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White Shadows: Perception and Imagination in Poetry

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Butler University

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Table of Contents

I. Between the Conscious and the Unconscious Mind: The Interaction of Perception and Imagination in Poetic Creativity

In the spring of my sophomore year, I enrolled in the introductory course to writing poetry here at Butler University. I am not naturally a poet, but I have an appreciation for reading poetry and, at the time of the course, was curious to try my hand at the craft, despite having had little experience prior to the collegiate level. As may be expected, I ran into obstacles.

I enjoyed playing with language in experiments of sound and rhythm, but, despite the vast array of assonance, consonance, enjambment, and every other technique I employed, the poems I created throughout the course proved little more than random words on the page. I could not craft compelling imagery, imagery that struck and left the reader dazzled with a feeling of evocative, transformative uncertainty–a lingering final note of impact, suspended without a name or a detailed explanation. Such a feeling, the very goal of poetry, testifies to how poetry can (and does) speak to readers on profoundly personal levels, reshaping their views of the world through an awakening of imagination. The dissatisfaction with my poetry at the end of this course led me to question what about a poem enables it to convey a profound understanding of the world or an experience to a reader. What is the state of mind a poet must enter in order to produce art from language?

The exploration of these questions is what I have striven to accomplish in my thesis and my accompanying poetry manuscript. Through research of poetic theory and application of this theory to my own poetry, I have endeavored to discover for myself the state of mind necessary to facilitate and amplify the creative process in order to compose

truly compelling verse. The poems, I hope, will speak for themselves as to the success of my venture or not, but, at the conclusion of this project, I have come to believe that the best poetry originates when the supposed mental dichotomy of consciousness versus unconsciousness enters a cohesive, interactive relationship, in which the imagination is sparked and fueled by physical, sensory perception to create a new recognition and appreciation of reality in the language of a poem.

I dove into this project in a way so that my learning, I now realize, was based on a system of reverse engineering. Rather than starting with the foundations of theory, I leapt right into the crafting of my poetry. Because of this, my poetic development throughout the project occurred through vacillating extremes. I started first with poems that were rooted exclusively in my unconscious, irrational imagination. (Having delved into no theory prior to embarking on my poetry manuscript, I naturally lapsed into my already tried-and-failed tendencies I had exercised in my poetry course.) My tendency with this preferred approach to poetry was to follow André Breton's Surrealist methods, allowing all sorts of fantastic images to fill my verses without a more overt, conventional sense of logic. Such a poem reads as follows:

My mind is a die, loaded to roll six.
Roll, tumble, slow, stutter,
faces swivel, tilt–*six*…
My mind gusts in operatic tenor
and strips black notes
off white piano keys…

While initially useful in trying, as Breton would say, to "short circuit" (160) any possibility of my overly imposing rationality,[1] Surrealism ultimately proved too limiting image-wise, as it effected a complete retreat inward to a purely mental landscape. The resultant poems were also too confusing linguistically, as my verse would be winding and my images too heavily loaded with descriptive language, such as:

> ...blue orchids bloom in the warm home-wood,
> Pressing to the black through translucent glass.
> Crush their necks to sweat, drop wounded heads back,
> Sputter blue bruises into blue melodies
> Across piano top, black keys, and strings,
> And the black, black, body with its black, black note
> Moans soft and low to petaled heads let go...

I was able to express vivid imagination and linguistic innovation in these early poetic efforts, but this unrestrained use of imagination proved to the detriment of the verse, as my work lacked a cohesive logic in its imagery. The imagery, therefore, became distorted in my inventive fervor, and the poetry that resulted was a confused poetry, a conglomeration of fancifully complex details without a clear rational logic.

The reasons for my continued failure in poetry steadily became apparent when I delved more into the theoretical research component of my project. In his key work on poetic theory, *The Mirror and the Lamp*–which proved most valuable in helping me resolve my poetic struggles–M. H. Abrams examines how poetry and poetic criticism

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[1] As a prose writer and someone more naturally inclined to think in patterns and formulas (I had initially come to university as a pharmacy major), I have had to struggle to relinquish my more conscientious control of language throughout the process of composing my poetry manuscript.

have evolved over time in order to posit an understanding of the mind's process when one approaches and writes poetry. What Abrams concludes in his work complements how William Wordsworth describes his own position, as a poet, toward the world in his famous poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey": "Therefore am I still / A lover...of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create / And what perceive" (4.103-104, 106-108). What these lines so succinctly imply, and what Abrams's work ultimately verifies, is the necessity of a relationship between the mind's externally directed perception of the world and its internally rooted imagination. Abrams's proposition on the importance of the poet's awareness of his or her surroundings, particularly nature (I will use the term "nature" from here on out, in accordance with Abrams's and other poets' phrasing), in so mental a process as poetry is that nature acts as a physical constant with which the unconscious forces of the poet's mind may interact and manifest themselves in specific shapes: "What is distinctive in...poetry...is not the attribution of a life and soul to nature, but the repeated formulation of this outer life as a contribution of, or else as in constant reciprocation with, the life and soul of man the observer" (64).

