The ethos of slam poetry

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The Ethos of Slam Poetry

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

James William Coppoc

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program
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Poems included in Chapter 3 have appeared in the periodicals Barbaric Yawp, Highnote, San Gabriel Valley Poetry Quarterly, Sketch, Static Magazine, and Sympathetic Ink; the website Poets Against the War; the chapbooks Whiff and Other Poems and Slams, Rants, etc; and the spoken-word album Sex, Poetry, and the Open Road. All rights, however, were returned to me upon publication.

Finally, I’d like to thank the slam and spoken-word communities, without whom my poetry would be stale and my research boring. Someone once said, “slam is like the sophomore year at Poetry College.” If so, I hope I never graduate.
I. General Introduction

The story of slam is the story of where American poetry went wrong, and of what it is doing to right itself. At some point during the twentieth century, poetry in America became the property of the universities and began to pull away from its popular audience. The result was that the popular audience abandoned it. To defend and insulate itself against popular apathy, the academy began to set its own standards for what was and wasn’t considered poetry. Popular poetry, from *Chicken Soup...* to Maya Angelou, has become nothing more to academia than the setup for a good punchline. The rift between popular and academic poetry is wide.

Today, almost the only way a literary poet can get published is to take advanced university classes to learn the necessary conventions, get a job at a university that gives him or her time to craft these conventions, submit his or her poems to journals that are usually underwritten by other universities, and wait for the accolades of the other university poets who read them. The successful literary poets are given better university jobs, published in anthologies for use in university classes, and invited to read their poetry at various universities. This is an insular society.

At best, this system is a survival mechanism for poetry. It pumps enough money into the field so that poets who write well can keep writing. At worst, this system is a form of inbreeding, and it turns poets into lonely souls, inhabiting the contemporary versions of ivory towers, never communicating to a larger audience than what the university supports.

But there are other poetries. The idea that poetry should create a cultural dialogue has never died, despite rumors to the contrary. After the first wave of academic poetry nearly
wiped out the elements of audience and communality, backlash movements started to appear. The most notable of these was the Beat movement of the nineteen-fifties and early sixties, complete with its social and cultural ideals borrowed from ideologies ranging from Marxism to Buddhism. The Beat aesthetic was so strong, and the poetry so forceful, that it made its way into the academic anthologies, where it ended its role as social catalyst and began one as social history. It lay on the page, silent and eventually irrelevant, leaving behind all the vibrance and resonance of the Beat reading.

The reading was, after all, the heart of Beat poetry. All Beat historians organize their histories by gatherings of people and readings of poetry. The connection of author to audience was the most important part of the Beat aesthetic, and it was gone. Other movements have come and gone in the wake of the Beats, but none could capture the energy and articulation of the Beat ethos until Slam began in the mid-eighties.

Today, every poetry slam in the nation captures regularly the communality that had almost been lost in the last century. Slam continues to expand every year, and has become a cultural phenomenon. Slam and its offshoot movements appear on Broadway, in the movies, on television, and in bars and coffee shops all over the world. Slam incorporates everyone from homeless men and women to construction workers to soccer moms to university professors. It is the most democratic and most inclusive of all poetry movements to date, and it shows no signs of slowing down.

The difference between Slam and any other movement is that the first duty of the slam poet is to bring the audience along. From the simple act of judging the poets on stage, to the encouragement to read their own poetry next time, the slam audience is made part of the movement. Slam poems, like any other kind of poetry, deliver the cultural and
philosophical messages of the movement, and one of the messages they deliver is that poetry does and should belong to the people.

The second chapter of this thesis, "Ethos-Based Discourse in Slam Poetry," is a scholarly look at how slam poets accomplish this. It develops its theoretical underpinnings by applying the idea of Bakhtinian discourse to a variety of cultural and literary theorists and commentators, eventually focusing on the work of Marc Smith, the founder of the poetry slam movement, to establish the metaphor of ethos and aesthetic as a "coat" the poet wears. The audience observes this "coat", and they see something of themselves in it. At the same time, this chapter develops a definition and history of Slam poetry, focusing on the work of Marc Smith as well as two other poets central to the movement, Jack McCarthy and Patricia Smith. Finally, this chapter examines the way slam poets forward the slam agenda through their poetry.

The third chapter of this thesis, "First Person Singular," is an introduction to and collection of my own poems. I am a working slam poet, having performed and published slam poetry, and having made spoken-word poetry my primary area of interest for scholarly work. The poems included here, individually and as a whole, reflect the slam aesthetic. They are all loosely autobiographical accounts of my life and my present state of mind, but they are also expressions of culture. All of these poems are competent and successful on the page, but they all also have the exciting prosody and quick accessibility that the slam aesthetic uses to connect with the audience from the stage.

In addition to these two chapters, I have included three appendices of additional material and a works cited. The appendices exist for the sole purpose of allowing the reader to experience the poetry as closely as possible to the way the author intended. Appendix A
contains the full text of the poems cited in Chapter 2, Appendix B contains audio recordings of several of the poems from “Chapter 3—First Person Singular,” and Appendix C contains audio of selected poems cited in Chapter 2.

Over the past twenty years, slam has established itself as the largest and most popular movement in poetry. It sweeps away audiences with its exuberance and its cultural expressions, then turns these audiences into the next generations of slam poets. If for no other reason, the sheer number of poets involved in slam has made it increasingly important for the academy to take note of this movement, and this thesis is an effort in that direction.
II. Ethos-Based Discourse in Slam Poetry

The emerging form of slam poetry carries with it all the critical implications of any new kind of writing. First come problems of definition. What is slam poetry? What sets it apart as its own form? How does it relate to other forms within the poetry genre? Next come questions of functionality. How does slam poetry work? What devices power a successful slam poem? The ultimate meaning of slam, however, doesn’t reveal itself until a third set of questions has been answered: the questions of importance. What does a slam poem do? What is its purpose? How does it affect its audience? Woven into the answer to each of these questions is the dominant mode of slam writing: dramatically rendered first-person narrative.

Defining slam poetry is problematic at best. As a new form of writing, slam doesn’t give the definer an objective temporal distance from which to observe it. As a completely democratic medium, one that allows any form or style, slam opens itself to as many possibilities as there are poems. Any definition, therefore, has first to contextualize slam poetry, then begin to focus on common elements among the poems that fit into this context. The most direct way to go about this is to first define not slam poetry itself but the “Poetry Slam” where it is presented.

According to Poetry Slam, Inc., the governing body of registered poetry slams, “Simply put, poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry” (Poetry Slam, Inc.). By this definition, the factors that distinguish a poetry slam from any other type of poetry reading are competition and performativity. The same paragraph goes on to say, “It puts a dual emphasis on writing and performance, encouraging poets to focus on what they're
saying and how they're saying it.” Judges are chosen at random from the audience, the poet is judged on both poem and performance, and token prizes are awarded. The audience is encouraged “to react vocally and openly to all aspects of the show, including the poet’s performance, the judges’ scores, and the host’s banter” (Poetry Slam, Inc.). The poem becomes a dialogue among all parties involved. The competition is used as a gimmick to connect poet to audience and energize the readings. In an “60 Minutes” interview recalled by Mark Elevald, editor of The Spoken Word Revolution, (slam, hip hop & the poetry of a new generation), Morley Safer asked Marc Smith, the founder of the Poetry Slam, “What about this giving of numbers to poems?” Smith’s reply was a smiling “totally absurd” (Elevald 2).

The Poetry Slam movement, then, falls into the larger context of “spoken word.” Sourcebooks Mediafusion, the publisher of Elevald’s book, states, “spoken word encompasses many movements, yet they all share a common credo—namely, that their poetry is designed to be performed in front of an audience” (Elevald xiii). Poetry Slam, Inc. says the same of Slam: “Slam is engineered for the audience” (Poetry Slam, Inc.). This is important because the spoken-word format changes the nature of the poetry itself. In his introduction to The Spoken Word Revolution, Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate of the United States, writes, “For one thing, the poetry reading offers a double connection: one with the poet who stands up from the page and delivers, and another with the audience united by a common interest” (Elevald 3). The medium by which this connection is made is speech.

