

TRANSPOSING THE TRADITION:
JAZZ, LYRIC POETRY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT
& BRACKISH (POETRY MANUSCRIPT)

by

JEFF NEWBERRY

(Under the Direction of Edward Pavlić)

ABSTRACT

Brackish is a collection of poems preceded by the critical introduction, “Transposing the Tradition: Jazz, Lyric Poetry, and the Individual Talent.” *Brackish* explores the writer’s experiences coming of age on the coast of Northwest Florida, using brackish water as its central metaphor. Neither fresh nor salty, brackish water is a mixture of both. It retains elements of salt water and fresh water and finds identity in the fact that it is neither. The lyric voice in *Brackish* moves in this way: it is neither a child’s voice nor an adult’s voice, but a voice that stands between those two poles, retaining a child’s sense of discovery and mystery and an adult’s awareness of the larger world. In this way, the poems explore the tenuous gap between innocence and experience. “Transposing the Tradition: Jazz, Lyric Poetry, and the Individual Talent” develops the theory of *lyric transposition*, a way of understanding jazz-influenced poetry. Like jazz standards, poems often cover familiar territory; and like a jazz musician, a poet develops an individual voice in the context of familiar material. What separates a poem from others on similar subjects or themes is the poet’s voice. Lyric transposition describes the movement from subject matter to the poet’s register, the way that musical transposition describes the movement from a song’s original key to another key, more appropriate for a particular musician. This theoretical perspective frames a discussion and reading of three jazz-influenced works of poetry: Michael S. Harper’s *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, Tyehimba Jess’s *Leadbelly*, and T.R. Hummer’s *The Infinity Sessions*.

INDEX WORDS: Jazz, Lyric Poetry, Jazz Impulse T.S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison,
Michael S. Harper, Tyehimba Jess, T.R. Hummer, Craig Werner

TRANSPOSING THE TRADITION:
JAZZ, LYRIC POETRY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT
& BRACKISH (POETRY MANUSCRIPT)

by

JEFF NEWBERRY

B.A., The University of West Florida, 1998

M.A., The University of West Florida, 2000

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2010

© 2010

Jeff Newberry

All Rights Reserved

TRANSPOSING THE TRADITION:
JAZZ, LYRIC POETRY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT
& BRACKISH (POETRY MANUSCRIPT)

by

Jeff Newberry

Major Professor:	Ed Pavlić
Committee:	Aidan Wasley Andrew Zawacki

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2010

DEDICATION

Brackish is dedicated first to Heather and Ben. The poems are also dedicated to The Crew. You know who you are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In some ways, I've been writing *Brackish* all of my life; so I find it incredibly difficult to acknowledge every person who has made this dissertation possible. The following list, then, is admittedly short-sighted. First, I want to thank my wife, Heather Cothran Newberry, for continually supporting me and not allowing me to give up. Thanks to my son, Ben, whose presence in my life has been a long, sustained lyrical moment. A special thanks is due to my advisor, Ed Pavlić, who gave me the jazz impulse and who taught me how to keep a foot (or a nose or an elbow) on the ground. My committee members, Aidan Wasley and Andrew Zawacki, offered helpful and supportive feedback on this dissertation, and I couldn't have completed it without their guidance.

Additionally, thank you to the editors of the following journals, who saw fit to include some of these poems in their pages: *Anti—*, *Barn Owl Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Hobble Creek Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Memorious*, *New South*, and *Pebble Lake Review*. Thanks, also, to Leah Maines, my editor at Finishing Line Press, the publisher of my chapbook, *A Visible Sign*, in which some of the poems in *Brackish* also appear.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TRANSPOSING THE TRADITION: JAZZ, LYRIC POETRY AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT	1
1. Lyric Inheritance	3
2. Transpositions	16
3. The Tradition of Individual Talent: Transposition in Three Jazz Poets	25
BRACKISH	38
1. The Butcher's Son.....	39
Childhood.....	40
Croker Sack Communion.....	42
Things Unseen	43
The Butcher's Son.....	44
Home Late, My Father.....	46
Fishing the Bridge.....	47
How to Shuck an Oyster	48
My Father, Fishing.....	49
Bottom Fishing	50
Cleaning Fish	51
To the Bone, or What My Father Said about His Brother	52
At Day's End.....	53

Payday.....	54
Factory Boy.....	55
After School, I Never Walked Home.....	56
Laying on Hands.....	57
Testament.....	58
The Fisherman's Son at the Conference	59
2. A Song inside a Song inside a Song	61
Deep, Like Blood.....	62
Mending a Net.....	63
Polly	64
Pants on Fire	65
Off the Pier: Crash, In Flight	66
To Sparky.....	68
Changing Strings: <i>Ars Poetica</i>	69
My Father is Tuning his Guitar.....	70
Transposition.....	71
The Notes You Don't Play.....	72
Drinking Beer.....	73
Honky Tonkin'	74
In the Cross Maker's Tent.....	75
Apalachicola Blues	76
Indian Summer.....	77
Out of Key.....	78

Advice to a Future Rock Star.....	79
3. Letters from North Florida.....	80
Port St. Joe, 1987	81
Mr. Stevens Breaks Down in North Florida	82
St. Joseph's Bay	83
Elegy for Port St. Joe, Florida.....	84
Poem for Port St. Joe, Florida.....	85
Poem for Apalachicola, Florida	86
Poem for Wewahitchka, Florida	88
Poem for Panama City, Florida.....	89
Poem for Destin, Florida.....	90
Distances	91
Josephine.....	92
The God You Want.....	94
Mosquito Summer.....	95
The End of the World	97
Trying to Beat the Blues in Port St. Joe, Florida	98
After	99
Canticle for the Gulf Coast	100
Letter from North Florida	101
WORKS CITED	105

TRANSPOSING THE TRADITION:
JAZZ, LYRIC POETRY AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

The poet is really not much different from the tenor player who gets up in the half-empty, smoke-filled dive at two in the morning to play the millionth rendition of "Body and Soul." Which is to say that one plays with the weight of all that tradition but also to entertain the customers and to please oneself. One is both bound and free. One improvises but there are constraints, forms to obey. It's the same old thing which is always significantly different.

—Charles Simic

. . . the tradition, always clarifying, always new and centuries old . . .

—Amiri Baraka

1. Lyric Inheritance

i. Notes on Lyric Inheritance

When I speak of lyric inheritance, I am addressing the way that a poet's influences and forebears manifest themselves in that poet's writing. A poet's lyric inheritance is evident in both the conscious and unconscious elements of a poem. Certainly, a poet learns by copying the techniques of his or her forebears and chosen mentors. A poet may turn to Yusef Komunyakaa to learn how to break a line, but she may then turn to W.B. Yeats to learn how to texture a line. At the same time, however, a poet cannot be consciously aware of all that she has inherited from his or her reading. A poem is simultaneously an expression of the poet's voice and the poet's past. The poet's lyric inheritance occupies a gray area between the poet's voice and the tradition from which he emerges.

One can look at tradition in two ways. For some, the very word *tradition* reeks of conservative, backward-thinking folks who would rather "do things like we always did them" than progress forward. This view sees the past as rigid and static, a period that stands like an idol, bearing its weight on the present. In this camp, reverence for the past means not changing it. If it ain't broke, the argument goes, then why try to fix it? For others, however, tradition implies something more alive but just as important. For those who see the past in this second way, tradition is less a straightjacket to enforce a set of timeless rules and standards and more a liberating community, a place where an artist can find kindred voices, those who have found their place in the tradition. In poetry circles, both views of tradition have held sway at different times in history. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, for example, a group of poets dubbed "The New Formalists" called for a return to rhyme and meter. A branch of the New Formalism, the New Narrative, clambered for a return to linear narrative. Drawn to a tradition of rhyme and

meter, these poets argued for a greater emphasis on the poem's audience, some even arguing that the lyric mode was outdated¹. Conversely, recent avant-garde poetic developments like "flarf" have advocated for a conceptual poetry that denies any value in traditional ideas of poetic meaning². Other schools and movements in poetry fall somewhere along this continuum, some existing near the middle, others existing on the far fringes. Whatever the case may be, it's clear tradition remains an important trope in poetic discussions.

ii. T.S. Eliot's Talent

While T.S. Eliot did not start the discussion of tradition in western poetry, his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" remains one of the touchstones in this ongoing conversation. Eliot sees tradition not as something automatically inherited, but as something a poet must earn. As Eliot explains:

[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (38)

Without a doubt, Eliot's idea of tradition is both aesthetic and social: he is a cultural critic as well as a poet, thus, his argument that a poet needs to have "in his bones . . . the whole of

¹ See Kevin Walzer's *The Ghost of Tradition* and Frederick Fierstein's *Expansive Poetry* for further discussion of the goals and suppositions of the New Formalist movement.

² For a further discussion, see *Jacket* magazine's issue devoted to flarf at <http://jacketmagazine.com/30/index.shtml>. See also <http://mainstreampoeetry.blogspot.com/>, a weblog devoted to the discussion of flarf poetics.

literature of Europe from Homer [to the present].” This cultural criticism reveals an important aspect of Eliot’s conception of tradition: it is simultaneously static and fluid. For Eliot, the past is both past and present; it is indeed gone, but its influence stands supreme. In order to write well, the poet must have the fluidity of own creative inspiration tempered by his awareness of the literature of the past. He must hold his “individual talent” in tension with “tradition.”

What’s important to note, here, however is Eliot’s idea of a “historical sense,” what he in the same paragraph defines as “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.” This historical sense is what allows a poet to access “Tradition.” This historical sense is not mere pedantry, though obscure erudition is often a hallmark of Eliot’s own poetry. Instead, this historical sense synthesizes the fluidity of the present with the stasis of the past. With the historical sense in his or her “bones,” a poet can bring his or her awareness and knowledge of the past into the context of the present. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* is a perfect example. In it, the poet juxtaposes diverse world religions and mythologies with grounded contemporary allusions to address the contemporary problems of his England. At various points in the poem, Eliot’s speaker becomes Tiresias, a blind prophet from Greek mythology; a drowned Phoenician sailor; and a pair of women arguing in a low-class tavern. The historio-mythological voices as well as the grounded contemporary voices differ only in diction, not outlook. Thus, Tiresias sees London the same way that he saw Thebes; he sees London the same way that the women in the tavern see it. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot demonstrates his historical sense by grounding the past *in* the present by juxtaposing these voices. Tacitly, the poem argues that England’s problems are timeless; its fall is no different from the fall of Thebes or Carthage. In effect, Eliot speaks through the past in order to address the present.

This use of the past raises an interesting question about Eliot's conception of tradition. Does being a traditional poet mean that a poet *must* use the past in order to address the present? *Must* a poet demonstrate the "whole of Europe" in every poem? If Eliot's own corpus is any indication, then the answer tends toward "yes," but a definitive answer is not easy, either. A better question might be, "How does the past become present in a poet with the historical sense?" The answer lies in Eliot's theory of depersonalization. For Eliot, the poet expresses not his personality, but his medium ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 42). Without a need to express his personality, a poet can focus on the work itself. For Eliot, medium is timeless and a poet's lyric expression has less to do with *self*-expression and more to do with the genre itself. "Poetry," Eliot argues, "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (43). In this way, the poet himself is not important; only the work itself remains import. The connection between this depersonalization and Eliot's "historical sense" lies in the work, not the poet. The poet's voice unites the past with the present. The result is the historical sense, a way of bringing the past to bear upon the present. For Eliot, the past provides a set of established truths, each of which can be called upon to address the present. This view of tradition leads to some ethically questionable poetic techniques like Eliot's tendency to borrow—whole sale—passages of writing from other texts.

"Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal," T.S. Eliot quips in *The Sacred Wood*, the same volume that contained "Tradition and the Individual Talent." And poets and writers often still quote this little nugget of wisdom, a useful observation, certainly. However, rarely does one see the entire quotation:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The

good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. (*from Philip Massinger*” 153)

The full quotation makes Eliot’s point clear: good poets do indeed steal. However, a good poet so fully ingests what he or she has stolen that in his or her use of the stolen material, the writing is completely changed into a different entity. For the good poet, then, the past and the present cohere to one another—one comments on the other, and the juxtaposition reveals truths about both. For the bad poet, the past and the present do not cohere. The resulting failing poem would perhaps be a mishmash of quotations and allusions that reveals nothing useful about the poet’s time or the past. The good poet, then, is both an inheritor of the past and a manifestation of it. The good poet’s voice brings the past to bear upon the present in such a cohesive way that one cannot tell past from present.

Eliot’s assertion that a good poet transforms stolen material into something unique underscores an important point about Eliot’s notion of tradition. Eliot’s division between what is stolen and what is unique is absolute—in this way, the new poem “hides” its genesis. However, as Eliot remarked in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” poets do not have their “complete meanings” alone. Instead, a poet must be judged against a canon of living and dead writers (38). The new poem becomes something new because of its association with something old. However, when one looks at Eliot’s poetry or one considers his argument in “The Mythic Method,” one sees not a hidden genesis but elements of the past brought to bear upon the present, or, in another way, elements of the general (the poet’s source material) brought to bear upon the particular (the poet’s vision). In this sense, a lyric poem exhibits elements of both its

original genesis and the tradition from which it sprung. Indeed, a poem exists simultaneously as both of these things. The poem is both itself and something different, a lyrical inheritance.

iii. Ellison's Jazz Impulse

Like T.S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison understands the artist as one who inherits and interprets. Writing a generation after Eliot, Ellison was no less a cultural critic than Eliot; however, Ellison saw the problems in society in a very different way. Indeed, Ellison would have outright rejected Eliot's cultural program. Nonetheless, the two writers share a concern about how living poets modify and use their past tradition. However, Ellison's conception of tradition differs from Eliot's. Like Eliot, who found much of his inspiration in the voices of European writers (both living and dead), Ellison turns to his culture, too—folk tales, songs, the blues, and jazz³. Ellison's idea of tradition is distinctly musical; the tradition is choral, not individual⁴. For Ellison, the artist creates it the context of a living community—which is not to say that all of Ellison's influences are contemporary. Rather, I merely point out that Ellison's idea of poetic inheritance differs from Eliot's. For Eliot, the author's voice disappears into the tradition; for Ellison, the author's voice finds its place in the tradition, the way a trumpeter might find his place in a jazz combo. In the essay "Living with Music," he imagines this community as jazz musicians, with the musician balancing "technical mastery of [his] instrument" and the "give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping [of] of group improvisation" (189). In the creative act, the artist works to find his or her place in the framework of tradition:

³ For a different assessment of T.S. Eliot's use of popular culture, see David Chinitz's *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, which explores Eliot's intersection with pop culture and provides some illuminating insight on the influence of American jazz on Eliot's work.

