

“Do you want happiness?” the sage asked.

“Of course!” One Nut and Lopsided Tits cried out.

“Then you must know sadness.”

“I told you,” said Lopsided Tits to One Nut.

2. The Story of Fat Ass

“Fat Ass had ADD, Tourette's, Asperger's, OCD, and a constant sinus problem that made him sound like he was reciting his ABCs underwater, in British English with a Danish accent and a lot of *motherfuckers* thrown in. This made him oddly popular. He was such an obvious target the bullies left him alone. The teachers never assigned him homework. Because no one expected anything from him, he exceeded all expectations.” When the Armchair Daoist finished speaking, he took a sip of Pouchong from his *gaiwan*.

“I don't understand,” Penis Nose said.

“That's okay,” said the sage, sipping his Pouchong.

3. When Wine is Better than Tea

“Tell us more about Fat Ass,” One Nut asked the Armchair Daoist.

The sage belched loudly, asked Lopsided Tits to boil water for tea, and told Penis Nose to open the window. When all was right in heaven, earth, and the four directions, he told them:

“Fat Ass was one with the Dao. His farts came out of nowhere and stank to high heaven.”

“My farts don't stink,” One Nut said. “Will I ever find the Way?”

“The water's boiled,” Lopsided Tits said. “What tea should I make?”

“Let's open the wine,” the sage said.

“I've composed a poem,” Penis Nose announced.

“Drink fast,” the sage said.

4. Sex and the Dao

One Nut and Lopsided Tits were hanging out in bed one Sunday afternoon. They had been practicing sex in an effort to find the Way and had discovered many ways to have sex.

"I should tell you," Lopsided Tits said, "Penis Nose has been sticking his schnozz in my business."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" One Nut asked.

"It could," she said, holding his face in her hands and going at him like a Tibetan.

5. Losing the Way in a Melodramatic Fashion

"Armchair Daoist," Penis Nose said, "sometimes you sound like Laozi and sometimes you sound like Chuangzi."

"That's because sometimes I'm Laozi and sometimes Chuangzi," the sage said.

"When are you the Armchair Daoist?" asked Penis Nose.

"I'm always the Armchair Daoist," he said.

"I don't understand," Penis Nose said.

"Fuck you!" the sage said and stormed out of the room like a caricature of a Frenchman.

6. On Attraction

One Nut and Penis Nose were sitting in the Wu Wei Café and drinking Oolong. One Nut looked at the leaves filling the inside of the yixing pot. "So much goodness from a tiny handful of leaves," he said.

"Who can fathom the ways of nature?" Penis Nose said. "Just think of Fat Ass. Ugly, sniveling, foul-mouthed, and yet the women flocked to him. What did he have that I don't?"

"Not what, but where?" One Nut said.

Penis Nose swung around to gaze at One Nut. His schnozz quivered. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that the tea on the bush is not the same as the tea in the pot."

The Armchair Daoist, the waiter that day, came over with a thermos of hot water.

"Master," Penis Nose asked, "why did the women flock to Fat Ass?"

"Who knows? Even if you could ask him, he couldn't say," the sage said, pouring more water into and then over the yixing pot.

"I'm going to ask Lopsided Tits," Penis Nose said, smiling at One Nut.

"She doesn't like guys who talk dirty," One Nut said.

"There's the answer," the sage said. "Who's the waiter tomorrow?"

7. Grasping for Not-Words

Lopsided Tits said, "According to Laozi, the female overcomes the male because she is tranquil."

"And because she is tranquil, she is underneath," Penis Nose said.

"He was speaking of statecraft," the Armchair Daoist interjected.

One Nut arrived at the table with a tray on which there were three *guampas*. “You suck the infusion through the silver *bombilla*,” One Nut explained.

“What tea is this?” Penis Nose asked.

“Tea is tea, Penis Nose. Suck it up,” Lopsided Tits said. “All tea is one with the Way.”

“It’s not tea. It’s *mate*,” One Nut explained.

“But not all not-tea is one with the Way,” the sage said, making a face as he put down his *guampa*.

One Nut stood there a while as everyone tried the *mate*. “I’ll go make some Bilouchun,” he said, clearing the table. “You know,” he added, “I think men are on top because they’re unstable.”

“What did he mean?” asked Penis Nose as they watched One Nut walk away.

“He was speaking of not-statecraft,” said the sage.

“He was trying to tell me something,” said Lopsided Tits, “without saying it.”

8. On Windows

“Fat Ass would sit in the café and tell stories about chewing *qat* in Yemen and smoking hashish in Fez and water pipes in Cairo. People would sit for hours listening to his tales,” the Armchair Daoist said. “Of course, Fat Ass never left town his entire life, and yet the people found truth in his stories.”

“How can that be if they knew the stories were made up?” One Nut asked.

“They were beautiful memories.”

“There was nothing to remember,” Penis Nose said.

“If we can remember what happened, then we can remember what didn’t happen,” The Armchair Daoist said.