Insofar as poems are composed by the ear, they are designed to be heard as well as read. To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison cell of
the page, where silence is enforced, to a freedom dependent only on the ability to open the mouth—that most democratic of instruments—and speak. (Elevald 3-4)

This speech act, and the performance inherent in it, allows spoken word poets to work with at least two sets of devices not found on the page. Each poet’s voice can mold the delivery of the poem through accent, volume, intonation, pitch, and all of the other vocal mechanisms found in linguistics, music, and theatre. Each poet’s body allows another set of devices, contained in dress, body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions. The entire energy of a poem is changed, for example, if the poet paces while delivering rather than standing firmly in front of the mic stand. Yusef Komunyakaa, in his introduction to the contemporary spoken-word anthology Listen Up!, describes how spoken-word poets employ these devices in building a unique sort of ethos through his version of the “trickster motif.”

Each poem negotiates at least two territories simultaneously. Like hip-hop, these voices want to appear untutored and, at times, they seem to exist at the nucleus of a class war with themselves. The language of this poetry is textured by popular-culture references and multiple levels of diction—erudite and street smart. The voices seem fully initiated: hip-hoppers dressed in the baggy regalia of Southern sheriffs of yesteryear and Rasta dreadlocks—decked out in disguises. (Anglesey xii)

These “disguises” are a distinguishing feature of spoken-word poetry. Unlike the critical maxim so often applied to poetry on the page, “the author is in the text,” in the case of spoken-word poetry the “text” is in the author. This doesn’t in any way diminish the
words the poet is using; quite the opposite, it enhances them by adding layers of meaning. Komunyakaa continues, “but the reader or listener is obligated to think about what lingers at the center of each poem…Thus, the architecture or appearance fortifies and underlines the trickster-poet’s mask” (Anglesey xii).

The poets, then, are not only presenting their work, but they are also presenting themselves. The dialogue poets undertake with audience, judges, etc. reflects what Mikhail Bakhtin, discussing dialogization in his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” calls “the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour” (293). When Bakhtin makes this comment, he is specifically thinking of another double connection: the joint utterance of “unitary language” and “heteroglossia.” “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (272). Directly before he mentions the “taste” of words, Bakhtin states, “For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete, heteroglot conception of the world” (293).

Applying this idea of the nature of “utterances” to Collins’ “double connection” and Komunyakaas’s “trickster motif” yields a view of the spoken-word poem (utterance) as a richly layered construction of ethos and message. The poet has some point to get across to the audience, and through the dialogue of the performance poem, the poet uses him- or herself to do it. The audience, on some level, “tastes” the poet. There is the “unitary language” of the spoken-word form, but the poet delivers a unique view of the content through voice, costume, inflection, etc.—through, on a literal level, his or her own mouth, as Collins put it, “that most democratic of instruments” (Elevald 3).
To return to the process of defining “slam poetry,” Poetry Slam, Inc. claims that “there is no such thing as ‘slam poetry’” and asks instead that the reader consider the difference between “spoken word” and “poetry.” “Spoken word is poetry written first and foremost to be HEARD. At any given slam, much of the work presented could be called spoken word (Poetry Slam, Inc.). In general terms, then (in agreement with the intent if not the letter of Poetry Slam Inc’s statement), “slam poetry” can be said to be spoken-word poetry performed at a poetry slam with the intent of engaging the audience through dialogization, through being “HEARD” as opposed to just “heard.”

While Slam is a wonderfully innovative form, it didn’t invent itself out of a spoken word void. The “heteroglossia” in the slam dialogue is the rich variety of spoken-word traditions from all eras of history in all parts of the world. Performance poetry readings, even performance poetry competitions, have been around as long as humans have communicated through ritual language. This is documented in northern Europe as early as the boasting contests in Beowulf, in the Mediterranean as early as Homeric bards roaming ancient Greece, and in East Asia as early as Basho’s career judging haiku contests. Similar citations regarding other early traditions can be found in literally hundreds of texts on the early histories of many cultures around the world. Slam being primarily an American movement though, certainly the development of spoken word poetry in the English language has been important—one need only think of the story poems of Chaucer, the troubadours, the cavalier poets, or Shakespeare’s career on the stage to imagine how central this format is to poetry in
the English language—but it wasn't until America developed a poetic voice of its own that the real, direct roots of slam were established.

At its best, slam contains all of the exuberance and expansiveness of Whitman, the clever, playful prosody of Poe, and the easy accessibility of Frost. It has the spontaneity and the rough edges of Allen Ginsberg, the social conscious of Gwendolyn Brooks, and the personal connection of Gertrude Stein. In short, slam is what used to be considered good poetry. At some point in the twentieth century, however, American poetry lost its sense of obligation to the American people. It became inaccessible and arcane. Because the academization of American poetry took it away from its popular audience, the conventions intended to make it connect with that audience, the same conventions that are the central focus of spoken-word poetry, fell into disuse.

Fortunately, another important quality of American poetry is that it has always been the poetry of the outsider. All the poets mentioned above are associated with movements that fought against the hegemony of the poetic eras in which they lived. The last three in particular, especially Ginsberg and Brooks, were part of the backlash that took place against the academy in the middle of the twentieth century. This backlash, the return to popular poetry, evolved into slam in just a few generations. Gary Glazner, producer of the first National Poetry Slam, recalls this evolution passing through the performance poetry of Anne Waldman and Ted Berrigan in the nineteen-sixties and Al Simmons into the nineteen-eighties, culminating in the famous Taos Heavyweight Poetry Championship (Glazner 11).

The tradition of spoken-word poetry, so deeply embedded in so many cultures, was part of the reason Poetry Slam, born in 1984, caught on so quickly. Billy Collins recognized
this heritage as a part of the audience's shared cultural subconscious, a reason deeper than the "double-connection" that spoken word is such a powerful force in contemporary culture.

Another reason may lie in the oral reading's ability to return readers to a time preceding the dominance of print... In this light, the public reading is a throwback, a resurrection of the Romantic notions of spontaneity and genius as opposed to the modernist sense of the author as a reclusive inscriber of verbal patterns or, more extremely, the postmodernist sense of the author as a false construction, the fond illusion of old-fashioned readers. (Elevald 3-4)

Old as spoken word is, however, there is a new and distinct "taste" to the form as practiced today. The contemporary form of spoken word, and by extension of slam, came about in the middle of the twentieth century as a dominant mode of expression of one of slam's direct predecessors, Beat. Fred and Gloria McDarragh, participants in the Beat culture of the nineteen fifties and sixties, recall, "Beat poets read in the streets, in the parks, in cafes, nightclubs... anywhere an audience might stop and listen" (181). The reason for this was the connection the Beat poets made with their audience. "The Beats thought of poetry as a spontaneous verbal art, and enjoyed reading their work whenever possible, no matter how small the crowd" (McDarragh 181). And, as Komunyakaa pointed out, the reading provided the Beat poet the opportunity to make use of his or her "trickster mask," projecting all the salient points of beat culture through performative ethos.
Following the American tradition of earlier bards such as Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, who came from working-class backgrounds and spoke of and to the common man, many Beat poets...examined the world they knew, and their personal reminiscences and observations were often laced with shocking street language. For their audiences, readings were adventurous entertainment, sure to provide a titillating edge. (McDarrah 181)

Most Beat critics and historians agree that this performing culture followed one flashpoint event—Allen Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955. Among the assembled poets was Michael McClure, whose account of the event appears in nearly every history of Beat poetry.

The Six Gallery was a huge room that had been converted from an automobile repair shop into an art gallery. Someone had knocked together a little dais and was exhibiting sculptures by Fred Martin at the back of it—pieces of orange crates that had been swathed in muslin and dipped in plaster of paris to make splintered, sweeping shapes like pieces of surreal furniture. A hundred and fifty enthusiastic people had come to hear us. Money was collected and jugs of wine were brought back for the audience...Allen began in a small and intensely lucid voice. At some point, Jack Kerouac began shouting "GO" in cadence as Allen read it. In all our memories no one had been so outspoken in poetry before—we had gone beyond a point of no return—and we were ready for it, a point of no return. None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellective void—to the land
without poetry—to the spiritual drabness. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision. (Theado 63)

They got “voice” and “vision.” Soon Beat poetry readings were a popular cultural phenomenon. They changed not only the way poetry was presented, but also the way it was written. The McDarrahs, observing the same things on the East Coast, agreed, saying, “The Beats revived the notion of poetry as a spoken art, as opposed to something to be savored solely on the printed page” According to the McDarrahs, “They wanted to see poetry return to being a vital force in making positive changes in society, not just something for graduate students to mull over” (181). The reason for this was clear. “They were interested in getting immediate feedback from their audience, of relating a story or communicating a message so that it could be quickly understood” (McDarrah 181).