⁴ Like the musician who solos while others play, the poet speaks (or writes) both alone and as a part of a chorus or band. The poet's singular voice exists simultaneously as an individual lyrical expression *and* as a manifestation of tradition.

The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. (189)

In this way, the poem becomes both the manifestation of the poet's own technical virtuosity as well as its own object, informed by and shaped by the tradition and precedes it. For Ellison, the solo (and the artist) are not isolated from a community but bonded to one. The poet's individual exists in a tension with the community—as a part of and as an individual expression within it. Craig Werner explores this tension between the self and the community, noting what Werner calls Ellison's "jazz impulse," an impulse toward individual expression and redefinition.

Paraphrasing Ellison, Werner argues that "the jazz artist constantly reworks her identity on three levels: (1) as an individual; (2) as a member of a community; and (3) as a 'link in the chain of tradition'" (*A Change is Gonna Come* 132). Unlike Eliot's idea of depersonalization, Ellison's jazz impulse allows the poet to retain his or her individual identity within the context of the past.

Furthermore, in speaking for—or more correctly *as*—himself, the artist speaks for others, as well; in the creative quest, the artist provides an avenue for his own self-expression; but those who listen are joined to him, as well. Like the pianist Sonny at the conclusion of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," the poet creates an avenue for communal existence, even if the community doesn't fully understand the artist's role, even if the community is reticent in listening to him or her. "Freedom," the narrator realizes during Sonny's song at the story's conclusion, "lurked around us and I understood, at last, that [the artist, Sonny] could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (863). As Ed Pavlić notes in

Crossroads Modernism, “Sonny’s individual talent absorbs the tradition. As he emerges from his withdrawal, Sonny achieves . . . a form of communion between the artist and the audience” (250).

In the creation of Sonny, Baldwin manifests Ellison’s understanding of artistic creation as well as Eliot’s idea of the tradition, unifying the creative act with the inherited past, not the agonistic anxiety of influence conceived of by Harold Bloom, but a unification of present and past joined by the artist. The poet’s forebears become members of a symphony, not fathers to slay. The poet, then, is both himself and someone else, the manifestation of his own artistic prowess and his own (chosen) forebears. The poet, however, can create only in the context of his or her own experience. A poet cannot break out of the shell of the self; it is through the self that all experience is filtered. However, the poet’s art is not limited by her experience. Indeed, to stay within the confines of experience is to take no artistic risk. One must risk failure in the process of discovery. As Ellison writes, “One learns by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar” (“Living with Music” 197). In the discovery of something new, the poet does not forget his past; the inherited rhythms and images remain in the verse, even in the poet (or the reader, for that matter) are unaware of such things because at its very core, a poem implies community—a reader and a writer joined in communion.

iv. Hugo, Matthews, and Komunyakaa: The Trigger and the Subject

This metaphor of the poet and the reader in communion underscores the lyric inheritance that I’ve been trying to discuss by highlighting the two planes that a poem simultaneously occupies—as being “about” some specific subject *or* as a manifestation of a feeling or emotion. I argue that the poem is both simultaneously: it’s certainly about something, without a doubt.

Poems have subjects—the thing that the poem is all about. However, a second subject exists, a subject that the poem implies. Poets often speak of “organic verse,” a term Denise Levertov used to describe her experimentation with open form or free verse. But the term “organic verse” also suggests that the poem grows from something natural, not mechanical. The primary subject of the poem may be organic, or it may not. The primary subject may be a response to something in the poet’s life (a family death, perhaps) or it may be the response to a writing exercise. However, the secondary subject is most certainly organic because it grows from and is implied by the primary subject, or what Richard Hugo famously called the “triggering” subject⁵.

In *The Triggering Town*, Hugo notes (among other things) how the triggering subject exists simultaneously alongside a more implied, more organic subject: “A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject . . . *and* the real or generated subject” (4)⁶. The triggering subject allows the secondary or “real” subject to emerge. This discovery becomes possible only if the poet has a closer relationship with the words in the poem than he does with the triggering subject of the poem. For Hugo, in prose writing, this first subject is the “strong one,” closer to the writer because it’s what the writer wants to say, what the writer feels compelled to say. In prose, then, the language itself has a close relationship with the subject. Poets, however, must reverse this relationship. They must develop a closer relationship with the secondary subject. As Hugo writes, “Somehow, [the poet] must switch [his] allegiance from the triggering subject to the words” (12). Note the use of the word *allegiance*; the poet must have a greater commitment to what is discovered than the triggering subject. The poet must, in effect,

⁵ Hugo’s triggering subject suggests a one-to-one relationship between the primary subject and the discovered subject. However, art is rarely so cut and dried. Indeed, the two subjects existing in a poem may have only an arbitrary relationship, joined merely by a single image. Or, these two subjects may have no relationship at all. The fact that both exist simultaneously concerns me.

⁶ The emphasis on the word *and* is mine. Hugo argues that the triggering subject allows the poet to discover the “real” subject. By extension, he argues that both exist in a poem simultaneously.

listen to the poem more carefully than he listens to himself. From the triggering subject, the secondary subject emerges. Thus, one cannot plan a secondary subject; it is improvisatory. The triggering subject belongs to the poet, but the secondary subject that he discovers in the creative act belongs to something or someone else, perhaps the tradition to which Eliot and Ellison allude. Indeed, the poet must travel through the terrain of what he explicitly knows to arrive at the mystery of art.

William Matthews's essay "Dull Subjects" addresses this idea, as well, though in a slightly different way. As Matthews argues, the subject matter of a poem (what the poem is *about*, the "triggering subject") reveals very little about how a poem means or communicates. Indeed, the poem's subject is bound to be banal—all subjects are common; all subjects have been addressed⁷. Nonetheless, subject matter alone is not merely subject matter. For a writer, the subject does indeed matter. Many writers spend a lifetime returning to similar themes time and again; sometimes, they return to the same subjects again and again. However, a poet does not treat the subject matter the same way each time that he or she composes a poem. Not only would doing so be incredibly dull, but doing so would be quite impossible. One can't step in the same river twice, Heraclitus reminds us. What, then, to make of a poem's subject? One can think of a poem's subject as a launching pad, a place that the poem begins, a place that allows the poet's lyricism to engage it, and a place that allows the poet, paradoxically, to let go of that original subject. As Matthews argues, "A poet beginning to make something needs raw material,

⁷ Matthews satirically suggests in "Dull Subjects" that only four subjects exist for lyric poetry:

1. I went out into the woods today and it made me feel, you know, sort of religious.
2. We're not getting any younger.
3. It sure is cold and lonely (a) without you, honey, or (b) with you, honey.
 4. Sadness seems but the other side of the coin of happiness, and vice versa, and in any case the coin is too soon spent and on we know not what. (22)

And, while certainly humorous, the list underscores the idea that nearly all subject matter is common.

something to *transform*” (22). Subject matter, then, is a “place to begin” in a poem (Matthews 26).

As Hugo and Matthews demonstrate, the poem’s subject can exist outside of the poem, but the poem’s content—its rhythms, its syncopation, its form, its fluidity, its movements—defines it and sets it apart from other lyric poems about similar subjects. In this way, the poem becomes a simultaneous subject, about both itself and its own composition. Yusef Komunyakaa notes this quality: “Poetry is so difficult to define, I think, because it’s constantly changing, growing. It’s becoming something else in order to remain itself—amorphous and cumulative until it forms a vision” (63). For Komunyakaa, the poem very much defines itself *as* itself. The subject matter fades into the background, merely a melody over which the soloist improvises. This view sees poetry as less a rational exercise and more an intuitive (or perhaps mystical) experience. The poem’s movements and form communicate more than the fact of its subject. In this way, the poem communicates in ways beyond the rational, beyond what one can parse out or measure, in what Komunyakaa has described as “improvised symmetry” (“Improvised Symmetry” 23). This “vision” that Komunyakaa invokes is what gives a poem its lyric inheritance and connects it to what Eliot calls tradition. The poem manifests both the vision of the author and the genesis of its creation, or what Hugo would call the triggering subject. In this way, the poem simultaneously looks forward and backwards, upholding the tradition of the poet/seer on a creative quest while actually enacting that quest. To use a different metaphor, the poet is not unlike the soloist who, during the millionth performance of “Take the A Train,” launches into solo that simultaneously defines the song *and* establishes the musician’s singular identity within the music.

v. “In the Tradition”

Jazz is often concerned with replaying different kinds of standards, and so a musician must establish his or her individual vision within the context of something inherited. The jazz musician’s attempt to synthesize the tradition and the individual talent is not unlike the poet’s quest, so it’s not much of a surprise that much has been written in the twentieth century about the influence of jazz on poetry⁸. Books like *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* and journals like *Brilliant Corners* as well as special issues devoted to jazz poetry by journals like *Callaloo* explore the various intersections of the two arts. However, the notion of jazz poetry is fraught with difficulty. Is the term “jazz poetry” anchored explicitly in subject matter? Must a jazz poem address an explicit jazz theme? Or does jazz poetry demonstrate the rhythmic movement some associate with jazz? The answers to these questions no doubt lead to more questions. However, there is no doubting the extant body of poetry and criticism that attempt to answer them.

Additionally, like poets and poetry critics, jazz musicians and jazz writers often agonize over the notion of tradition. As Travis Jackson notes in “‘Always New and Centuries Old’: Jazz, Poetry, and Tradition as Creative Adaptation,” “the issue of tradition [in jazz writing] and its proper understanding is perhaps the trope of tropes.” Jackson also notes the two understandings of tradition prevalent in jazz circles: “In some cases, tradition, like ritual, has been associated with the timeless and the unchanging, viewed as an Eden to which one must return or a wasteland from which one must escape.” For those in the latter camp, tradition is a referential base of jazz-tropes like “blues and swing in audible in the works of . . . Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington” and others. “Any music,” Jackson observes, “that is a legitimate heir to the tradition emerges from an intense study of the music’s masters and

⁸ See <http://jazzstudiesonline.org/files/Jazz%20Poetry%20Bibliography.pdf> for an extensive list of sources. See also Sascha Feinstein’s *Jazz Poetry: From 1920s to the Present*.

masterworks.” On the other end of the spectrum, one finds musicians like Keith Jarrett and Kevin Whitehead, whose “vanguardist outlook” connects the musicians with the iconoclastic experimenters of past decades. In this view, “tradition . . . is primarily a function of change and innovation” (357-358).

Ultimately, Jackson synthesizes these two views with a close reading of the poet Amiri Baraka’s collaboration with instrumentalist and composer David Murray and percussionist Steve McCall entitled “In the Tradition.” Jackson provides an excellent discussion of “In the Tradition,” showing how the title itself resonates as a “multivalent signifier” (359). The title is borrowed from an album of standards, traditions, and originals by Arthur Blythe, a saxophonist and composer. Blythe’s eclectic mix of songs appealed to Baraka, who was perhaps drawn to the multifarious guises that tradition takes in the album. The poetic/musical collaboration with Murray and McCall allowed Baraka to cover similar terrain. “In the Tradition” is a long meditation on how African-American poetry fits into the poetic tradition of the United States. In successive lines, Baraka repeats “remember” and “tradition” a number of times, invoking by name several poetic and musical trailblazers like Langston Hughes, Sun Ra, Art Blakey, Duke Ellington, and scores of others. As Baraka reads aloud, Murray and McCall play through “foundational styles and practices that one might use to construct an African American musical tradition” (367). “In the Tradition,” Jackson concludes, “[presents] a view of tradition as something still in process” (368). In the end, Jackson sees “In the Tradition” as a synthesis of the two views of tradition he invokes at the beginning of the article, seeing tradition itself something that changes and adapts and “[opens] the way . . . to both the past and the future” (369).

2. Transpositions

i. Notes Against Definition

What is jazz?

If you have to ask, man, you'll never know.

I quote this old joke⁹ to demonstrate something peculiar about jazz: its ultimate refusal to be defined. Whenever someone tries to pin down a precise definition of what jazz is or what jazz does, examples to the contrary come to mind. Many definitions of jazz are merely descriptive, locating the music in particular time or place or describing the tone or timbre of the music (West Coast, Bebop, Free Form, Modal, and so forth). This elusive nature, this refusal to be pinned down, this flitting away from rigid hierarchy: the same can be said of much twentieth century poetry. Like jazz musicians, poets often refuse to be labeled. Schools of poetry rise and fall; traditional rhyme and form come in and out of fashion. But poetry remains, just as elusive as jazz, just as hard to pin down. Indeed, to define *poetry*, one may resort to very techniques of poetry: “Well, poetry is like”

This elusive nature makes defining exactly what makes a “jazz poem” all the more difficult. Qualifying the influence of jazz on American poetry is a simple task. As I noted above, journals like *Brilliant Corners* and anthologies like *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* make clear that jazz has had an identifiable influence on American poetry. On the other hand, quantifying the influence of jazz on American poetry is a difficult if not impossible task. Like poetry, jazz itself defies categorization and definition. Forcing it into easily categorizable columns reveals nothing useful about the music itself. The same is true of jazz-influenced poetry, which is not to say that poets and critics have not investigated jazz’s influence on poetry. Poets as diverse as

⁹ Attributed in various places to Louis Armstrong

Melvin Tolson and William Matthews have written extensively about jazz and have written jazz-informed poems, and jazz continues to inform the work of many poets, both American and abroad. Kevin Young, David Kirby, T.J. Anderson, and a host of others have explored the relationship between jazz and American poetry. In the oft-cited “Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding,” Barry Wallenstein argues that poetry has always “craved the company” of music and that “in much modern poetry, especially free verse, the range of [jazz-like] improvisatory gesture is immense” (595). In “Jazz and American Modernism,” Jed Rasula argues that jazz is a “conspicuous feature of modernity,” connecting it with the “intellectual challenges” of what came to be called “Modernism” (157). Like Modernist poetry, modern jazz (post Bebop) moves the focus of art from the audience to the artist, emphasizing the simultaneously personal and objective way(s) that artists engage with and communicate with and through their art¹⁰. Like jazz, poetry is a genre (however nebulous); however, like jazz, poetry is not limited by its milieu. The question of what constitutes a jazz poem, however, remains unanswered. Yusef Komunyakaa, who’s written a large number of jazz-influenced poems, asserts that “a poem doesn’t have to have an overt jazz theme as such in order to have a relationship to jazz” (Komunyakaa and Matthews 645). Thus, a poem about a decidedly pop music artist like Michael Jackson could have been influenced by jazz, if only in rhythm or tone. If subject matter doesn’t mark a poem as jazz-influenced, then what does? What constitutes a jazz poem?

