

## PRESENTATION TO THE POETRY SOCIETY OF TEXAS

by James Thomas Fletcher, February 12, 2022

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*NOTE: This PDF is a slightly revised and greatly expanded version of the PST presentation, including all poems mentioned in that talk but, because of time constraints, not read or only partially read.*

Before I discuss particular approaches to poems, a word about my poetry. I have several topics about which I write. The past is a recurrent theme. All of my books spend time reflecting upon pastness in the many shades that it drenches the present. Love filled my earliest poems. To be expected in a young man. In graduate school, I studied Richard Hugo and, thus, I write letter and dream poems.

After teaching English in North Carolina, I ran computer classrooms and labs at the University of Illinois. The poetry I wrote while there often reflected conversations with other English instructors, especially as it pertained to the reading and writing of poetry. Metapoetry. My book ***Cairn*** contains much of that.

While living beside seven wetland lakes within a heron sanctuary near the Wisconsin border, nature poetry became a large part of my work and increased when I retired to the mountains and rainforests of the Republic of Panamá. My books ***Émigré: Poems from Another Land*** and ***Mercury & Moonlight*** greatly reflect that part of my life.

Death became a major theme as I aged. I write a lot about silence and sound or the vibrations of sound. A mix of Zen and science. I am attracted to both ends of that spectrum.

Somewhere along the way, I began writing poems that continued the correspondence of *Griffin & Sabine*, an epistolary novel trilogy from the 1990s. *Griffin & Sabine* poems are sprinkled throughout my books and last year I finally collected them into their own chapbook, ***The Visual Spectrum of Desire***.

Although I have a master's degree in writing poetry, I am not an academic. In fact, I don't think much of academic poets. Nevertheless, I am a big believer in Reader-Response Theory and its connection to the reading and writing of poetry. A simple explanation of Reader-Response is that the reader

brings to the text the entirety of their life experience. Their personal past morphs the meaning of what they read. You and I take away different poems from the same page. I will return to Reader-Response in much more detail toward the end of the presentation.

Mostly, my poems just tell stories and readers interpret them in their own ways. How my poems come into being may be broken down into a few rough and arbitrary categories:

**1. As an EXERCISE**

Etudes, practice, exercise in workshop or class.  
Ekphrastic might even be considered an EXERCISE

**2. As a PROJECT**

Writing a poem a day for, say, Poetry Month, is a PROJECT. Requests or challenges certainly are, as well as personal projects.

**3. SPONTANEOUS** (for lack of a better word)

This catchall category includes poems that spring from your reading or writing, memories, things that happen to you, or that you see, current events, even a simple comment.

I wrote a poem once because of a comment. While critiquing another student's poem, our teacher said, "you don't have to say round breasts, we know what breasts look like, unless you are writing about square breasts." And so, I felt compelled to write **Square-Breasted Poem** and had great fun doing so, tossing in a lot of references to Cubist and other abstract art.

**SQUARE-BREASTED POEM**

from *Poems from Terra*

I know what you expect  
duchamp's nude descending a staircase  
picasso, chagall, cubism  
the angular features  
of crystalline structures  
but of course beyond the surreal,  
nothing as simple as dali's drawers  
on the venus de milo  
or the tits of pat nixon  
boxation of the boobs  
is a more common occurrence  
than is generally supposed  
and yet  
all I am after is the elimination of the obvious

a deleting of the adjectives  
the discarding of the trite  
but the oddest thing  
the antithesis  
is that now I can say  
round breasts beneath curving shoulders  
or plump buttocks and smooth belly  
with impunity  
elimination causes resurrection  
and all my daydreams are destroyed,  
vanished  
the feel of my finger  
tracing your tetrahedrons  
in furtive search  
for the mastaba of nipple  
concrete caresses  
of a body as perfect in shape as an enzyme  
a study in molecular symmetry  
preceded  
by these big  
square  
boxes

But let's back up to the first category: EXERCISES. Some of my poems in my first book, *Poems from Terra*, began as class blackboard line exercises while I was getting my master's in writing poetry. We went to the board and wrote a line when it hit us, not necessarily bouncing off the previous. Everyone wrote those lines down and at class's end took them home to turn them, some of them, or just a single line into our own poem. It worked.

We also did imitation poems, I still do, using the scaffolding of another's poem for your own words. As an example, a friend emailed me this anonymous 9<sup>th</sup> C Irish poem. Some of you may know it.

I have news for you  
The stag bells, winter snows, summer is gone.  
Wind high and cold, the sun low, short its course  
The sea running high.  
Deep red the bracken, its shape is lost  
The wild goose has raised its accustomed cry  
Cold has seized the birds' wings  
Season of ice  
This is my news.

Which I imitated as:

**WINTER THOUGHTS**  
from *Cairn*

I have news for you.  
The deer graze beside my window  
where the snow streaks past.  
Cold and night shadow the woods  
and turn the lake into plains  
for the coyote and the vole.  
Red of cardinals beside blue of jays  
and speckled sparrow sit.  
The moon wanes with the old year,  
in the night sky the chariot sits overhead  
where the red-tailed hawk circles  
in the morning sun. The crow summons me  
into the heart of the woods  
where pines and glossy magnolias gleam  
greenly through the bare branches  
of oaks and chestnuts.  
The holly is pendulant with red berries.  
On the darkest night  
we celebrate the return of light.