In other words, the Beats made the “double connection” by entering into a discourse with the audience. Anne Waldman, a leading Beat scholar and one of the poets mentioned earlier for her part in developing spoken-word competitions in America, touches on themes that echo Bakhtin when she claims, “I think the nominal ‘Beat Literature Canon’ endures and has such force because it holds together, through communality, a discourse that manifests a visceral relationship to language” (xix). The consequence of this, according to Waldman, is that “one focuses on the writing itself and finds that it still breathes” (xix).
What makes Beat poetry “breathe,” specifically, is the same ethos found later in slam poetry, the “erudite and street smart” diction described by Komunyakaa or the “democratic” mouth mentioned by Collins, what Waldman calls “an unabashed candor and generosity operating inside this literature” (xix). This ethos shows in many of the same conventions that operate in slam poetry today: “candid American speech rhythms, rhapsody, skillful cut-up juxtapositions, and an expansiveness that mirrors the primordial chaos” (xix).

Allen Ginsberg, in a 1975 interview with the literary journal Unmuzzled Ox, explains through a sort of Zen parable the sentiment underlying the Beat aesthetic of “spontaneous prose” as it applies to spoken word poetry.

I was talking with Chogyam Trungpa, Lama, about a year ago last summer in San Francisco...I said “...I find I’m getting tired of running around reading my poems.” And he said, “Ah, that’s because you don’t like your poetry...The trouble is you’re always reading it out of a book there, out of a text...why don’t you go up on stage and improvise like a great poet? Like Milarepa?... Why do you have to read something on a page?

...That’s the way I did it...I just went from chanting using a few chords on the harmonium to a long sort of almost poetical monologue bittersweet chant—“how sweet to be in America surrounded by petrochemical leprosy,” and that led to a twenty minute improvisation about safety in the city, bombs, China, how we were enjoying the Viet prosperity. From then on every time I gave a reading I tried to do some improvisatory work. (19-20)
The tradition begun by Ginsberg and the other Beats has continued in spirit into contemporary readings. Komunyakaa asserts that “spoken word poets, like the early Beats before them, practice their art in a democratic manner” (Anglesey xviii). He quotes another notable Beatnik, Ted Joans, as saying “We brought poetry to the public. We took it out of the salons de poesie... Our generation brought poetry out in the open and we recited in coffeehouses and bars” (Anglesey xx). In other words, they created the spirit and the venue for the evolution of the poetry slam.

But slam is not beat. While the “taste” may be similar, and Beat may be slam’s direct progenitor, slam poetry does have a character of its own. Jeffrey McDaniel, an acclaimed performance poet, goes so far as to call the Beat/Slam comparison a “flawed analogy” in his essay “Slam and the Academy.” He claims that “the Beats flourished in a far more conservative era and were more intellectual, more anti-establishment, whereas slammers, despite their countercultural poses, are often eager be assimilated into mainstream culture” (Glazner 35). The taste of the slam poet is the taste of mainstream America, but only now, in the true age of heteroglossia, when it is paradoxically “mainstream” to be a counterculture figure. This calls to mind the idea of “performative identity” as described by Judith Butler and of art as propaganda as described by W.E.B. DuBois.

Discussing gender, another aspect of the author’s “taste,” Butler says:

If the body is not a “being,” but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field...then what language...
is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its
“interior” signification on the surface? Sartre would perhaps have called this act “a
style of being,” Foucault, “a stylistics of existence.”...Consider gender, for instance,
as a corporeal style, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative,
where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.

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Butler’s “signifying practice,” a reference to Saussure’s semiology, can be used to
draw Komunyakaa’s “trickster motif” from spoken word into the realm of performative
identity. By this comparison, the true and complete meaning of the poem, or “signified,” is
carried to the audience via the poet’s particular “body,” or “signifier,” and so “what lingers at
the center of each poem” must be carried by the identity performed by the poet—the
“disguises” and the “voices [that] want to appear untutored.” The means the poet uses may
be less dramatic than Butler’s idea of “body” as signifier, but they function in the same way.

This applies to more than just gender. Each element of the identity a slam poet
constructs becomes a part of his or her performed ethos. If, as Dubois stated in “Criteria of
Negro Art,” “all art is propaganda and ever must be” (DuBois 296), then the art generated by
these constructed identities must be expressive of something beyond what is on the face of it,
and in the case of slam poetry, that “something” is a statement of the culture from which the
poet comes. The poems take on an almost sociological significance as slam poets, often
marginalized in life, express who and what they are in definite terms.

Among the ninety-seven poems included in Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of
Performance Poetry, the book Poetry Slam, Inc. calls “the definitive anthology on slam,”
seventy-five (77.3%) are written in the first person, and, of the remaining twenty-two poems, several still have the poet as the point of view character. Forty-two of the ninety-seven poems (43.3%) are dramatic monologues or persona poems (most with a strong narrative element), and the remaining fifty-five, divided nearly evenly between narrative and lyric, nearly all have a strong dramatic element. Inductively, the conclusion to be drawn is that slam poems are generally dramatic recounts of the poet’s own experience, or memoir.

Kate Sontag and David Graham, in their anthology of commentary, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, write, “for good or ill, we live in the age of memoir…more than forty years after the poets and poetry first tagged “confessional” [a timeline that happens to coincide with the evolution of Beat to slam described earlier] ignited critical controversy, American poetry continues to display a notable confessional strain” (3).

Two of the poets whose commentary is included in Sontag and Graham’s anthology are Billy Collins and Yusef Komunyakaa. Komunyakaa, linking the mode of autobiography to the form of spoken word (audience-driven poetry) and to the slam notion of being “HEARD,” says:

Whitman wanted to be heard, and so do we—it’s something basic. The poet wishes to share. Even when the dialogue is with part of oneself, spoken to a corner of one’s psyche, one would hope that he or she isn’t Echo. For me, the speaker is often a universal “I” whose feelings have been shaped by experience and/or imagination, an empathetic witness… (115)
In his essay from the same collection, Billy Collins calls his brand of “autobiographical or ‘post-confessional’ poetry,” “poems that are driven by the engines of memory rather than the engines of the imagination” (81). Collins didn’t mean that the poems weren’t imaginative; he meant, like Komunyakaa, that the figure of “I,” the “self” as expressed in poetic form, has been “shaped by experience.”

The experience of these poets, however, is not solely the popular culture they grew up in, but also the literary traditions they have been exposed to. The best slam poets, like the best poets on any kind, are first and foremost readers. As often as not, a poem that is successful in the slam world will also be successful on the page, a subgenre called “fusion poetry,” because the poet is informed by literary tradition. Many of the literary conventions that cross over from other poetry into slam (symbolism, allusion, etc.) can be made only by drawing from a rich literary background. Komunyakaa quotes Ted Joans, one of the poets mentioned earlier, as saying, “I grew up with my face stuck in a book. There’s the key. Miles Davis said, ‘Gonna get an education, on Forty-Second Street there’s a big university called the New York Public Library. Spend some time.’ It’s true” (Anglesey xxiv). Komunyakaa goes on to compare the literary background of the Beats to that of the contemporary spoken-word poet.

The poets... report that the reading they did in their youth provided the connective tissue between the past and future. Joans points out that the Beats were educated and had gone to “expensive” colleges, and those who had missed the train got there another way. For example, Gregory Corso used to sit in on classes at Harvard, or whatever he could get in. Reading definitely provided the point of departure for
writing, and it was a prerequisite for so many debates and conversations in the coffeehouses.

When [Saul] Williams [seminal spoken-word/ hip-hop artist] states “We were all on the same page,” he also means that literally. The poets who congregated at his house after spoken word shows shared their insights about their readings from poetry, fiction, plays, and even the news. In academic circles, this is called work-shopping. Without doubt, these poets discovered that reading was essential if they were going to progress or reach the literary stature they dreamed of. (Anglesey xxiv-xxv)

This, and the working class background mentioned earlier, is the heritage of the slam poet. This is what his or her identity is constructed from. And so this is the self that comes through most strongly in his or her poetry.

Marc Smith, founder of Poetry Slam, author of Crowdpleaser, and advisor to and narrator of The Spoken Word Revolution, has been an indispensable part of the spoken-word poetry scene since he began slam twenty years ago. He demonstrates through his commentary and his poetry a broad understanding of the poetic traditions that have influenced spoken word. Perhaps it is this heritage he was thinking of as the metaphorical tenor for the “father” vehicle in his poem “My Father’s Coat” (Appendix A 60-61).