This question frames jazz poetry as a genre, a move that seems at best limiting and at works pedantic. Indeed, perhaps the best way to think about jazz’s influence on poetry is not through genre. Instead, I return to Craig Werner and Ralph Ellison. In “The Charlie Christian

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot argues in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” poetry is an “escape from personality,” paradoxically making a personal art (the lyric poem) something objective, outside of the self, yet another transformation.

Story,” Ellison defines a “true jazz moment,” a definition that Craig Werner extends and expands in *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse*. Ellison argues that jazz is not a mere formula or set of movements. Jazz is a way of thinking, seeing, and understanding the world. The jazz impulse is in many ways about transformation and refusing to accept pre-determined categories. The jazz impulse is also a way of understanding the self’s relationship to the external world. As Ellison argues:

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in a chain of tradition. (234)

As Craig Werner notes, “the jazz impulse focuses on realizing the relational possibilities of the self [and] of expanding consciousness through a process of continual improvisation” (“James Baldwin” 219).

Understanding jazz as an impulse rather than a genre or a theme allows one to understand jazz poetry as poetry of expansion and self-definition. Jazz-influenced poets like Yusef Komunyakaa, Ed Pavlić, T.R. Hummer, and others demonstrate an impulse toward self-definition in the context of tradition. The jazz-influenced poem, then, simultaneously looks forward and backwards, finding its voice in the way that it balances the tradition and the individual talent.

ii. Hayden Carruth's Formal Idea

In "Influences: The Formal Idea of Jazz," poet, critic, and jazz aficionado Hayden Carruth argues that the important thing about his claiming jazz as an influence is jazz's "formal idea." Carruth defines jazz as "spontaneous improvisation within a fixed and simple form" (27). His idea is that a jazz-influenced poet improvises upon a theme, not unlike the way a jazz musician improvises over a chord sequence, working within the key of the song to create something new. The jazz poet might work within the context of a form or of some other rhetorical device like the repetition of a refrain. In any case, Carruth sees the tension between the grounding base and the individual improvisation as imperative, noting that "[f]reedom and discipline are the perennial and universal conditions of artistic creation" (29). The poet, then, occupies this space between freedom and discipline. The poet works with received techniques of prosody to create an individual expression. For Carruth, the artist must lean toward individual expression in order to maintain that connection to tradition. In the act of improvisation, the artist "transcends the objective world . . . and become a free, undetermined sensibility in communion with others" (26). Carruth's theory of improvisation implies that for a poet to have a truly original voice, the poet must embrace an individual lyricism that allows him or her to transcend the poem itself and thus connect with the tradition, those other writers who are "equally free and undetermined."

Importantly, however, Carruth also links improvisation to composition. For Carruth, the act of improvisation *is* composition. The jazz poet's lyrical flights are not grounded by the poem's subjects. Indeed, the lyrical flights *become* the subject. After all, message is medium. But for Carruth, these lyrical flights do not reflect some primitive "spontaneous overflow of power feelings." "Improvisation," Carruth argues, "is the privilege of the master". The

improviser does not forget what he has learned in order to improvise. Instead, improvisation is “composition impelled by knowledgeable spirit” (“The Main Thing about Improvisation” 101).

iv. Improvisation, Voice, and Heteroglossia

Improvisation emerges from a kind of verbal alchemy within the poem. When a poet composes the work, words juxtapose with words; images juxtapose with other images. Lines break and words fall down the page in a rush of energy. However, it would be incorrect to assume that improvisation is merely a spontaneous eruption, some lyrical flight outside of the poet’s control. As Paul F. Berliner notes in *Thinking In Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, the idea that improvisation is merely creation *ex nihilo* is wrong. Berliner echoes Werner’s idea of the jazz impulse, connecting improvisation with a way of thinking and a way of seeing the world. “Characteristically,” Berliner argues, “improvisation perpetually shifts between precomposed musical ideas and those conceived in the moment” (495). Furthermore, those musical ideas conceived in the moment are the products of intense study and devotion to jazz. In order to define himself within the tradition, a player must know that tradition. After all, Berliner notes, “Improvisation depends . . . on thinkers having absorbed a broad base of musical knowledge, including myriad conventions [that allow a player to formulate ideas] logically, cogently, and expressively” (492).

Similarly, in writing a lyric poem, the poet upholds the history and tradition of lyric poetry while creating a new voice within that tradition—and these two things occur simultaneously. As poet and critic T.J. Anderson has observed:

The jazz artist’s vocabulary is made up of a variety of influences, from swing figures and bebop licks to free jazz gestures, and that vocabulary can also extend

to include quotations from popular songs, Western classical music, or songs from other traditions. Thus, the artist weaves a mosaic that simultaneously alludes to different musical traditions while at the same time developing a new one. (17)

How, then, does a jazz poet find his or her place within the tradition? In what way does the poet's individual expression commune with the tradition? The best way to answer these questions is to study the poet's voice.

In *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song*, Charles O. Hartman notes that the poet's voice is the product of both the tradition and the individual. A study of both poetic texts and written musical scores, *Jazz Text* attempts to flesh out the notion of voice, a term that Hartman sees as nebulous and often useless in a critical context but nonetheless a critical question in jazz poetry. As Hartman argues, "Discussions of . . . poetry and jazz use the term *voice* with some claim on its thick implicit knot of meanings, but we seldom tease out any strands" (1). In order to explore the idea of a poet's or musician's voice, Hartman uses Mikhail Bakhtin's description of a novel as a *dialogic* text, a term Bakhtin defines as "heteroglossia," or, in Hartman's understanding, "the bickering of one language with another in the novelist's prose" (38). Hartman disagrees with Bakhtin's notion that the meaning of a poem "must emerge from language as a single intentional whole" (qtd. in Hartman 38). Instead, Hartman sees a poem as a collection of voices, some in tension with others, some clearly original, some the echo of various influences. After several close readings of various jazz and poetic texts including some usual suspects like Michael S. Harper and Miles Davis but also of some not-so-obvious choices like Robert Creeley and Jackson Mac Low, Hartman concludes that "the voice of the poet is both one and many, [comprising] both sound (imaginatively reconstructed) and statement" (136).

iv. Lyric Transpositions

Still, in the end, a reader has only the poet's voice on the page, though that voice may be the product of many different sources. That voice reveals itself not only in the way that a poet sounds when read aloud, but also in the way that poet conceives of subject matter. The musical technique of transposition provides a perfect metaphor in describing how a poet simultaneously expresses his or her individual talent while upholding a commitment to the tradition. When a musician transposes a piece of music, he moves it from one key to another. The melody's intervals remain the same; however, nearly everything else changes. Singers often transpose songs so that the song fits into the singer's range. Sometimes musicians transpose songs to meet the requirements of an instrument. In the simplest sense, to transpose a song is to move it to another key. The following chart shows how a familiar chord progression in the key of C natural is transposed to G major:

Key of C

C Am F G7 C Am F G7

I had a girl. Donna was her name. Since she left me, I've never been the same.

Key of G

G Em C D7 G Em C D7

I had a girl. Donna was her name. Since she left me, I've never been the same.

In this way, a singer or performer can move a song to his or her register, depending upon the singer's ability and his or her range. This chart is, admittedly, simplistic, and it doesn't fully demonstrate the complexities of more formal transposition. Nonetheless, it usefully illuminates the kind of movement I'm discussing. In transposing a song, a musician allows himself to play

that song; however, in transposing the song, the musician does not change the song itself. In other words, the song remains itself yet becomes something else—an expression of both the tradition and the individual talent. One can think, then, of a poet transposing subject matter, bringing the subject to his or her own register or range.

Another kind of lyric transposition occurs for the audience of a poem. In speaking for himself, the poet speaks for others, too, allowing a kind of communal transposition to occur. Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey" demonstrates this movement. A blues-influenced poem, "Ma Rainey" finds its voice in dialect, a significant choice because the poem is invested in how an artist speaks for an audience. The poem's use of dialect connects Ma Rainey in the poem with her audience; Brown's imagined audience is also the speaker of the poem. In the poem's third stanza, the speaker impels Rainey not only to speak (sing) as herself, but also to speak *for* the audience:

O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo' song;
Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong. . . .

Ma Rainey's blues provide a communal catharsis, allowing the artist and the audience to transcend momentarily the fact of their existence as poor, black southerners, just as the performance allows Rainey herself this kind of transcendence. In giving a voice to the audience's pain, Rainey allows this momentary transcendence.

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" provides another useful description of the kind of communal transposition that Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey" enacts. At the end of the story, when the narrator/brother has finally accompanied Sonny to hear Sonny play jazz, the narrator feels a connection that he'd never felt before when Sonny plays a solo:

I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we know only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones on the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky. (863)

Significantly, it is not the music that so moves Sonny's brother, allowing him to see once again his dead family and feel a sense of connection even with his uncle, whom he'd never met. Instead, it's Sonny's blues, Sonny's treatment of the music. In his solo, Sonny lyrically transposes the pain of his own life and the catharsis of playing onto his brother and by extension, the rest of the audience, too, though the reader is not privy to their thoughts. Indeed, Sonny's blues gives the narrator a voice for his pain and his loss. His safety and sanity and happiness lie in the lyric moment of Sonny's solo. Paradoxically, though the "hungry as a tiger" outside world caused Sonny's pain, his finding a voice for that pain allows release¹¹. Sonny's blues provide a lyric transposition of his pain and his catharsis. Sonny simultaneously alludes to tradition in his use of the twelve-bar form, but his singular vision of the song expresses his individual talent. Additionally, in seeing lyric poetry as transposed, one sees not only the import of the poet's voice, but doing so also gives a measure of respect to the subject matter itself. All subjects may

¹¹ As Baldwin himself comments in "The Uses of the Blues," "[T]he acceptance of anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy" (151).

be common or banal, but the individual experience transposes that otherwise common experience, giving it emotional weight and gravitas. It is for this reason that Philip Levine can write of his dead father just as Mark Strand can and both poems be completely different. Reading one of Levine's elegies for his father, "1933," one would never mistake Levine's voice for Strand's, though Strand's "Elegy for My Father" addresses some very similar subject matter. Losing a father is an almost universal experience. Parents die—that much is true. But a person's experience of the death matters more than the mere fact alone. Even in poems which are pure flights of fancy, the subject is transposed to the poet's own voice. Transposition also saves poetry from mere autobiography or biography, allowing a reader to see the not only the actual history undergirding a poem, but also the history of its composition, the rhythms and tropes and metaphors that are the poet's invention, the poet's voice. In books of poems that take on the voices of historical figures or attempt a retelling of history, the poems reveal much more about the poet's voice (and all the attending complexities) than they do about history itself. Like Hugo's triggering subjects, these historical subjects allow a framework for artistic improvisation.

3. The Tradition of Individual Talent: Transposition in Three Jazz Poets

While one could think of any lyric poem as a product of the lyrical transposition that I outlined above, the notion is particularly resonant in jazz and blues-influenced poems. Within these poems, the poet alludes to both improvisation and fixed form: the improvisatory nature of jazz and the 12-bar form of blues. Furthermore, I want to narrow this discussion to poems that explicitly address blues or jazz, for it within this context that lyric transposition becomes the most interesting. In subject-driven poetry, the poet must express an individual vision within the context of something communal; the poet must create something new within the context of

something old. This creation emerges in the way that a poet transposes the subject matter to his or her register, using subject matter as a launching pad, a place to begin, and a fertile ground for improvisation.

i. Michael S. Harper's Mode of Personal Transpositions

Michael S. Harper's *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* demonstrates how subject matter is transposed from historical fact to lyrical vision. While it would be easy to categorize *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* as an elegy for John Coltrane, who died three years after that the book was published, reducing the poems to mere elegy undercuts the lyrical vision of the collection. Certainly, Coltrane stands at the center of the book—a figure who inspires the poet through both his music and his life. Additionally, the book includes Harper's most anthologized poem, the book's title poem. However, Harper's vision extends beyond the facts of Coltrane's life and music. The poems in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* address a variety of subjects, from portraits of jazz musicians to poems dedicated to Harper's family, including a touching elegy for Harper's son. Indeed, the book itself is strengthened by this kind of transposition, moving the locus of pain from the loss of Coltrane to the loss of a family member. In this juxtaposition, Harper suggests that Coltrane's death was not merely a historical loss, but a personal loss, as well. In this way, the personal elegies in the book become a part of the overall dynamic that *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* addresses.

This dynamic is possible through lyric transposition. In his 1977 essay, "Modal Aspects of Black Poetry: 'The First Act of Liberation is to Destroy One's Cage,'" Harper advances his theory of a poetic modality, which he describes as "another word for total environment, where every aspect is dynamic." This modality is intuitive, not rational; it "cannot be arrived at by

comparative analysis or discursive (descriptive) thought” (19). Thus, the connection between Coltrane’s death and the other elegies in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* lies not in explicit connection, but in this modality—a continuum that connects the personal, the historical, and the cultural levels of experience. In jazz music, modal jazz is based upon a mode of notes within a chord progression; in modal jazz, the chord changes do not direct the music the way that they do in, say, bebop. Thus, in modal jazz, improvisation becomes of utmost importance—which is not to say that modal jazz does not use chords. The chords in a modal jazz song provide a framework for improvisation, and when the music transposes, so do the modes. In *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, John Coltrane’s actual death sets the mode of the book; the poems fall within this mode. The poems in the book lyrically transpose, connecting the public and the private and transcending the subject matter by transforming a personal love for jazz, a personal loss of a family member, and the public loss of John Coltrane into a book of elegies that address the larger concerns of how art transforms and how the artist creates. The book’s titular poem addresses this kind of transposition.