Another imitation method that you are probably familiar with is using the last word in the lines of another poem. To write **Stargazing**, I used William Blake's, "The Tyger" as a base. I'm sure you recall it. Here is Blake's first stanza:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

So the end words are: *bright, night, eye, symmetry.*

**STARGAZING**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

When the clouds part to a moon bright  
cleaving the dusk of day and night  
I peer close with artificial eye  
admiring those unearthly formulae.

The colors of night wash the skies  
filling the pinpricks of my eyes  
I turn in awe and in thought aspire  
to dwell among those globes of fire  
as they splatter celestial art  
across the heavens epic chart.  
Staring until my soul is seared  
from gazing upon this sight revered.  
While streaking comets become a chain  
within the peripherals of my brain  
where frantic neurons attempt to grasp  
the meaning which to my iris clasp  
like rays of gold or iron spears  
producing embers hot as tears.  
And so when clouds enclose that bright  
light revealing the lack that is night  
I turn inside and in my mind  
envision perfect symmetry aligned.

You may notice that line four use a different word now.  
In my rewrites, I changed *symmetry* to *formulae* to better fit  
the rhyme as it is pronounced today.

I also write ekphrastic poetry. My wife is an artist so there's an  
incentive. Plus, during those months when I write a poem a  
day, ekphrastic gives me something specific to write about.  
One of my favorite paintings of hers is "Aquarium". In my  
poem **Aquarium**, I imagine lying on the bottom of a lake,  
hands behind head, watching the day pass above, the fish,  
Frisbees and dogs out beyond the trees. It's easy to get lost in  
art.



1 Aquarium by Cynthia Fletcher (Oil & Cold Wax)

**AQUARIUM**  
from *Wild Seeds*

You lie on the bottom of an aquarium  
looking up at the perfect blue  
of sky and that spray of cloud in white.

The trees dip their dripping leaves  
into the water, brushing the face  
of the surface with fine crinkles.

Somewhere above, between you and that sky  
the orange-gold specks of fish  
follow one another merging into clouds.

You lie with your hands behind your head  
watching the perfect day pass above.  
Imagining the warm summer. Birds

chittering within trees, children playing  
over there near the meadow. You look out  
and the trees all lean in looking back at you.

Dogs are chasing Frisbees across sunny lawns  
out beyond. Rays of light filter down,  
sparkle on the bottom beside you.

A ring of hemlock along the periphery,  
suspended pendulums swaying imperceptibly.  
From below, they are within their own shadow.

A lone fish breaks from the group  
to inspect. Perhaps you deserve attention.  
No, just a form not of her world.

Like a handful of Imperial Topaz  
the golden-orange flecks pour themselves  
into the sky, into cloud, into spirit.

When you reach to touch them  
the movement swirls the water  
and a spark arches, before silence.

Moving to the PROJECTS category, I list requests or challenges,  
writing a poem a day, and personal projects. My Vietnam  
poems could be considered a personal project. My Tai Chi

poems certainly were. I took Tai Chi in Panamá for years and my Sensei, my teacher, so beautifully described the 24 movements while he was demonstrating them that I decided to write a poem for each movement. I have a Tai Chi section in my book *Mercury & Moonlight*. Here is a sample poem:

**STAND LIKE BAMBOO**  
from *Mercury & Moonlight*

You stand like bamboo  
toes touch and feet root into the soil  
eyes sealed, body swaying like a reed  
slender in the breeze  
grounded below wafting above  
                yin                yang  
Qi collecting in a pool  
of energy beneath you preparing  
to unleash.

As for **Requests & Challenges**. I was asked to contribute to a book of poems about the letters of the alphabet. They needed someone to write the letter 'N'. I wouldn't have written this poem without that request.

**NSIGNIFICANT**  
(look for this poem in my next book)

'N' is so needy, calling in the night  
that it wants love, that it is denied  
and negated because it follows 'M'.  
Skulked into the second half of the alphabet,  
the dromedary of letters biting the tail  
of that more renowned bactrian before.

Half a letter.

Shorn of even a distinct sound,  
a guttural, amputated phoneme  
of its more favored cousin.  
Its value like its profile  
hewn from the solid block of marble  
that is its predecessor.

Always thought of as negative.  
Sound shamed to be interred  
behind nobler letters.

Known to gnash and gnaw  
at pneumonia and gnostic knaves  
and the ultimate slight of mnemonic.

Half a letter.

Match en dash to em dash  
and it comes up short –  
a truncated indigence of design  
drawn from the Egyptian for snake.  
Snake. Branded as a villain  
since the very beginning.

I must read the next poem first before talking about it.

**SKINNY DIPPING**  
from **War**

We hike all day in the heat.  
Grimy with dust matted to sweat  
and tired. When we step out of the woods  
we stand on the boulder-strewn  
bank of a broad river.

With the quickness of youth  
we drop our clothes  
and buck naked leap  
into the cleansing water  
bracing in its disparity  
between its temperature and ours.  
We revel, we splash,  
we swim. Most of us anyway.

Some stand guard with M-16s  
as thirty days with a bath bleeds  
from our bodies to wash  
toward the South China Sea.

For those Vietnam poems, I played down the war and concentrated elsewhere. I approached that time obliquely for the most part. When those poems started to pour out, I also wrote down a list of scenes, memories, happenings, that I thought I might write about. Things I didn't want to forget. Once that well of poems dried up, so to speak, I had this list of things left over. I reviewed them all and decided that none



were worthy of a separate poem. Then it struck me to turn the list itself into a poem which I did in a rather unique way. I named it **Slideshow Vietnam**, presenting the poem as if being shown on an old Carousel Slide Projector. Each snippet of text from that list is a line followed by the word 'click' in brackets as the next line, emulating the sound of a slide projector. In the print version of ***Roses for the Canyon***, I even have one of the "slides" in the poem upside down!