“Old Master wrote that the farther you go the less you know,” Lopsided Tits said. “The world is outside your window.”

“Also inside your window,” One Nut said.

“The Way here is the Way there,” Penis Nose said, filling everyone’s *gaiwan* with hot water.

“There are many windows,” the Armchair Daoist said.

9. Poetry and Wine

“Would you like to hear my poem?” Penis Nose asked after the Armchair Daoist had opened a bottle of Tall Horse Sauvignon Blanc.

“First, a toast to the muse,” The Armchair Daoist said, taking a swig from the bottle and then pouring a glass for everyone.

“It’s short,” Penis Nose said.

*Rain pings in the gutter and
drain, sings in the stutter of
pain, brings in the clutter and
stain, clings to another day.*

“Very nice,” One Nut said.

“The rhyme scheme rivals that of the ancient bards,” Lopsided Tits said.

“Is the rain good or bad?” asked the sage.

“It is,” Penis Nose replied.

“So it is,” said the sage.

“I have one, too,” One Nut said.

“More wine, anyone?” the Armchair Daoist asked, filling up his glass.

One Nut recited his poem.

*I had a dream
about a story,
and in that story
I had a dream.*

“I appreciate the allusion,” Penis Nose said.

“What's it called?” asked Lopsided Tits.

“Plagiarism,” One Nut said.

“A fitting title,” mumbled the sage. “Anyone else have anything to share?”

“I have a poem,” Lopsided Tits said.

“I was hoping for a Pinot Grigio, but all is one along the Way,” said the sage. Lopsided Tits cleared her throat and began.

*Hesitant, like a man on a wet Chinese sidewalk.
Hesitant, like a toothless man chewing a buttered bagel.
Hesitant, like two lovers almost touching.
Hesitant, like a woman who's missed her period.
This is how the sage approaches life – hesitant.
This is how the sage approaches death.*

The Armchair Daoist coughed and fell out of his armchair. They rushed to pick him up.

“Are you okay?” Penis Nose asked.

“I felt like Arjuna staring into Krishna's mouth,” the sage said.

“What?” One Nut asked.

“Oh, nothing,” said the sage. “It was just a bad case of déjà vu.”

*from the Recently Discovered Manuscript
The Way of the Armchair Daoist*

1.

Let the grasses grow in the rain;
they will brown and wither in the drought.

Count the flowers as weeds
and all weeds will be flowers.

When goats are slaughtered for the feast,
hyenas and vultures move into the city.

If it's a jungle out there,
it's a jungle in here.

2.

The armchair sage owns no TV.
He takes a nap without dreaming
and wakes up without a desire to shop.

3.

When people lose track of the Dao,
celebrity becomes a goal.
In cities they ride stationary bicycles
behind plates of glass.
In villages they dream of moving
to cities of glass.

4.

When the country has lost the Way
people can no longer be themselves
but they must act like themselves.

Ruling the country is like starring
on Reality TV.

5.

The Way is so narrow
it's wider than the world.
Few know where they are.
Going forward, they think they are going back.
On the Way you go nowhere.

6.

When the traveler thinks
this way is that way,
he is lost
though he may be right.
When the traveler thinks
this way and that are the same
he may be right
but could still be lost.

7.

Laozi tells us those brave in daring die,
those brave in not daring live long.
GI Joe knows this to be so, but a soldier
is a moving target, he says, a soldier
not moving is a sitting duck.

The Armchair Daoist says, *Duck*.

Notes

“Like a Squirrel” contains a reference to the squirrel in Nizam Hikmet’s poem “On Living.” The phrase “hungry hands” is from his poem “It’s This Way.” Both poems are in *Poems of Nazim Hikmet* (Persea Books, 2002).

“Malaria” includes a line from James Brown’s song “I Got You (I Feel Good).”

“At the Station” uses a bit of Romantic diction to describe a television commercial. “Soft-lifted” is a term John Keats used.

“The Armchair Daoist” and “*from the Recently Discovered Manuscript The Way of the Armchair Daoist*” are indebted to Burton Watson’s translation *Chuang Tzu, Basic Writings* (Columbia UP, 1964) and Robert G. Henricks’ translation *Lao Tzu Tao-Te Ching* (Ballantine Books, 1989).

Vita

Robert Wayne Lucky holds a Bachelor of Arts in The History of Religions-Anthropology from Dartmouth College and a Master of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Washington, Seattle. His work, mostly nonfiction and poetry, has been widely published in various international journals such as *The Art of Eating*, *Petit Propos Culinaire*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, *frogpond*, *bottle rockets*, *Ribbons*, *Red Lights*, *Eucalypt*, *Ribbons*, *Presence*, and *The Prose-Poem Project*. His short-form poetry has been widely anthologized. He is co-author of *my favorite thing* (bottle rockets press, 2011). Since 2004, he has taught History and English in international schools in Bahrain, Thailand, China, and Ethiopia. He is currently teaching at the International Community School of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is married to Lisa Black and has one son, Gavin Lucky.

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