The epigraph that begins “Dear John, Dear Coltrane” is a quotation of the same lines chanted in the final movement of Coltrane’s opus *A Love Supreme*. The four-line phrase (“a love supreme”) is mimicked by the bass line the song, and the four line phrase continues throughout the song, with Coltrane and his band playing variations on the theme. In Harper’s poem, the lines place the work firmly in the context of music, specifically rooting the poem in Coltrane’s album¹². However, the poem’s opening lines transpose the poem from being *about* music to addressing not only Coltrane’s childhood in North Carolina, but also the slave auction sites that

¹² Sascha Feinstein notes in *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920’s to the Present* that “the poem is structured like [the album *A Love Supreme*—in four parts” (131).

were common in area, years before Coltrane's birth. Modally, the opening lines connect Coltrane's present suffering with the suffering of previous generations of African-Americans:

Sex fingers toes
in the marketplace
near your father's church
in Hamlet, North Carolina—
witness to this love
in this calm fallow
of these minds,
there is no substitute for pain . . .

The fingers and toes certainly call to mind a "larger, more universal African-American history" to which Coltrane belongs (Feinstein 130); however, the lines also suggest the commercial history to come, how Coltrane's music become something to sell, something to be bought, not unlike his ancestors. And like those same slave ancestors, Coltrane suffers for the enjoyment of others. As Harper's lines insist, "there is no substitute for pain." And this assertion provides another example of lyrical transposition: Coltrane's pain is tied explicitly to his music. He transforms that suffering into music, which the audience can then hear and experience that same release. So, then, do the readers of this poem.

As readers, we are privy not only to Coltrane's suffering—the Coltrane in the poem—but also to Harper's own pain, which is also transformed into art. This modal connection of the historical and the personal aspects of the poem undercuts any reading of the poem that would suggest that it's "about John Coltrane's life." Of course it is, but it's also about how art emerges from pain. And it's also about race. And it's also about jazz. Indeed, it creates a modality within which the poet improvises. This kind of lyrical transposition allows one to see the poem as simultaneously *about* John Coltrane, but also about so much more—within the context of the book.

ii. Tyehimba Jess's De-personalized Modality and Transpositions

Tyehimba Jess's *Leadbelly* historically transposes, allowing the poet to speak through the mouth of the subject in a kind of vocal and historical transposition that reveals not only the subject of the book—Leadbelly—but also much about race and class issues surrounding Leadbelly's career. Unlike Harper in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, Jess in *Leadbelly* takes on the voices of several characters: Leadbelly himself, various members of Leadbelly's family, Leadbelly's guitar, John and Alan Lomax (the musicologists who "discovered" Leadbelly), and one point, Leadbelly's songs. The poet's voice simultaneously disappears and manifests itself in these characters. Camille Dungy suggests that adopting the voice of the blues player allows Jess a "means of self-exploration beyond the confessional." The poems in the book naturally reveal the poet's obsessions and interests, even if these obsessions are revealed through the guise of dramatic monologue. In this way, Jess's poetic voice transposes the life and career of Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter. The poems simultaneously unveil the story of Leadbelly's career and subsequent exploitation while at the same time addressing Jess's own self-examination as a black artist in the 21st century¹³.

Like *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, *Leadbelly* transposes African-American history, allowing the poet to address not only Leadbelly's life, but also the complex and often brutal history of African people in America. Furthermore, as a "blues man," Leadbelly represents a kind of mythic character that more or less upholds the old "noble savage" stereotype. As Jess himself explains:

¹³ It's important to note that nowhere in *Leadbelly* does Jess refer to himself explicitly. My argument is that the fact of his writing the book reveals the self-exploration. In "In Others' Voices: The Millennial Poets and Personae," Camille Dungy notes a growing number of young African American poets who have turned to the personae poem/dramatic monologue as a way of self-examination and self-exploration. In effect, the characters in the book become lenses through which the poet can view himself.

The more I explored, the more I found that [Leadbelly's] personal themes matched certain major themes in African American history: his relationship to The Prison Industrial Complex, The Great Migration, anthropology . . . [it] got more and more interesting. The fact that he was grounded in myth, and on the edges of American folklore was also appealing to me. (Ali 1)

In the book, then, the character Leadbelly is both himself and something else—a real presence based on a real person, but also a manifestation of various themes found in history, which are connected—to use Harper's term—modally. Leadbelly's movement from prison inmate to celebrated blues artist demonstrates one of these themes. His relationship with the noted musicologist John Lomax is another. Certainly, Lomax's recording of Leadbelly preserved the musician for future generations and opened doors for the ex-convict that might otherwise have remained shut. Yet Lomax benefitted from this relationship, as well, furthering his career by publishing Leadbelly's songs. In the dramatic monologue "Ethnographer John Lomax Speaks of His Vocation," Jess writes: "This country needs a Columbus like me" (66). One can easily see the connection: Lomax is a kind of Columbus, exploring and staking claim on a territory over which he has no ownership. Lomax, however, is a manifestation of a kind of institutionalized racism that conceived of "primitives" like Leadbelly as noble savages. Later in the same poem, Lomax describes the "Ivy league lecture halls" where he will reveal "the primitive man's oracle" (66). At the same time, however, because of Alan Lomax, we have access to Leadbelly's music; and by extension, so does Tyehimba Jess. Lomax's unfortunate tendency for racial stereotyping connects with his recording of Leadbelly's music, showing yet another modal connection and transposition.

iii. T.R. Hummer's Tonal Transpositions

For T.R. Hummer, transposition is tonal, a modal connection between the subject matter and themes of his own work with the tone of the music that inspires him. A white poet and academic like T.R. Hummer might be subject to the same charge of exploitation that many have leveled at Alan Lomax; however, Hummer's *The Infinity Sessions* does not exploit black music by attempting to draw credibility from it, not use jazz to further his career ala John Lomax. Instead, jazz becomes a source of creative inspiration from which the poet draws both strength and inspiration. Structured as four "suites" followed by a section entitled "The Chaos Remasterings," *The Infinity Sessions* pays tribute to four jazz artists, Jimmie Lunceford, Adrian Rollini, Mabel Louise "Big Maybelle" Smith, and Herman Poole "Sonny" Blount, better known as Sun Ra. Each of the suites draws its titles from albums by the artists, so that, for instance, "Music for a Nightmare: Suite for Sun Ra" includes titles from the albums *Sun Ra: The Singles* (Evidence Records, 1994) and *Monorails and Satellites* (Evidence Records, 1992). Further emphasizing the connection between the suites and the musicians, Hummer includes factual epigraphs for each suite, revealing some tidbit of biographical information about the musicians. Subverting expectations, however, the poems do not have any explicit connection to the songs that make their titles¹⁴. Instead, Hummer draws from the mood and tones set by the songs, improvising within the context of the song's titles. However, as close as the book is to the language of music, its poems exist on their own plane and succeed as art outside of the musical references.

The book's opening poem entitled "The Infinity Sessions" makes clear, however, that the book is a kind of rerecording or re-imagining of the artists' music. The first line reminds readers

¹⁴ In a review in *Southern Review*, Beth Bachman argues that the book "[interprets] the standards of Lunceford, Rollini, Maybelle, and Sun Ra" in an explicit fashion, using, for instance, Adrian Rollini's "attention to the audience" in that particular suite of poems (463).

that although identifiable jazz musicians provide the context for the book, we are in a “sealed room.” The poem takes place in an imagined recording studio, somewhere outside of space and time, as removed from and as close to actual music as the poems in the book are. In the studio, a microphone hangs from “nothing visible,” requiring an “act of faith to imagine/The equipment it portends,” foreshadowing the way that Hummer uses song titles, divorced from their original context. A few lines later, an “Engineer” might or might not signal “the souls” or “the players” to enter the studio. One can easily read “the Engineer” as a kind of poet figure, both in charge of the poem but at the mercy of its mysteries, recording the music of “the souls” yet not in charge of what occurs. Indeed, even the musicians themselves seem hesitant: “Nobody,” the poem tells us, “wants to call/The song.” But as though compelled by some mysterious force beyond their control, they do begin the session. A “seraphic reel” records what Hummer describes as “the great remastering: variations in the key of pain” (1-2). As “remasterings,” the poems, however, do not merely re-record the songs that the jazz musicians played. Instead, the poems transpose tonally.

In the transposition of tone, the poems attempt to capture something that is neither specific nor chartable. How a person hears a piece of music is not rational. Certainly, a person can hear the same chord progression and same melody as the person next to him or her; but the experience of that music belongs to that person alone. In essence, Hummer’s poems comment on how each person responds individually to art; and each person responds to that music in his or her own context, a context that may be public or private. In “Living with Music,” Ralph Ellison remembers a grade school incident that highlights this matter:

Once during a third-grade music appreciation class a friend of mine insisted that it was a large green snake he saw swimming down a quiet brook instead of the

snowy bird the teacher felt that Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* should evoke. The rest of us sat there and lied like little black, brown and yellow Trojans about that swan, but our stalwart classmate held firm to his snake. In the end he got himself spanked and reduced the teacher to tears, but truth, reality and our environment were redeemed. For we were all familiar with snakes, while a swan was simply something the Ugly Duckling grew up to be. (191)

As Ellison's narrative reveals, we know music and art only in the context of our experience. Had the children in the tale known swans in their environments, they might have reacted as the teacher wanted and expected. What's important to note, however, is that teacher thought that child's response to *Carnival of the Animals* was wrong and misguided. The teacher wanted the child to experience and conceive of the music exactly as the teacher had, an impossible feat. For even if the child and the composer shared similar backgrounds, the swan remain both the composer's swan *and* the child's swan. Further, in this synthesis, they become something new. In a similar way, the poems in *The Infinity Sessions* remain both tributes inspired by the music of Hummer's jazz heroes, but they also exist on the poet's own imaginative plane, transposed tonally to a new key, one in the poet's own register.

Brackish

The manuscript that follows this introduction is a book of poems collectively entitled *Brackish*. The word *brackish* denotes a mixture of fresh and salt water. Brackish water is both fresh and salt and neither; it's too salty for human consumption, but it lacks the salinity of sea water. In the combination, however, it retains elements of both fresh and salt water. In other

words, brackish water has elements of both sea water and fresh water, but it is neither. I find this fact an extremely useful metaphor in describing not only my poems, but also my poetics.

Like the jazz-influenced poets and critics that I've discussed above, I occupy that tenuous place between the tradition and the individual talent. Perhaps a better metaphor would be that I stand at the crossroads of tradition and the individual talent, and I try very hard to manifest both. A poet I return to time and again for inspiration and instruction, Yusef Komunyakaa, notes this attempt to be in both places at once:

[Many poems] seem to exist in two or more places simultaneously, and a narrator or a speaker is forced to negotiate multiple worlds. There is accrued bravery here. It is this cultural dualism, this ability to be two places at once, to be a shape-changer, that strengthens the creative quest. ("Crossroads")

I am, then, as Komunyakaa points out, a shape-changer, simultaneously a poet driven by a need to write about the Gulf Coast but also a poet deeply invested in craft and the poetic tradition of the lyric poem.

While my poems begin with the Gulf Coast, I believe that like the kind of jazz-influenced work that I've discussed above, they transcend their subject matter, as well. The term "regional writer" is often an epithet, used to dismiss writers whose work addresses only local issues and only local phenomena. However, just because a writer writes about one particular region doesn't make him or her a regionalist. If that's the case, then William Faulkner is a regionalist—and so are Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, and Flannery O'Connor. My work addresses local concerns, certainly; however, my work also addresses a plethora of other issues, subjects and concerns that have always been at the core of my writing. In particular, class issues are vitally important to my poetry. Growing up with two working-class parents who often resorted to check floating and

government programs like food stamps, I was keenly aware of the economic divide between my family and some of the other families around us. This awareness became a kind of obsession for me. Indeed, I grew up seeing the world as two parts: the haves and the have-nots. To this day, though I am firmly middle-class, a college professor with a dog, a wife, and a son, and a home owner to boot, I struggle with a fierce, deep-seated classism. This obsession with class reveals itself sometimes as a direct subject in a poem. More often, however, this class concern appears as tertiary detail, an undergirding concern on top of which the rest of the poem scaffolds.

Modally, however, this connection between class and region and my own personal experience is made explicit. Like Michael S. Harper's *Dear John, Dear Coltrane, Brackish* contains poems about music and musicians as well as more personal poems about my experiences on the Gulf Coast. When I first read Harper's essay about modal poetry, I mistakenly assumed he addressed only his experiences—and by extension, only African-American experiences. However, now, I understand modality as a way of connecting. Modality functions in my poetry, too, just as it does in Harper's poetry. When I reread my work, I see the modal connections between my experiences and, say, the history of the Gulf Coast region of Florida. Additionally, I see the connection between my father's experiences and my own. My father figures prominently in the book, and my reading of Michael S. Harper provided me a model with how to address his presence therein.

Divided into three sections, *Brackish* moves from childhood to adulthood. The first section of the book is entitled "The Butcher's Son." The section contains many autobiographical lyrics about my father, poems that I wrote in many ways as an attempt to understand my father, who died when I was 15 years old. Fittingly, then, this section is filled with poems that are anchored in a child's or adolescent's sensibilities. None of the poems are persona

pieces/dramatic monologues; however, they poems do often position the speakers as children. Fitting, the section begins with a prose poem entitled simply “Childhood.” Written as flashes of images, the poem is based on a childhood memory of mine: awaking early to the smell of my father’s cigarettes and coffee. However, “Childhood” is not a mere recollection of this memory. Instead, in it, I try to lay out the obsessions that spun around in my head during those days: fear of the outside world, fear of my father’s death, fear of nuclear war, and the overall unnamable fear that I experienced. In titling the poem “Childhood,” however, I am saying something *all* childhood, however. The tragedy of being a child is that one does not stay a child; that time period is both beautiful and terrible precisely because it is ephemeral.