**SLIDESHOW: VIETNAM**  
from ***Roses for the Canyon***

Stunning landscape  
<click>  
Freedom feel of flying in the open chopper door  
<click>  
Mountains in fog  
<click>  
Miles of green, the river's silver sparkle  
<click>  
Landing zones, amber waves of grass  
<click>  
Humping mountain trails  
<click>  
Dirt and dust of Montagnard villages  
<click>  
Old women with betel-black teeth  
<click>  
Digging in  
<click>  
Setting claymores  
<click>  
Midnight watches  
<click>  
The fuck-you lizard serenades you  
<click>  
That crawling tingler  
<click>  
Eating C-Rations cold to steal time to write letters  
<click>  
Reading Heinlein, "Wherever you step it squishes."  
<click>  
Resupply drops  
<click>  
Trading my beer for Dr. Pepper  
<click>

Grenades in the trash from lazy lieutenants, two  
wounded  
<click>  
Sniper shot glancing off peace sign  
<click>  
Rotting corpses  
<click>  
Dragging American bodies  
<click>  
Slitting the dead Chinese soldier's throat  
<click>  
Jumping off an ant pile during a firefight  
<click>  
Sappers at Firebase Hard Times, sheets of blood  
<click>  
Camp Enari  
<click>  
Cooking steak with beer  
<click>  
Stirring shit with kerosene  
<click>  
Riding convoys  
<click>  
Urchins hoping for handouts  
<click>  
Twenty-first birthday, chopper retrieval in night rain  
<click>  
Beehive rounds  
<click>  
B-52 strikes  
<click>  
Chopper crash in Cambodia  
<click>  
Skinny dipping in the river  
<click>  
R & R  
<click>  
Watching Kent State dead in Cam Ranh Bay airport  
<click>  
More green  
<click>  
More blood  
<click>  
More death  
<click>  
*Click, click, click*, the empty chambers rattle.  
<click>

But the real project in PROJECTS is writing a poem every day. Doing so forces you to write poetry that you never would have on your own. I wrote **Pink-Toed Tarantulas** while needing a poem for that day and decided to choose a random line from a random book. I grabbed Marge Piercy's "Circles on the Water" from my poetry bookcase and plucked out "The air swarms with piranhas".

**PINK-TOED TARANTULAS**  
from ***Roses for the Canyon***

*The air swarms with piranhas.*

A random line from a random book.  
Marge Piercy's *Circles on the Water*.  
Bookmarks within tell me I read this book  
sometime within the past thirty years.  
but I don't know that line  
or recall the poem it's from.

On the Amazon a stick and string  
from the shore will net you instantly  
as many piranha as you wish.  
In. Out. All day long.

I watched the tawny kids in dugouts  
do this. I did it myself.  
Easiest fishing you will ever do.

However they are butt-ugly fish  
and the meat-eaters are evil looking  
with their tiny white teeth upon teeth.  
Gnashing machines.

You may not know of vegetarian  
piranha. They have flattened teeth  
like molars and feed on nuts and berries  
that drop like shedding leaves  
into the current.

*The air swarms with piranhas.*

Although none of them fly that I know of.  
Dust motes do not bite.

My piranhas were orange and grey  
and looked like cadavers while still alive.  
They snap with fury at blood.

If they could fly, they would  
fly right at you and start gnawing.  
If they could fly, were they to somehow  
evolve, our story of life  
in the Amazon Basin would alter.

Schools would become flocks  
and banks would no longer be safe zones.  
Wild flocks of piranha would chase  
men through the jungle to devour them.

Birds, bats, snakes, the pink-toed tarantula,  
none would be safe from marauding  
gangs, squadrons searching prey.

Your mosquito netting would be chainmail.  
Tourist steamers would line their decks  
with chicken wire. What horror  
has Marge Piercy leashed upon the world?

After reading about the last Empress of Japan while taking a  
MasterClass on Space Exploration, I wrote **Success is the  
Greatest Failure**. The elaborate details of the Empress's  
coronation dress within the poem are inspired by descriptions  
of an astronaut's space suit.

**SUCCESS IS THE GREATEST FAILURE**  
from *The Speed of Sweat*

Kōken, the last Empress of Japan mounted  
the Chrysanthemum Throne wearing a gown  
made of fourteen layers of gossamer paper,  
some as sheer as a butterfly's wing.

And employing all the then-known colors  
of that royal flower. Her robe was a scandal  
to a court that had only known traditional white  
in the time-honored reigns of her predecessors.

Kōken's management of both court and empire  
was as unique as her dress. Custom abhors  
change and the nobles violently objected,

forcing her to abdicate, and exile.

For six years she remained in the mountains  
above Kyoto until the never-ending rain arrived  
in 770 with such calamity that Shintō and Buddhist  
priests all pleaded for her restoration.

Kōken returned with a new name, Shōtoku,  
and a new prophecy for the future of Japan. Cowed  
nobles were tolerant now of her changes which  
created  
the beginnings of Japanese literature and poetry.

But for women, success is the greatest failure  
and the Council of Ministers barred female  
succession to the throne after Kōken's death.  
Twelve hundred fifty years, no women.

With **Obverse Window**, I was staring out my window trying  
to think of something to write for that day's poem when I  
imagined the house across the street being robbed and then  
set aflame.

