

MY AMERICA

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated, with love and gratitude, to my parents, Mark and Diana Parmenter, who have shown an amazing level of support during a long, challenging, and wonderful process that would not have happened without them.

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *my America*, is partly a series of poems written from the perspective of Modernist photographer Edward Weston. The first section, “Tina mia,” is situated in the late 1920’s, when he had left his lover and model, Tina Modotti. These poems are imagined as unsent letters written to her from his studio, at the bitter points of poverty and solitary work that leave him with nothing but his images of her for comfort. But the Weston persona describes how little he can get from them, and comes to understand that the images are artifacts of his own gaze. The next section, “my America,” takes place before World War II, when Weston took pictures for a 1942 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The poems make a stage for what I invent as Weston’s confrontation with Whitman—a celebration of the self in collision with the witness of a country pushed into turmoil by selfishness. The last section, “To protect his writing from the perils of publication . . .,” is set near the end of Weston’s career, when he allowed his journals to be published, but famously cut parts out with a razor beforehand, the contents of which are unknown. I imagine the contents of those fragments, including quotes and photographs.

My dissertation begins with a critical article on Lucie Brock-Broido, whose work, like Weston’s, brings contexts into collision. I begin by discussing her work in the context of Virginia Jackson’s work on the lyric genre, that opens poems generally considered lyric to the possibility of other definitions. I then draw on Stephen Burt’s

discussion of Brock-Broido's tendency to present different, divergent selves; drawing on both Gorgias and Homer, I present that tendency under the lens of epic, such that her proliferation of selves challenges perceived epic ethics. From her first book's persona poems to her recent work, I argue that what she offers may be seen as an epic web, in which both identity and interconnection are charged with a new power.

## LUCIE BROCK-BROIDO'S EPIC WEB

Out of recent poets considered Elliptical or hybrid, Lucie Brock-Broido is the one that I consistently, no, compulsively reread. There's a kind of comfort in rereading her that I only seem to get from being mesmerized by the language, while driven by some apprehension of meaning that seems always about to arrive, that can yield seminar papers and starts of articles, as it has for me, while withholding any satisfying closure.

Her work satisfyingly thwarts that Stevens dictum about a poem resisting intelligence almost successfully; she resists intelligence by seeming to oversaturate it, by essentially taking it over, gumming up its works in a way that makes them seem to work better. "Meditation on the Sources of the Catastrophic Imagination," and the layers of inquiry implied by the title, grow more spellbinding as they branch away from any one conclusion; the speaker seems caught, even lost with me, in lines that seem both natural in their phrasing and unnaturally complex:

From the outside, peering in, it would seem my life  
Had been as smooth as a Prussian ship gliding on the bridegroom

Of her Baltic waters in a season of no wind. (5-7)

I reread lines like these to be sent back into their iridescent thicket again. It's not like reading Eliot; it's like getting free of whatever was hunting him. It's not meditation; it's more fun.

Stephen Burt's writing about Brock-Broido helps me to unpack it. In *The Master Letters*, he finds a new approach to persona, with more than one persona presented within individual poems; in his view, she makes "selves or masks, in which the I who

speaks the poem seems here and there . . . and nowhere particular" ("Subject" 111). The illusion that each poem has no more than one speaker loses all stability here; it comes wonderfully undone. The poems comprise networks of speakers, with a dynamic and indeterminate dialogue happening among them. This seems like quite a different approach from the lyric ego that Whitman drew from Wordsworth and supercharged; there is no "I" containing multitudes, just the multitudes. There's an intersubjectivity run wild, dispersed first among the personae, and, ultimately, among the readers who engage with them.