The second section of the book is entitled “A Song inside a Song inside a Song.” The poems in this section connect most explicitly with the jazz-themed criticism and poetry that I discuss in my apologia. The section’s title is drawn from one of my own poems, “Transposition,” a poem from which I drew the idea for my critical stance, as well. The poem is explicitly about my discovery of my father’s music, the 1950 and 1960s artists that he loved: Elvis Presley, Sam Cooke, and Roy Orbison. However, the poem also addresses my own adopting of the music, and by extension, my attempt to understand my father and the world from which he emerged. Because my father died when I was 15 years old, I’ve spent a good portion of my life trying to understand my self in the context of his death. So, I see myself as twice removed from him: by his death and by his music. I’m left creating my own song—the “song inside a song inside a song” in the poem’s final lines. The rest of poems in the section

The book’s final section, “Letter from North Florida,” is a long poem in which I try to explore the deeply conflicted feelings that I have about North Florida. Growing up on the coast, I hated living there. No place seemed more isolate, no place more of a cultural wasteland. I

wanted nothing more than to drive as far north as I possibly could and settle my life elsewhere. However, I didn't leave. I spent my college years in Pensacola, barely a three hour drive from my hometown. Even when I moved to Georgia in 2002 to take a teaching position at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, I found myself no more than a four hour drive from the Gulf Coast. As I've grown older, I'd developed an appreciation for the beauty of the Gulf Coast and a deep respect for the Gulf of Mexico. I try to address this complex relationship that I have with my roots in "Letter from North Florida." The title is important: the poem is a letter "from" North Florida in two ways. In the most obvious way, the setting of the poem is on the Gulf Coast; so, it's clearly a letter from North Florida. In another more complex sense, however, it's from the region because I'm from the region. In this sense, I suppose my work embodies one of the oldest themes in the study of southern literature: the connection between the land the people who inhabit it.

My poetic voice emerges from my literal past as well as the more figurate past of the lyric tradition. In this way, my voice is as brackish as the water to which I allude. The poems in *Brackish* mix together personal experience, philosophical questioning, a love for music, and hundreds of other concerns and themes. Brackish water is in the end unpalatable to the human body, tainted as it is by salt water. It retains too much salt for human consumption. But within that salt is a hint of life, freshness that, though subsumed, exists just the same.

BRACKISH

1.

The Butcher's Son

*If he feels the elusive calm
his father spoke of and searched
for all his short life, there's
no way of telling, for now he's
laughing among them, older men
and kids. He's saying, "Damn,
we've got it made." He's
lighting up or chewing with
the others, thousands of miles
from their forgotten homes, each
and every one his father's son.*

—Philip Levine

Childhood

From my bed, I hear footsteps.

•

Beyond the jalousie windows, something hefts in the dark, something weighty, an oiled shadow. August-dried grass crunches. Unseen hands probe seal & siding. My heart seizes at the backdoor latch.

•

My father's snores echo down the dark hallway. Cigarette smoke yellows the beige tiles. His smell is heavy.

•

I imagine a shambling mass of parts: human hands clasping ankles, mouths drooling red, thighs wedged between shoulder blades. Walks—no, tumbles—it tumbles, dribbling words from open wounds.

•

From my back window, I can see the paper mill smoke stacks. Some nights, they are missiles. Some nights, the smoke unfolds in mushroom blossoms.

•

Something speaks from the hallways, a voice ribboned in the ceiling fan's hiss.

•

My father awakes at 5:00 each morning. His leaves coffee drops on the kitchen table. His fingers mark the newspaper comics.

•

I wake up & want to scream, but my father has to work tomorrow.

•

Someone is in the backyard: someone faceless, a voice like eastern thunderheads, like ink thrown on white paper.

-

Something speaks in the roar of paper machines.

-

My room reeks: the factory-churned sulfur, pine wood mulch, the ever-stinking mill.

Croker Sack Communion

Down dirt roads, by damp ditches
half-filled with stagnant water
we drive & finally arrive:
a rented cabin by a muddy creek,
a fish camp for a week of angling.
My father never spoke when we cast
lines into green water or raised
an eyebrow when a plug bobbed,
dancing like fist stirring the air.
occasionally pulling a shell cracker
or striped bream from the line, we
stored them in a croker sack, hung
from a cypress root down into living
water that kept the fish alive until
we split them open & threw entrails
back into the river. He read scripture
aloud at night, when I lay awake
in a shroud of sweat-soaked sheets
that reeked like funeral dressing.
He prayed in a voice deep like the earth
that clung to my jeans after a day
wading through swamp water.
Lord Jesus, Most Gracious Heavenly Father,
Light of Light, Very God of Very God,
his voice a cadence of naming, the calling
of spirit. The cabin didn't change
to an ethereal white. No transcendence.
no sudden lucidity. Only lying
awake, hearing my father's voice
plumb silence, like a boy stabbing
a stick into deep mud, rooting crawfish.

Things Unseen

At my father's grave, I've never knelt,
 never said a prayer, never written a letter
 & burned it to send smoke spirals to

a world of spirit. Never heard his voice
 whisper secrets of existence.
 Never felt the hand of the Holy Ghost

push into my chest, fingers
 through flesh, to grab what's certain:
 a still-beating heart that pumps the blood

that moves the hands that do not clasp
 when I do manage a prayer, that nods
 the head drowsing into dreams, half-

finished words still shaped on my lips,
 dried & crusted by morning. Still, when sleep
 takes me & I dream, I never see

my father in one of those blue-gray
 visions of the dead—only images return:
 a broken string on a Gibson acoustic,

the faded blue of a 1974 Buick,
 the shining grease that used to part his hair,
 the oiled leather of a baseball glove,

secreted away in the top of a closet I never open.

The Butcher's Son

The butcher's son stays out late because the butcher's dead—
five years tonight.

At the Lighthouse, he sips draft Bud, pulls deep drags
from an unfiltered Camel

between bratwurst fingers, though he doesn't smoke.
(His father smoked:

Always smelled like a slaughterhouse.) All night, regulars clasp
the son's shoulder,

Whisper memories in smoke. Everyone has a story
about the butcher.

*Your dad was a crazy son of a bitch, put a cherry bomb in the meat cooler
one time. He laughed when we called*

the cops. says a loose mass of flesh stretched taut over bones
that snap with each clipped word.

A fat bald man laughs a story in a blue haze: *Your old man
used to draw pictures of everyone,*

Used to hang 'em by the coffee pot down at the store. The bartender
pulls more foamed mugs.

The Braves lose on TV. *They always lose* the son thinks,
remembers Tuesday night games,

the butcher chugging Budweiser as Dale Murphy whiffed
a third strike. The butcher's son

doesn't tell the story of his own broken front tooth,
or the chopping block of the butcher's fist.

He flicks ashes, remembers drawings of himself,
fat-headed, fat-lipped.

*You got to toughen up, boy. This world don't like crybabies.
They'll cut you up.*

Then, his father's sharp staccato laugh, the bone-knife teeth.
Then, the old man's coffin

like a side of beef, cold, solid. *You're cut from the same carcass,*
the bartender says, offers a free round.

The butcher's son opens his mouth.
His stripped words are bloody bones.

Home Late, My Father

Stands in a halo of orange porch light,
moths around his head in a cigarette haze.

He coughs & I hear him, inside, wrapped
in a sheet, sweating, the echoes

of my parents' knock-down-drag out
reverberating in the ceiling tiles.

His angry *I'm going for a goddamned beer.*
Her throat-hitched sobs.

My father

lingers in the darkness, smoking.

Sometimes, childhood is only fear:

tomorrow less promise than threat—
my father, drunk again, watching CNN,

screaming about communists & Reagan.
Red & blue missiles flicker on screen.

My father torqueing his fist
around my brother's arm, yanking
him into the backyard, throwing
a rake.

Do the goddamned yard.

My father after work, sitting
at the kitchen table, unable to move,
gout deep in the grooves of his knees,
butcher market blood on his white shirt.

What did I know of the cancers
blossoming in his heart like tiny black
kisses? I had to imagine him
opening the door, haunting the hall,
Stopping at my room.

Awake,

I feigned sleep & smelled tobacco fingers
smoothing my eyes, holding them shut.

Fishing the Bridge

Pensacola, Florida

Not many tonight: a few old men
& young boys hang lines over the edge,
light cigarettes in cupped hands.

October dark, humid, a burnt-trash
hint of Autumn preserved in the sea's salted wind.
Clouds refract moonlight, a fish belly glow.

on the abandoned bridge, my brother & I
cast snatch hooks, glowing lures fish strike
on instinct. We talk about this late heat,

sip Miller Light, keep our words weightless:
the mill's shut-down, next season's
defensive line. We don't mention

a mildew-streaked white house. A father
dead ten years. Joe's single words
& nods. I start *Do you remember when*
but trail into a whisper at my brother's

shush. *Listen.* Far beneath, gray water
slaps concrete pylons & Joe shrugs.

Thought I heard one jump.

His reel bows then & the graphite doubles.
Joe grunts & sets feet against bridge rail.

Fatal splashes far below, where channel lights flicker
& flash: a fist-headed drum turns

in dark water. I imagine the hook
deep in its throat, the black blood.
The rod whips & line slacks. Joe stares down

into the darkness. *I can't see anything* he says.

How to Shuck an Oyster

Against intuition: turn hinge toward palm.
Insert blade where no crevice exists.
Believe the shell will open.
Salt will soak your steel wool glove.
Believe the blunt blade will split
The still-living mollusk in your hand.
Sit outside in November chill,
listen to your brother's words,
the timbre & tone. Don't tell him
his mouth moves just like your father's.
Don't mention the trailed-off whispers,
clipped syllables drawn from
his cinched croker-sack jowl.
Drink too much beer; stomp your feet.
Complain about the coastal cold,
the razor wind coming off the bay.
Dare him to eat one out of the shell.
Suck one down yourself, feel the freeze
seize your throat. Pretend you know him:
your brother who never speaks of his dead
father, this boy with sandstone eyes
& oyster-shell hands, calcite palms
that didn't run over your father's
coffin that January. Pretend you forgave him.
Talk about the easy things: fishing,
a graphite rod spinning frozen shrimp
into a white-capped sea, the line's buzz
as a speck takes the bait, dives deep,
bows the rod. Don't talk about your
brother's hate of your father, the ghost
bruises you still see on brother's face,
the sick crack of bone you remember,
the saltwater silence that preserved
you all on the way to the hospital.
Plunge a hand into burlap darkness:
grab another calcium-caked shell.
Pry with all your strength. So much mud
between the cracks. So much salt.

My Father, Fishing

Dawn knives through cypress & pine,
casts slatted shadows over Depot Creek.

He tightlines.

I eye a cork.

He draws the line, sways it,
lets hook & worm fall back
in the dark water. My cork lies

& drifts, no twitch.

We don't talk.

His grunt-glower silences me:

I'll scare the fish. My voice might
Scatter channel cat or bream.
But nothing pulls our lines.

He lights another cigarette & I
picture the bit-shot lead, the thrice-tied

sickle-curve of a barbed hook,
dead cricket plumbing the creek
bottom's mud.

Twelve years old,
I know my father only in shadows
before work—the sulfur stench
of a lit match. Cigarette fumes.
Ashes flecking the Formica kitchen table.

These quiet trips to the water's edge.

He fishes in silence & I mimic

him in the morning light, my line
dropped into the darkness.

Bottom Fishing

Between saw grass & cattails I cast a line
in the shadow of a live oak's overhang,

try to picture the muddy creek's depth:

the brown strands of wilted weed,
lost jigs & beetle spinners tangled
in cypress drifts—

 a fat-headed water
moccasin sliding by my baited hook.

I jiggle the pole, dance the dead
cricket & hope a passing bream
takes the lie so I can claim another victory
that I'll only throw back.

 But I can't see
past the opaque surface, can't cipher the way
a channel cat sometimes bumps the bait
& leaves it alone or half gone.

 I plumb
the creek's bottom with baited
questions & often come home empty
handed, bait gone, swallowed in darkness.

Cleaning Fish

My father scales mullet. A flat-edged
knife flakes off slate shards
that stick to his hands, forearms, & hair.

June heat melts shadows on the back porch,
Where I hold a hose he grabs to wash away
black & pink tangles of guts. He hooks

His thumb in & scours the cavity clean.
We bury viscera in the alley beneath soft black
Wheel wells. Later, cats squall as they fight

Over the death we've secreted away here,
between our rented home & a paint-flecked
boarding house where an old man lives,

who spends Sunday afternoons tinkering
a backyard full of junk: a yellow bus
with blacked-out letters, an airboat without

a propeller. *Let's go* my father says, turning
toward home. He runs a hand through thin
hair & scales catch the wind, hang in the air.

To the Bone, or What My Father Said about His Brother

He combed his hair just like Bill Haley,
spit curls. All grease. Shined like a griddle
after pancakes. His fists were butcher blocks,
carved from years punching clocks,
sharpening blades, feeding the bandsaw's
scream. You know those movies
about toughs? The ones with young men
with too much time & too little money,
who hang out behind abandoned quick stops,
smoke cigarettes, & drink beers they pop
with pocket knives? Your uncle rolled
Marlboros up his t-shirt sleeves & told
my daddy where he could shove that damn
butcher's market. He spent a year on
an aircraft carrier, somewhere off Korea,
maybe Japan, some other world I never
knew. When he came home, I cut him
off when asked about the market,
how long I planned on shaving rich folk's
skirt steaks & chicken breasts. How long
I wanted to come home stinking, bloodied
head to toe. Once, when we were kids,
he dared me to jump into the Seminole.
Fifth day of January. Bark busted
on the trees overnight. Mamma and Daddy
up the road at a hog killing. I dove
right in & felt my breath cut out my
throat. He pulled me out, laid me
on a stump like a piece of meat.
Said he didn't think I'd do it. Didn't
know how stupid I was, how his words
cut deep into me, straight to the bone.

At Day's End

My father slouches toward sleep,
stinking of the butcher's market,
still splattered with a day's worth of blood.
A clenched Pall Mall unweaves in smoke.
Grilled cheese sandwiches congeal,
left over on the kitchen table.
TV's blue light flickers on closed
curtains & plays across his face,
the day's disasters tattooing
his cragged brow: trouble
in the Middle East. Arms race.
Iran-Contra. The day's doom
dissected on the evening news.
Reagan & Gorbachev spar in dueling
split screen. My father shakes
his head & shudders: a nuclear dream—
a cloud blossoms in black & red:
the same vision draws him from bed
each night. He haunts the house,
a refugee in darkness, flipping
through bills: overdue, past due,
collections & credit card offers.
By six a.m., an empty coffee cup
brims with darkness. My father is alone.

Payday

My father doesn't empty his pockets:
change jingles all evening,
silver & copper swirl lint, hair,
some roux of palm sweat & grime.
Stripped of his butcher's white,
he still stinks of steaks & blood.
He lights a Winston with work-hard
hands, yellow finger tips, red knuckles.
pops a beer, leaves gray-green
prints in the sweat. Money green.
I imagine him breaking a five
On the way home, a pack of smokes,
a six of Bud. The bored cashier
doesn't even count back the change.
My father drops it in his pocket,
limps to the car, body spent,
broken into nickles & pennies,
coins so small no one stoops to grab.