**OBVERSE WINDOW**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

I watch the thieves arrive  
Across the street from my window.  
Their trailer slides to the curb.  
The orange safety cone a perfect touch.  
Furniture descends from the house,  
Televisions. Guns. Nothing in boxes.  
I know the owners are gone.  
I know something is amiss.  
Yet I watch in fascination  
As the crime unfolds.  
Without sound or hesitation  
Truck and trailer pull away.  
Only then do I see flames  
From the rear of the house.  
The quiet street erupts in sirens and movement.  
Flashing lights and splaying hoses.  
Men in yellows helmets and men in blue caps.  
Notebooks materialize.  
Radios spatter wavelengths in energized chatter.  
Smoke and water blend

Into sea-grey mush far in the back.  
In front the house looks the same.  
The paint is white, the bushes green,  
The yellow flowers bloom unsinged, untouched.  
Perhaps only envious of all the water  
Bypassing them in the dry summer evening.

A knock

on the door disturbs my personal silence.  
*No. I was in the back, sir.*  
*I saw nothing. I am unable to help you.*  
*Of course I'll call that number*  
*Should I think of anything at all.*  
Just a crazy evening.  
And all I wanted was to read my book.

**Invisible and Silent** came about by wondering about the things that exist beyond our senses. The colors we cannot see, sounds we can't hear, tactiles beyond our ability to perceive.

**INVISIBLE AND SILENT**  
from ***Wild Seeds***

The invisible colors of the spectrum  
are just as bold, just as vibrant  
as the visible.  
Only we cannot see them.

Sounds beyond our range,  
above and below, still turn  
the ear of many a wary quarry  
when all we hear is silence.

Is a smell too faint to register  
considered scent? When pressure  
fails to trip our sensors  
do we call it touch?

Even our sense of sense  
is eclipsed in creatures outside  
of us. Anxiety or fear appear  
long before we are aware.

The macroscopic cosmos expands  
faster than we can catch it.

The microscopic universe spins  
within dizzying emptiness.

Should I care if some unseen atom  
explodes in colors I cannot  
comprehend beyond frequencies  
I am unable to attune?

Gamma rays arouse no fragrance  
as they pass touchless  
through our bodies and tongues  
will never taste them.

Yet the heart feels what cannot be felt.  
Hears the beat within a lover's breath.  
Carries aroma like a wedding bouquet.  
Tastes the lips of departed lovers.  
And sees both past and into forever.

But ultimately, for me, poems just happen. Motivated by something you write in an email or letter, a line of poetry that you read or misread, a memory that sneaks into your head, something you see or that happens to you. Poems spring from everywhere.

Much of my book ***Cairn*** originated as emails. I wrote "Passing the Audition" in response to a series of questions by a colleague with each part of the poem written as a response to individual questions.

### **PASSING THE AUDITION** from ***Cairn***

You ask an interesting assortment  
of questions. I hope that I pass this exam.

#### ***Does a writer have an identity?***

Read *If On a Winter's Night, a Stranger*  
for your answer.

Of course a writer has an identity,  
but it may not what you think.  
The writer is everything she has experienced  
but draws in varying degrees from different pools  
of her past. She casts a line  
into her psyche and may come up Mondrian-esque  
on one try and Breughel the Younger on another.

Seurat tinged with Monet or Manet now,  
Ensor dipped in Klee and gilded with Klimt next.  
And so am I.  
And so are you. And so are we all.

***Is a poem's persona so remote?***

Never, never,  
and always. The poem is the poet. The man you see  
before you has dipped his brush within  
himself and painted his skin with organs and tissue  
and blood and stringy veins.  
Read me, I have suffered.  
See me, I have excelled.  
Hear me, and mark well, for this is also you.  
But at the same time never be too certain  
where to plunge the knife of truth.  
Smoke and mirrors.  
Poetry is where you don't see it.

***Do writers have to be a bit crazy?***

You do know how to arrange your questions don't you?  
After the above dementia,  
I am now supposed to reassure your sanity?  
Writing is knowing.  
Self-knowing is sanity.  
If the veneer of ignorance covers insanity,  
which is better? But I think you've misread the signs.  
It's not your sanity that you feel slipping away  
when you write. What is it? Describe to me  
and thus to you the feeling.  
Feel. Fingers. Soul. Spinning mind.  
Lick your dry lips and dig into yourself.  
Those kaleidoscope rhythms are your reality,  
discover them, use them, tame them,  
or ride them where you will.  
Don't fear them.

There is no learning,  
there is only practice.

A series of letters from a friend in Italy, a painter losing his  
eyesight, among other woes, inspired **Pyjamas & Panto-  
fole**. Pantofole are houseslippers.

**PYJAMAS & PANTOFOLE**  
from ***Roses for the Canyon***



Outdoors is cold by my standards.  
When I don't have things to do outside  
I am in pyjamas and pantofole  
dedicating the day to preparing dinner for one.

As my eyes fail my world condenses.  
I have lost my license, can no longer drive  
and so my personal world shrinks.  
No more to paint and thus how I filled my time  
for fifty years also fades.  
With the death of my wife, my wife  
of half my life, even conversation and touch vanish.  
I devote the day to preparing a dinner  
which I cannot share.

Crushed by the absence of all  
I once loved and can no longer  
do or see or touch, taste  
must suffice for all my senses.

Reading poetry is perhaps the biggest inspiration for writing  
poetry. Certainly, it is for me. This one might be considered a  
book review poem.