Burt's essay also helps me to see how the difficulty of Brock-Broido's work might be tied into its multiplication of identity. The fact that I frequently can't make sense of her work becomes, not quite a LANGUAGE-y liberation from the hegemonies of sense-making, but reshaping of meaning-making into something more participatory, that doesn't need to arrive at meaning to be a great event. I get the sense of being in dialogue with her personae and other readers, and that search for meanings to make feels like a common goal, a conductor, a connector. Her poems are not meant to mean; they are meant to link her strange arrays of speakers with each other, and to help the reader get tangled among them. These lines from "Rampion" do more than add up to a thesis, by synthesizing multiple perspectives:

One day I will be buried with the ashes of my familiars, near my father  
within a moment of a brook at Slippery Rock. One day I will be the  
daughter of a tailor & be born into a combed blanket of brindled fleece,  
lyric running down the honey scarp & bluffs.

*Dark? I washed the adjective. (Master Letters 43)*

The word “lyric” points back to what Burt depicts as the model for Brock-Broido’s voice: that of the submissive, who uses personae to line her isolation, and there to find what remains a lyric dynamic—he sees her work rising from an abandonment to this role of lone, divided speaker addressing a self who doesn’t exist. For him, it’s her isolation from everyone, her being stranded among fictive selves, that draws out her lyric voice (“Subject” 112-17).

This dynamic made complete sense to me until I read Virginia Jackson’s *Dickinson’s Misery*, in which John Stuart Mill’s vision of poetry as rising in the absence of an audience gets linked with what we think of as lyric today. By restoring the social context of some of Dickinson’s writing, Jackson calls into question the basic idea that lyric poems are driven by a lack of readership. The many sea changes in poetry criticism that follow Mill seem to only burnish this vision of lyric’s source, until, as Jackson shows, one of the only meaningful criteria for a lyric poem is this vacuum where an audience should be; a lyric poem is antisocial, and so, for Burt reading Brock-Broido, what might look social must be pathological; of course, the speaker is alone, and delusional in perceiving selves and audiences. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be a lyric speaker. No wonder Burt finds that kind of isolated figure in Brock-Broido’s work; Jackson suggests that the modern reader of poetry is wired not to look for anything else.

But what could Brock-Broido’s speaker, or speakers, be, if not lyric? I am arguing for lyric’s other: epic. Lots of riders need to be attached to that word, certainly, since, rightly, epic stands for a lot of negative tendencies that poems seen as lyric have helped to counteract. But, first, it’s maybe best to say why the leap between these polarized

genres, instead of just landing on one of the many others possible; Burt smartly applies “Ovidian or ‘heroic epistles’,” and it works up to the point where the multiplicity of speakers and addressees comes into consideration (“Subject” 108). After all, each of Ovid’s epistles is from one speaker to one recipient, and immersed in a single, stable narrative—Dido’s letter to Aeneas holds Virgil’s narrative, and is held by it, for a kind of richness of authority that implies Ovid giving up some of his own, even as he does by taking on the disempowered roles of the *Heroides* speakers. Brock-Broido’s *Master Letters* poems proliferate speakers and addressees, so that the crowd within the poem leans toward the one outside of it, a mob in which the reader needs to make the links; when Brock-Broido says, “Breath is as much of Mob as I can master,” she tropes the horde of her own voice (11).

Her use of persona suggests “dramatic” as a fitting term, especially following Eliot’s division of voices into epic, dramatic, and lyric, of which the second, for him, occupies the space where the poet can be seen speaking through characters, and doing so to an audience—the poet’s work of putting on the mask stays visible, as Brock-Broido’s definitely does for her readers. But, for Eliot, the dramatic voice is indistinguishable from dramatic monologue, where the poet can still be credited with vanishing into a single, fictive speaker, even if he or she can be tracked in the vanishing act—Brock-Broido’s persona poems in *A Hunger* stand as examples. Jackson’s suggestion that the cloudy term “lyric” be seen in terms of what were once a number of types of lyric invites a number of possibilities, a potentially large number (Jackson 235).

But the juxtaposition of lyric with epic that has most recently caught my attention is Susan Stewart's, in her brilliant and encyclopedic *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Stewart pits them against each other, in part, for their ways of characterizing suffering. Here, all sorts of caveats about the term "epic" should rain down, since applying it to Brock-Broido's voice risks invoking the sorts of pro-heroic, conservative connotations that Stewart lucidly teases out. The first of them is that epic abstracts suffering (296), which Brock-Broido does not; her representations of it are as specific as they are acute to sense and memory—the burning monk in "Also, None Among Us Has Seen God" is described by his "sweetest smell" (*Master Letters* 4).