While having faced diminishment and alteration in the face of urban growth and industrial development, the processes of nature–unlike the often inexplicable, chaotic workings of the unconscious mind–offer a sense of, as John Dennis phrases it, "Rule and Order, and Harmony," which poetry, as an "imitation of Nature," will naturally draw upon to convey deeper meanings that physical nature sparks in the soul (qtd. in Abrams 17). In this way, nature, both as a stimulant to the mind's creativity and as a subject in poetry, becomes a framework upon which the poet may allow his or her imagination to

act, thereby giving unconscious thoughts clearer definition through association with more clearly comprehensible objects and processes. To incorporate natural imagery is to give voice and physical presence to emotions that are otherwise imperceptible and incommunicable outside the sheer naming of them. And to resort to naming the emotions explicitly in poetry is to kill the poem on its feet, for the abstract terminology conveys nothing tangible to challenge and intrigue the reader trying to extend beyond his or her own understanding of the emotions in order to comprehend the poet's own uniquely informative experience of those same emotions.

Wallace Stevens expands further upon the necessity for an attentive perception of external reality in order to advance the effects of the poet's imagination:

> The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have...we concede that the figure is all imagination. At the same time, we say that it has not the slightest meaning for us, except for its nobility. As to that, while we are moved by it, we are moved as observers. We recognize it perfectly. We do not realize it. We understand the feeling of it, the robust feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it. ("Noble" 313-314)

Without the rooting in a setting or images accessible to all, the poems a poet writes become so detached from reality that they are limited strictly to imagination, to the raw unconscious of an individual. Imagination is vital to poetry's success, as the imagination gifts poetry with the poet's own unique perspective and creative ability, but when imagination overwhelms a poem and becomes the sole force at work in the poem, the poetry will communicate with no one but the poet alone, as the poet will be the only one capable of understanding the workings of his or her own mind displayed on the page. The journey of the poetry will stop where it originates–the poet's own head.

To adhere so strictly to imagination, to the point where the resultant poem is comprehensible to no one but the poet alone, is to render the poetry what Denise Levertov terms "private" versus the more desirable "personal." She writes:

> By private I mean those [details] which have associations for the writer that are inaccessible to readers without a special explanation from the writer which does not form part of the poem; whereas the personal, though it may incorporate the private, has an energy derived from associations that are shareable with the reader and *are* so shared within the poem itself. (271)

By retreating from any consideration of reality and relying solely on pure imagination to create windingly complex imagery in my poetry, my poems became too coded in their language to the point they were incomprehensible to anyone save myself. The experiences I created were exclusive to outside perspectives and could not be shared. To avoid this, then, I subsequently shifted in my methods to incorporate a greater sense of

reality in my verse, hoping to effect a positive change. This new phase in my development I have come to loosely term "realism."

The problem that arose with this transition to a new extreme in "realism" was that I had misunderstood Dennis's quoted view of poetry as an "imitation" of nature. By "imitation," especially as it relates to the surrounding physical world, Dennis meant not so much replication as he did inspiration. Nature, as the poet perceives it, is meant to inspire the imagination, to awaken the mind into a process of invention and interpretation–not to serve as a still-life template that limits a poet's creativity to an act of copying and the resultant poetry to a mere description of what the poet perceives. In an effort to discipline my imagination, I had taken imitation to mean the latter of the two, much to the detriment of my poetry.

The poems I created during this phase of "realism" were sparsely worded descriptions of the nature I encountered, the imaginative element of my previous attempts squashed to a virtual minimum. In an attempt to alleviate the problem of maintaining too rigid a control of my verse, I attempted to uphold John Keats's concept of "Negative Capability," a state of mind in which "man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (44).[2] This concept actually proved very influential for me in my later writing, but, at the beginning, I had a confused understanding as how to employ this mental approach. During this stage of my poetic development, I took Negative Capability too far. I not only nulled my restrictive conscious control of my poems, but I also annihilated any personal emotion I could invest

[2] While imagination may be more the realm of uncertainty and mystery, during my early stages, I applied Keats's Negative Capability more to my realistic, perception-oriented approach so as to refrain from overly explaining or assigning explicitly sentimental connotations to the images I used. (My Surrealist poems tended to border on the sappy.)

in the poem. From long winding sentences broken up by phrases, I converted to sparse, jaunty fragments, their images as choppy as their syntax. The following, for example, is part of an earlier draft of "Sting," the final, more successful draft of which is included in the manuscript:

> Howl. Stagger, fall. Scrape black knees. Muddy white dress.
>
> Twist pale leg to peer under heel.
>
> Muddied fuzz sticks to heavy red heel.
>
> Pick off crumpled curl of crushed honeybee. (2.5-8)

The result of such a restricted style–restricted to the point where I even checked myself in the use of complete sentences–leaves the impression of being choked and, perhaps, should have been a clear indication to me that my poems were again lacking some vital essence under this new approach to my writing. My problem, as I discovered when I turned back to more poetic theory, was that, in nulling my imagination, I had nulled myself. Keats's assertion that the poet should have "no Identity" as "he is continually [informing]–and filling some other Body" (46) to convey his or her experiences was intended not to cancel out the soul of the poet but to remind him or her that the poem could easily be suffocated beneath too strong an egotistical grip if the poet tries to direct the poem according to a preconceived logic rather than follow a natural, impulsive intuition. The result of these more realistically driven poems, then–despite the fact they successfully accomplished the clarity of imagery I had previously lacked in my more Surrealist efforts–was the drab equivalent of a scientific lecture, and a superficial one at that. Anyone who read these poems could go out, find the same objects in their natural contexts, and perceive them exactly as I had described them in verse without

experiencing any profound transformation or enlightenment in his or her perception of the world.

