Dead Benny

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Dead Benny

by

Scott Lane Norenberg

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Sheryl St. Germain, Major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2004
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of
Scott Lane Norenberg
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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INTRODUCTION

The following collection of poems attempts to work on multiple levels. On one, each persona/narrative poem should be able to stand on its own feet. On another, the collection as a whole is meant to be a broader persona/narrative which delves into the life of an over-educated under-employed drunk named Benny. The purpose of this introduction is to explain my poetic aesthetic and place this work within the landscape of contemporary poetry. To do this, though, I need to begin in a place some would deem inappropriate for such a discussion, namely, poetry’s audience. As I see it, poetry has two consumers which exist in non-exclusive realms: those who buy books and read poetry, and those who attend readings and poetry slams, or listen to rap music. To put this distinction more simply, some people read and some people listen. My work attempts to appeal to both audiences. To successfully engage the two audiences, a poem should contain, at one level, accessibility, and, at another, depth. By demonstrating how accessibility and depth are balanced in my work, it will become clear as to not only what my poetic aesthetic is, but also where my work fits within the current poetic situation in America.

For audiences that prefer to hear poetry, the poem must have accessibility. By accessibility, I mean that a poem has to be able to entertain its audience or be understood in a single oral experience. Due to the very nature of spoken poetry, the audience has only the one chance to “get” something from the poem. This does not necessarily mean that a spoken poem lacks depth, but some of the techniques used to achieve accessibility can produce a seemingly shallow, yet pleasurable work.

The techniques I use to achieve aaccessibility are few and obvious. These techniques are not exclusive to the realm of accessibility, but they do contribute to it. A brief
examination of the first poem in this collection ("Jesus decides to take a bath") demonstrates nearly all devices I use. First, the language is colloquial and straightforward; there are no apparent double meanings to ponder on a first read, and the syntax is roughly standard. Next, the imagery is concrete, coherent, and seemingly does not invite a read for complexity (more on this later). Lastly, in both structure and content, this poem appears to be one that contains humor and therefore, entertains the oral audience. Some elements that are found in other poems in the collection that add to the experience of the listener are: the use of rhyme and meter to create a song-like atmosphere; repetition of words or phrases to create particular cadences, crescendos and end points; and brevity, to maintain interest.

It is possible to trace the American use of accessibility back to Bradstreet and her Puritan 'plain style' of writing. Some more recent poets and movements are Bukowski (and many of the Beats in general), Baraka, the New York School (namely O'Hara), as well as the rap artists and slam poets of today. Although many of the poems in this collection were born out of spoken word performances, I do not feel comfortable placing them in these movements or alongside the aforementioned poets. This discomfort arises from the intention of the work, that it speaks as broad persona/narrative. But to return to accessibility, by maintaining it in almost every poem, it is my hope that I not only can reach the oral audience, but also take away some of the fear a non-poetry reader has of this art form.

Now that the role of accessibility has been explained, I can begin to elucidate the idea of depth. A poem that contains depth (or complexity) is one that must be read and reread to so the audience can appreciate the full scope of its meaning. By virtue of a poem's ability to be read over and over again, these poems often challenge the reader intellectually as well as
emotionally by containing several interpretations at once. There are several ways a poet may attain depth, but for the sake of brevity I shall limit myself to the devices I use.

Perhaps the most used device in this work is that of allusion. By their very titles, such poems as: “Jesus decides to take a bath,” “40 Years of Alcohol Rain and a Night Called Ark,” and “Babylon Creek” suggest that the persona of Benny is not just a single individual person, but is in fact deeply entwined within the nature of faith, knowledge, and God itself. It is this process of allusion that holds together the narrative side of the text as a whole because what I tried to do is to show a transformation in Benny from a person who was once one who was acted upon by the fates to one who does the acting. If this is achieved, then the importance of this text is the over-reaching, almost transcendent quality of Benny’s relationship to the world. So we see, this process of allusion adds to the depth of the work.

Another technique used to reach depth in this work is that of deep metaphor. Let us return to “Jesus decides to take a bath.” This poem’s deep metaphor exists not only in comparing Benny to Jesus, but initiates several other metaphors which are hidden as themes and motifs until two of the ending poems (“Raising the Bar,” and “Getting it up by going down”) tie these themes and motifs together into the extended metaphors they are meant to be. Hence, the poem “Jesus decides to take a bath” should be reconsidered after reading the text as a whole so that a reader can see another interpretation of it. If a reader finishes this work, rereads the piece, and comes away with a new take on it, then I have achieved complexity through the use of deep metaphor (by deep metaphor I mean that an image, or regular metaphor, is extended through other pieces and slowly gains momentum and added meaning).
The last method (and perhaps the most important) I will mention in which a poem can attain depth (or cause a person to read and reread a poem) is that of resonance. A poem that has resonance is one that has a specific style of imagery or phrasing that makes the words and images stay with the reader. There are two main reasons why a poem resonates with its readers: the images and phrasing directly correspond to their lives, and that the images and phrasing speak to a greater truth of the human condition (a truth that has been intuited but not necessarily identified). The ways in which I attempt to make a poem resonate are by alluding to shared experience (e.g. Christian mythology, sex, love, intoxication, writing, etc...), by anchoring these references to concrete images that are coherently structured (note the echo of simplicity), and by creating a line structure (or flow) that at once corresponds to the emotion being described and creates that same emotion in the reader. I believe the first two ways resonance is achieved are self-evident, but the third requires some explanation.

The poem “Benny at a funeral” is a prime example of how I attempt to evoke a specific emotion that corresponds to a coherent flow of images and line structure. The overall emotion is one of anger and frustration that may arise when someone dies. This 23 line poem is one continuous sentence whose images race together, topple over each other, and compete for the reader’s attention. It is not until line 14 that the reader has a brief respite which acts as a ‘calm before the storm’ when suddenly the tone shifts from its initial frustration to anger.