The second word that Stewart uses is "sublime," which ties to Kant's discussion of war; epic represents war as sublime, and that kind of suffering as not only noble but possible to model, just as the poem does (Stewart 294); Brock-Broido opposes this in "Am Moor," by depicting wounded soldiers "baying," animal in their suffering (*Master Letters* 76).

Stewart comes closest to talking about epic voice when she describes epic narration as distinguished by a context of authority and a force of will (296-97), and arguing this conglomerate point leads to my justification for applying the term to *The Master Letters*. The epic will is implied by the ability to speak the epic poem, its vastness a testament to heroic feats of memory that will must compel, and the authority seems to lie, for her, in the attribution of divinity to the poem itself—the one who is vehicle for the epic carries a divine mandate to do it.

Each of these thoughts makes a nice kind of sense on its own, but the classical epic theory that Stewart plays bard to puts them at odds with each other in a way that makes it necessary to conceptualize epic voice as separable from the epic themes of heroic suffering and war, with their validations of oppression. Will implies agency, and, for Plato, the epic poet and bard have authority in inverse proportion to their agency. The epic voice, for him, issues from that madness in which the poet's own voice is subsumed in the gods'—will displaced, with the rest of the self (41). Stewart's view of the human poet who speaks the epic comes more from a sense of the epic hero, so she sees epic narration automatically troping the gory, regime-upholding acts depicted by the poem. This naturally leads to what looks like a given for her as for Bakhtin, that epic has a one way trajectory, from authoritative source to audience; the epic voice, for both of them, rises from isolation, which is the home of the lyric voice. What it's seen as doing to the audience, its dehumanization, its conscription of the listener's will, makes it an essentially lyric event; the epic voice accepts no argument, doesn't care who you are, and works to shape whatever "who" you are into one that will fight for the state. But both Bakhtin and Stewart conflate epic narrative and epic narration; the voice gets tasked with what it says.

Then, Stewart uses a word for epic narration that, understood in its best sense, will help to show why Brock-Broido's voice is an epic one: "public" (296). What she goes on to describe as epic narration, though, is not only private, but privatizing, in its compulsion of the listeners to some oppressive, self-interested hero of will—she takes assumptions about the lyric poem, that the audience doesn't matter, and bends them

to seemingly epic goals, such that the audience of epic doesn't matter as an active presence, only as passive. But the public, interactive nature of the epic voice is inscribed in theory at least as old as Plato, whose epic poet and bard not only give up will, but give up ownership in the process, and are identified as belonging to the communities of their audiences. The epic poem, however oppressive its contents, is there for the public more than the public is there for the poem.

This idea of epic as public gets its best metaphor from one whom Stewart cites—Giambattista Vico. Where Bakhtin comes to see epic as monoglossic, and epic voice, by extension, as reductive, Vico sees both as so completely public that his Homer is a composite, a signifier for the Greek people as a whole. His Homer is not only heteroglossic, he's essentially composed of multiple selves, like a Brock-Broido poem. Vico takes to a fabulous point what preceding epic theorists keep in more conservative terms, but it all points away from a single voice issuing to a single or absent audience, and directly at a multiply voiced, public event.

What Brock-Broido gives us in *The Master Letters* is just that, through the many, partial personae who are speaking, the many intertexts either present or alluded to, and the ways in which she works against just those oppressively nationalistic ways of thinking and speaking that epic poems have validated. Her ability to sustain poems as sonically unified by stridently heterogeneous entities make them a kind of epic web in which she, they, and the reader become parts of one community.