There are three generations represented in this poem, Smith (the “I” character), his father, and a “younger man.” Smith has taken onto his body an aspect of his father, and the
younger man originally takes that aspect to be part of Smith’s own identity, asking him where he got the coat. Smith silences the younger man by telling him that the coat belongs to a dead father. The tenor of Smith’s poetic heritage fits this vehicle exactly.

If Smith’s metaphorical “father” is an aesthetic passed down from other generations of poets, then the part of the vehicle that represents that aesthetic must be something that envelopes Smith and must be something that can be observed by his audience. The “coat” covers a large part of Smith’s body, and is apparent enough that a stranger on “the street” can see it. The audience, however, is more defined than a random stranger—it is a “younger man.” One of Smith’s nicknames, and the name of his personal website, is “Slampapi.” He is commonly referred to as the “father” of slam poetry. In the poem, the “I” character (Smith), develops into a father figure of its own. The younger man (now a “son” figure) wants the aesthetic (coat) Smith has, and asks him for advice on how to get it. Smith tells him the owner of the coat is dead.

This would seem to be an odd choice to end the metaphor. The coat/aesthetic is not passed on, and Smith apparently doesn’t fulfill his role in the fatherhood chain. A little background information on Smith, however, shows this to be in keeping with his personal philosophy.

The world of slam... is their territory. The young people are working it, and, like their predecessors, they’re asking the same questions. “Who screwed things up? Why do we have to do that? Who put you in charge? I see things a little differently. Let’s mix it up a little bit.” They’ll push me out soon enough. Let ‘em do it. Let ‘em try. It’s their duty as artists to behave and believe so...
...[speaking of a poetry event that involved youth reading as well as adults] I laid it down righteously and rocked 'em, but after me came Eli, a kid...He hopped onto the stage, almost into my shoes, copped a few of my performance tricks, and blew the lid off the place, eclipsing the old man for a few moments—youth, gobbling up knowledge on the spot and spitting it out. (Smith, The Spoken Word...)

Smith, like many of the leaders in the spoken word community, professes faith in America's youth to continue innovative, even revolutionary, poetry. While a sense of what has gone before is necessary (wearing the father's coat), a sense of the limitations of the past ("he was a narrow man") must lead to a break (father is "gone, passed away") so that the newer generation can attempt "more of everything he [the father] should have done. More of what he should have tried to understand," in other words, "mix it up a little bit." That is the reason for the tone of admonition when Smith reminds the audience "it seems to me/ That this is the way that most of us/ Make each other's acquaintance—/ in coats we have taken/ To be our own."

There is another important metaphor at work in this poem: a statement on performative identity.

Most of us show off to one another
Fashions of who we are.
Sometimes buttoned to the neck
Sometimes overpriced.
Sometimes surprising even ourselves
In garments we would have never dreamed of wearing
(Appendix A 60)
This is not, strictly speaking, the poet’s “true” identity; this is the identity the poet chooses to “show off”—this is Komunyakaa’s “trickster” disguise. The coat, already established as an aesthetic, is “worn” to suit the poet’s and poem’s immediate needs, “sometimes surprising” even the poet wearing it by presenting a performative identity he or she “would have never dreamed of wearing.” The coat the “I” character wears in the poem, the second hand coat that had belonged to a father he didn’t like, seems to fit the Southside Chicago tough construction worker background Marc Smith comes from, the “taste” of his cultural background.

Aside from the powerful statements made by metaphor, perhaps the most telling device at work in this poem is the dramatic soliloquy. There is a narrative element here; Smith is telling the story of his encounter with a younger man on the street, but the storytelling leaves the realm of simple monologue and enters that of soliloquy with the first person plural pronouns of the final two stanzas, bringing the audience into the statement Smith is making, and making Collins’ “double connection,” speaking not only for Smith’s personal self, or “coat”, but also for the universal “coat” that covers everyone involved in the Bakhtinian dialogue of the utterance.

When asked about this construction of “coat” as metaphor for aesthetic, Smith called the interpretation “valid,” but went on to add that poetry can’t ever fit exactly into such distinct, easy categories. He said, “the coat means that, but it could mean other things too... we’re all trying to write something, and who we are is part of that” (Smith, Personal Interview). The “coat,” then, becomes a tool for understanding the entire dialogization of the slam poem. It is the “trickster mask” of Komunyakaa, it is the outward manifestation of Butler’s “body,” and it is the catalyst for the meeting of author and audience in Collins'
"double connection." But more than that, when using this tool to analyze other poems, it becomes quickly apparent that other poets central to the slam movement have "coats" cut of the same cloth as Smith's.

Jack McCarthy, known as the "standup poetry guy," also has a long history with slam and the spoken word. Stephen Dobyns, author of Best Words, Best Order, has written of him, "Jack McCarthy is one of the wonders of contemporary poetry. He writes—and often performs—dazzling narratives full of wit and humor, sadness and hard thinking," and Thomas Lux adds, "The only ambition he seems to have is to tell the truth as best he can in poems" (McCarthy "Bio"). One of those narrative poems is "Careful What You Ask For" (Appendix A 61-63):

The careful layering of humor, commentary, and multiple anecdotes in "Careful What You Ask For" is a trademark of McCarthy's work. McCarthy begins his essay "Emotions in Poetry" with the sentence "Two tools I find very helpful are indirection and metaphor." He uses this narrative technique to promote his own dual agenda in the world of contemporary poetry—to allow sentimentality into the poem, and to make poetry relevant and accessible to everyday people.

I should also preface this with a word about sentimentality. When I read poetry reviews, I get the feeling that one of the worst sins a poet can be accused of is sentimentality. More, I get the feeling that poets go far out of their way to avoid that charge. I think this is a serious mistake. In my opinion, you get the biggest bang for
your buck by skating right on the thin ice of honest sentiment, as close to the edge of
sentimentality as you can get—without falling in. (McCarthy, Emotions… 1)

The techniques McCarthy promotes in his commentary are vital to getting this across.
McCarthy writes, “If you’re writing a poem about the death of a child, and you want the
audience to experience some immediate emotion, the worst thing you can do is begin by
telling them this poem is about a child’s death” (McCarthy, Emotions… 1). This narrative
technique, though, is not just a device McCarthy employs in his poems; it is part of his
“coat.” In a recent interview, McCarthy admitted to being “something of a storyteller when
[he] talk[s]” (McCarthy, Email Interview). Discussing his “real voice,” he had this to say:

Patricia Smith once suggested that I change the phrase ‘inevitable gratuitous
meanesses,’ because she thought that was a lot for our audience to get their ears
around. I dug my heels in, because—well, because I love the English language.
(email interview)

The plainspoken dialogue and gentle humor fit perfectly this self-described “working
guy from the Boston Area” (McCarthy, “Bio”) who “love[s] the English language.” But
that’s not the only reason for the plainspokeness. McCarthy sees himself “as a soldier in the
undeclared war to make poetry ACCESSIBLE.” He maintains, “in service of that goal, the
voice in my poems is as honest and conversational as I would like to be in real life” (email
interview).
McCarthy’s poem comes from real life. When asked how much of the poem is autobiographical, he responds, in typical McCarthy voice,

Almost all of it. I’ve never actually cried at a supermarket opening, but then I’ve never been to a supermarket opening, and I’m not sure how I might behave. I’ve cried at dumber things. The rest of it is literal truth. (email interview)

Like Marc Smith, McCarthy has an agenda for his poetry. He wants not only to write good poems himself, but also to show other poets how good poems should be written, so he puts on the “coat” of an accessible, sentimental, storyteller who is speaking, through personal experience, to the human condition. Also like Smith, McCarthy uses his “performance tricks” to underscore that same message. He enters the stage looking very much the gentle grandfather storyteller, addresses the microphone almost hesitantly, gives the audience a gentle grin, and in a kind, soft voice tells his story. He doesn’t embellish with hip-hop hand gestures or what poet and critic Neal Bowers has called “the histrionics of the performers on Poetry Slam night” (422). Instead he just lays out the utterance for the audience, then quietly steps back from the mic.