The anger is the release of the frustration; it is a shout in defiance, a denial nearly all people have faced at one point or another. This shout ultimately relies on the repetition of the words “don’t tell me.” Now, these words, taken out of context, do not seem to be the strongest words, nor necessarily appropriate for the situation and emotion being described,
but they are monosyllabic and simple (hinting at the thought processes of someone who is experiencing anger) and with their repetition they gain a strength that (I hope) causes a reader to remember those final four lines in which they appear. If readers do remember those final lines, they will return to the poem and upon their return they will have the opportunity to dig more deeply into the images and structure of the poem which should (eventually) make them read the poem not only as a single entity, but also as a small piece of the greater whole. In achieving resonance then, I will have made the depth of a poem accessible.

The description above shows us that resonance is the keystone in the bridge between accessibility and depth. For any single poem to succeed, as well as the entire text, it must resonant on at least one level with the reader. Whether the reader (or listener) laughs at “Jesus decides to take a bath” or explores the connotations of reincarnation that are alluded to, and accentuated by, the subtle change of tone in the middle of the poem, he or she must find something in it, something to “get.”

Not all poems within this work have a true balance between accessibility and depth. I do not expect the general public to recognize that the poem “An end’s beginning” is really three poems in one, three poems that all contradict each other. Nor do I expect any grand dissertation to be written on the poem “Benny tries subtlety.” Also, I do not think anyone would necessarily call this text a narrative collection because much of it is rooted in persona and the persona’s progression and final change happens on an extremely buried philosophical level. In fact, just my claim that this collection is a narrative may cause some to want to compare it to Rita Dove’s Thomas and Beulah or to Anne Carson’s’ The Beauty of the Husband (both are excellent and very complex books). And I will be the first to admit that the narrative within this piece is not nearly as explicit as those in the aforementioned books,
but in my defense, I am trying to maintain accessibility at almost all times. By doing this, I can confidently claim that all my poems can stand alone (and if I may be so bold, this is an issue I could challenge both Dove and Carson on).

Ultimately, the above listed facts do not make this work a failure though. If a reader/listener can be entertained or provided with insight, a poem has succeeded on accessibility's level. If a reader/listener can make the connections between the metaphors of addiction as love, love as death, death as writing, writing as life, life as love, love as addiction, addiction as writing, writing as death, etc... then I have succeeded on the level of depth (especially if the reader/listener realizes that Benny is the avatar of addiction, is death, is life, is love, is poetry).

The persona element of this collection comes through not only in the brash language that is used, but also in Benny as a metaphor/avatar of the abstractions listed above. This over-the-top manner of writing mixed in with those abstractions makes Benny more of an entity than an individual, and hence, turns this collection into one that can be called a persona collection.

If I have succeeded, where then does this place me in the contemporary scene of American poetry? The influence of the Beat movement is undeniable, as is Confessionalism (in both its forms of negativity as seen in Berryman and Plath and in its latest incarnation which has a positive spin as seen in Li-Young Lee). My demand for simplicity excludes me from the Language poets (though at times an argument may be made against this assertion) and from Surrealism (this too could be argued). In the end, I see my poetry as a hodgepodge, a Frankenstein which, depending on the light, can look like Stephen Dunn, Ai, Bukowski, or even Franz Wright. And finally, if this text fails on all levels of understanding
and enjoyment; if it is nothing but a representation of a dead creation, then at least I can take comfort in the knowledge that I learned a great deal in writing it.
Jesus decides to take a bath

Strange to be thinking about death
being so young and all,
but after that fat bar-fly chick said,
"Jesus! You stink!"
and the only thing I had wanted
from her was to bore out
the monstrosity of her hole,
well hell, that inevitable option of death
held its own charm.

From the bar-fly
I wanted I don’t know what:

to fuck her brains out
with the lights out
in the pitch of night.
To crawl into her uterus,
coil up and around her fallopian tubes
then kiss her celluloid covered ovaries
and be reborn.
To be alone with a body in the dark,
perhaps that’s what I wanted most
and when I went to pick a body,
it was an any body who said
"Jesus! You stink!"
40 Years of Alcohol Rain and a Night Called Ark

I know it’s too late,
that my shallower beauty
has long since broken the bitter glass.
So I’m here at the bar, alone as usual,
hanging on to couples who laugh
and talk about yesterday’s, last week’s,
last year’s parties and confrontations
and me hearing this,
smiling, yes I too remember
being too sober to forget,
dragging the drugged out nihilist
through his own piss
or that time old man Nomad dislocated
my shoulder when I tried to bust his kneecap
with a whisky bottle.
Before we reach that land of gin and honey
the couples begin to leave, talking
about babysitters and work. 2 by 2 they waltz
until I’m alone as is the usual,
before time, wasting good booze
on a bad buzz when the waitress wobbles over,
sits her bleeding hips down, and says,
“Hey Ben, tell me a story.”
Me hearing this, smiling, “Yes, I’ll tell you a story.
I’m ready to fill the world with a deluge
that could drown us all.”
Benny’s Apology

It was me, I admit it—40,000 years ago I crushed the fertility cults of Eurasia and have kept women down since. I made up make up and corsets and bras and silicon implants and collagen injections; all were my idea and hey, I’m sorry. And yes, 400 years ago or so I stole black people off the Ivory Coast. I made them pick cotton, raise cane—it was a major fuck up; I don’t know what I was thinking—I’d like to blame the rum, but everyone knows rum is no excuse, and neither is money, hell, speaking of money, and life, liberty and the pursuit of land, I better say it now, I shot the buffalo. It was I who paraded Sitting Bull’s defeated ass like it was a trophy from a safari. I sent the thousand nations to artistic taxidermists. I sent my photographers, my writers, my listeners and generals to capture the last blood drops of those cultures—I packaged their world and now it’s found on The Antiques Roadshow where it’s been bought and sold bit by bit and I cringe at how many times I’ve lit my cigarette with the dollars I made doing it and in reflection, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I destroyed the Neanderthals, I’m sorry I rape the earth, I’m sorry men leave their wives for younger women, I’m sorry for gay bashing, for addictions, for taxes, for potholes and hunger. I’m sorry for genocide, for pain and darkness. I would say nail me to the boards but after I made Socrates drink the hemlock, I hammered Christ to his cross so trust me on this one, you don’t want me being compared to those dead white guys (assuming they were white).
A Love Poem?