**FURLING**  
from *The Speed of Sweat*

These sticky flags tell a tale.  
I place them in books I read  
and when finished, the edge  
may be furry with flags  
or barren  
depending upon what caught my eye  
with poignancy or delight.

The book I just finished  
is a compilation of new and selected poems  
from four previous books.

Flags fly from the first of the book  
like the coronation of a new king,  
fluttering in regal splendor.  
But the last half  
is as empty as Christ's coffin.

In the poem, "Grave" from "Aimless Love", Billy Collins writes that the Chinese list 100 different kinds of silence. I feel that I am somewhat of an authority on silence for I have written numerous poems on the subject. So I was instantly intrigued. Then at the end of the poem, he says he lied about that. This was my impetus to write my own poem, **One Hundred Silences**.

**ONE HUNDRED SILENCES**  
from ***The Speed of Sweat***

Forgiveness may be spoken in silence  
Anger often is  
Quiet reigns over shared contentment

Standing beside your grave  
I am often silent  
You always are

Monks and nuns make a science of silence  
The deep sky and the arching sun  
Move without noise

Yet both bow in homage to the moon  
The queen of silence moving  
Through the starry stillness

Tai Chi'ers glide without rustle  
The bookworm is quiet as she reads  
Though her lips move at favored words

Muteness is one form of silence  
Death another, and sleep  
Perchance to dream

The frost speaks volumes wordlessly  
The seedling tiptoes upward inaudible  
Leaves unfurl, flowers blossom mute

On gondolas of cotton  
Continents of clouds waft lazily  
Silent to the most sensitive instrument

The Chinese have one hundred silences  
You said, and said you lied,  
And none of them are in this poem

Kenneth Rexroth writes of thinking about an old love, which sent my mind back to a flame of my younger days, and this poem came out.

**PAST LOVES**  
from *Mercury & Moonlight*

I think of her, a flicker of long ago.  
She touches a book and for a second  
My name passes through her mind  
Like the bullet that killed Lincoln.  
Years ago we shared a time  
The same physical space.  
We touched.  
Sparks flew from our bodies  
Like an autumn bonfire to the stars.  
Laughter reeled like spirals  
In the playful air.  
We never considered becoming vague  
Memories or a lost photo.  
A name just on the tip of a tongue.  
A tongue now sealed in sentiment  
Instead of searching for undiscovered  
Crevices of joy.  
Synapses fire, they dull  
And revert.  
And the other life plods on.

Reading a poem by a former classmate of mine from graduate school inspired this recent poem.

**ECHOES**  
(look for this poem in my next book)

My grandfather spoke here. Here  
my grandmother sang. Where are their voices  
now? Are they traveling fainter  
and fainter through the dust of stars  
into the black cosmic sea of eternity?

Or are they still here? Fallen  
into this red dirt at my feet. Trampled,  
buried like their bodies. Corpses

of phonemes dried and desiccated,  
broken, sinking deeper into the soil.

If I split the earth with my spade  
can I dig up the bones of their words?  
If I search with a stethoscope can I hear  
their syllables once more? Will they fly  
to my ear like bells over a distant horizon?

Perhaps they are fossilized into stone.  
Perhaps the softest brush will break them.  
If a song is trapped within amber  
may its music be freed once  
more to sing in the crisp clear air?

Here is a snippet by William Carlos Williams from his long  
poem, *"Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"*.

It is difficult  
To get the news from poems  
Yet men die miserably every day  
For lack  
Of what is found there.

Those few lines were the stimulus for this poem:

**DEFINING HUMANITY**  
from ***Roses for the Canyon***

Let me take you on a journey.  
Leave your body behind, bring your soul.  
This is poetry.

Syllables not merely for ears,  
Simply perceiving stimuli through vibration.

Feel these words—forged anew—for and by only you.  
Words written with an open heart  
Must be read the same.

Blood lies on each page, spatters of DNA,  
Tears of the heart.

On this journey we will pluck flowers  
in Hell and place them on your casket to view.  
This is poetry.

Experience mortality in a comma.  
Emotion feeding on gaps at the end of lines.

And rhymes to flutter the heart  
Palpitations within the mind.  
This is poetry.

Become more than you are by melding  
with who you never were.

Sit at Homer's knee as he sings in Aeolia.  
You are human. This is humanity.  
This is poetry.

However, it doesn't have to be poetry that triggers you. I read an article in *Wired* magazine about the restoration of previously lost literature by a new technique that can read carbonized scrolls burned by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and recovered under the ruins Pompeii. Even with the brittle scrolls still rolled, this amazing technology read the contents and recovered previously unread works by ancient authors. After reading some hitherto lost lines by Philodemus, I wrote:

**PHILODEMUS FLEES TO PEIRAEUS**  
from *Cairn*

Carry me softly across a flat sea  
as I flee past descriptions, far  
far beyond the pale of florid prose,  
softly across a flat sea,  
across the mountains  
of adjectives, through and beyond  
the dark forests  
of nouns standing idly  
beside the darkening rooted path,  
into the clear white blinking  
sunshine of the plain  
of words, and plunging  
into the overtly fog-laden,  
dismal, miasmic adverbial swamp.  
Past descriptions where  
past descriptions are no longer able  
to adequately describe the light  
striking our corneas, where your face  
may no longer be seen  
reflected in the sphere of a pearl

and only the powdery perfection  
of Salacia smiles back at us.

Reflection upon memories can produce powerful and wonderful poetry. Many of us have probably written poems about where we were when JFK died. I have. One thing that especially pleases me about this poem (below), is that the title serves as the phantom last line creating some involuntary circularity.