For this very reason, as I discovered, the imagination, when operating in coordination with the poet's perception, is essential to any work of art, as imagination is the part in the interaction that is purely unique to the poet's self. Wordsworth, in defense of his own poetic style, argued that "a poet's best guide to universal human feeling is his own feeling…his own feelings are his stay and support" (qtd. in Abrams 108). In a similar vein, contemporary poet Robert Bly demands, "How can the personality be present if the unconscious is pushed out?" (19). Writing verse based solely on physical perception results in poems that, while perhaps still able to play with sound and rhythm, convey little in their essence, as the poems themselves are without the deeper substance of the poet's imagination. Such a result is perhaps why A. R. Ammons claims to prefer "confusion to over-simplified clarity, meaninglessness to neat, precise meaning, uselessness to over-directed usefulness" in his poetry, for while he acknowledges the necessity of rationality in poetry, he also acknowledges the fact that "[d]efinition, rationality, and structure are ways of seeing, but they become prisons when they blank out other ways of seeing" (4). By reacting to the extreme, adhering completely to rationality and disavowing irrationality, I had cancelled out the potential of my own imagination to create verses with images that held deeper meanings I could not discover or express through conscious perception alone. By allowing no stretch of the imagination, I had experienced no compelling emotion, nor had I opened myself to receive any such compulsion. I had left my mind no room to see the world absorbed through my physical senses in a way that rendered that same world new, startling, wildly

unpredictable and logically inconceivable, yet more engaging and compelling to explore. Without opening my imagination to interact with my conscious perception of the world, how could I hope to create original, complex, dynamic verse?

Somewhere around this point in my poetic development–after having realized that I was, once again, floating loosely between the two extremes of all imagination and all perception with little idea where to settle (if one can settle without growing stagnant in creativity)–I came to the realization that the root of my troubles was the fact that I had been viewing the conscious and the unconscious aspects of my mind as incompatible with one another. Yet the simple truth of the matter is they are not. They are two parts creating the same wholeness of an intellectual, emotional mind, and, rather than opposing forces, they are complements to each other, feeding into and off one another.

The concept is similar to that of yin and yang: the conscious arises and grows out of the unconscious; similarly, the unconscious surfaces and derives itself from the conscious. The seed of one is embedded in the other, and, as such, the perception and imagination are free (and even prone) to interact naturally. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a contemporary, friend, and collaborator of Wordsworth, explains this idea in his own examination of how the mind operates creatively. Coleridge argues that elements of a poet's environment, as the poet's external surroundings are always present and readily confront his or her perception on a regular basis, naturally filter into the poet's mind and play a part in the space where imagination reigns:

> In every work of art there is a reconcilement of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it…He who combines the two

> is the man of genius; and for that reason he must partake of both...He must out of his own mind create forms according to the severe laws of the intellect, in order to generate in himself that co-ordination of freedom and law, that involution of obedience in the prescript, and of the prescript in the impulse to obey, which assimilates him to nature, and enables him to understand her...for this does the artist for a time abandon the external real in order to return to it with a complete sympathy with its internal and actual. (38)

The presence of nature in poetry as the representation of the poet's conscious perception is not so much, then, a mere representation of reality upon which the poet must exert his or her imagination but, rather, a prompt from which the poet's imagination may spring and flourish. Theodore Roethke's poem "The Far Field," for example, demonstrates the immense capacity for a single moment–in the context of this particular poem, a looking out over the sea–to spark a profound contemplation in the mind of the poet:

> The lost self changes,
> Turning toward the sea,
> A sea-shape turning around, –
> An old man with his feet before the fire,
> In robes of green, in garments of adieu.
> A man faced with his own immensity
> Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
> The murmur of the absolute, the why

Of being born falls on his naked ears.

His spirit moves like monumental wind

That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.

He is the end of things, the final man. (4.1.82-93)

From a glimpse of the ocean, the poet conjures the image of an old man. From this image of an old man, the poet crafts a contemplative narrative of the world's end, the termination of existence, and the profound loneliness and trepidation of facing that end. In this way, the poem moves from perception of the physical world into the imaginative, deeply philosophical consideration of life and purpose.

In a similar vein–and, ironically, drawing from the same imagery of a sea–the mind's capacity to flow so easily from perception of reality to the deeper understanding of aroused imagination is demonstrated beautifully in Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," a poem that, through the central figure of the artist singing by the sea, openly examines how art arises from the inspiration of one's surroundings:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

The water never formed to mind or voice,

Like a body wholly body, fluttering

Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion

Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry...

But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.

The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea

Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

...And when she sang, the sea,

Whatever self it had, became the self

That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,

As we beheld her striding there alone,

Knew that there never was a world for her

Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (1.1-5, 2.14-3.17, 5.38-43)

The reality that one perceives, then, does not become the entity of the poem or the art itself. Rather, one's perception of the world evokes emotions and ideas in reaction to that reality, and that reaction, that moment in which the mind seizes upon the perceived image and casts a certain "colouring of imagination," to use Wordsworth's phrasing ("Preface" 5), over the image according to the poet's impression of that moment in time and place, is what ultimately results in the artistic language of a poem. The poem must still keep to a faithful representation of the imagery presented by reality, so the reader may share in the poem's experience through grounding in a recognizable context–yet without the poet's personal imaginative element rising naturally from the imagery, the poem renders itself static, having nothing truly significant to impart to the reader. Speaking metaphorically, the perceived image provided by nature may be considered the heart of the poem, but the imagination is the unconscious electrical impulse that prompts the heart to beat. Without this impulse, the heart stands still. The blood does not flow. The organism of the poem is dead.