There are thieves of truth saying clichés like ‘eyes are windows to the soul,’ words like these and others come in such repetition that I cannot help but believe in them. I look at your eyes and see my skin a tropical tan in those burgundy bourbon reflections. I look to your smiles, your postures of forced relaxation, your black silk draping over mystery unrevealed. I don’t know, is this a “moment” seeing you see me? Are we both spiders on the same web, hungry for the same blood? Are you seeing yourself in my eyes? And if so, what harm are we doing by looking at each other and seeing only ourselves? This one night blood fest—love? I don’t think so. It’s a bit dangerous, but still cool so let’s snub emotion, just fuck and if we bleed, so be it.
Benny Gets David Thirk at Last

At 23 and visiting the folks.
My father, reading the obits, sits opposite;
"you ever know a kid named David Thirk?" he asks.
"Yeah, we were sort of friends in grade school," I lie.
Dave was what we called a dirtball, a big kid,
beat me up a lot. "Says here he killed himself
last week, a shame, he was a young man."
I remember he smelled bad and his mom had pretty eyes.

So I'm sitting there with my dad and I can't help but think
why is it a shame for the young to die? Why was it a shame
for Dave to walk into a bathroom, fill the tub, kill the lights,
and bite the razor?
To me, that son of a bitch finally ran into something
or someone his own size, and as it is with the rest of us,
he got licked. There's no shame in being beaten.
If you've got the balls to admit you're done
kudos to you, and I'll be damned if Dave didn't earn,
just by running a vein, what he never beat out of me.
Drinking the Father

Waves caressing the shore,
low water, there's a sand beach
below the rocks. I remember my father
calling the lake "the drink."
"The drink" escapes with me now,
not remembering but remembering
that first taste and fall,
the weariness, the treading to float.
"Sink or swim," my father yelled,
standing above me laughing.
With success came a shot of blackberry brandy,
4 years old and learning to swim.

I'm in the bar again.
I lift my drink and swallow
my father and the lake in one gulp.
Benny wants his cake mother-fucker

No one asked we no-ones
if it was cool with us.
so it seemed to happen suddenly
and we went “what?” too fricking late.

Now, the firmament rains spooge
from masturbating jackal mad happy egos
living in towers of concrete climbing
vertical chaos blocking blue black
circling sky, sight, mind.

And now, like herds of horses fitted with blinders
we trot along Popeing their parts,
pushing their daises, bathing in a trickle down
of green god blood.

A capitalistic overflow, an action of pistons
pumping, humanity’s machine moving so fast,
faster than the quickest code of justice.
So fast none of us no-ones had the time to say no.
Ode to Lung Butter

The best luggies
come after a night of 20 odd beers
and 3 packs of cigarettes,
when you find yourself sprawled
half on the bed, half on the floor
and you tremble rumble suffocation—
black air sacks gasp a guttural sticky tar,
depth of death and then your mouth fills
with a green/yellow mucus that chews
like gum so you lean over, grab
an empty can left over from your bout
with the night and drain your jowls.
You roll back over and breathe, breathe
the new day, breathe unrestricted,
like breathing freedom, freedom and the new day.
Luggies are all right by me.
A Poem Without Power

I can't afford power—
the lights cut off, the fridge, the stove.
Still got heat though (it's the law).

Don't know if you've ever shut it
all down, every sound.
The quiet is weird:
neighbors neighing like horses
in a stable sleep, water pumping
to other apartments
with a flush and gurgle.

I write this by candle.
I have a makeshift lantern
with tinfoil reflecting yellow silence.

I have half a loaf of bread.
I'm saving the canned peaches
for an occasion. My empty belly
grumbles like a tractor
plowing stones.
Another Poem Without Power

Rollvaag was so close to being right on in his book Giants in the Earth, but he confused trolls with hobgoblins.

I've been in the Dakota Territory ten years now. I've seen clouds like anvil headed demons lace claws of wind/lightening/hail across flat black earth while I fought against the gods of twisters and blizzards. I know all too well the creatures of this fertile and frozen land.

Here, under plowed ground, under foundations of houses, of homes, are the hobgoblins. Those green skinned devils have stolen my power, no light but the winter sun, nothing to cook on, no phone, no contact.

At night I see their eyes (yellow as a candle's flame) dart around the room. As my stomach rumbles they pick and peck and bite and scratch my weakened body. They must find ecstasy in torment.

Trolls aren't like that; they destroy bodies with bone cancer, rip sanities to suicide. Trolls kill, trolls murder.

Were Rollvaag alive now, he would know no troll makes a home on the plains, they are a wandering pestilence everywhere. On this stretch of prairie though, in the Dakota, hobgoblins are surging.

Rollvaag, you were so close to being right on and I wish you were because death is a creature I can handle.
Above abuse

I had seen her only once.
She had frizzled brown witch’s hair.
Her cigarette lined face had long ago
given up the idea of skin and now
held the texture of hide.
I saw her only that once, smoking
on the stoop of our low rent building,
but god did I hear her. Her voice
an angry rasp that rose up
through the floor of my apartment
every flipping night.
But it was more that just her voice,
under her was a yelp, a cry,
a young genderless pitch that said
not again.
Don’t get involved, don’t get involved, don’t get involved
is the mantra of the poor.
I don’t hate her for what she did,
and I don’t feel guilt for doing nothing.
That kid would learn the way of life soon enough,
would learn that what some consider proper,
what some call ethical,
what some say is basic human decency
is a luxury not all of us can afford.
Now, this moment

We’re crashing in a city park
and the cops just patrolled by
They didn’t see us and the moon smiles
It’s a warm summer night, maybe 11:00
Over our heads a wasp flies
Nomad is allergic
begs us to kill it
will trade his wine to whoever does
That wasp of darkness
doesn’t want to fight though
Nomad runs away crazy
as it continues to float above us
I’m glad for our nocturnal friend
glad that we ragged men aren’t
the only creatures who refuse to wilt
in the face of the night
but I’m especially glad
it only takes an inch of winged fear
to make an alcoholic drop his lifeblood
and run head-long into the unknown void.
Blue Song of a Convenience Store Clerk

The ladies come and go
buying tickets for the lotto
and I realize I'm inflicted.