Factory Boy

Caught in the rain,
 a boy boards
a school bus, book bag soaked,

heavy.

 Trails sopped footprints
& stares out a tiny window

at the paper mill's grained shadow.

Somewhere in the steel, his father
 feeds pulpwood machines,

& drinks the black smoke rising

in twisted hieroglyphs.

 The bus roars,
jerks, throws the boy forward.

 Someone laughs.
Throws a balled-up wad of paper.

It could be
 his father's fist
balled beside him.
 It could be

a clenched throat,
 a tightened
stomach, a porch light that gleams

till 11:00 when the old man finishes

second shift & comes home.
Stink of paper & ammonia.

The boy reaches
 for the paper, holds

till it soaks & his palms go black.

After School, I Never Walked Home

I never rode a bike. My mother arrived
in a backfiring blue station wagon, roof rusted
in pocked spots, gray interior cracked

& split. A stink of menthol & Coca Cola.
Said no child of hers would ever ride
a yellow dog. Some kids walked, poster-children

(literally, like the smiling students on classroom
wall calendars). We rode in silence. Past the gasoline-
choked line of yellow-black busses, faces

plastered to the windows, a line of mouths, eyes.
Past the student parking lot, where some
loitered & revved pick-ups & t-tops.

We drove toward the east side, where trailer parks
squatted in afternoon heat & asphalt
gave way to oyster shell & sand.

Paper mill smoke settled in the pines.
She dropped me, drove to work, & the streets
Swelled with shadows as busses drove by,

Children I hardly knew, familiar faces
my mother called *them* & I called *we*.

Laying on Hands

Cool & dry, my mother's hands
wrapped my forehead
& she pressed, sealed

flesh to flesh. The headache
throbbed to a numbed echo
in the back of my mind, forgotten.

I imagined the method some
backwoods home-cure
culled from her South Georgia

childhood, cousin to divining rods
talking the fire out of bee stings.

So when my brother came home
from school & said his head
felt like a tight fist, I laid
hands on his forehead

& imagined the ache
soothed—heat drained
from a black iron skillet,
cooling embers of last night's fire.

What are you doing? he said
& squirmed away, fearing perhaps
an older brother's spit or bruise.

Hush my mother said. *He's praying.*

Testament

for Benjamin

Let *body* be a word. Burn
my books & swallow the ashes

with bourbon. Chant my name
aloud & imagine my face

scarred by the Gulf's salt scour.
Read the Book of Guilt

aloud, linger over difficult
passages—enjoy the paradoxes.

Leave quandaries & questions
to theologians. Let them parse

the wind. Let them diagram God
with doctrine & flow charts,

& measure a needle's diameter.
Ignore the ink that spills

from my mouth. Focus on
my mouth, instead, the word

shapes it makes. Remember
these hands, most of all,

the lines that score my palms,
the fingers that trail dust.

The Fisherman's Son at the Conference

Everyone here has a book.
They say *ennui* & *facile*,

ostentatious & *corollary*.
No one sees me though I must

Throb like a hammer-struck thumb.
Thread through the crowd

like the wrong end of a needle—
all eye, no point, nothing to stitch

the distance between hip waders
& pressed slacks. My father called

me foolish when, a child, I wouldn't
wade hip-deep into St. Joseph's Bay,

afraid of the stingray's barb,
the unseen row of razor teeth—

blood & salt bubbling the sea.
He said there's nothing to fear

as long as you drag your feet
& push with your toes.

He said *cast net*. He said *shrimper*
& *high tide, low tide*.

So what's the difference
between bait & fisherman?

Some nights, I feel a throat-fed
hook piercing my chest & still

smell the cannery's fish stench.
Even my books dampen on the shelf.

Somewhere inside me, a Sargasso—
stagnant, silent. So many panels

here, so many signings. Books, papers,
professors. They can smell my salt.

If I open my mouth, I'll drown everyone.

2.

A Song inside a Song inside a Song

*If I don't see you no more in this world
see you in the next one. Don't be late.*

—Jimi Hendrix

Deep, Like Blood

Sundays, Broward Haynes staggered
in the Piggly Wiggly, bought a bottle
of orange juice, sat on a parking stop
in the afternoon fade. Said he was 39,
a Christian man, could drink
any of us boys under the pulpit,
with communion wine or Schlitz,
showed us two fingers he said he split
when he built Hathaway Bridge over
St. Andrews Bay, where he dropped
quarters just to see them twirl & shine
in salted moonlight. Broward Haynes
said God held a key & a dust tray just
the other side of the sky, said Jesus
talked to him as he slept. *What's he say,
Broward? Says this world's as tired as I am,
& half as fucked up.* Said he was half-
Cherokee, half-Scot, an Appalachian
hill-stomper who wound up in North Florida
*Cause shit obeys the laws of gravity, gents,
flows down, settles in a cesspool—you call
that an ocean?* He flicked a burned butt
at the Gulf of Mexico, breathed last night's
Thunderbird & Old Crow. He looked up:
*Ain't nothing but a toilet bowl God's waiting
to flush. Read the Book, gents, it'll tell you all.*
We filched him Kools, slid him snack cakes
from damaged boxes of Little Debbies,
traded shifts talking with him & bagging
groceries as the sun went down. One night,
he said the sky reminded him of blood.
But Broward, we said, the sky's blue; blood's red.
a steel-wool beard scoured his jaw, made
his mouth seem like the drain at the center
of a butcher's market. *It ain't the color* he said.

Mending a Net

Outside, an old man who might have been
a prophet mended a net & whistled
something tuneless & familiar.

Across the road in the paint-flecked house,
old women sipped coffee, gossiped
about heathens & church attendance.

The old man knew the voices—Mary Lambert, Eunice Haddock,
Abigail Crane, the door-to-door breakfast committee
at Good Shepherd Baptist. They talked Easter,

a Spring Festival to bring lost souls home.
Words sliced through the screened porch.
Gulls floated on wind blown

in from St. Joseph's Bay, white, hard-edged
scars in a calcium sky.
Down the oyster-shell road, by palm scrubs

& slash pines, ditches stood stagnant, mosquitoes hovered,
In thick black clouds. Rain had been falling
for weeks; the old man's knees became his almanac.

His knuckles throbbed—a red, pulsing ache.
The old women talked in blue, quilted voices,
words like the interweaving of a cast net

or maybe like the weights that pull it down,
the cinch that pulls mullet & trout in close
before the fisherman draws sieve from water.

Someone may have mentioned his name, gestured with a chipped cup lip,
but syllables knotted together
& the old man heard only wind.

The net lay finished, pooled at his feet.
Behind him: a wooden box of nets to be mended.
Above, gulls & gray could mean something

if he looked, if he took the moment to decipher
what might not be a message. But the wind cut
grooves in his skin. His fingers had gone numb.

Polly

Late again. Shift begins
at 4:00 p.m., words in her mind,
community college vocab:

Metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche.
New words—new worlds—lines
of black on white paper,

like the grocery line of Campbell's soup
& Meritta bread, Stove Top Stuffing
& pork chops half off.

Lately, the old coupon clippers
resemble Emily Dickinson
& Polly imagines

the Moth of Amherst with a dash-
scored grocery list, shuffling
down aisles of words,

trailing bobolinks & nobodies.
Stock boys smile & flirt, *Polly want*
A cracker? they cackle.

She scans another frozen dinner,
drops the ice & slime
in a plastic bag. Tomorrow,

in Am lit, a test of words & quotations.
Yes, she says. *Polly want a cracker*
& tries to parse the line,

Tease out the meaning, scan her life.

Pants on Fire

Everyone knew Benny lied:
wove tales & spun words
like an poet: less lie, more metaphor.

He never got lost in the Fingers,
never shot fifteen dove with a single blast,
never drove into Panther Swamp

on his daddy's '72 Indian,
& never caught a Mako off Cape San Blas.
He sacked groceries at Piggly Wiggly,

carried brown bags to hot cars,
smoked Winstons in the alley,
sipped Cokes & stacked pallets.

Said one day he'd join the Marines,
see the world, find himself
deep in Africa, some shaman's protégé,

smoke unweaving from a lip-clenched pipe.
Benny told us he already knew
the secret words, the key to unlock worlds.

Knew how to cipher the crow's black
laugh, how to read the midnight
sky, the cloud's striated sine,

St. Joseph Bay's milky cosine.
We knew his trailer, his black & tan Ford,
the tilt-back half-step he swaggered,

his Redman baseball cap,
his Metallica & Megadeth t-shirts.
No one believed him, it's true.

But we urged him *Tell us about . . .*
& the tales spooled from his mouth
like paper, pristine, blank, wordless.

Off the Pier: Crash, In Flight

A dare: feet paddle open air,
arms wave Frampton
windmills and Natural

Light sloshes his belly.
Braves cap backwards,
he is a flume of flannel

falling into night's humid
hands; the bay's wet promise
opens in a gray-green scream.

Silhouetted in Dodge & Ford
headlights, Crash descends,
silent for once, a babble-

mouthed boy with a bowl cut,
buck teeth, a horizon-wide
grin that split his face

like ice suddenly cracking
on a frozen lake. We stole
beer together once: walked

into a Circle K and met
two city cops on our way
out the door, two quarts

& a pack of Debbie Cakes
stuffed in our shorts.
My father shook his head,

said, "You goddamned idiot."
Crash's dad slammed
the boy's head into the Ford's

slick steel. Crash squalled
& fought & bore the brunt
of cigarette-scarred knuckles

& his father's half-pint breath.
I hated my father for his words.
I hated the blue black on Crash's arms.

Crash should freeze above
The bay, always stay that way,
timeless, an old photograph

or a time bomb. He explodes
the surface. His body bursts
in a thousand storm gray shards.

To Sparky

You drew our childhoods
in black & white: round head,
black circle of mouth,
security blanket towed

behind philosophizing boy.
When Schroeder played piano,
musical notes took tangible form,
spilled from the staff sheet,

so much ink sacrificed to art.
I found my voice in your plain
existential angst, woe-is-me,
football-freefall fool whose name

became the signifier for faults
bleeding through my steaming
morning mirror: Charlie Brown.
He never aged—already bald,

he raged against himself more
than a gray slab of sky etched
from the silence of an empty page.
You knew dusk better than all

of us, the light and dark blending
to a no-color in a no-place
where shadows drain from fallen
leaves & chimney smoke smells

so like home. *Schulz* you
signed every image to the end,
when your right hand's quisling
quaver blurred the page

& made the children all dance.

Changing Strings: *Ars Poetica*

First, let the old strings die.
Let the sound fade to cold
dull hum. Only then.

Unwind & listen. Treble slacks
to bass then to silence.
Celebrate the dead tones,

the music once summoned.
Lay them aside, these spent
wraps of nickel & brass.

Open a new set & feel
the cold between your fingers,
the song's prenatal pulse,

music waiting to be born.

My Father is Tuning his Guitar

He twangs & twists, wraps his hulking bulk
around the six-string's strained neck. He hums,

searches for a perfect "E," & twists tuners,
head cocked like the RCA dog.

He can't play well, knows only one
progression—the first, the minor sixth,

fourth & fifth, every song the key of C.
He can sing Roy Orbison, Elvis, Hank.

I can't touch his guitar. I always knock out
the tune, (he says) so I listen. Some nights,

his voice drifts through the house like time
or wind & he rough strums, strains to hear

a flat or sharp ring in the notes' communion.
He plays hard, rakes pick over brass-wound

strings, grinds calloused fingers between
scalped frets. The strings always flatten

& he stops mid-verse or half-chorus, cradles
six strings over his knee, & sings to tame

the strings. I try to match his hummed
tones, tune my voice to his whisper.

Transposition

My father always played the same chords—
three-note Mel Bay triads
that jangled with his palsied

strum. A voice like an empty jar of jelly,
his baritone scraped the bottom
while fat fingers framed the song.

Old names: Sam Cooke, Elvis Presley,
black-and-white phonograph photographs
stacked in a hidden milk crate,

a secret I found between the folds of this big man's
clothes, shoulder-tight jackets he wore
only to funerals & weddings:

Dull-edged LPs, scratched black 33s
& 45s in single sleeves, a matchbox
full of needles & spindle inserts.

He ignored symphonic fills, eschewed
orchestra for a single range
despite the song: Key of C.

Years later, I cradled a student's 12-fret,
twisted my fingers & sculpted notes,
picked an arpeggio of half-

remembered chords, howled a gumbo of hum-
song & mumbled lyrics,
& stomped my feet to a rhythm

he taught me: a record-spun poem transposed
to a new key beyond the treble clef's harmony—
a song inside a song inside a song.

The Notes You Don't Play

Because Stevie Ray played one
 & before him, Jimi Hendrix,
who coaxed napalm & machine gun
 chatter from his cream-colored
sixer & because Buddy Guy still
 runs fingers down his polka-dot
black body, because Buddy Holly
 thundered Texas rock & shuffle,
I yearned for a Fender Stratocaster,
 dreamed fevered visions of three pick-ups
& a maple sunburst top. Imagined
 my fingers sieving blues from
the fretboard's railroad trestle,
 the song calling up Old Scratch
at the Crossroads, who'd offer me
 lightning fingers for the fine gift
of my virgin soul. After school,
 I walked Leitz Music's bass
& six-string-crowded aisles,
 wondering what I'd name her—
always *her*: B.B. King's Lucille,
 Stevie Ray Vaughan's Lenny—
how she'd whisper her name in flattened fifths,
 but too afraid to touch the wares.
Sometimes, in a brave fit, I plugged one
 in to a Fender Reverb & fingered
a low "E," trilled the second fret,
 heard "Voodoo Chile" somewhere
deep inside my head. Mostly,
 I dreamed, the same way
I watched April Carpenter
 during second lunch, too afraid
to ask her to the prom, scared
 of what would happen if she said *Yes*.

Drinking Beer

Usually, Chris bought the six-pack,
goatee & sly grin fooling the Junior Store
clerk. It tasted like my father

smelled: sour, somehow sweaty,
some strange grit I wanted spit
but I held the foam between teeth & lips

like words. We talked shit,
said we hated our fathers, said we hated
this old town, shot middle fingers at the Gulf.

Somebody said a hurricane could wipe
this place off a map, peninsula be damned.
Vince could drink 10, 12

easy, J more. Chris drank his 4.
I drank 2 & wandered down by the beach,
bonfire blazing behind me, my friends'

silhouettes stretching like long dark tongues
lapping the night. My father saved me
from drowning, once, muscled

the undertow & drug me in. I coughed
sea water, spit salt. He wheezed
beer breath, slapped his thighs,

vomited alcohol & sand. Said
I was a fool thinking I could swim
that far, said I was a fool for lying

to myself, thinking that I was a man.