With this realization on my part, I came to recognize the significance of the metaphorical images integral to the premise of Abrams's text on poetic theory–the mirror

and the lamp. The mirror, Abrams argues, demonstrates the poet's effort to accurately reflect the world to the reader: "...the work of art continues to be regarded as a kind of reflector, though a selective one. The artist himself is often envisioned as the agent holding the mirror up to nature" (42). The selectivity of reflection the poet must exercise originates, partly, from the simple fact that the poem reveals only one possible perception and one possible manifestation of imagination–that of the poet. On another level, though, the selectivity of reflection implies a certain openness in the poetry by this created reflection, not in the sense that the poet has not altered the image so much with his or her imagination that the imagery presented is skewed for the reader, but that the poet has merely presented it as he or she sees it, honestly, for the reader to take as he or she will. Walt Whitman advocates expressly for this forthrightness in poetry without any sort of pretentious, artsy pontification, defining the poet's art as an offering of a surface by which readers may look and experience a similar transformation of perception via awakened imagination:

> The greatest poet...swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome ...What I tell I tell for precisely what it is...What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me. (107)

At the same instant as the poet reflects the world without "composition," the poet is not without a sense of judgment on the image he or she reflects. While swearing not to be "meddlesome" in his art so as not to distort the truth of the image, Whitman does indicate a need for the poet to project a certain level of awareness or contemplation upon

the subject so as to inform the reader not only of the subject but also of the chord the subject strikes within the poet. The poet, then, should judge his or her subject "not as the judge judges," for a definitive, absolute value, but "as the sun falling around a helpless thing," illuminating the potential for profound discovery from multiple different angles (102). Such is the demonstration of this passage from Whitman's, perhaps, most famous poem, "Song of Myself":

> A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
> How could I answer the child? .... I do not know what it is any more than
> he.
>
> I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
> woven.
>
> Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
> A scented gift and 15emembrance designedly dropped,
> Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and
> remark, and say Whose?
>
> Or I guess the grass is itself a child .... the produced babe of the
> vegetation.
>
> Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
> And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves. (6.90-101)

From a simple question on a simple subject springs forth a multitude of possibilities, each one viable in the mind of the poet, each one a provoking image unto its own. To fit the grass with not one perception but a multitude of imagined possibilities allows the poem to exert greater impact upon the reader, to live a greater life and to speak in diverse ways through broad reaches of imagination, all stemming from so common a subject as grass.[3] While not present in all of my poetry, such an effect as Whitman produces in his own poetry is what I ultimately ended up striving to capture in my poem "Sparks," allowing, through gaps between the seemingly unrelated images of a firefly, a cigarette, and a cat (while suspending, with much effort, my own urge to editorialize and explain the connections), a reader to develop his or her own associations and comprehension of the poem:

In a small jam jar,

my hand clapped

over the chipped glass lip,

---

[3] This passage from "Song of Myself" was, in part, a significant influence on one of my own poems, "Concerning Seeds Blown from Treelawn Maples," which was also, in part, based on a very real moment with my family last summer, when we sat at a window contemplating the names of the maple seeds that litter our front yard. The question that appears in the poem was ultimately what had popped into my head over the course of what became an intensive debate between my parents and me and, I think, harkens back to my initial impression when reading Whitman's poetry: "Helicopter, whirly gurg, whirly gig, samurai: / Why not forget the whole business of naming?" (7.11-12).

a firefly blinks

black and green.

From a limp hand, a cigarette

tumbles and rolls, with gusts,

into the street. Sparks

bloom and smother

to black beneath semi wheels.

A click of light. A window

flies up. A yellow tabby

sails into the warm blue night.

The significance of Whitman's urging to write poetry in this way–judging as the sun judges and allowing multiple possibilities to form in the images and, ultimately, the readings–coincides with the second part of Abrams's theory: the lamp. Alongside the integral mirroring function in poetry, the poet must shed a greater illumination on the subject reflected, an illumination that clarifies the revelation drawn from one individual's elusive unconscious, demonstrates its relevance to all sensitive, perceptive beings, and "invent[s] (in the root sense of 'discover') aspects of the universe and of human nature hitherto overlooked…" (42). The symbol of the lamp, then, as originally established in poetic theory by English writer and art critic William Hazlitt, is a necessary component in a poet's creative process that must function in tandem with the mirror so as to enable a revelation from the perception the poem reflects:

> Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry…The light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light, that while it shews us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it… (qtd. in Abrams 52)

The "sparkling radiance," as Hazlitt phrases it, when building off a truth with which people can associate, is what allows a spark of wonder to form and is what ultimately defines the relationship between the lamp and the mirror in poetic craft. The lamp, the poet's personal, internal impressions, enhances and elevates the truthful depiction of physical reality as reflected by the mirror. And through the poet's effort to cast light on the object of his or her contemplation, the process of poetic composition–of creativity itself–becomes clear. As Coleridge explains:

> In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to the full development of the intelligential act; and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature. (38)

Without the lamp, the poem is merely an object, as superficial and two-dimensional as an actual reflection can be. Without the mirror, the poem is but beams landing haphazardly on a shapeless, persistent dark. Without one, there is no connection because there is no life speaking from the poet. Without the other, there is no point of connection with the

reader because there is no common ground upon which poet and reader can both stand, deeply contemplate, and–to draw upon that initial, most fundamental function of poetic tradition–speak to one another. For this is the essential purpose of the mental approach to poetry as symbolized via the combination of mirror and lamp: to create, as Michael Ryan describes it, a "communication" (375).