Patricia Smith, the poet McCarthy mentions as having workshopped his poem, is another core member of the slam movement and another writer who works frequently in the realm of *ars poetica*. Her poem “Building Nicole’s Mama” (Appendix A 64) clearly states her poetic agenda.
So poets, as we pick up our pens,
as we flirt and sin and rejoice behind
    microphones—
remember Nicole.
She is an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

And she is waiting.
And she
is waiting.
And she waits. (64)

These two stanzas end a poem dedicated to “the 6th grade class of Lillie C. Evans
School, Liberty City, Miami,” a frightening and sympathetic look into the intrusion of death
into every one of the students’ lives. “Nicole’s Mama” is dead, and Nicole begs for a poem
to remember her by. Smith recognizes that in the face of such sorrow and tribulation, a poet
has a duty to his or her culture. Smith’s social consciousness works its way into all of her
poems, a fact recognized by Kurt Heinz, the author of An Incomplete History of Slam, in an
essay included in the online project The Book of Voices.

[Smith’s] work resides in the present, in the urban neighborhood, in nightclubs,
streetcorner gathering places like the barber shop or in 3:00 AM taxi rides home. She
throws fierce charisma. She always has. And while she writes from the “I,” she
writes selflessly so. The audience is free to step into her shoes as they will, trying on
her point of view as her writing slips into the identities of others. In all of this, there
is an enlightened, worldly political conscience. (Heinz 1)
This “political conscience” comes from Smith’s career as a journalist. In 1997, she discussed her writing “mindset” in an interview with Julie Schmid.

[I] put myself into every role in the story. For instance, before I begin to write about a murder of a convenience store clerk, I step into the shoes of the clerk, a co-worker, the person who found the body, the husband waiting at home. It gives me a more textured perspective once I begin the story. And when I started writing poetry, I brought that mindset along. (Schmid 1)

These “roles” fit Patricia Smith much like Marc Smith’s “coat” fit him. In “Building Nicole’s Mama,” Smith wears the coat of a concerned guest lecturer, but also tries on the sympathetic coat of someone witness to death. In another poem, “A Motherfucker Too” (Appendix A 65-66), Smith dons the coat of a jazz fanatic attending a memorable performance. Her entire voice changes, both on the page and in performance, as she takes on the diction, cadences, and energy of someone very much in the jazz world.

Up to you to figure which one of ‘em we talking about. Could be any of the three, lining the babes up like dominoes, swearing they just had the love to give, and up on the stage, passing it on, flashing it shameless, struttin’ it silly... (Appendix A 65)

Even the grammar of the speaker changes as Smith puts on this new “coat.” The purpose, however, isn’t just to sound jazzy. Somewhere in the process of this poem, Smith repositions
Sarah Vaughan from “a motherfucker too” to the best musician on a stage full of legendary musicians. By the end of the poem,

The thing to remember
is the collision of Miles, Bird, and Dizzy,
all of them lost behind Miss V,
three motherfuckers in awe of another.
(Appendix A 67)

Smith moves from taking on the “role” of Miles Davis, womanizing and shameless, to taking on the “role” of someone recognizing Sarah Vaughan’s genius as greater than any man on stage. Still, even in the various roles Smith plays, she is still very much herself under the “coat” she is wearing. According to Smith,

When I begin a poem, the first thing I do is slip on that poem’s skin. And while I’m wearing that skin, the voice that emerges is the voice that the poem requires—I can be male, female, jubilant, wistful, skeptical or bitchy. The hardest thing a poet has to do is to maintain a signature, no matter where the poem takes you. My goal is to have someone read any of my poems and know it’s me, immediately...in the end, every voice—no matter how different it may feel or sound—has my own voice as an undercurrent. (email interview)

Smith creates the “trickster mask,” then removes it to show the poet behind the performance. Her reason for doing so is, of course, her audience. One of Smith’s particular agendas in writing and performing poems is to inspire the audience to become poets themselves.
I just want them to say “I can do that.” I believe that the only difference between me and someone who doesn’t write poetry is that something happened in my life to click that latch loose, open that other throat. If I can be passionate and accessible, if I am open to query and criticism, I can show people that poetry is far more than a recreational exercise. It’s a tool that moves your life forward. (email interview)

Smith’s “fierce charisma,” and the selfless “I” mentioned by Kurt Heinz, work to make Collins’ “double connection” happen every time she reads these poems. She uses voice and pathos to draw the audience into her world, sharing her “coat” with them. In this way, she is perhaps the most dialogic of slam poets, or, as Heinz claims, “more than any other artist, Patricia Smith sounds slam poetry’s keynote” (1).

Heinz also claims this “keynote” is “reclaiming performed poetry as a living art” (1). The idea that slam is “living,” presupposes that slam “breathes” in the same way Ann Waldman claims the “Beat Literature Canon” breathes (xix). The keynote of slam is the “communality” Waldman mentions—Komunyakaa’s “erudite and street smart” diction and Collins’ “democratic” mouth. What makes this communality work is that the audience sees itself in the “coat” the slam poet is wearing. This coat is ethos and aesthetic. The discourse that proceeds from it, the “double connection” of the poetry reading, brings audience and poet together in a way that no other poetry can. Slam is the property of the people, and slam poets articulate this “taste” in every poem.
The function of the slam poet, however, is more than just a passive reflection of culture. All good slam poetry wants something of its audience; it wants them to get their own coat, to be careful what they wish for, and to always remember Nicole. Marc Smith, Jack McCarthy, and Patricia Smith may be leaders in the slam movement, but they are all always conscious of their followers. Mark Smith says as much in the last few lines of his own spoken-word *ars poetica*, “Pull the Next One Up.”

All these are inscriptions of a human force that can
Conquer conquering hand over hand pulling the rope
Next man up, next woman up.
Sharing a place, sharing a vision...

Until they know the courage...
Until they understand
That the only courage there is is
To pull the next man up
Pull the next woman up
Pull the next up...Up...Up
(129)
III. First Person Singular

When asked about my own aesthetic, my first response is almost always to invoke Walt Whitman’s famous disclaimer, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (76). Taken as a whole, this chapter is full of contradictions: inconsistencies in voice, tone, diction, form, etc. Underneath it all, like the slam poets of the last chapter, I am the same author. I simply take on a new “coat” for each new utterance. I believe this is the only honest way to write an autobiography.

I am reminded of Dave, the character who delivers the vehicle for the “Ars Poetica” that begins this manuscript. When Dave was “writing his poems on the walls in blood,” he never once stopped to check his cursive. Perhaps Dave was making a conscious effort to adhere to the tenets of the Beats’ “spontaneous prose” (a subject, incidentally, the real life Dave was passionate about), but it is more likely Dave was just getting down as much as he could while the blood was still flowing. This is how to write a poem.

This is not, in another contradiction, how I write a poem. I begin this way, getting it all down as quickly as possible before the inspiration leaves me, but then, in accordance with my training, I revise. Many of the poems in this manuscript have been through dozens of revisions. Some of them don’t look anything like the first blood to hit the wall. By the time each poem is finished, as the acknowledgements section of this thesis indicates, it shows all the conventions necessary to publish in the university journals usually so resistant to slam and other popular movements. This places me in a small subcategory of spoken word, “fusion.” Fusion poetry has all the accessibility, exuberant prosody, and popular appeal of poetry written for the stage, but it also pays careful attention to the devices of the page.
Lovers of Shakespeare, etc. would recognize this fusion as what used to be considered good writing.