**SOME THIRTY-EIGHT MINUTES AGO**  
from *The Speed of Sweat*

I was biology and chemistry aide in high school.  
Evacuated the entire school one day  
trying to redo a chemical reaction I had seen.  
Smoke billowing out windows and doors.  
No explosion. Just that lingering smell.

So Friday at lunch, instead of the cafeteria  
I was in the supply room with beakers  
and chemicals, and the dead cat  
in the fridge with my lunch.  
We were to dissect that cat next week.

That particular day, I forget what I was doing.  
Nothing important. Nothing earthshaking. Nothing  
that would stop the planet in its tracks  
for weeks. Years perhaps. When the clock ticked  
like a bullet, I walked back into class.

There was a burnt ozone feel of dead electricity  
in the room where each silent student hunched  
over their desk. Unblinking as cadavers.  
Their gaze unbent, laser focused ahead,  
all ears attuned to a voice on television.

*From Dallas, Texas, the news flash, apparently official,  
President Kennedy died at 1.00 pm Central Standard Time.*

Sometimes things just happen to you and you feel compelled to write about them. My wife was driving as we left a mall in San Antonio one day when this redhead strutted out dressed head to toe in hot pink. As my wife drove, I started scribbling this poem:

**COTTON CANDY**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

She bounces out of the mall  
like chiffon on a trampoline.

Her hair a bouffant pink only seen  
when bubble gum is set aflame.

A nocturnal emission of Barbie and flamingo.

Summer dress and sandals flow  
in complementary shade.

*She probably shits sugar plums,*  
I heard someone say.

Another time a woman parked in front of my house several  
nights in a row. She just sat in her car for hours. I finally went  
out to see why she was there. After talking with her, I wrote:

**THE WAITING GAME**  
from *Cairn*

She was there  
again tonight  
the lady who waits  
in her car  
in front of my house  
for her husband  
to show up  
at his girlfriend's.

I planned to take her  
some coffee,  
a gesture to break  
the hate  
and boiling thoughts  
but I did not  
having waited myself for husbands  
to leave.

To some extent, we are what we read. I was reading *Moby Dick* when I had total knee replacement. During recovery, I wrote several poems, including **My Wooden Leg** and **Pain**, fusing my pain with Ahab and the butchery of whales.

**MY WOODEN LEG**  
from *Mercury & Moonlight*

I reach down to feel my wooden leg  
Hard and smooth as if fresh from the lathe  
I can almost smell the burning resin.  
Redder in hue than its mate  
Though not sanguine.  
The pattern of grain does not show  
Yet I imagine summer's growth  
Winter's chill, years of drought  
And fullness. That dark streak there  
A hoary frost.  
There a spring filled with clouds and sunshine  
Water running and insects flying  
Birds building nests  
In a branch destined to be carved into this  
Apparatus to stand upon.

Ahab's leg was ivory—whalebone.  
It glistened in the moonlight  
It sparkled above the reflecting sea.  
Bone replacing bone.  
More appropriate for racing our existence.  
His dead foot trod unshod in tandem  
Beside its fleshy mate.

Mine is dull compared to his.  
My wooden leg is a balloon about to burst.  
A dead hollow thunk of a trunk when I thunk it.  
Skin stretched to the breaking point  
Blood and fluid.  
Solid and hollow at once—artificial.  
Both human and mechanical,  
Sinew and titanium, blood and plastic.  
Almost all black at first,  
Then gray and green and yellow.  
Rainbows from an unknown past.  
Now too red, not yet pink.  
And not quite real, forcing in feeble life  
Through its constricting veins.



## PAIN

from *Mercury & Moonlight*

Coming out of the blue  
you find yourself moaning  
Where does it hurt they ask  
and you have no clear answer  
it hurts somewhere along the leg  
somewhere above or below or beneath  
where your knee used to be  
and in your pain thinking is fuzzed.  
Ice is nice, an instant fix  
if you remember between shrieks.  
Pills are of little use,  
how to time effect and cause?  
Whiskey works well for either  
pre- or post-pain, once the shudders  
subside.

Give me blood. Give me bones visible  
through skin. Give me a source  
and pain has a reason. So I dream  
of headless whales, feasts for sharks  
gouges of foot-thick flesh ripped  
in the foaming red sea. Whaler surgeons  
harvesting blubber for oil.  
I dream of painless rendings below  
the surface and the screech in my brain  
merges with the book I read  
*Moby Dick*, which I always first type  
Mody Dick. I too am a Moody Dick  
when the pain changes my demeanor.  
If my leg swam away in the maw  
of a shark would I still feel pain?

Small pains fill my day. Sitting, lying,  
crying. Leave me alone. And the night,  
forever my friend, is now less than comfort.  
I may doze in the day but night ushers  
the unwanted to the head of silken ropes.  
And when whiskey is gone, I'm stuck with rum.  
Second-grade drink for secondary pain.  
Pour the whiskey on my leg  
set it on fire, give my pain a *raison d'être*  
save me from the night, my friend  
turned traitor.

Send Uriel with the Flaming Sword of Eden  
to cauterize my wound and soul  
bury me with Adam and Abel  
bury my pain on the altar of the Virgin  
of the Rocks, give me a room with Noah.  
My blood smeared on the jambs of Egypt,  
see it darken over time  
fall in clots and mix with dust  
as all pain mixes with dust and disappears  
into oblivion or the expanding echoes  
of sound cascading far from my body  
and back into this uncomfortable chair  
this confining bed, this damaged and damned

appendage. Pain is everywhere  
and nowhere in its throbbing language  
of disillusion and fear.  
Release me Lethe to wander unhampered  
into fields where sorrow  
has already been harvested.