Returning to my own poems with this new understanding of the interplay in the mind, I began to reconsider how to adjust the craft of my poetic images. For this, I found a particular definition and distinction offered by Bly particularly useful. In his article examining the faulty trends in contemporary poetry that render verse stagnant without life, Bly offers this differentiating analysis of a mere "picture," which poetry becomes without the poet's personal, imaginative input, versus a living, breathing "image":

> An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination...it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective 'real' world...if there is no image how is the unconscious going to make its way into the poem?...The important thing about an image...is that it is made by both the conscious and the unconscious mind. (26-27)

As the interactive, discursive space between the physically present object and the mentally active perception of that same object, an image permits a sense of movement through the flow of imaginative thought initiated in creating a connection between the

object and its impression upon the poet and reader. On the other hand, a picture, depicted according to a strictly logical perception of what is immediately present without any sort of alteration or participation in its crafting by the human mind, permits no deeper exploration of the world or the human psyche. A person who writes or reads such a poem is left with the same impression as he or she would have upon encountering that same picture as it exists in real life. There would be no development, no sense of movement, no journey nor, as William Carlos Williams terms it, "revelation" (342). Achieving this element of revelation in my own poetry has been a long and arduous struggle, as the majority of my poetic development has been, but the one poem I have achieved that I firmly believe accomplishes this sense of discovery, comprehension, and transformation is the poem "April," based off the memory of my grandfather's passing. The final stanza in particular, especially in coordination with the black spot[4] that opens the poem–the supposed source of my grandfather's terminal illness–is what ultimately defines and crafts the overall experience of life and death:

> Two days later, in the crowded chapel,
> a speckled moth appeared, winged
> through the window. It flitted
> through the chancel throughout Father's eulogy,
> brushed and settled on Grandpa's lapel,
> before it dusted off, winged west, dissolved

[4] This observation I should actually attribute to my advisor, Professor Chris Forhan. He made the observation of how the poem opened with a dark image, the black spot, and resolved with the reverse–something bright and hopeful with the white shadow. Like many of the moments that turned out surprisingly well in my poetry, I had crafted this detail unwittingly–"unconsciously," I suppose one could fittingly say.

to white shadow.

What I discovered in my own poetic experiments at this stage of trying to reconcile my consciousness with my unconsciousness in my imagery, particularly while writing "April," is that, at the core of the interaction between perception and imagination, there exists an intense rough-housing–a literal playing–in shaping image and feeling in the mind and the resultant language of the poem. It is this sense of rough interplay, the uncertainty of influence in molding the final product (the poem), that Donald Hall terms "conflict." Conflict is vital for a poem to come alive, for through conflict comes a sense of progression, of throttling toward an undisclosed destination: "Energy arises from conflict. Without conflict, no energy. Yin and yang. Dark and light. Pleasure and pain. No synthesis without thesis and antithesis" (141). By conflict, though, Hall does not intend to imply that perception and imagination, as I had originally viewed them, are at odds with each other. Rather, they move together, as in dance, learning the rhythms and moves of the mind's other half until settling upon the pattern and choreography that strikes the most pleasing note and gives birth to the poem. The movement in poetry, then, becomes the search for resolution, a resolution in which the poet, the reader, and the world achieve a state of shared understanding, where everything is in harmony and makes a certain natural sense. The tension that results in this creative process and production of poetry reflects the natural processes of obstacle and growth human beings undergo in the experiences of everyday life. This sensation–that entering into uncertainty as Keats urges and emerging into a new awareness as Williams promises–is what ultimately allows the poem to transcend from sheer words to art.

I do not anticipate I have achieved a state of mastery through this project, nor was that my overall aim when I first embarked on this process. I scarcely dare consider myself half a poet even after my research and experimentation in verse. My ambition, both in the research and the poetry, was to explore, experiment, and at least glimpse the mental origins, the ultimate attitude and frame of mind, that best enable the sort of creativity necessary that allows poetry to sing. I cannot say I have stumbled upon an exact answer to my initial questions as to the state of mind necessary for poetry. In fact, through the course of my project, I believe there is no exact answer, as creativity is unique to each individual mind and is, therefore, utterly unquantifiable. But I have found a certain satisfaction if not an outright proof in my own poetic development. Looking back over the many poems and drafts of poems I have written, I can notice a significant change, one that actually brings me great pleasure. My poems no longer feel abstract or incommunicative, nor are they sparsely clipped or convoluted. I find my poetry feels more honest, direct, more transparent in its imagery, and more open to interpretation. Of course, I still have plenty of room for development as far as poetic technique is concerned. However, I feel a greater ability to relax into that mental state of play, in which the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious begin to blur, and imagination and perception partake in the creation of something fresh and original. That, I find, is the true testament to progress, a stride well made, and my poems are the more alive for it.

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II.

White Shadows: Poems

SPARKS

In a small jam jar,
my hand clapped
over the chipped glass lip,
a firefly blinks
black and green.