Perhaps this makes me, as Collins calls it, a "throwback." If so, I accept the title. Given the choice, I'd rather be derivative of the traditions I love than be anywhere near the same "cutting edge" as poets like John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. In that context, then, I submit the following poems as slam poetry, as publishable poetry, and as the honest and often contradictory autobiography of a fusion poet.
One time Dave found us some sandwiches in a dumpster behind Casey’s. I didn’t know how to tell him that I wasn’t that desperate, that I would never be as hungry as he was, so I took one of the sandwiches and ate it because Dave was a True Friend, and you don’t see many of those anymore. Dave taught me a lot that year, like where the shelters were and how to tell your story until someone gave you money because they didn’t want to hear it. One time Dave promised me he’d show me how to get three squares and a cot by convincing the hospital you hear voices, but the funny thing is when we got there Dave just opened up his wrists and started writing his poems on the walls in blood.
Unemployment

My wife doesn’t like it when I spend a day without pants
she says it makes her uncomfortable
it’s not like I’m running around naked
my robe covers most of me
underwear seems to keep things organized
but that’s not enough for her

I tell her that she should be glad I’m content to let her wear the pants
that enlightened men don’t need them
Socrates never wore pants
neither did Jesus
she doesn’t buy it

last week my wife had to explain to her boss
that she had to go home for her lunch break
because I’d lost my pants, and my keys were in them
he wasn’t surprised
he said it was because I was “theatrical”
I think secretly he wanted to be like me

secretly all men want to be like me
unshaven on a Tuesday
pantless in their domains
not just not wearing their pants
but not even knowing where they are
because they haven’t used them for days

Imagine what the world would be like
if people weren’t controlled by their pants—
pasty white political bandylegs
would lose out in charisma
to tanner men who walk in the world
and have mass to show for it

Peace would be found
at all major peace summits
just look at how the people smile
in the underwear commercials

all men’s suits
would always be half off
Imagine all the time and energy gained
if nobody had to work to get into somebody else's pants
Imagine how things would change
if we all celebrated just one pantless day per year

at first we'd be shy
tuck our legs under our desks
so our coworkers don't see

we'd titter and giggle at police
and construction workers
and people on the street

teenaged boys would take up marbles
just to spend the day at sidewalk level
watching the girls go by

but eventually we'd learn to just accept
each other's cellulite thighs and knobby knees
to see each other's bodies as holy and exciting
we'd become closer as human beings
more open to the people around us

at the end of the day
the leaders of the community
would come to me in ritual thanks
for the idea

and I'd greet them at the door
underwear organizing
robe modestly covering

I'd smile a gracious smile
and tell them I just did
what anyone would do
if they were in my position
Prayer

He asked me how often I pray
this God-squad motherfucker

like three minutes
on his knees
makes him an expert
a saint
a true apostle
of the one true faith
whose mission
of the moment
is to save my soul
through enforced
contrition

like genuflection
is the secret handshake
that will somehow get him
into heaven and get me bounced

like somehow God hears
it better if it's loud enough
that other people notice

he looks at me
with this rolodex
behind his eyes
of all the reasons
his faith is better
than my faith
of all the ways
his Jesus
loves me

and he wants an answer

I want to tell him
that knees are for blowjobs
and churches are buildings

want to take him
to the nearest all-night
dispenser of generic
Christianity and show him
how the pictures on the wall
are just a blend of Ted Nugent
and Charlie Manson

want to tell him
about how they
hid from Herod
in Egypt, Africa
and make him tell
me the difference
between black and white

want to take his crucifix
necklace, dangle it
in front of him
make him explain
why after two thousand years
Christ is still on this cross

but that’s not what he asked me

I want to answer his bracelet not him
want to tell him what Jesus would do
want to tell him that Jesus
was homeless and hungry
with dirt on his feet
and under his nails
that Jesus knew prostitutes
(although not in the Biblical sense)

that Christ was a communist
an Arab
a Jew

that Pontius George W McCarthy Hitler Ashcroft Bush
was just doing his Job
with the full approval
of the church

but he didn’t ask me that either
he asked me if I pray

so I say yes
every breath is a prayer
and if you haven’t been
moved you haven’t been
listening

every inhalation is life
entering the body
is Genesis
is man from dust
is love at its base
chemical level

every exhaling
is an opportunity
to reciprocate
and you want me
to waste that shit
on now I lay me

every poem is a prayer
is a divine breath out
is my offering to you
because you are God’s
creature and I want touch
you, want to make you feel
what I feel, want to communicate
more than words, want to
give you my world
in stanzas and line breaks
want to know that someone
is listening

every kiss is a prayer
is inhaling flesh
is me breathing you
breathing me breathing you
breathing me

How often do I pray?
Every breath is God.
Identity

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?" he condescend in prefab punk intonations born of MTV rockumentary regarding Sid Vicious and the like

"Who the fuck are you?" hollow inside 2002 vintage reprint tee-shirt of 1970-something concert tour made to look dirty

But he smell like loofa like clean tile like body wash like rich mom bathroom where every morning he procure carefully sculpted dishevelment of a man of the street

"Who the fuck are you?" whimper timid strange squire hatchling in 14-gauge armor and plumage carefully calculated to deter defer detour imaginary predators

"Who the fuck are you?"

I, like Ginsberg, have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked

Beat rabbi I have followed in search of truth, beauty, and Carl Solomon

Have traveled the world tourist class found no train to leave my brain nearly imploded under the weight of consciousness

Have pronounced OM waited meditated screamed at the cosmos "Who the fuck are you?"

Have drowned myself in needless sorrow masturbating angst dreading life because Bukowski say the difference between art and life is art is more bearable when I can't bear my art

when it only taunt me with same koan

"Who the fuck are you?"

I am hellfire brimstone preacher man who say that none shall enter but by shame sorrow and denial of humanity

I am boy set apart by braces on legs want to run free fast unfettered

I am broken twisted father in living room hospital bed soul eat itself even while body heal because family shop in foreign town so neighbors don't see food stamps or tears

I am mother torn from children because must work to keep them nobody home stop them from straying

I am kid smoke cigarette in Minnesota boxcar extinguish on wrist so pain outweigh other

I am guitar crying sublimation release

I am poems that rhyme sound like Metallica lyrics

I am father walk again

I am man who watch while city flood while people have no home while shit come back from sewer reverse all natural process

who watch while sergeant yell while call me worthless while want me to die for ribbon he got on chest

who watch while man die in New York while cops come don't catch anybody don't resurrect
who watch while empty bottle echo life around it both perpetuate each other draining
who watch while nation go to war while bastard president say we gotta die but he got no
ribbon on chest
who watch while world say we wrong but we can’t hear them because we make them and
they follow us and god bless the u s a
who watch while death wait

who watch while life come back while father walk while mother proud while run free fast
unfettered
who watch while love while marry while boy meet girl never leave
who watch while school while friends while growing changing reaching seeking
who watch while world spin don’t care who do what where when

Who the fuck am I?
I am sum
I am experience
I am Christ thought word
I am I am I am
Who the fuck are you?
Blind

I want to dance savage
your pulse in my veins
my veins on the earth
naked under the stars

want to sing your adoration
in the night, give my voice
to the wind

want my echoes to wash warm
over the trees, silver their leaves
in anticipation of moonlight

want the night to spread wide
take us deep into her womb
call us her children

cradle us in long shadows
of ancient love

give us her eyes
so we can see
in the dark
A Televised Address to the Nation

he sit so quiet
nobody squeak
slowly he speak
an empty technique.

we sit so quiet
nobody move
can't find a groove
in something so smooth

they gave him a mike
still he ain't loud
he don't know how
to speak to the crowd

words and words and words
fall off his page
fall off his stage
I just can't engage

words and words and words
fall from his lips
his fingertips
push text like they whips

but words is words is words—
and he got nothing
but words
to say...

my brother is gone
he's gone to the war
soon he'll be followed
by ten thousand more

we sit so quiet
nobody squeak
nobody speak
we dead and we meek

we dead
and we meek

we dead
and we meek
Miscarriage

Her womb abandoned,  
she cradled our baby  

and cried that night  
into hands that smelled  
like someone else’s child.
Whiff

I stand nonchalant
ostensibly ignorant
of the pervading odor

He does too
and she
nonchalant
ignorant

Elevator polluted
no one mentions
too polite

Quiet flatulence
is a study in human frailty
and the tendency to blindly endure
putrid oppression
Sex, Poetry, and The Open Road

Primal rumble of low revolutions,
ebb and flow of old cement—
oaks, incandescent in April, undulate
in sluggish rhythm and sink
into the corners of my eyes.

Encouraged by spring wind,
smelling of leather and oxygen,
I caress the clutch,
penetrate a lower gear,
smooth back my hand against the throttle,
and explode into the sun.
Close to You

What’s the difference between dinner and diner?

Doesn’t dinner, when we dine, just follow a line from mouth to behind?

And doesn’t the diner then squirt straight into the dirt the essence of what was dinner?

And isn’t that essence then sopped into the roots of our crops?

And don’t those crops grow up to become our supper?

So if the dinner became a part of the diner, but the diner then left the dinner behind her, and the dinner came back later to find her, which was the dinner, and which was the diner?

or if the dinner the diner left behind her when she stopped to squirt into the dirt never was sopped into the roots of the crops, wouldn’t it just lie in wait until on some future date when the diner goes to meet her fate it reverses the order of the previous state, and the dinner swallows the diner?

The reason I ask is a little diviner then diners and dinners and dinners and diners.

Cause if we fell in love, you see, I’d be part of you and you part of me. And then whenever we’d shit, we’d guarantee a part of each of us would be always, forever, together.
Last Night (almost)

I almost died last night.