Too many moons
my 3rd shift sight
has held the wails and pleas
of feral addicts who are strapped
to gurneys by police and EMT's.

Too many times
I've seen 3 a.m. women
brandish switchblades within the store
and demand absent vodka.

A block from the shelter,
in between three bars I work
for scoundrels who hide their eyes
as they come and go
buying tickets for the lotto.

I should have finished college and sold bulk packages
of Botox injections to lobsters desperate for beauty.

And forever they go
buying tickets for their lotto
thinking Michelangelo
is a mutant turtle
so should I even bother to ask
some overwhelming question
like is it death or another customer
that waits behind you?

No, not at all, no,
it is enough that I take their money
and let them live.
Stray Life

I adore
my parasitic ways
in this dog town—
grab a hand-out
sit on hot rocks
broken glass
murky river rolls
viscous clay
flood dead trees
dried leaves
no shade and the sun
relentless
empty beer bottles
sail down stream
like cream that oozes
down my thigh
for the girl walking by
and I’m real lazy
ride the free buzz
taking it all in ease
and if I got something to say
it’s about the wise scent of flowers
and a rabid mutt who should praise
his fleas.
note in a bottle from nowhere

Sitting naked, after the eighth or ninth beer,
my sink filled with fetid dishwater
and soaking pans. A half dozen,
half read books flopped across stained
and ruined carpet.

Aspirins in the bathroom, acetaminophen
by the door, ibuprofen next to the bed.
ashtrays full and spilling and the walls
the wall bare white
except for two pictures.

One is of a Lenin statue toppled
over on the winter of an Austrian field.
I set it in an ideal spot, off center, at eye level,
alone on my easterly wall.

The other, a painting, hangs seven feet above my bed,
just out of reach. It shows a clipper, three black masts,
twenty-two white sails. The ship, time frozen,
tacks non-existent winds, plowing the sea.

First thing through the door any visitor will see
is the felled chiseled granite of Lenin.
When waking with eyes looking up,
any one who spent the night will glimpse
that ghost white ship sailing uncharted waters.
And at any random instant, one would notice me,
naked, drunk, in between the failure of ideals
and futilities of dreams—
walking a blade of a plank with bottles of medication
and never grasping the point.
**Diatribe Against U.S. Painters**

It's the painters and their victimization. Their fractured lives abstracted in tortured Sally Jessy Raphael strokes. Their ego portraits and sorrowed eyes hold desperate visions of wastelands accentuated in anachronistic backdrops of easy speak decadence dancing Berlin burlesque cafes. Their lives, on display, a mincemeat pie of all the flavors from the last century, of what they are now, of what we are now.

Fucking painters, take your tumor and dye your oils its green-red-gray color. Squeeze the puss from your chancre for consistency, add a tear for dead children, one more for dead parents. Hawk a luggie to recognize violence against women and paint. Paint your pain, your inequality. Paint your life, your needs and wants—PAINT! PAINT!

Paint from the richest nation in the world. Paint the power, the freedom. Paint the barbed chains behind your tormented smiles, our tormented smiles, then die just like the rest of us.
Hell with imagists

All right,
it’s December twenty something
and it’s late—
I’m writing this with one eye closed.

Have been drinking
the nectar of brandy.

Drunk,
so drunk
a red wheel barrow
don’t mean shit.
Benny Meets God

Let me tell about when I met God.
It wasn’t what I imagined; who would have thought
God was a little 16 year-old chick who’s
hotter than the sun’s corona and has a chowbox
that fits like an isotoner glove.
But damn, there we were, me and the big G
doing that dance of mystic revelation.
The shit was sweet, but that little girl,
Creator of the World, never
told me she carried the clap.
And there it was,
the burning bush that did not burn.

Hell, the moral is that penicillin
can cure any religion.
When Benny Tries to be Good

I've been missing evil, missing eternal
struggle, war, friction, advancement through destruction.

Today's evil is always somewhere else—New York, Iraq,
it lurks in Chinese diseases and damn it, I wish it were here.

I want it to have a face but no name.
I want to play pool with it and
it should be like a Mongol horde,
one arising from a great plains dust storm,
one that explodes my lungs because it's touched
my tongue. I want to stick my dick
in its rotten twat. I want to ride
its anvil thunderhead and smash small
prairie towns.

I miss in wounded eternity, its rusted iron eyes,
its entropy. I miss
its exceptional expertise, its general exactness,
but there ain't nothing doing.
I'm in mid-Dakota wheat, and here, right now,
the kindly nature of safety and goodness
is robbing me of life.
I'm ready to gnaw off my own jackal leg
to get away from this trap evil set for me,
this evil of comfort.
Jazzy Blues

Outside, cars crush compacted brown sugar snow.
Inside, Coltrane chug-a-lugs cool heroine jazz.

Clothes, bottles, cigarette butts landscape my floor;
what the midnight clicking roaches must think of me.

Falling into bed, diluted, dizzy, I nest against somebody,
covering myself under rolling hills of cotton wishing I could die,
but only for a little while.

A quick death is what I want.
Just an itsy,
bitsy,
quickie.
Looking for religion

At
goddamn
three in the morning,
the same songs playing
that played throughout the day.

Down
to the corner
of my whiskey bottle;
the last few fucking shots
haven't even tickled my numb red throat.

Winter's wind
throws dancing gypsy knives of ice.
I begin to dig, hunting for inspiration,
but Bacchus isn't with the Muses tonight.