From a limp hand, a cigarette
tumbles and rolls, with gusts,
into the street. Sparks
bloom and smother
black beneath semi wheels.

A click of light. A window
flies up. A yellow tabby
sails into the warm blue night.

A VIEW FROM THE SHORE OF SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN

From the lawn of a beach house
overlooking Lake Michigan, Chicago stands
faded, a purple blotch. Skyscrapers dim
to rusting thimbles
tottering, pink, on a hazy horizon.
They appear unsettled, balanced atop
vapor, cast up off frothing waves.
The crests rise, swell, like scabs,
and rift the shuddering body of jade
as sailboats–white, angular paper cranes–
drag on a whim of wind
east, toward this distant shore.
The same wind pushes tree leaves back, reveals
the silver lines ribbing the dark green, exposes
beneath the shade of two trees
growing at the yellow shore's edge,
soft white dots–a fawn, sleeping.

WHILE I WAS READING

From the hill to my left, a faint crack.
A gray heron
emerges from the shadows of trees. It dips
a thin leg into the shallow pond. The murk
bursts with black tadpoles. The heron
lowers his beak, snaps up
a fleshy strip, swallows it
whole, the black tail
wriggling like the ink
beneath my finger: *Along the dark path*
came a watery beam of headlight–

Shrieks. I jolt. My book
tumbles. Two girls
in heels and short white dresses
rush toward the pond edge.
They lift flat cameras, snap self-portraits,
stand brushing shoulders to compare their shots.
(Between their slanted necks and slipshod grins,
my face will surface, a fuzzy frowning moon.)

I lift my book, clap it
closed. The heron
slinks back into the cover of trees.

WHAT THE RAINS TURN UP

I wake in the dark
to fat drops pounding on my apartment window.
Outside, in the black parking lot, a shifting speck
floats through the downpour, a bleary light.
I rise, slip on old tennis shoes,
pad down to the first floor, open the door,
and stand beneath the dripping overhang.

At five, I had the habit
of losing things. I'd bury plastic dinosaurs in the park sandlot
in a scheme to rescue species
from extinction. For hours, when my plotted rescues failed,
my father would search. He'd come home dirty,
empty-handed. "The rains will turn them up," he'd say.

I took to burying other lost things, lost
without my meddling:
my hamster, Leopold; my sister's cat, Sam.
My mother fashioned coffins
from old shoeboxes, and I lowered bodies wrapped in tissue
into graves dug at the base
of her climbing Don Juan roses. My father, later, would dig the boxes
up and remove them to a more "suitable" plot–
a backyard patch of brick and dirt.
Rains exposed the box lids there–soiled Nike logos on dingy cardboard.
Fat worms lolled in thin mudpools, waterlogged bits
of disintegrated plexus. With rain came smells
of pale corpse matter, a subtle choking reek from the back of the house.
On nights such as this, the smell still rises, when I watch rain
pummel cars and sweep leaves into gutters.

A sharp gust hurls water in my face.
I wipe my eyes, soaked, and turn to go inside.
A crunch underfoot.
I pause, lift my heel,
allow a plastic bottle cap
to float on by.

ON CONNECTION

The world
condenses to stark X-rays. White heat
releases from sparking synapses, the chance alignment
of atoms drifting loose in shrinking space, as
dark clouds brush black hilltops
in a crackle of light.

Afterward, rain, sparse
as ash, will drift over the bones
of fire-eaten trees.

FROM THE HAMMOCK STRUNG BENEATH MY COPPER BEECH

On my dark bedroom window, raindrops
glow white. A flat moon hangs
above the dead beech.
Each branch gleams silver.
In the morning, chippers will come
to devour my rotted tree.
For now, limbs creak
with my weight, idly swinging.

From the neighbor's crab trees, petals drift,
plaster to the bark and my bathrobe.
They float with the motion of headlight beams
that swing nightly across my bedroom ceiling and cast
shadow-cut floral patterns from the sheer curtain lace
across my bed.
Often, the light drives me out
to the hammock, where light does not move
but rests in shallow glares on bark and window panes.
Lying beneath my tree in the hammock's swag,
I am convinced, for a moment, of the oblivion
couples enjoy, entwined, on their sides,
too sunk in sleep to wake at the tap
of branches brushing against wet glass.
A body slips from the rumpled sheet,
pale ribs speckled with rain shadow.

Hard gust. Black boughs shake.
I roll, rise from the swollen hammock.
The world rains white with loosed petals.

A DOMESTIC SCENE

From a house set deep into a hill,
a balcony juts into a nearby wood.
Branch tips scrape shingled tile and stir
echoes of rain from bamboo wind chimes.
On the balcony, a girl
knots blue satin around a white cat's neck.
Through the doorway to the kitchen
waft scents of melting–butter, chocolate,
vanilla-scented wax.

On the rail lights a sparrow, shaking bathwater.
The cat springs from the girl's lap,
thuds against the wooden rail.
The skewed bow flutters with the spasm of wings.
The girl screams. Out runs the sitter–a skull-capped boy,
hands caked in flour–to strike the cat
with a copy of *Dissections*. The cat leaps,
snags a branch, and flashes blue satin as it dashes
into the trees. The still bird rolls,
drops over the rail.

The sitter goes out to sweep the dead bird away
and call into the wood, "Here, Kitty, Kitty."
The girl picks up a Cabbage Patch doll
and wanders into the house, to the smell
of burning.