The rain was falling sideways
and a little bit down—and me
on a motorcycle, my visor
and windshield blurred,
cutting jagged trails
in the water
on the pavement,
fighting the wind,
sometimes losing.

Each time my tires
came to the shoulder
I would fold into myself,
stop my breath,
and lean down
into the wind.

This must be what it is like to fly—
breath stopped, body steeled,
carefully balanced
on a cushion of air
that shouldn’t be strong
enough to support you.

I almost died last night,
but instead I trusted
the wind and lived
a little bit more.
Cat Warrior Dancing

her hips keep time, roll back
the tide on pelvic beat, slide
in and out of gravity, trace
echoes in the blue-gray air

hands magic like knives
she cuts the night, leaving
spent measures hovering
incredulous in her wake

and the band bends to her
turns bass notes to love notes
to high hopes of her keeping
on for just one more beat

as they play into the night
while this gypsy dancer, this
cat warrior prowls the floor
wrapping herself in my gaze

in this moment I know
that she must be my oxygen
that I must breathe her now
forever, that I must move her
with every beat of my heart

but I cannot dance
cannot share this sacred
space the way she shares it
so I wait for this moment
to end so my life can begin
Next to you (my heart)

my veins tire of blood
like the universe tires
of recycling carbon
and bullshit
and the thickbark tree
that holds the wall
behind the park
gnarls to vomit
stardust

because the stars are tired
of being counted, they fall
before you can finish
because I am tired
of your counting
I have stopped
listening for it
 instead I watch the tree
not moving and listen
to my blood slow
to a stop

when the last star is counted
you will see that I am dead.
“I grew Hemp”

A red speech balloon frames the words over Washington's dollar portrait.

Mike's broad face opens into a smile that he shares

with me and I share
with the waitress

as I hand her
the president's shame.

I see her show the cook,
and they laugh together.

Tonight, he will show
his wife, and they will light

a joint to celebrate
their private joke.
The Value of Contemplation

often I wonder
how death will take me
if it will begin below me
and roll over me
crushing me
each part in turn
until it swallows
my eyes
in milky blackness,
or if it will enter
my body at its heart
and spread warm
through my veins
until I tingle with it
at every extremity

will I smile
and go gently
or rage instead
(being a poet I
know the terms)

will I be ended
ascended
or simply recycled
into a new
day’s wreckage

I know my legacy lies
safe in human memory
(things never being
what they seem)

as for my body
I am glad to be
rid of it

but still the paralyzing
uncertainty of how
exactly the mortal
coil be shuffled
is always enough
to keep me
if not actually
living at least
not dying
either
I Think My Wife Hates Sinatra

Have you ever had one of those days
that begins in the shower
with Sinatra at the top of your lungs
sublimating
feeling the world and your oneness with it
as if steam and lather and damn near scalding water
can wash off all the little parts of you
that you wish were scrubbable
the parts that make you feel
less than fresh
even after your regular morning ablutions

That’s the second greatest experience
I’ve had in a shower
watching stress and worry
scum up
flake off
and dance jerky along the shower floor
toward the metal grate
that covers the pipe to forgotten

I think it’s the singing
or maybe just the idea of Sinatra,
of making whoopee my way in New York in June—
Start spreading the news
I’m singing in the shower

and she asks me
how is it possible
that I sing with such abandon
when I can’t even dance
when I look like a drunk gazelle when I try
when people get that concerned look in their eyes
and ask if I’ve been checked
for a rhythm deficiency

and she asks me
if it ever bothers me
that all the neighbors now know
all the lyrics from Songs for Swingin’ Lovers
but wouldn’t recognize the melody
if an A.M. radio beat them
over the head with it

and I tell her
regrets
I’ve had a few
but then again
too few to mention

and she looks at me
in that funny way
that only wives look at husbands
shakes her head
and exits the bathroom
leaving the door open
just a crack
so that the steam
and the moment
follow
Sunset is the time

when the sun bows low
to the moon who beams
toward bands of planets
playing jazz licks that stick
to the toes of starry-eyed
dancers cutting slow arcs
on the polished floor of the sky

when the ends of the earth
give birth to a palate of reds
so vibrant they make color
wheels blush

when objects become silhouettes
and shadows on the street grow
so long their edges move together

the moon croons blood ballads
that warm the veins of her men
bringing lust to their tongues
as they search her rhythms
for their mother song
for the beats of their inner hearts

the moon pulls her women close
syncopating their days
filling them when she is full
leading them to another horizon
In the Mood: a Sonata

I. Crescendo

it began, I believe, in the drum section
then it boiled over into the horns
within seconds, the piano was completely engulfed
it flowed and filled and the band couldn’t contain it
it pooled on the floor and swung from the rafters
it was in our minds and in our bodies
soon there was no band, and there was no us
only the Duke and In the Mood

II. Tarantella

it drew us from the tables
massed us in the clearing
arms and legs entwined
rhythmically writhing
now faster
it moved our exhausted limbs with exhilaration
sweating together
an orgy in clothes

III. Finale

overgrown
it folded in upon itself
sang itself slowly to sleep
in a final harmonic dismissal
it carried us back to our chairs
and there we slept
dreaming of the Rapture
of dancing ourselves into eternity.
After

last page turned
photo uncovered
dying memory
eulogized

I remember you
walked with me
bought with me
Audrey Hepburn,
champagne,
and chocolates

drank with me
so much merlot
it stained my palate
I tasted it for days

parted with me
promised to keep
me close to never
change to grow old
to visit each other’s
porches drink wine
in the twilight

I never called
you, never wrote
you, never will

so instead I sit
you on my lap
memory books
being all that is
left of you now

and my palate aches
for the taste of merlot
for Hepburn, champagne
and strawberry chocolates
A Poem in its Infancy

I cannot write my son

somehow seventeen pounds
of soft articulated flesh is
more poem than I control

somehow six months constant
revision has taken all my words
my line breaks and neat stanzas

made me witness to this poem’s mutiny
my epitaph engraving itself on the world
Almost Gone

almost gone, the thick
of your hair, travelling
unbrushed red down
your shoulders as you
blink open the morning

almost gone, the bone
shadow ballet of your
frame entering the room,
the intimacy of patchouli
in your wake like karma

you always posed for pictures—
I have no natural memories
of you, only what I've
attached to the same
smile, impenetrable
a thousand times
under lamination

and your hair and your
shadow and your
scent, still clinging,
always fading,
ever gone
Where Were You?

It was a "where were you?" day,
like when bombs fall or
somebody important dies or
innocence is lost.

People who have nobody to reach for
are at higher risk,
among other things,
of not having an alibi
when something happens
that leaves them suspect.

People with nothing to hold on to
are at higher risk,
among other things,
of being completely ignorant of the fact
that, somehow, they are still alive,

so they gradually become invisible
inaudible
blended
sorted
filed
lost.

Today,
when we were sitting next to each other on the couch
not touching by any extension of body or metaphor,
and I said I love you,
and you, for whatever reason, didn’t answer,

where were you?
Roadhouse Revelation

I play you in progressions
I borrowed from the blues
walking bass and seventh
chords, bends that tear
the air like open wounds

no lyric here, only
the slap of my sole
on the floorboards
for company

you can see the notes
of the chromatic scale
wallow in the air
and fade like smoke

America, this is a love
poem—six strings,
two hands,
and me.
Variations on a Theme

you've seen us on the street
swagger and syncopation
arm in arm
bar to bar

leather and Levis,
dirt in hair and skin,
boots on our feet

our hands and our humor
and our edges are rough

our scars run deep, never
fade with time, always
rise on cold days
in purple relief

we're beery and brazen
and brawling and lusty
stepping in and out
of streetlights, singing
our lives, our working
class anthems

blue wailings
of what we never
saw coming
Blood on the Windshield

There is blood on the windshield.

In the moment we worked calmly in unison to extract the body.

Now there is no body. There is only blood on the windshield which nobody mentions.
My Father's Coat

I'm wearing my father's coat
He had died. I didn't like him,
But I wear the coat.

I'm wearing the coat of my father,
Who is dead. I didn't like him,
But I wear the coat just the same.

A younger man, stopping me on the street,
Has asked,
"Where did you get a coat like that?"

I answer that it was my father's,
Who is gone, passed away.
The younger man shuts up.

It's not that I'm trying now
to be proud of my father.
I didn't like him.
He was a narrow man.