Brock-Broido's use of split and partial personae doesn't leap immediately out at me, like her dramatic monologues do in *A Hunger*—those are clearly marked, in the title or notes, and follow through lines roughly coordinated with back stories—Browning, or Bidart, with less clarity and more lyrical fireworks. The personae of *The Master Letters* are not just garlanded with lyricism; it transfigures them. But they don't announce themselves as clearly demarcated identities to be read as separate from Lucie Brock-Broido or some generic speaker. Each poem yields an uneasy kind of many-ness, a milling of apparitions around some shattered cipher of an "I," or one that draws its strength from the piercing and wheeling harmonies that these fragments make together—"I" as the light shining through some shattered collection of crystal, "I" as lyrical web, not diaphanous like a spider's, or apparitional like the world wide kind, but finding some great weight where they end, dependent on suspended trajectory as they may be on trajectory's trace of salvation. The beauty of the voice in her poems, again, is no ethereal or dismissible quality; it's sinewed with this persistent, fierce kind of strangeness in which the voice is too many to ever be one.

One of Brock-Broido's masterstrokes, and what makes her more of a linguist than Browning or Bidart, is her way of hazing these many voices into an idiolect that spans her work thus far, and finds a Dickinsonian supercharge in *The Master Letters*—odd capitalization, uncommon word choice, and a kind of stiff diction in which superb lyricism crystallizes. It is the voice of a mask of no one in particular, but of many in part. Calling it baroque may equal calling it contemporary, but I don't think it is, quite. An ethic of economy in American poetry that predates Williams, is snuck into Whitman, and

may grow originally from Bradstreet, seems to keep breeding even in the avant, LANGUAGE-y poems that I would expect to be baroque incarnate; they have that feel of being pared toward their final lines, though, often wonderfully. Brock-Broido's poems, especially in *The Master Letters*, hold that baroque torque of order into folds like an aurora composed of torches; they fold with Deleuzian transcendence away from linearity's goals and a LANGUAGE-sanctified goallessness; they do so with a diction that has no code of identity behind it, but the one of many personae, epic in their ways of enfolding my attention.

Burt's work on her mostly takes personae as its focus, and wonderfully parses some of their natures. I am following his lead in the explications that follow, and hopefully showing just how quickly key poems in *The Master Letters* shift from one speaker to the next, with little to demarcate that break but cues that are jarring in their subtlety, creating the above-mentioned unease, as well as an "am-I-still-dreaming?" kind of defamiliarization about whatever speaker I may believe to be represented right then; she, or maybe he, gets blended into the next one, and, in my uneasiness, I realize my over-reliance on persona as one place to stay, that whatever manifestation of Keats' "Cameleon" metamorphism draws me to it, some illusion of fixity has kept me there. When I dive out of the single "I" of "Carrowmore," the first poem in the book, I'm here:

Wherever I went I came with me.  
She buried her bone barrette  
  
In the ground's woolly shaft. (3)

The speaker has divided, and I'm no longer in territory that I might recognize by the reference point of one speaker; I'm out of my depth; I'm webbed among these selves that diverge from each other, but do so with lyricism that demands my attention. I try to make connections between them, and become less isolated in the process.

One of the poems richest in split or partial personae is "A Brief History of Asylum." While the title might suggest movement from one era to another, and so some shifting that makes a kind of overarching sense, the first couplet takes us into a singular part of history, and out of the historian persona: "My innocence diminishes in the thrall / Of a New World symmetry . . . ." The shift into the fourth stanza shows us another identity, one that can say, with archaic and eugenic authority, "Did not the eyes of Lunatics look / Differently?" For this speaker, Lunatics not only exist, and should be seen as a singular, proper category, with the upper-case "L" making them a proper name, but they are engraved by nature, in the eyes. Then, in line 13, that voice is left behind for a quick declaration of different identities that are mostly difference—"I am angel, addict, catherine wheel." Not only are those three distinctly different in nature, but they hold different functions, the last one "spinning sparks from Lourdes to Alexandria." A catherine wheel has no face to press against a window, so the next stanza can be seen as another persona. That rainy scene is then followed by the voice of Robert Hayden, and his lines from the poem "Runagate, Runagate" make the poem resonate with the sense of an identity separate enough to belong in italics. We might say that she mines another poet for the very next line: "& I a Jew" concludes Plath's line of self-interrogation, from "Daddy," where she goes from "I began to talk like a Jew" to