OUR NEIGHBOR'S DAUGHTER

Over the fence and into our yard
hops the little vandal. She has come to pick
my mother's violets. Wet grass tints her white lace gray
as, barefoot, she strolls, swinging a stick against our fence,
whacking at puffs of dandelion. She pauses
to yank a fistful of flowers (most she will discard
for flaws in design), when–abrupt–she howls and falls.
Beneath her heel, the muddy crumpled curl
of a honeybee, crushed.

Our lawn shudders as breezes lift
hundreds of shreds of petals and seeds,
scattering them, spinning, purple and gray,
in dizzily spiraling constellations.

ON THE ROAD

The meridian stretches–a broken backbone–gapped with U-turns and lightless intersects.
Trees upon trees, fields upon fields, yellow dashes blurred to solid lines–

On the cold steering wheel, my hands
slip. I snap my head up.
My eyes flutter and blink.

A dark heap
looms from the dusty shoulder strip–
a smattering of joints, red withered deer.

An upturned box before a shriveled cornfield–"FRESH LEMONADE - 75 cents."

A child's bike rusts against a bent wooden post that balances knotted duct tape (a dented
mailbox)–

At the sound of a crack, I jerk back to the wheel,
catch the black of bird
exploding on my windshield.

LESSONS ON THE VALUE (AND NECESSITY) OF CAUTION

While rifling through some leaves you'd pulled
from the gutter, the athletic curl of a caterpillar
dropped, china-blue, into your hand. It
unfurled in your palm, and you held it
between us. For once, you were inclined only
to show and forbade me
from brushing the bristles with my finger–unlike
our usual "experiential schooling."
Sisters, you insisted, had a special obligation
to teach one another, and when I was of a more
cooperative age, you'd sit me down beside you
on the bench in our yard and take my hand to place
mystery gifts–ants, earthworms, roly-poly bugs,
the sharp crooked angles of crickets. Then, you'd tip
daddy longlegs down my shirt back–to prove
spiders were friendly, ticklish things. Later, I having grown
mistrustful of your methods, you devised new ways
to give me lessons. Once, when lacking
the example of a farm, you straddled me
and stuffed handfuls of grass into my mouth
until I gagged and vomited bits of green–
this to explain the digestive system
of cows. Now, as the caterpillar dipped its flat face
and nudged at the creases of your palm, you, enraptured
by your discovery, were inclined to keep the moment wholly
to yourself. But at the prick of a bite,
you gave a sharp cry and threw down the fat worm
to grind beneath your heel. Teeth
became your new obsession, and I feared
what you'd bring me next
cupped in your hands.

PARADOX

A tree grows
down from a cracked cave mouth
in the open country of northern Italy, where
nuns keep bees and run pinot vineyards.
A pond has gathered in the depressed cave floor.
Someone has filled it with breeding carp.
Like birds, the fish swim
around the trailing treetop,
and dodge the sudden drop of round weighty seeds
that splash and sink, with bubbly comet tails,
then lie like stones
at the bottom of a bowl.

A SCIENTIFIC STUDY

Through the hovering lens of a magnifying glass,
I watch an ant bob
in a bead of rainwater
rolled to the tip
of a hosta leaf. I lean forward to note
the fine spread of ripples, the decrease
in frequency of generated motion,
the seconds ticking on a digital stopwatch:
thirty-one–thirty-two–thirty-three–thirty-four...

A spider, resting under the leaf,
shoots down and vanishes
in rain-beaten mulch.
Black legs flex with the sharp precision
of red numerals changing
from one minute to two.

At last, the ant floats
suspended, slowly
turning. Four steady minutes,
plus two seconds. I reset the watch
back to zero and mark new time
for the drop to settle.

FOG

Peeling from the surface of a still black lake,
a low cloud rises
in colonnades. I-spies, sprawled
on checkered blankets, catch
the catacombs of a white city
rising high behind the dome of an old amphitheater, echoing
sweet notes of *Scheherazade*. The cloud city
presses close to the shore, spreads its white halls,
engulfs the orchestra. Strings
swell. Horn bells choke. Notes
waver, fall off pitch.

From reed-ridden shallows, Canadian geese
pad out across the water, white-bottomed boats
with rigid black masts. They forge out
in a ricochet of sabotaged music and vanish
into the labyrinth-blind, where all
falls still, promptly silent.

THIS SLIGHT EDGE

Five lampposts pop with frail, hot wire and cast
foggy halos on the country road. It winds
around the base of a hill overlooking
cornfields cut, withered from harvest.
Behind the sudden bump on this flat stretch of land, the sun
sinks into a muddle of horizon and the sky closes black
upon this slight edge of world.

Emerging from the dark around the curve of the hill,
wandering along the side of the road, a woman
totters beneath the circles of light. Her thick ankles
roll on wobbly heels, and white hands
clutch at her open coat collar. A hat, red
as a harvest moon, flaps its broad rim
over her shriveled gray temples. A song
slurs and gurgles from her throat, lost
in the rustle of dry cornstalks.

The headlights of a car
swing along the road. They catch the woman
staggering between two lampposts.
A gust rips at her coat. A white body
gleams beneath the lifted lapels. For a moment,
her face shines beneath her broad sweeping hat.
Her mouth stretches–O!–at the swift flying motion
of screeching white light, before

the slam
of a bumper, the thud
of heavy flesh, cracked bone,
snapped wood, the tumble
of a lamppost. The light goes out
in a shower of sparks and glass.