At goddamn
three in the morning,
the same songs playing,
I'm up to the neck of the next whiskey bottle
ready to butcher a muse if I can ever find her.

I'm worried the gods might be dead.
If they are then I'm drowning
down the uselessness of a drunkard's refrain
with all the Jesus-blood I want, but none of the salvation.
Poetry

is the road
between a bar and bed
it’s the cop and his spotlight
the rapid heart and squinting eye
it’s finger tapping anxiety
it’s a uniformed voice saying
“I suggest you go home son”
then going home, home
head resting soft to sleep
sleeping, another felony averted
Benny tries subtlety

Come on baby,

Nock my arrow
Raise my sorrow
Wheel the barrow
Feed my marrow

Heal my soul
Mine my coal
Snort this blow
Reap your sow

Deep the weed
Do the deed
Live my creed
Flap my seed

Lap that sap
Throw your cap
Pap on tap
Tip the map

Dip this lip
Cup my sip
Oil that hip
Pun this quip

Sun my line
Glue my crime
Lick the time
Pull the sign

Come on baby
Foreboding

Reading a history book, war specifically.  
There’s a picture—
“Gerhardt, Bruno, Stefan,” the name listed.  
They’re smiling, sun shining in the Ukraine;  
a black and white photo is what it is.  
Had an old great-uncle Gerhardt,  
family lore says during the war  
he was in prison, temper and bad liquor they say.  
Anyway, in der bade Zimmer  
reading history, then checking the mirror  
thinking, *Damn, I come from Nazis?!!*
Glancing a photo, black and white,  
three driven men smiling with a pre-Chernobyl glow. 

It was the spring time then,  
just like it is now and what scares me  
is that more eye color  
can be passed on.
Waking with snow to water

The sound of tongues catching snowflakes
Will wake any good metaphysician
From the deepest slumber, the most sound sleeps,
The gentlest oblivions. That habit of torpor
Can always be broken by those melting crystals—
Among other things like unending chirping
And sunlight hatching open morning eyes.

When a tongue catches a snowflake,
That silent transubstantiation of snow to water
Is a hymnal to children laughing.
It is the joy of solid cold to fluid hope
Like grasping at a dandelion seed caught in wind
Then making a wish.

For having a hangover,
There are worse sounds
That can wake a man up,
Worse sounds than kids
Chasing dreams.
The Essentials

It was right after one of the whore dog bitches of nowhere left me
and it wasn’t that I loved her because I know love is no more
than a delusion cooked up to help us survive,
yet I did have an attachment to her.
She was a habit and falling asleep with nothing
in my arms brought an insomnia
like a feverish rat scratching at cupboard doors.
So I started to live the poor man’s Elvis—
booze to sleep, caffeine to wake up
and sake the saints if that didn’t give a month’s rest.
but entropy, chaos, all things in time fail
and there I was, frail from sleep deprivation
with no salvation in sight. Damn man,
and damn women too, needs—needs are what a man needs.
Water, food, warm bed, roof overhead,
pads and tampons on the little shelf above the toilet
near perfumed soaps. Needs is what a man needs:
blood, feast, sanctuary. Needs:
four walls, a ceiling, full belly, and that straight
up tight Kotex security is what a man needs
because without it the only rest he’ll find
is in the hard brown dirt.
An end’s beginning

Benny’s Journal  March 20

Every so often, in the gray between grain and star, between dreams—
that space where wish owls fly with undead witches and no one cares—
there comes a brief respite, a stable for Time, a glint (not hope, not light)
of relief, a sleepless rest for red eyes haunted wild with crazed sanity.
This spark, this fathomless creature that carries its rider without effort or care,
is a bed, is a chalice, is a crack in the doldrums, a new drum of life.
In between intoxication of the body and sober spirit of the tongue
I saw such a being, talked with it, rode with it on a trail that torments death,
that trail that scares life into people, and there, light dimmed, darkness retreated to shade, there it touched me, she touched me.
There are no words—
warmth beyond flesh, beyond the cool burn of the bourbon that never said no,
beyond the fires lit in distant cabins where humanity, a savage of abandon,
fights to stay in this world by heat and light alone, this woman, Celia, touched me.
She brought me out of struggle and drove me to a place where the present melts, the future and logic turn fuzzy, abstraction becomes coherence, falls to one idea, an image of clocks losing their hands. Precision, chaos, control, where whole trinities are holding hands, uniting, skin to skin on skin. This is no dream.
A young private woman

You have a big closet, large enough for your mattress (which you put in there). Every night that I lie next to you you worry that it's weird, sleeping in a closet. *Freakazoid* is your word, "You don't think I'm a freakazoid for sleeping here do you?" And of course you are, but I'll never say so—I need the free bed.

You do drugs crazy, pills you get and know nothing about, crank, coke, crack, that shit that killed our friend, that crap that sent more than one friend to prison. Mix that in with a frenetic little man like me and it's no wonder you're dysfunctioned.

And every evening, before the third shift, we wake up and I find myself dowsed in seat, dehydrated, suffocating next to you thinking I can do better than this. Yet, right now I lie flanked by your pants and punk shirts, and you are rising to turn off the alarm. Your nude form walks through the slits of Venetian blind light, blessed western summer sunlight crosses your curves. Those golden incisions grace over your smooth native auburn skin and I have to say *Goddamn.*

Thank you for letting me in this deathly dark place, this hidden den you meant only for yourself.
The soul of a transmigrational drunk wakes up next to an old friend he just met for the first time this time around and regresses

My ape sloped head hunkers down
as I pry off my mate.
I roll my flesh over the bed’s edge
and grab a beer to break the fast.

The mirror has my eyes
black as the river Styx.
The whites are bloody
as Auschwitz. Just the karmic
dues I guess for the night’s booze,
bliss and sex.