Honky Tonkin'

Broward stumbles out the Wonder Bar's back door
& stared out over the bay's white-gray wash.

Gray like melted steel, gray like steel wool,
ray like Hank Williams' voice floating

from the bar's glowing jukebox, not silver
like the steel guitar's strings, gray like his old man's

eyes the day the shrimper came home & said
Season's done & I can't pay what I owe.

He spent the night playing a Hank record
over and over again, needle cutting into black

vinyl like a fish hook into a finger's whorls.
He watched his father from another room,

the way the old man shook with each aching chord.
Now he lights a Kool & walks out beyond

the sea oats & grass-stubbed sand dunes,
to where the bay washes dead horseshoe crabs,

clumps of kelp, wave-smoothed driftwood.
Hank's voice carries in the night breeze:

When you are sad & lonely & have no place to go.
Tomorrow morning, he'll take his daddy's place

on another shrimp boat trawling past the cape,
out into the Gulf's deep steely deep & pray

for something, anything to keep him afloat.

In the Cross Maker's Tent

Port St. Joe Seafood Festival

The old woman carved crosses from driftwood,
Displayed them on lattice board, ran balsa
Hands over one as she spoke: *I find the pieces*

*Each morning, washed up from the bay. Some days,
Webs of seaweed tangle them, but I find the best
Pieces this way: hidden. I wanted to buy a carving,*

Pictured her hands turning the wood, palms like wave-
Polished sea glass. Did she use a lathe? Did she plane
Or shave the wood? How often did she ever slip, slice

Skin from her palm? Outside, the festival continued:
People drifted by the tent, a steady rhythm of voices,
Like waves stealing sand. October wind rattled

The tattered canvas. Bruised clouds churned low
Over St. Joseph's Bay. A sudden strobe of lightning.
She gestured west, swirled the air with one lined palm.

*Indian summer. Rain's coming she said. Storms, hail.
It's the heat mixing with the coming cold. I chose
A gray cross with periwinkle inlays, felt the honed-*

Down ridges, imagined her finding it after a sleepless
Night, carving it as the sea lay still, a sheet of glass.

Apalachicola Blues

We wander between backed-up pleasure barges
 & weekend yachts.
 Smell of salt, taste of brine—

Early November, still warm, an Indian summer
 heat in the sunset over the bay.
 At the Seafood Festival, we stuff

ourselves with oysters & steamed shrimp,
 Bud in a can. Dorals on the cheap.
 Tone says *Look*

A two-piece plays Robert Johnson via Clapton:
 “Crossroads Blues.” Not a black
 face in the crowd (or band).

I try to imagine the Blues
 God in Apalachicola,
 shuffling by the river houses, guitar

slung over his shoulder like a rifle.
 The stares would have
 followed him like a vocal harmony.

Maybe he takes a seat by the salt marshes,
 wraps long fingers
 around the neck, conjures a hoodoo tale

of Voodoo. Church bells
 peal the night air. Midnight.
 & Tone point to a thermometer:

80 degrees & three weeks shy of Thanksgiving.
 We fold back into the crowd,
 flirt with girls, puff our chests out & scowl—

real bluesmen, white dudes
 obsessed with a black man’s soul.
 We pass a rebel flag-emblem blazoned

on a Ford’s broad hood.
 I smell brimstone, it seems.
 It’s so hot here. Every damned year.

Indian Summer

Apalachicola Seafood Festival

Not the summer heat I've always known,
but a kind of amber burn, a slow smolder
at the horizon's edge: late October
in Apalachicola, 77 degrees, humid
like a kiss. Fried shrimp smell
in the air, salty, tangy, mixing
with sweet peppers and sausage,
Budweiser and cigar smoke. Something
carnival in the late heat: the scents,
the sounds, the seafood symphony
of raw oysters & fried catfish,
Harley Davidsons parked in rows,
as fat bald men rev the throttles,
grin, take long pulls from bottled imports.
At the docks, bands play Hank & Hendrix
from moored boats while couples sway.
A harvest moon rises. An old woman
in a red tent carves driftwood crosses.
Her husband ties three-dollar flies,
fiber, filament and red feathers. Some slow
to watch them work, browse, maybe buy,
maybe just to feel the press of warm shoulders.
In the crowd, a boy who will remember
all of this rocks on heels, mouths lyrics
as a boat band plays: *Jambalaya & crawfish pie*
& *file gumbo*. Sundown: cool air settles,
the bay breathing a constant breeze.
Music sounds off the blue green waves,
harmonizes with the eastern wind,
lifts salted hands into the briny night.

Out of Key

Something about a slack note makes me think of winter
in North Florida—
how the seabirds no longer
ride the humid breeze, how ice sometimes edges
the salt marsh

on early mornings. I used to drive east
toward Apalachicola, find an bar
down by the brined river, & eat oysters

fresh from the shell, shucked by hands
I didn't know—

some high school drop-out maybe,
some boy working his way through community college

whose dad thinks the government charges
him far too much for far too little—

a story all too familiar. But my father's dead

& he never haunts my steps or whispers
to me in dreams, though I've yearned
for some vision,

some affirmation of the soul's migration,
some common meter chant

in a familiar key, the same song in different words.

Advice to a Future Rock Star

Let's get this out of the way: you have to die
young, preferably in a motel room
in Los Angeles or the back of a Lone-Star-state-
bound tour bus, an empty bottle of Beam
by your side, handful of pills haloing
your long blonde hair. Know that your death
will be a joke ten years from now,
your time forgotten, your leather leggings
& low-slung six-string gauche, passé.
The teenager who worships the pain you wrung
from a Fender's rosewood fretboard cues
up the last song from the last album
on your death's anniversary, sit alone
at home with shot of his dad's bourbon
& grooms long-haired anger to your sinewy
notes' turns & twists. Later, he wanders
his neighborhood, smokes Marlboros,
& mouths your words, feels the shapes
on his lips, tries to imagine how you wrote
that first song, lying in bed in South Georgia.
Summer. 101 in the shade. Your old man's
bruises tattooing your arms in blue & purple
blossoms. The boy won't know how
you strummed three chords, dreamed
a life in stage lights, glare so bright you forgot
your name. Later, at home, he plugs in
a Squier, & plays a familiar progression,
his eyes shut tight as though in pain. Or prayer.

3.

Letters from North Florida

*Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are,
and the things which shall be hereafter.*

—Revelation 1:19

Port St. Joe, 1987

6:00 p.m., end of day shift.
The day unfurls like a discarded butt.
A misting rain settles
over silent streets & newspapers
& leaves blow tiny torrents.
A boy walks 8th street,
drags a pine limb
on the slick pavement.
In a vacant lot, a rusted
Tonka truck lies buried
in mud near an umbrella
with ripped canvass.
A man gets out of a '72 Dodge
with ash-flecked hood
& lights a cigarette, coughs,
stares at the smoke-hazed east.
The paper mill screams
& a chorus of dogs sings a dream.

Mr. Stevens Breaks Down in North Florida

Outside Sopchoppy, he abandons the car,
wanders a side road & reads metaphors
in palm fronds. Crickets scream & bats

shadow beneath a cold moon refracted
in slate clouds. The pressure drops.
He feels the storm before his clothes

damp. Rain means water, means cold.
Beyond pine & dune, the Gulf churns
what might be a song, some tidal melody,

but wind stings his ears & thunder breaks.
Lightning streaks. Houses hide between
loblolly & sweet gum, porch lights emblazon

empty porches. Trucks on cement blocks.
Dogs howl. Cats squall. No streetlights
master the dark. He tries to imagine a world

outside this swamp & mess, quests
in his mind to create beauty from salt marsh
& saw grass. The bayou draws him

deeper. The sea rages & houselights dim.

St. Joseph's Bay

Storm bands score the east.

Evening builds: brackish

water swirled with red clay.

Shrimp boats cut white wakes,

skirt St. Joseph's horn.

Pulpwood smoke like rubella

blossoms the sky.

An old man with sandstone

fingers unfurls a cast net,

hauls it hand over fist,

shakes the empty sieve,

wades again into the flat

glistening blade of the bay.

Saw grass clusters whisper

his memory: a boy beneath

the drawbridge, a line taut

into the bay. Grains of sand pepper

pine sap on his jeans.

He imagined the bay years from then—

now, still the same green

expanse, the same mystery.

The old man hurls the net

again, into a silent sky.

Darkness descends:

Carina sails on phosphorus keel.

Elegy for Port St. Joe, Florida

Say you notice the paper mill first,
or where it used to be, the expanse
of sand & palm scrub like ghost pain
reminding you of what once was,
what still is, despite the absent smoke
stacks. At the new marina, yachts
sidle by fishing charters helmed
by old men with salted beards
& faces carved by the Gulf's razor wind,
the same faces that once walked a strike
line back when the union still mattered.
By sundown, the old men have moored
& driven home, down the same roads
you once knew, the old cracks paved
over with dark asphalt, scabs over
broken flesh & you wonder if you
got out of your car, knelt as if in prayer,
picked at the road with your finger,
would the wound tear & blood seep
into the stagnate ditches where you
once caught crawfish with a hand net?
Drive out east of town, where grass
has reclaimed the railroad tracks,
& pavement covers the traffic stops
where the Apalachicola Northern
once passed, its keen whistle so loud
you tasted coal dust between your teeth.
By midnight, you should know
the shift change whistle won't blow,
the streets won't swell with ash-
flecked pickups driving home.
Your father said it would be this way—
you'd miss this place, this sea walled
village by the bay, where you once
prayed for anything to take you away.
You're a fool, though, so you drive
to the beach & stare at the moon,
study the empty highway leading out
of town & wish what he said were true.

Poem for Port St. Joe, Florida

Trailer parks & rusted mailboxes, cinderblock
homes in measured rows near worn-down roads.

Junior Food Stores, pick-up trucks with plastic
bottles that fly from the beds. Oyster-shell

parking lots, limestone churchyards, sand, sandspurs,
dunes whiskered with sea oats near a seaweed-

strewn shore, flecks & specks of shattered sand
dollars, horseshoe crabs, scallops, & periwinkles.

Baked brick banks & churches, red like scabs,
a mill that spews charcoal smoke, ash-flecked cars

in rows. Boys with scarred knuckles & broken
noses, knees scored from palm fronds, pine needles,

mosquito stings. Silk-stocking drive where the mill
execs live, where the paper man tosses news before dawn.

A welder in coveralls, a woman with desiccated
skin, parched from hours with an acetylene torch.

The old sun rising over the bay, stinking of brine,
pulp wood, ammonia, black-gray foam on the water.

Shrimp boats with heavy arms outstretched, seines sieving
the sea, drawing a day's catch, a month's paycheck.

A road like a strip of electrical tape frayed at the edges.
A road like an old man's lined hands: hard, aged.

Poem for Apalachicola, Florida

Floodplain forests spill
into the bay, a brackish

mix of swamp & salt.
Channel cat slice saw grass

& sea birds cluster on a concrete
causeway, scatter as cars & trucks

roar by, tires thump-thumping,
thump-thumping, the galloped

rhythm a murmured heart.
Patton Bridge spans Apalachicola

Bay, stretches to St. George Island,
the rich man's backyard playhouse,

where frat boys & suits knock
back imports with South Florida

sweethearts, Atlanta transplants
with fake bakes, & Tallahassee

debutantes, orange kings, tomato queens.
A few fishermen tightline beneath 319,

haul out black drum, sheephead,
she occasional speckled trout.

Old men in white hip waders gig
flounder in skiffs, dark figures

on a gray sea, chiaroscuro
against evening fog. Ground oyster

shells form every bank & church
parking lot, crushed calcium that leads

down to the edge of the bay itself,
down to the salt. A pearl must lie

in the soft muscle of one fleshy heart,
though the oystermen never tell such tales.

Poem for Wewahitchka, Florida

Who finds this place finds a lake of jagged
bone, gray tree trunks rising from still water,

the left-over runoff of the sand-blocked
Chipola, dammed from the Apalachicola.

Sons & daughters leave, rarely return.
Old timers pull channel cat from the lake,

clean & freeze them for the winter
when the wind's too cold to fish.

Tourists happen down 77, the only stop
maybe gas, a red light, a mom & pop

Fish fry serving up bream, catfish, rolled red
roe, cheese grits, fried potatoes, sweet tea.

In summer, asphalt strips rubber from tires
that pass here, black streaks burnt to streets

that lead back to the only road out of town.
Coast dwellers down by the bay come north

in these hurricane months, take shelter
in Baptist churches, pray for the cyclone

to pass, to deluge another town, to leave
a gaped maw along the coast elsewhere,

east or west, Jacksonville, Pensacola, maybe
out of state, someone else's tragedy, while

here, Dead Lakes rises, flood the bank, stands
dank, still. Weeks may pass before water recedes.

Poem for Panama City, Florida

Sailboats carve white wakes in St. Andrew's Bay
& tugboats push barges beneath Hathaway Bridge—

all silhouetted against a gasoline haze in a nickel
gray morning. A condominium's rebar skeleton

rises like a ruin near a dry-rotted billboard:
"World's Most Beautiful Beaches." Time shares

& topless bars crowd by palm scrubs & pine saplings.
a 10-foot chain fence surrounds the abandoned

Miracle Strip, now a sea of grass-cracked asphalt.
downtown, a few old men fish the marina,

cast into the wind. Rust-pocked pickup trucks
pack the paper mill parking lot & community

college students wait tables in sea green bistros.
All day, workers on 98 smear tar on broken

blacktop behind a steaming truck, hold "Stop"
signs, "Slow" signs. On the edge of town,

west of Tyndall Air Force Base, aluminum-sided
houses darken in the paper mill's shadow. Above,

F-16s Immelman behind drones in a creosote sky.