Most of my dream poems are long pieces but here is a short  
one that, like most of my poems, happened just as I tell it.

**MIDNIGHT OASIS**  
from *Cairn*

I dreamed that I kissed you last night.

Your apparition woke me in mid-dream for you  
were face-to-face beside me in bed  
and I awoke leaning into the kiss.  
It felt soft and real but there was nothing  
in the darkness when my eyes opened  
although I couldn't be certain  
that I hadn't kissed my wife by mistake.

Richard Hugo in *Triggering Towns* says that what you have  
written and how you chose to write and punctuate it, "must be  
right because you put it there". Don't second guess yourself  
too much. I once edited and re-edited a poem and was never  
happy with it. I worked on it off and on for months, maybe  
years. Finally, I looked back to the original version of the  
poem and realized that it was much better already. A few  
tweaks and it was ready to go.

I also remember agonizing, agonizing, about including one poem, **Don Quixote** in *Poems from Terra*. I couldn't decide if it was good enough, if it was too personal, if it was simply too weird. But I did include it. And over time, two separate people have said to me that **Don Quixote** was their favorite poem in the volume. It's easy to doubt yourself. Trust what you have written.

**DON QUIXOTE**  
from *Poems from Terra*

I lie here  
the easy life breaking me down,  
no more dragons  
or cockroaches to fight  
yet fearing my ancient plunges

I yearn for tatters and sleaze  
peer listless into the future  
and the light, remembering  
always remembering  
I never dream

An amateur scatologist  
who no longer can differentiate  
between a flower and a turd  
I examine my feces and my life for the proper colors  
but prefer to find streaks of blood  
something uncommon among the corn and broccoli  
and the tedium medium of the well-regulated life

I fight for passion  
uncover only apathy  
I believe in too many and too little  
and too late  
I sell my chaos for order  
but boredom is a high prime interest rate

Once I jousting windmills  
and won

One of my absolute favorite success stories is the poem **Requirements of Life**. A few years ago, I stumbled across my notes from a biology class in junior college of all places. One page was headed "Requirements of Life" with a bullet list

below of those requirements. For some reason, which I will never be able to fathom, I looked at this page and said out loud, "I can make a poem of that". And so I did.

## **REQUIREMENTS OF LIFE**

from *Émigré: Poems from Another Land*

- Assimilate nutrients
- Grow
- Reproduce
- Be responsive to stimulus

Love is not listed  
Money is not necessary  
Deities do make not the list

*Life is nothing more than a chemical reaction.*

That line from Biology class notes.  
As years pass, I think more and more  
On the phrase and realize how true it is.  
But somewhere among the chemicals  
That spark life  
Lies that yet unknown combination  
That sparks love  
For we know love is a spark and a reaction.

You assimilate, you grow.  
Love is not required to reproduce  
Yet somewhere in your cytoplasm  
Within those dark-banded threads of chromosomes  
One chemical is about to attach itself  
To another, to insert a piece of genetic matter  
And suddenly, your head turns back  
To that girl who just passed.

*Life is nothing more than a chemical reaction.*

Deities do make not the list  
Money is not necessary  
Love is not listed

And yet if you are responsive to stimulus  
You will catch up with her  
And say hello.

There are times when you see something and know that you have to write about it. Happens all the time to me. In Panamá gringos exchanged books through a shop called Irene's. Naturally, poetry books were limited but one day I discovered Kenneth Rexroth's *New Poems*. Inside the book was stamped "DISCARD: Oklahoma County Libraries". I'm living in Central America and find a book discarded by my hometown library!

**DISCARDED**  
from *Émigré: Poems from Another Land*

This book was discarded  
It carries the official stamp  
To prove it:  
DISCARD. Oklahoma County Libraries.  
In all of the capital county  
No one likes Rexroth?  
Or translations of Chinese poetry?  
*On how many bridges have I trampled*  
*The fallen cherry blossoms?*  
Writes on exile centuries ago.  
Another praises an artist  
In words a thousand years old  
In a language still not forgotten.  
Rexroth himself remembers kisses  
From his past and wonders  
If a faint synaptic spark ever illuminates  
Those shadow caresses in her mind.  
I studied poetry in Oklahoma.  
Has the estuary of verse dried up  
Like the harbor of Ephesus  
Or its own great Dustbowl?  
Would the librarian be surprised  
To discover her book traveled  
The globe almost as much  
As the words within,  
That Rexroth has since joined  
Those extinct Chinese poets  
In that dim land of ancestors.  
This book was discarded  
But not abandoned.

Once at a jazz concert in Panamá during rainbow season, I watched a rainbow rise from the earth, one color at a time. It was an amazing sight. Who knew? So I wrote this poem.

**ARCS OF COLOR**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

You see only the beauty, the color  
Like the fabled pot of gold.  
You never see the birth of rainbows.

Brutal clawing to escape the moldy earth  
Bloody rents, the clingy mud.  
The colors seeping from the red soil singly.

One by one they abscond the suffocating  
Darkness, grappling to reach the bluish light.  
Bodies of cracked and broken prisms

Line their trail of tears to the stars.  
I have seen them rise from the ground,  
Individual rings of color floating

Up within an ether we know nothing of.  
Rising slowly, uncertain of their freedom  
To hang as triumphal arches in the sky

Taking the trash out one night recently I saw a perfect dandelion sparkling in the moonlight like it's own miniature moon. That, too, demanded a poem.