Yet I look on her today
and can recall all the lost battles
we waged against the Khans, Caliphs, and gods.
So now, I’ve found some bravery
and I’ll be bold as young Achilles
because, last night, in holding
that vagabond soul, I’ve finally found
something that’s better than dying.
Benny Wants Something More

Do not listen to my words
alone—they are an empty breeze.
You must put them in the context
of touch: my hand across your cheek,
now spooning, my arm along
your womb.

I'm telling you more
than I'm saying.

If you lack belief
in this vanished language
then I am a ghost
and you are nothing
more than ashes and wind.
Choice

Pregnant is not the most sonorous word,
in fact, today it hurt my ears.
She’s three months in
and we’ve been together for two.

I remember a fortune teller,
who had more turquoise than a hippie
should own, told me I was
the Japanese Rabbit—once a great
and proud warrior, but now cursed
to run at the glint of danger.

My ear drums are bursting cacophony,
thumping, breaking,
thump and run rabbit run,
I’m running.

I want to say I’m sorry,
but sorry is a weak word
and I’m not weak.
Written in Water

My name is Celia Jones. I’m floating
in the bathtub and I know what you’re thinking,
here’s another freakazoid, more clap-trap
about the sorrows of someone’s life,
their defeats, victories, strengths, weaknesses,
but this isn’t like that.
I’m not going mention my cunt or womb
or how sore my nipples get sometimes.
In fact, I don’t think I could talk about myself at all.
There’s this philosopher who had this idea that you
can never talk about something, only the stuff
that’s around it. Like you can never talk about the sun,
only its heat, its blinding brightness, but when it comes
to the sun itself, we’ve got to stay quiet.
The sun could be a hole in the vault of heaven for all we know.
So you see, I could never talk about myself, but
I can mention the things around me.
My ex-boyfriend, Benny, said I was a magnet for lost souls.
That’s why I don’t feel bad about this, like the time I
took in a stray dog who bit me and we had to put him down
to check for rabies or how all my friends have screwed
up problems from screwed up families and how they see me
as their best friend though I don’t have a best friend.
Benny said he was a lost soul and that’s why he had to leave.
He said he was too addicted to booze, that he would suck the life
out of me and my child, that he wanted the child to be his;
I liked Benny; he’s smart, talked about philosophy, art,
and he loved to dance with me. Reggae music is my favorite.
It hits like a heartbeat; I can barely feel my heartbeat. My pale
stomach looks like pale brown egg floating half in and half out
of the water. Well, the water doesn’t look so much like water anymore.
It’s more like red wine. Benny always liked red wine.
Benny at a funeral

Well past the last of the stones
brought in from the field sterilized
by lime that came from the quarry
that buried its immigrant workers
next to the glossy green of a forest
that was harvested a century ago
when railroad barons went as belly up
as the pan fish during the heat wave
that made their guts bulge and turn white
as the snow that killed so many duck hunters
in a November blizzard as it
surprised Minnesota like a Krakatoa
whose ashes fell in what came to be known
as the summer without sun—
while some say it’s a judgment of God,
and science claims it’s pressure and time,
I stand in between these two dead fields,
one of clay, one of rotted stumps, I stand
on a field of graves and all I can say is
don’t tell me God doesn’t hate us,
don’t tell me nature is neutral,
and for fucks sake,
don’t tell me we cannot defeat death.
Love is dead. We’ve killed Her.

I hear
worms with arms, asses, and mouths
coming. They are not my children
But I’ll feed them since you’ve brought
them here.

Be careful and remember Eros,
Mars is red for a reason.
No one ever said I was on the side of life.
There is nothing for you to do here but bleed.

To come near is to abandon
your immortality,
to become nothing,
to fuck your identity
into destruction.

When I am done,
there will never be another larva
in you, no creature to continue your Karma.
Come, come my darling,
if it is you wish,
here is my blade.
I am prepared to rule alone.

I hear the force your burden now;
I feel the weight; I know the weariness.
Lie with me,
here dear Love, soon enough
no one will remember your name.
The worms are with me now.
It is the time of your demise, your freedom.
Those mouths with arms and asses
shall feast at my table now
and there they will pay
for what we’ve done to you.
something about that old quarry

Ever since I went to the old town quarry
something’s been bothering me.
Maybe the echoes got to me.
It could have been the tenor of sunlight
against the gray limestone. Or
was it the cave where the wounded
workers were sent to heal or die?
Was it that the harvested stones built
the town’s hospital? Is that it, the slow death,
the dying? Is it my own mortality? No,
it’s more than that.
It could be the square fish fossils
that were found there, the fact that men broke rock
where there was once an ocean.
It could be that someday, someone will dig through me.
But what I think it is
is that someday I’ll be on the ocean’s bottom—
not even fit to lime a field.
Babylon Creek

At Babylon Creek
I saw one Hell’s Angel
smash another Hell’s Angel’s head
with a truck jack while laughing.

We were all sprawled along the Creek’s bank
clicked together by our drug of choice: the junkies,
the powders, the droppers, the mainliners,
and I was sitting back in between vodka, crank, and pot
with my feet dangling in the water’s cool flow.
The day was hot. A goddamn perfect sun beat
down through a sky that had just enough clouds
for the acid freaks to see bunnies, Jesus, and aliens.

We were dregs and I had stopped trying
to wash the dirt and blood off my hide some time ago.
I was getting sick of it though—sick of chocking on hog
exhaust, sick of the mud and running guns,
sick of the diseased drug whores
who offered to lick my ass while I jacked off
so they could get just one more fat line.
But still, even though I saw a man get smashed
into a flesh bag of broken bones, I had a lion’s pride,
a pride I refused to let go of.

That day at Babylon Creek, with my feet stuck
in a cold fast current of clear clean water
I finally realized who and where I was.
So I took out my coke, rolled it in a joint,
took one huff, took two,
and waited for some kind of judgment to come.
Damned by Empathy

All f*cked up around a 55 gallon fire
under the NP Bridge, a stolen whiskey
was passed among us addicts
and other day by day people
so rich with time we liquidate it.