“I think I may well be a Jew” and “I may be a bit of a Jew.” The next fragment of Hayden gets interrupted with an archaic, diagnostic self again, one that breaks Hayden’s scene and braids it into the larger strangeness here (8). The end uses the language of 20<sup>th</sup> century science—“lobation, incision”—and invite the idea that the speaker will be operated on, that her temples are “lamblike, mild,” and that she is “subject, subjugate, enthralled” to the cult of medicine, of subjugation by a science that both hallows and curses the world within the skull (9). We end up with an aggregate of speakers that roughly cluster around the themes of subjugation, flight, and Americana, but do so with no definitive declaration, or result, except the declaration of different selves, and the resulting web.

“Pursuit of Happiness,” is one of the shorter prose poems in the book, and one that shifts quickly from one persona to the next. Like “A Brief History of Asylum,” this poem offers a concept as a title, but goes right into italicized lines that are a quote from William Blake: *“I really am sorry that you are falln out with the Spiritual World.”* In this poem, also, then, she breaks to a world, and then away from that, and from that voice, into one remembering a specific scene, that looks nothing like a spiritual world, and not necessarily like a fall away from it:

There were so many nights I sat on the wooden stairs of my porch &  
listened to the biremes of the crickets’ wings rowing & rowing . . .

She shows deliberate details, that conjure not only a specific scene but the witness within it, who finds that the stairs are wooden, and that the insects are crickets, with not just any music to make, but biremes in their wings. Even with the strangeness of

the word “biremes,” this is a voice that could issue from a lot of different speakers, at a lot of different times, as long as they were not too elevated—she says, “There were so many nights I sat,” not, “There were so many nights in which I sat,” or anything else that would make it like the proper voice before it. The next stanza is just one sentence fragment, and all it says is, “A Wilderness Lord,” and this, too, seems unable to be assigned to the same speaker as the previous lines. This speaker is elevated again, baroque, and truncated, where the one before her flows (38).

And another speaker yet says the next two stanzas, one both baroque and broken, one that describes an outdoor scene like the second speaker, but does it in a way that emphasizes her difference—instead of crickets with their biremes, she hears “the low rub of cicadas indexing their oil & eventide”—archaic, scientifically inflected, and surreal. The last line, though, is none of those except poignantly surreal—“*I send a message by a Mouth that cannot speak.*” For the speaker of that line, we move back to the actual, historical Dickinson, but one snarled, like the rest, in this web of, not indeterminacy, but semideterminacy. The range of speakers in this poem is ours to guess, but what matters more than their number is the sense of many voices webbed into one space (38).

The poem that closes the book is “Am Moor.” It is full of the expression of different selves. Even the title declares a self, one with the multiple resonance, first of the Trakl poem with the same title, then of something which moors, of a kind of terrain, and of the Shakespearean, racial reference. The first line, “Am lean against,” breaks into an obscurity that works against the title’s multiple particularities. The three lines that

follow break away again, into something singular and clear—"the heavy hour / Hand," with the strangeness of "at urge" implying that the hour hand has some personality, enough for desire. From there, the poem explodes with different declarations of selves, past and present, but the juxtapositions, like "Am numb" and "Was shoulder and queer luck," don't make a coherent picture that could be taken to reflect changes in one speaker's emotional state. They advance an elaborate strangeness that twists the function of juxtaposition into this ecstasy of different selves: "slant," "fen," "Wind," "stranger," to name just a few (76).

The section of the poem that's most like an arc, that comes nearest to narrative, runs from line 16 through 21:

Ninety badly wounded men lay baying  
  
In the reddened reedy  
Hay of Saxony, was surgeon to their flinch and hoop, was hospice  
  
To their torso hall,  
Was numinous creature to their dying  
  
Off.