Poem for Destin, Florida

Highway 98 empty. Mid November, cold wind
off the Gulf of Mexico stirs sand in tiny tornadoes

that spin into oblivion. On Choctowatchee Bay,
thick white caps crown a viscous cobalt sea.

waves break on summer yachts moored in silent
docks beneath East Pass Bridge. Come summer,

tan bodies pack party barges. Beer & barbecue,
margarita & shrimp will spice the salt

wind. The din of classic rock & top 40 over
a persistent diesel drawl. But now, gulls echo above

cracked sea shells strewn on white beachhead.
Sea shacks sit empty. Forgotten wind chimes

ring on empty porches. Beyond Destin Harbor,
condominiums crowd close, lean into the Gulf,

empty save occasional retirees, reaping cheap time-
shares & all-you-can-eat breakfasts. Raw bars &

seafood joints stay open some nights. A few locals
sway to a juke box playing the same memorized

songs again & again. An occasional Christmas
carol brings a sing-along chorus in the 70-degree

night. A glacier moon freezes the sunset & shatters
light into a million shards. Stars burn like bioluminescent

fish, visible only in the deepest trenches, forgotten, alive.

Distances

Find the plates from the farthest state you say
& I slink the shadows between rented minivans

& truck-towed RVs. Your cigarette's cherry
stalks me, a will o' wisp shadowed against

the sign's neon glow—*Gulf Sands: Clean Rooms.*
You don't know the way I watch you turn up

the Strawberry Hill & ache to taste your malted
lips. You can't see the urgent fingertips I drag

over license tags, tracing counties & states.
I imagine your smile when I say *Michigan*,

All the way to Florida to see this shitty beach?
Far off, the mill whistle howls its 11:30 keen.

Your laugh is thick like this moonless May
night on the edge of summer when sun-burned

tourists fill these motels & condos, thin grinning
families like commercials for an American Dream

we've both known is a lie since we were 12.
How much do they pay for these rooms anyway?

Your voice hazes across the lot's oyster shell shards.
A salt breeze blows & I wonder if you smell the same

mullet & paper mill stench. Does the Gulf
mean something to you & your peninsula eyes,

your sea oat hair, your body like the cape's horned curve?
I want to feel your hips' sheathed blades like the raised

continents on a globe, the etched cities & seas,
mountains & towns: tiny names no one bothers to read.

Josephine

Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the ocean.

—Leonard Cohen, “Suzanne”

Josephine’s daddy spent his days in the bay
& his nights going door to door, a bucket

of shrimp for five dollars. He always stank
of the sea, like fish & ammonia. At school,

she looked away, hiding her eyes in a gaze
that always looked south, where St. Josephs’ Bay

spilt into the Gulf of Mexico. No one spoke to her;
she walked the halls alone. They scoffed,

said she stank of fish scales & shrimp hulls.
I hid my face, silent. One Sunday in church,

her whole family came in late & Josephine,
a plank in a white dress, sat near me. Between

the preacher’s labored breaths & sweat-splattering
swats on the pulpit, I inched closer to Josephine,

reached out my hand while she dug grooves
in varnished tan pews with thin fingers,

long like the spikes I’d heard they used to nail
Jesus to a cross. *They mocked him*, the preacher

gasped words like puffs of smoke from a fire
that burned in him. *They mocked God’s son.*

*They tortured him. They killed him! Do you
stand with him? Or do you stand with the world?*

The organist played “Just As I Am.”
Above, a ceiling fan rocked in rapture.

Salt sweat stained my shirt, slimed my palms.
Won’t you come home to Jesus? the preacher

pleaded & I looked at Josephine, submerged
in a liquid shadow beneath a stained glass

window, her skin green & blue, like the sea.

The God You Want

Lives in the suburbs,
rises at 6 on weekdays & smokes
at a yellow-flecked Formica table,

reads comics, sips coffee.
The God you want has callous-thick
feet, grit-black fingernails,

breath that stinks of garlic & coffee.
He waters his backyard, though restrictions
say it's an off day. Only tips

15 %. Only buys premium gas.
A red Cherokee bloats his unedged
driveway & sometimes weeks pass

Before he mows his grass (or has
someone do it for him, lazy bum).
The God you want doesn't think

of you very often, & when he does,
he snickers at your prayers, tiny
bearings rolling in black hole ears.

His email box swells. His answering
machine beeps, echoing in his tiny house.

Mosquito Summer

St. Joseph, Florida, 1841

After the ship arrived, the fever spread
like wildfire, dry kindling
in late summer lightning,
when dark clouds strobed
in the east like some doom
prophecy. Rains came daily,
though, soaking pine and palm.
Puddles stood stagnate
days after and mosquitoes
began to gather in dark fog.
A girl near the bay awoke
burning, with red eyes
like the horizon. Others
caught the fever, soon,
sleeping uncovered, waking
with muscles tense, aching.
Bodies piled by the road side.
A grave digger fled north,
said he dreamed of a burning sea.
The doctor shook his head,
coughed, thought of Augusta,
where he'd studied, the hot
summers, the heat settling
between brick buildings,
the stink of cadavers & fluids.
He waited for the day he'd rise
from his own sheets, the fire
ablaze in his blood, eyes burning.

The Baptist preacher stalked
 behind the pulpit that Sunday,

reading aloud Revelations:

This is the plague promised.

This is the end of the world.

The End of the World

After *The Day After*

& I stumbled for days,
stared at striated clouds or I
lost myself in leaf's veined
skin. I watched an ant
tumble a bread crumb the size
of his body & wondered
if he sensed my shadow's
enveloping darkness.

I dreamed of blood-bathed
shards—a broken world
floating in space's black void.
In those days, I knew death
screamed in jet wash
& shuddered at every F-15
breaking the sound barrier
over the Gulf of Mexico.

My father swore Russian
satellites aimed ICBMs
at our hometown. *The first
to die* he said. *The airbase
is just down the road.*

My father called Gorbechev
Garbage Mouth & cursed
Reagan's trickle-down voodoo.

We watched *Red Dawn*
& I scribbled on church bulletins
in Cyrillic script while the pastor
warned of the Whore of Babylon,
& the Seven Churches of Asia Minor.

My father coughed & coughed
as he lay awake at night,
the cancer a dark spot
on his heart, which beat
with every rattling breath.

Trying to Beat the Blues in Port St. Joe, Florida

It's no use trying. The mill's shut down,
the streets whittled thin, & the last good
beer you drank was seven years ago,
dangling your feet off the gazebo,
down by St. Joseph's Bay. Low tide.
Salt marshes glimmering in the evening
fade. You pitched cigarette butts
just to hear the sizzle & promised
your friends that one day, you'd leave
this town behind, let the road unspool
behind in an unrecorded song. You'd write
sometime, maybe drop a line from Texas
or Los Angeles, wherever you ran out
of money or will. You imagined walking
down the Santa Monica Pier, the Pacific
taking your breath, & maybe you'd have kneeled,
maybe even said something like a prayer,
the words leaving your mouth like smoke
from a storm drain. Tonight, you drive
out east of town, lay down five spots
for PBR & smoke the rent money. Wander
out on the back deck, where a blues band
plays "Sweet Home Chicago." Some ghost
white kid with a pimpled voice tries
to wring pain from six strings & a wish.
Let the music win. Ignore the missed notes,
the styled slurs. Something about pain
rings true, even if you're telling a lie.
The evening sky slows, a brackish wind
rattles the pines. Crickets & cicadas scream
to the lightning bugs' strobe. The mill whistle
still blows at 11:00. Look at the time. It's so late.

After

1.

Flooded churches, collapsed roofs.
Rebar skeletons & broken cinderblocks.
Aluminum peeled like cuticle tears.
The stench of salt & sewage
in a soaked stew of carpet & shingles:
the bleeding Gulf coagulates in every crevice.

2.

Gray-faced men & women in lines—
Red Cross sandwiches, canned water.
National Guard trucks cut gray
wakes where streets once stretched.
Some gather in groups, wave their hands,
hymn a cloud-streaked sky. Others wander
through waist-deep water, pull sopping
mattresses from tangles of aluminum,
peel blurred photographs from silt & sand.

3.

A boy with storm water eyes kneels
as his mother & father rescue wedding
China shards from sand. He imagines the hours
imagining this very thing: a city soaked
to sucking blackness, the seawall collapsed,
highways swallowed. He thinks of his father's
strange hours praying, the old man's words
swallowed in the radio's squelch of white squall.
The boy pulls a porcelain cup from soaked sand.
Seawater sieves through a jagged crack.
It gathers light & shines. It flows.

Canticle for the Gulf Coast

Still the peninsula's long arm,
still the horizon's canoe of clouds,
seawater swirling gray foam.

Tristan De Luna's sailors
once guided with charts
and sextants, an astrolabe—
navigating the coast,
sounding dark water.

*In a cold grave, fish flutter
through portholes. Motes of plankton
float in a ruined wreck.*

The Seminoles knew
the coast's crooked shore
as intimately as
the gator's croak
bouncing off a bayou.

Only names remain:
Okaloosa, Wewahitchka.

Beach houses and condos crowd
the coast like doctors
around a deathbed—
white masks tight,
they prophesy death.

*Crepe paper walls rend and wrap
around palms in a tropical gale.*

Pines are teeth—
shadows in a moon ascending
over flattened dunes.

Hurricane memory still in the palm's
gutted roots.

Still the bay's exhale,
after so many years
of waves eating sand.

Letter from North Florida

Post-summer quiet. Only gulls & waves
as the bay peels back white & green.
condos empty, beach houses cold.
Wind chimes ring in the salt.
Off 98, cypress roots boil
from salt marshes & saw grass.
I found a boy's shoe here, once,
half-buried in muck.
How he must have fought,
pulling his leg free.
How the marsh must have held
him, sucking him deeper.
How he must have felt
suddenly free here in the marsh,
where salt & fresh water meet,
where brackish water swirls.

•

A gazebo burned one night,
glow visible across St. Joseph's Bay,
Flames rose, red spirits
fighting the earth's sure hold.
Embers soared in the wind,
carried out over the bay.
I lost them the stars,
couldn't tell sky from earth.
That year, the hurricane
carried a beach house
over the road. The tide
water dropped it 60 feet
from where it once stood.
Upstairs, a china cabinet
held blue-swirled dishes, cups,
saucers, someone's history
handed down, sealed away
now in a beach home.
Not a crack. '98 washed
away near the cannery
& stayed closed four weeks.
I watched the build a new road,
direct traffic around the sunken earth.

•

Since the mill closed,
the bay's turned Bermuda green,
a neon glow: almost unreal,

not the slate gray I remember,
not the chemical stench
of pulpwood & bleach.

Shrimp trawlers once carved
Long wakes in the scum,
skirted the peninsula's horn,
motored for the deep waters
of the Gulf of Mexico, beyond
the factory's disease & ash.

Sulfur once stained
the air, a rotten egg stench,
the pulpwood reek:

Smells like bacon & eggs
the old folks said.

On payday Fridays,
mill workers lined
outside Piggly Wiggly,
clenching green checks:
St. Joseph's Papermakers,

cashing the paper they printed.

•

One year, a boy disappeared
in the Fingers.
Said he slipped beneath
the melted copper.
Dove in to save a friend.
Search & rescues,
police cars, ambulances
lined the ditches,
hunted the sloughs for weeks.

Not a sign.

They found him bloated
beneath a cypress stump,
half-rotted, gator bait,
skin softened the brackish
flow. He appears
in my dreams, sometimes,
struggling against
the current, waving his arms,
kicking in spasms,
almost dancing.

WORKS CITED

- Ali, Abdul. "The Poet as Historian: An Interview with Tyehimba Jess." *The Amistad* (2006): 1-4. Web. 29 July 2010.
- Anderson, T.J. *Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry*. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2004. Print.
- Bachman, Beth. "Re-collections." *Southern Review* 42.2 (2006): 451-465. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 21 July 2010.
- Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *Early Novels and Stories: Go Tell it On the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, Another Country, Going to Meet the Man..* Toni Morrison, ed. New York: Library of America, 1998. 831-864. Print.
- Brown, Sterling. "Ma Rainey." *The Collected Poems of Sterling Brown*. Michael S. Harper, ed. Chicago: Triquarterly-Northwestern UP, 1996. 62. Print.
- Kermode, Frank, ed. *The Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1975. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. "From Phillip Massinger." Kermode, 153-172.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Kermode, 37-44.
- Carruth, Hayden. "Influences: The Formal Idea of Jazz." *Sitting In: Selected Writings on Jazz, Blues, and Related Topics*. Iowa City: U of Iowa UP, 1986. 22-29. Print.
- . "The Thing about Improvisation." 99-101.
- Dungy, Camille. "In Others' Voices: The Millennial Poets and Personae." *Black Issues and Book Review* 8.2 (2006): 16-17. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 21 July 2010.

- Ellison, Ralph. "Living with Music." *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1995. 187-198. Print.
- . "The Charlie Christian Story." 233.
- Feinstein, Sascha. *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*. Westport: Praeger, 1997. Print.
- Feinstein, Sascha and Yusef Komunyakaa. *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- . *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print.
- Harper, Michael S. *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985. Print.
- . "Modal Aspects of Black Poetry: 'The First Act of Liberation is to Destroy One's Cage.'" *Mississippi Review* 6.1 (1977): 19-21. Print.
- Hartman, Charles O. *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.
- Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York: Norton, 1979. Print.
- Hummer, Terry. *The Infinity Sessions*. Baton Rouge: LSU P, 2005. Southern Messenger Poets. Print.
- Jackson, Travis A. "'Always New and Centuries Old': Jazz, Poetry, and Tradition as Creative Adaptation." *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. 357-373. Print.
- Jess, Tyehimba. *Leadbelly*. Amherst: Verse P, 2005. National Poetry Series. Print.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*. Clytus, Radiclan, ed. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. Poets on Poetry. Print.

---. "Crossroads." *Ploughshare* 23.1 (1997): 5. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.

Komunyakaa, Yusef and William Matthews. "Jazz and Poetry: A Conversation." *The Georgia Review* 44.4 (Winter 1992): 645-61. Print.

Matthews, William. "Dull Subjects." *Curiosities*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990. Print. 20-31.

Pavlić, Ed. "Follow Me Into a Solo: Jazz, History, and Reckoning with Diasporic Dissociation in James Baldwin and David Bradley." *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. 244-284. Print.

Rasula, Jed. "Jazz and Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*. Walter Kalaidjian, ed. West Nyack: Cambridge UP, 2005. 157-176. Print.

Werner, Craig. "James Baldwin: Politics and the Gospel Impulse." *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse*. Urbana: U of Chicago. Print. 213-240.

---. "The Jazz Impulse." *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, & The Soul of America*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006. Print. 132-136.

Wallenstein, Barry. "Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding." *Black American Literature Forum* 25.3 (1991): 595-620. *Proquest*. Web. 9 Dec. 2009.