Ten feet away, in the gravel and weeds,
a woman seemed to rise out of the earth itself.
She leaned against one of the cold concrete
columns buck naked.
Shivering, she turned toward us,
managed a precious few tears, then
she looked down at her bloody
cunt and belly.

She looked back up at us
and decided to die right there.

We were drinking stolen whiskey
not noticing her Hell settling around us;
our fire becoming an ejaculating smokestack
of Hades itself. "Fuck, where'd she come from?"
Nomad asked the air. We walked toward the corpse
and I nudged it with my boot.

What ever the reason, the dead always bring trouble
to addicts so we slammed the whiskey and ran.

That night, someone stole my blanket so I hopped
on a west coast boxcar. That's where I am now.
It's weird; I'd never been in Hell before
and I'm still shocked
at just how cold of a place it is.
Benny Blows Hell from the Earth

Hunger gnaws
my gnarled
and twisted bowels.
My last 4 dollars
bought a cheap wine
hangover.

Stumbling
with styrofoam saliva
and pits for eye sockets
I hit my head
against the wall
again and again.

There is no
romanticism here,
and the only hope
is that the pain
will wake me up
or,

if I'm lucky,
kill me.
One who knew Picasso

tequila bottle shards
  collecting
  against the shore of the wall laugh
  like people mocking
  aberrant

  solitude

those fragmented shells
of promised
  happiness
reflect hollow cubist eyes
  a deformed
character

  drunken and staring
like that withered old whore
  who wails
under the moon,
"when did I ever say no to you?"

There are no old guitarists here,
but this is a blue period
The Poet

a cigarette smoldering

23 stools along the bar, 22 empty

rum snuck into the shelter

the crescent moon

dead, dry comic books

silence in remembering

a magnet of rags

futility and redemption in words
  (or is it faith?)
Benny finds a good place

I’m lying on the floor of my new basement efficiency, the windows open, a cool summer breeze pouring down. On this sticky day it’s the place to be when footsteps running raggedly come closer to my open windows. I’m lying on the floor hearing heavy footsteps stop, winded breath wheezes criminal with the cool summer breeze coming in through my open window. Lying on the floor as sirens draw closer, dogs barking loud, louder heavy breathing out my open window bringing worries as dogged footsteps run away. Lying on the floor, with mites and roaches barking dog racing by with clunking cop running sirens sirens and all I can do lie with rats and stains, Windows open, cool summer breeze pouring in. Lying on the floor lying in poverty lying.
Linear Equation

I lost my notebook.
It’s not so much that I lost
good poems, dynamic ideas
or even something more than shit,
it’s the fact that my thoughts are there,
a bit of who I was is in there.

But my notebook is gone now.
I open a forty of Mickey’s fine malt liquor.
It’s packaged so you have to drink it quick;
if you take too long the taste turns
to cool flat urine.
The brew centers my sorrow momentarily;
it’s something I know (the alcohol). Funny—
what I’m using to remember helps the forgetting.
Losing myself in drink, I try to go back
to that nameless motivation,
the spur to the jingle jangle jingle of the gone words
in the lost notebook.
I feel the booze that was there, the humidity
of July’s afternoons—puddle-like stagnation,
heavy air, the words were heavy.
Their tone a desperate shadow, quiet, very quiet.
There was something about lakes
and something about a woman;
her hair cascading midnight
or some bullshit like that, I can’t remember.
But with this forty, I’ve got the mood that was there,
it was smooth.

Useless. My meditation ends—fuck.
Everybody loses things, important things,
things close to them, symbolic things,
things that focus them, the stuff that anchors
people, knick-knacks, newspapers, shoes.
Everybody has something different that does
the same thing; an object that embodies them,
something to relate too, to let them know
where they’ve been and where they’re going
and Judas,
my notebook is nowhere.
Metamorphic Moment

Behind a locked door, 
Drinking red wine with an Alka-Seltzer in it 
(I’m trying to balance the forces Karma won’t) 
a PBS nature program shows wet winged butterflies 
waiting to dry, perching themselves vulnerable 
along the swamps tall grass. 
My stomach jolts a frog tongued fire to my heart 
so I take another sip.

It wouldn’t be hard to be a butterfly, 
to bound on a flower’s song 
instead of a bottle’s gurgle. 
The TV shows them flying now, 
chaotic ballerinas on a stage of wind. 
It would be nice to fly in the sun like that, 
to hide from the rain and robins under a leaf, 
to float out of this locked door swamp 
I’ve been cocooning in.

Maybe it’s time to unlock the door, 
open a window and let the breeze dry my wings. 
Maybe—
Spring Flood

Melting mud muck wet
Small sea puddles
Dot the urban landscape
Where emergency aid
Comes as free buckets and mops

Water, water everywhere
Underneath, around, rising
While the holes in my clothes
Let it seep in leaving wet socks
And cold feet

But oh, the sunlight is warm
And the breeze forgiving
A caress of coolness
Instead of needles that numb
And the snow is shrinking

Cars coast on black rivers
Drowning alternators to stalled
Frustration so people run
As much for cabin fever as for the sun
While bike riders smile and splash

We know the warmth is a bubble
In the early spring, fragile
As a concertina, gentle
As a feather, dangerous
As a cop on the take

Our homes are sinking
But it’s nice to be outside
Nice to be alive
Old Bukowski

Chuck once said
"living too long
takes more than
time."
He was a hard case though.
Anybody can bow to the bottle,
but his shit was Dionysian.

In one picture I have
he stares blank as a wall
rubbing his grizzly gray beard
that hides his pox and boil scars.
His sun wrinkled leather skin
droops over his skull,
his eyes hollow and tired—
bullshit whores,
easy bartenders,
horses that never won,
it all just wore him down.

Just before the end he wrote
about birds, cats, ulcers
and Hemmingway.