**DANCING IN THE MOONLIGHT**  
(look for this poem in my next book)

Midnight as I step into the street  
to drop my bag of trash in the bin  
and turn to return.

There a dandelion glows, flawlessly  
spherical. Dazzling in the moon  
light. Each pappas aflame.

A moon of its own. A dwarf planet,  
a wandering star in miniature,  
floating upon my dewy lawn.

Luminous. I stare at its splendor.  
I stoop to gaze yet  
dare not disturb such grandeur.

In the morning, it is blown.  
Seeds dancing in the air, wandering  
the currents like lost children.

The seedhead barren, bald, bereft,  
gives no evidence of its nocturnal beauty.  
The ugly duckling as mother of swans.

One day, walking around the lake behind my house, it dawned  
on me that, from the standpoint of physics, I compress time  
as I near my house so I went inside and wrote:

### **DOPPLER**

(look for this poem in my next book)

Walking around the lake I compress time  
as I near my house, a walking blur  
of blue in classical physics.  
Yet passing, time expands as I turn  
reddish in hue. All this on a level too  
infinitesimal for we corporeals to discern.

Time squishes and expands  
like a concertina in the hands  
of a jolly universe.  
Colors stretch and contract within  
their spectrum in the subtlest of psychedelic  
hazes keeping time to this jiggy dance.

And all the while we ride  
the roller coaster curvature  
of space-time undulations  
at dizzying speeds, the BB  
in the gravitational well of planets,  
and never feel dazed.

Someday we may drop through the other  
side of a black hole, our tiny droplet  
of energy, into the unknown  
parallel universe of imagination  
and there none of this  
will matter anyway.

**Spelunking the Past** popped out as a surprise. Going through some old photos, I found one that I had forgotten about and, well, I'll let the poem speak for itself.

**SPELUNKING THE PAST**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

Do you remember touring Fantastic Caverns  
on our frantic trip thirty-three years ago?  
We rode a tram through the cave.  
Inside they took a group picture.

I had forgotten that side junket  
of our wild cross-country excursion  
until I found this photo minutes ago.

It is black and white but you  
are wearing my green jacket and beret.  
I am in shirt sleeves wearing my heart there.

The photo is hazy and blemished  
but we are there, joined  
and bound in time, carved in stone,  
as it were, for one moment in eternity.

I loved you.  
How can you be dead?

Let me wrap up with Reader-Response. I said that I would return to it. My brief explanation is that the reader brings his or her entire background to everything they read. But naturally, Reader-Response is a bit more nuanced than that.

Reader-Response theorists say that the reader actively constructs the texts that they are reading rather than simply passively consuming them. Reader-Response criticism argues that texts have no meaning before a reader reads it. The reader, then, becomes in some ways, co-author of the text in that they actively complete meaning through their interpretation. Meaning, then, is not an object to be found within a text, but is an event of construction that occurs somewhere between the text and the reader.

Wolfgang Iser uses the example of two people gazing at the night sky. They both look at the same stars but one sees a



plough and another sees a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.

For Iser, a literary work is composed of both written and unwritten portions of a text. The structure of the writing brings about expectations. When the text moves in an unexpected direction, the reader may make their own connections, filling in the gaps left by the text itself. These Iserian gaps are the unwritten portion of the text that calls for the reader's participation. Different readers fill in the gaps in different ways, allowing for infinite interpretations. Think of all the interpretations and religions springing from that same text, the Bible. That's a perfect example of Reader-Response.

You may, then, think of your poetry as a performing art in which each reader creates their own, possibly unique, text-related performance.

With no studies or documentation to back me up, I have a personal theory that misreading is also related to Reader-Response. I wrote a paper in graduate school on T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" based upon a simple misreading. I recently wrote a poem based on a misreading of one of Barbara Blanks' poems. So let me share one poem from *Roses for the Canyon* based upon a misreading.

**BLUEBELLS IN THE MOONLIGHT**  
from *Roses for the Canyon*

She writes "Bluebells in the Moonlight"  
and attaches a photo to her email.  
I open the message and glance  
at the forest floor awash in pinpoints  
of color within pale shadows.

Pleasant.

I return to the message to say so.  
But the moonlight has vanished  
because moonlight was never there.  
She had written "Blubells in Łódź"  
misspelling the flower and with her home  
town, the provincial capital, filling  
the space where I saw that softened  
glow illuminated in my imagination.

We construct our own worlds and fill them

with artifacts and intentions dressed  
in naked light or caressing dusk.  
We hear the bluebells,  
smell the colors, and sift the images  
in our mind to meet yearnings locked  
within the closets of a playful id.

For me, that's the essence of Reader-Response. We construct  
our own worlds and fill them with artifacts and intentions that  
our Ids design.

And I'll leave you with this last poem on Reader-Response:

**THE WATER GARDENER**  
from *Émigré: Poems from Another Land*

Reading is writing. Words drop  
into the bucket of your mind  
like a river passing under a waterwheel  
lifting the wheel up and around  
until the words spill out onto the page.  
The same words, the same ideas,  
rearranged, yet splashing  
in unplanned directions  
to move through the mind  
of another reader in another place  
creating new thoughts and cascading  
into truth or revulsion  
or simply criticism,  
becoming blossoms of waterlily  
and lotus floating  
upon the lake of the imagination.



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