The hat spirals off
into the open black fields, bobbing into distance
with slight lifts of breeze.

AN INTERRUPTED PEACE

Mist hangs
over a shallow pond, dense and dark
as the black dust of coal crushed
to a hard, clear gleam. My face
falls a shadow upon the still water. A cold damp
creeps through the cloth of my sneakers.

A boy in a yellow poncho
appears on the far side. He jumps, lands
with a clean, crisp splash. It fades with the tinkle
of high-pitched laughter. Ripples reach
across the dark way and break the shadowy contours
of my face to reveal the gold gleam of the sandy bottom
with minnows, shells, a handful of coins,
and the shiny colored glass of broken bottle necks.

APRIL

"The black speck has grown
into ravenous mold. It's spread,
filled Grandpa's lungs."
This was Father's way
to explain cancer of the prostate
to a twelve-year-old girl. It mattered little
where the cancer had grown.

With the shift into April, we gathered
at Grandpa's house. His eyes had shut.
He had ceased to talk. His mouth
hung open, emitted soft rattles.

Every morning that week, Father took me
to the living room and showed me
old pictures of Grandpa and me–
when I danced on his feet, clinging to his belly,
when I bearded his face with soap bubbles,
when I followed him down in the dark
of four a.m. to brew black coffee,
both of us barefoot in oversized bathrobes.

That eighth April morning, I found Father
in the kitchen–the photos on the table with others
much older–a cold cup of brew
clasped in his hand. And through the space of the door,
I glimpsed the room beyond
and discovered Grandpa's bed
no longer there.

Two days later, in the crowded chapel,
a speckled moth appeared, winged
through the window. It flitted
through the chancel throughout Father's eulogy,
brushed and settled on Grandpa's lapel,
before it dusted off, winged west, dissolved
to white shadow.

SNOW GLOBE

For a moment, I am
centered, wholly
at rest, in the shadow
of an archway, watching
snow
fall, mute, without the rush
of direction, inclined
to come down
from a stillness of mauve sky
only
by weight
and dervish whirling.

THE EGG

Once, while my family
dined on the patio, a robin's egg
fell and cracked on the bricks.
My mother, with her toe, brushed the egg
into the mulch, determined
Nature would dispose of it.

For two days, the shell
floated loose upon a membrane
that shrank and yellowed in the air and sun.
My sister speculated on the egg
as a Mayan omen–of the world's abrupt end
in a drying of oceans and continents
crumbling into a deep, black pit. "That's Hell,"
she'd assert. "You wait and see."

Mother forbade us to play
near the egg. But my sister went out,
on hands and knees, wheedled
a toothpick into a crack, and carefully lifted
the top away. A beak, a leg, a half-closed eye–pieces of a whole
thrust from alignment, the orbitals of a cosmos
collapsed to one plane–gleamed
pink, still moist. Her face
wrinkled at the start of a bird, and she tried
to piece the shell back in place.
But everything had shifted, would not settle
back in shape. In the end, she mounded mulch
atop the opened bird and predicted the world would end, instead,
with a sound crack
and spiral off, piecemeal, into space.

Later, I found ants
crowded around the egg. They touched antenna
to the faded bird. They took
small pieces from the dry broken shell
and carried them off
on the way home.

CONCERNING SEEDS BLOWN FROM TREE LAWN MAPLES

The sky hangs low, stressed with storm weight.
Trees thrash and bend. Maple seedpods with yellow sails
rip from branch tips and fly horizontal.

Dad and I watch from an upper-story window.

"Helicopters," I declare, noting the rotation.
"One-plane resistance. Lopsided tailspin."

Dad shakes his head. "Whirly gurgs."

"Whirly *gigs*," Mom corrects from the hall.

From the yard across the street comes a cry: "Samurai!"
The black sky cracks. Summer floods commence.

Helicopter, whirly gurg, whirly gig, samurai:
Why not forget the whole business of naming?
Leave the task for some other Adam,
take, as they come, the falling flood of seeds–
plucked sails whipping across lightning-ripped skies.

THE DOCK

A half-moon, suspended
over a black lake, disintegrates
into a thousand mock moons. The dock extends
into shimmer and shadow.

Dad prefers this early hour. "Shadows
scare fish. Little light, little shadow.
Your Grandpa told me that."
I tag along to spy his cork
amidst the watermoons. His glasses
glow white between the two moonfields.

In the next life, he will be
a deep-water fish, milky-eyed, smiling beyond
the white-light lure.

Tonight, another man
sits at the end of the dock. His pale legs hang
over the edge, are swallowed
to scabbed knotty knees, with pant legs
rolled, Huck Finn. A pipe dangles
between his thin lips, shifts
as he mumbles an old hymn.
Dad lifts his head. "I know
that tune. Your Grandpa's favorite."
He passes me his rod, stands,
walks the narrow planks. He takes a seat
beside the humming stranger. They murmur
while his cork rises and falls on the water.

The cork vanishes. The rod bends,
jerks in my hands. I call out, "You have a fish!"
Dad does not stir. He sits
beside the man, their voices
silent. Dad has rolled his pant legs,
slipped his feet into the water. He turns
his head to look over moonrimmed ripples.

The line snaps. The cork drifts
away, bobbing, zigzagging
with muscled strokes of fins.
Behind reflective lenses, Dad's eyes shine silver.