I almost feel sorry for him,
70 odd years,
50 odd books,
no one really giving a damn.
Just sitting there, waiting,
staring down memory.
Alcohol Writer

a captive of empty bottles
finds usual throat burning
illuminations smothered
under the sealing night

crickets squeak as maggots eat
the earth he sleeps on
earth alive with unspeakable
truths
Raising the Bar

it gets to be hard writing about women
because they all seem slutty
or crazy or too christian. and after these years,
all this booze, and it’s more than booze,
it’s crank, crack, acid, horse,
it’s made me tired, over-worn,
a fashion style that’ll never come back.

this is the return, the refrain, the description
is a repetition of stereotypes. this is the shit
everyone everywhere has heard.
Discovery seldom comes and when it does
you can bet Death
is living in the shadows.

discovery seldom comes and when it does
you can bet Death
is living in the shadows.

this is a life, an age where all is trite, tripe
easily destroyed—maybe
if I/We could build something
stronger than a split atom then I
could get out of the bar, abandon
this repetitive word-concept-form-life-crap,
teach children how to play the tin-whistle
or bass guitar. is that too random?
how about I write the way to melody,
the way of rhythm, and if We’re brave,
a touch of harmony?

the future has no closing time
and when We’re there
We’ll drink the Yangtze with zen masters
after We’ve smiled because vinegar
tastes like vinegar and old wine tastes
like vinegar and women taste like vinegar
and We’ll let christians taste blood
while buddhists frown and pucker
forgetting self-denial because they know everything
is nothing more than more suffering while
muslims draw sober lines
in the sand as hindus hunt for compassion
in an elephant’s head, We’ll know
that all of this has been thought, been said, been done,
been over laden with so much crap
no one can get anything from it.
and so I go to the bar again,
an echo of the beginning, trapped in form—
all ways, all roads lead to the same dead end
(I knew Death was living in the shadows somewhere).
Getting it up by going down

Above the tables, mounted to walls, are fixtures that cross centuries in design by their lava-lamp shape and yellow kerosene glow. Waiting to be served I notice these lights and am seduced; their near hourglass figure, the mellowed light only there to make intriguing shadows alluring.

The tender finishes with another’s pour, half twirls a waltz, and locks eyes with me questioning. I nod as she retrieves a bottle from the awkward cooler two feet lower than the others. She knows me, my uniformed ways and pops the top then pours me a glass of brew. The amber golden liquid waits in front of me now, its viscosity my adoration and purpose. I drink languidly, heavily, forestalling gulps into one long swallow pouring down my esophagus.

There are 8 other people here tonight. most wear flannel, some have their work blues on. Their talking about a female anchor, their desires. Though I keep my mouth shut, I wonder if those desires aren’t for the weather woman, but her powers of prophecy, that arcane mystery of harmonizing today’s plans with tomorrow’s actions.

I sit sipping my forecast, drinking the atmosphere.

Outside the rain begins to fall and it alters, changes dispositions, affects eyes, bending light—how the world is taken in.

How the world pours in, how the world pours in

I drink the brew before me from the bottle now, my glass being drained. Too often the bottle is my lover; its scent in my sheets and those distant
times in the past the past when my lovers were more than
glass and fermentation, when their wounds would
dilate in moist heat, and how I drank
at those passionate distillations languidly,
heavily, lapping up humanity’s first and best dry wine.
Is that the desire I have now,
drinking in brew from a bottle?

It’s neither an original nor an odd
thought to metaphor women and love
and words and life and booze and confuse them all.
Nor is it odd to be here, a drunk among drunks,
only that there are 9 of us here is odd.
Why the world isn’t drunk I wish I knew,
not that being drunk helps things.
It really is only a symbol of desire
yet to be fulfilled, maybe hope.
The hope of drinking a lover, to lower yourself
from her lips to her neck, her breasts, swirling
your tongue around that woogah connection
cascading the downward flux then
drinking it in.
That I have felt vices crush my head from hangovers and
that I have felt vices press my skull from passion, both
I was drinking and both I was pouring as I do now—
my being, her being, I write, you read, listen, please,
it is something I need to know you know.

And isn’t that what neo-lovers of the 21st century
propose: secret communication.
“We have to communicate,” women have told me
but words are most often cheap things.
There are other ways to communicate,
some speak by sight, by clothes, by action,
by things that demand notice:
look at my bald head, my black leather, my mastectomy,
look in my green blue brown black red eyes.
And there’s touch, touch me there, this way,
caress my hold me warmth. A touch
doesn’t lie. I have had touches pour through me.

I finish the last of my brew
and scan across the odd regulars
wearing their flannel and work blues.
They drink and pour each other in
as the tender dances between us
like an urban nymph becoming a waterfall.

I walk out into the rain fantasizing
about the weather woman.
After a few minutes I begin to feel better
for being wet, soaked to the bone.
Dying Benny

When it comes to your death or mine
the cause doesn’t matter. Dead is dead.
I can smell mine on the horizon.
It’s like over-ripe fruit or yeast–filled
prison wine, shallow and intoxicating,
a nauseous way,
a tepid fever, sickness, a melting,
a forced condensation, attaching myself
to something greater. I leave
with fascist blue eyes that lost their salt water
years ago. I would like to think a wasp
might find sugar in the fugacity of my corpse
or that some female mortician would be so
entranced by my appearance she shoves a rod
in my prick and fucks my cold body one last time,
but I know, just like the chance for a final judgment,
that will never happen.
Benny’s treasure

Two little plastic green army men
One silver dollar from 1918 (deeply worn)
A Trojan Condom wrapper
       (4/14/86 written in black marker on the back)
Name tags from:
      Burger King
      Stop-n-Go
      Al’s Service
      Jude’s Photo Hut
      B.J.’s and Kay’s XXX
An empty brass Winchester 30.30 shell
An old picture of a young man carrying 3 huge pike
One letter written in pencil on lined paper—
       all the words faded except,
       “Dear, dear” and “goodbye”
A small silver key
       (like the one that opened this box)
A 3x5 note card reading,
       “If you’re reading this I’m probably dead.
       Even if I am dead, get the fuck out of my stuff
       you jackals.

          Yours,
          Benny”