There was more of everything he should have done.
More of what he should have tried to understand.

The coat fit him well.
It fits me now
I didn't love him
But I wear the coat.

Most of us show off to one another
Fashions of who we are.
Sometimes buttoned to the neck
Sometimes overpriced.
Sometimes surprising even ourselves
In garments we would have never dreamed of wearing.

I wear my father's coat
And it seems to me
That this is the way that most of us
Make each other’s acquaintance—
in coats we have taken
To be our own. (Glazner 82-83)

Careful What You Ask For

I was just old enough
to be out on the sidewalk by myself,
and every day I would come home crying,
beaten up by the same little girl.

I was Jackie, the firstborn,
the apple of every eye,
gratuitous meanness bewildered me,
and as soon as she’d hit me,
I’d bawl like a baby.

I knew that boys were not supposed to cry,
but they weren’t supposed to hit girls either,
and I was shocked when my father said,
"Hit her back."

I thought it sounded like a great idea,
but the only thing I remember
about that girl today
is the look that came over her face
after I did hit her back.

She didn’t cry; instead
her eyes got narrow and I thought,
"Jackie, you just made a terrible mistake,"
and she really beat the crap out of me.
It was years before I trusted my father’s advice again.

I eventually learned to fight—
enough to protect myself—
from girls—
but the real issue was the crying,
and that hasn’t gone away.

Oh, I don’t cry any more,
I don’t sob, I don’t make noise,
I just have hairtrigger tearducts, and always
at all the wrong things: supermarket openings;
the mayor cutting the ribbon on the bridge.

In movies I despise the easy manipulation
that never even bothers to engage my feelings,
it just comes straight for my eyes,
but there's not a damn thing I can do about it,
and I hate myself for it.

The surreptitious noseblow a discreet
four minutes after the operative scene;
my daughters are on to me, my wife;
they all know exactly when to give me that quick,
sidelong glance. What must they think of me?

In real life I don't cry any more
when things hurt. Never a tear at seventeen
when my mother died, my father.
I never cried for my first marriage.

But today I often cry when things turn out well:
an unexpected act of simple human decency;
new evidence, against all odds,
of how much someone loves me.

I think all this is why I never wanted a son.
I always supposed my son would be like me,
and that when he'd cry it would bring back
every indelible humiliation of my own life,

and in some word or gesture
I'd betray what I was feeling,
and he'd mistake, and think I was ashamed of him.
He'd carry that the rest of his life.

Daughters are easy: you pick them up,
you hug them, you say, "There there.
Everything is going to be all right."
And for that moment you really believe
that you can make enough of it right

enough. The unskilled labor of love.
And if you cry a little with them for all
the inevitable gratuitous meannesses of life,
that crying is not to be ashamed of.
But for years my great fear was the moment
I might have to deal with a crying son.
But I don't have one.
We came close once, between Megan and Kathleen;
the doctors warned us there was something wrong,

and when Joan went into labor they said
the baby would be born dead.
But he wasn't: very briefly,
before he died, I heard him cry. (Glazner 27-29)

Building Nicole's Mama

For the 6th grade class of Lillie C. Evans School,
Liberty City, Miami

I am astounded at their mouthful names—
Lakinishia, Fumilayo, Chevellanie, Delayo—
their ragged rebellions and lip-glossed pouts,
and all those pants drooped as drapery.
I rejoice when they kiss my face, whisper wet
and urgent in my ear, make me their obsession
because I have brought them poetry
They shout me raw, bruise my wrists with
pulling
and brashly claim me as mama as they
cradle my head in their little laps,
waiting for new words to grow in my mouth
Angry, jubilant, weeping writers—we are all
saviors, reluctant Hosannas in the limelight,
but you knew that, didn’t you? Then let us
bless this sixth grade class, 40 nappy heads,
40 cracking voices, and all of them
raise their hands when I ask. They have all seen
the Reaper, grim in his heavy robe,
pushing the button for the dead project elevator,
begging for a break at the corner pawn shop,
cackling wildly in the back pew of the Baptist church.
I ask the death question and forty fists
punch the air, mel, mel, and O’Neal,
matchstick crack child, watched his mothers’
body become a claw and 9-year-old Tiko
Jefferson,
barely big enough to lift the gun, fired a bullet
into his own throat after mama bended his back
with a lead pipe. Tamika cried into a sofa pillow
when daddy blasted mama into the north wall
of their cluttered one-room apartment,
Donya’s cousin gone in a drive-by. Dark window,
*click, click, gone*, says Donya, her tiny finger
a barrel, the thumb a hammer. I am astonished
at their losses—and yet when I read a poem
about my own hard-eyed teenager, Jeffery
asks
*He is dead yet?*
It cannot be comprehended,
my 18-year-old still pushing and pulling
his own breath. And those 40 faces pity me,
knowing that I will soon be as they are,
numb to our bloodied histories,
favoring the Reaper with a thumbs-up and a
wink,
hearing the question and shouting *me, me,*
*Miss Smith, I know somebody dead!*
Nicole says, Nicole wearing my face,
pimples peppering her nose, and she is as black
as angels are, Nicole’s braids clipped, their ends
kissed with match flame to seal them, and
can you teach me to write a poem about my
mother?
*I mean, you write about your daddy and he dead,
can you teach me to remember my mama?*
A teacher tells me this is the first time Nicole
has admitted that her mother is gone,
murdered by slim silver needles and a stranger
rifling through her blood, the virus pushing
her skeleton through for Nicole to see.
And now this child with rusty knees and
mismatched shoes sees poetry as her scream
and asks me for the words to build her mother
again. Replacing the voice. Stitching on the lost
flesh.
So poets, as we pick up our pens,
as we flirt and sin and rejoice behind
microphones—
remember Nicole.
She is an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

And she is waiting.
And she
is waiting.
And she waits. (Elevald 187-188)

A Motherfucker Too

“...the whole band would just like have an orgasm every time Bird or Diz would play
...Sarah Vaughan was there also, and she’s a motherfucker too.”

—Miles Davis

Up to you to figure out which one of ‘em we talking about. Could be any of the three,
lining the babes up like dominos,
swearing they just had the love to give,
and up on stage, passing it on,
flashing it shameless, struttin’ it silly,
those blowings that coulda caught fire
if fire was what they wanted.
And two of them smack slapped,
and one of them born
with beep beep in his blood
and even with bebopping this heavy,
it was a mess before you knew it.
Up to you to figure out
which one we talking about.
Arkansas road walking with church funk
pumping through his branches and he stop
and he wait an all-night answer
the Lord don’t want nothing to do with,
blue lines so funky they smelled bad.
Irrational flyer, up there so much
Gabriel post a note saying
No sidemen needed, dammit,
keep that horn in its cage.
But he blow so tender. Up baby, up,
mute like screaming through a
closed mouth. Up baby, up,
and two of them smack slapped
and one lock himself away,
riding the back of the bitch.
Strapped down on daddy’s farm
banging the walls and shit,
how many ways is blue?
Came out kicking, came out crazy,
and wanted nothing else but
a hungry woman after jamming.
The three of them,
Dark appetites in triple,
and one stroked it out,
one exploded,
one just got old.
The thing to remember
is the collision of Miles, Bird, and Dizzy,
all of them lost behind Miss V,
three motherfuckers in awe of another. (Elevald 193)
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Appendix B—Audio CD of Selected Poems from “First Person Singular”

This CD, companion to Chapter 3 of this document, contains five of the poems from “First Person Singular.” While the set of devices concerning body language cannot be transmitted adequately with the technology available, these five tracks are intended to convey the devices of authorial voice. The track numbers and corresponding page numbers are listed below.

Track 1—“Unemployment” 31
Track 2—“Prayer” 33
Track 3—“Sex, Poetry, and the Open Road” 43
Track 4—“Cat Warrior Dancing” 46
Track 5—“I Think My Wife Hates Sinatra” 50
Appendix C—Audio CD of Selected Poems Cited in Chapter 2

This CD contains poems cited in Chapter 2 of this document and, in two cases, printed in Appendix A. While two of the tracks contain music and one narration, these added elements are not indicative of slam poetry, only of the source from which these poems were taken, Elevald’s *The Spoken Work Revolution*. A list of tracks and page numbers follows.

Jack McCarthy—“Careful What You Wish For” 62
Patricia Smith—“A Motherfucker Too” 66
Marc Smith—“Pull the Next One Up” 30