Brock-Broido's notes tell us that the poem, as a whole, was inspired by Trakl's experience as a medic in the war, so we might expect some coherence here, some linear scene that could be held onto, and taken as a kind of code for the poem, and maybe even for the book as a whole, a summation to read as the sneaky, secret presence of a lyric "I", one with a merely broken emotion that can be mapped onto the book's breaking from speaker to speaker. Instead, this section offers more division into different selves—the surgeon, then the hospice, then the numinous creature. This

poem as a whole, like this book as a whole, works so completely against the lyric speaker that the ending, “Was the bleating thing,” suggests, not, “I was frightened and victimized,” but, literally, “I was a lamb.” What the epic web represents are not senses of identity to be traced back to different emotions, but different identities (76).

I’m finally turning now to the metaphorical language that Brock-Broido uses in the book’s Preamble, to describe her work with personae; and I didn’t put it off to denigrate it, but because it seems, itself, to manifest different personae that the above discussions can inform. She refers most clearly to the starting point of the project that became *The Master Letters*: “On the Speaker: at first, she was a brood of voice . . .” That wonderful double connotation in “brood” suggests something held in, contained, and also a maternal, inhuman speaker; what comes into the departure from her turns human, daring, and piratical: “Raids on other work began . . .” Finally, the presence of an “I” comes as purifying agent and abbreviation: “Then, a lustrum into the composition, I signed a poem—L” (viii). The fact that this gives an incomplete picture of the poems’ contents not only suggests it as a persona poem, but as the kind of fiction-making that, maybe, ties to the poems’ epic relationship with audience. There is a show going on here, and no one, not reader, speakers, author, or even poems, is in it alone. Part of that show may include this idea that the autobiographical Lucie Brock-Broido, the “L,” enters the work at a late point. That may be true, and, certainly, elements like the elegiac late poems in the book correlate with events from her own life. Her use of “L,” though, instead of the “Lucie” that serves her well in *A Hunger’s* “Lucie & Her

Sisters,” hints at Dickinson’s web of relations, specifically Loo Norcross, addressed as “L—“ in a number of Dickinson’s letters. On the one hand, Brock-Broido may be seen divesting herself of personae until the autobiographical shows through; on the other, that arrival at “L” can be seen as the successful finish on a synthesis that Dickinson, and many others, including the reader, make possible.

Whenever I read the Preamble, I get catapulted back into that stance of searching the book for intertexts, finding the ones mentioned in the notes, like the Blake in “Pursuit of Happiness,” but hunting more for the unmentioned ones, some italicized to show me to Google them, others suggested by inflection. The Barthes-rooted impulse to read each poem as a weave of intertexts that will, in turn, unravel themselves becomes a hypnotic exercise, and one that puts off the question of what Brock-Broido is actually doing with others’ work. There are a lot of Dickinson quotations in *The Master Letters*, showing a kind of sustained attention to Dickinson that lands somewhere between immersion and invocation—Brock-Broido’s reference to her as “Queen Domestic, composing as she did from her looms & room & seclusion” holds the royal title for a reason (vii). But Brock-Broido’s kind of attribution does not quite come down to citing each quote and making a note; the quotes that she does attribute may be half of the ones in the book, and the notes may raise more questions than they answer. They can be strangely, almost fussily specific:

Line one is, in part, based on ED’s letter to Higginson, June 1869. In this letter, written after her third refusal to travel to Boston,

Dickinson has invited Higginson to Amherst, explaining that  
she is Home-bound . . . (82)

But this specificity doesn't contribute to meaning-making within the poem; it gives the note about the poem a weight that I, in turn, look for in the text that the note refers to. I look at Dickinson's letter, not for what it will tell me about Brock-Broido's poem, but for whatever significance Brock-Broido, the dedicated reader, might have found there. It's a mysterious way to work, and mystery in intertextuality always takes me back to Eliot, who made those notes to *The Waste Land* that may or may not have had anything to do with the poem in the overall thrust toward the Grail legend—he apparently never even cut the pages of his copy of *From Ritual to Romance*. Clearly, Brock-Broido did read and draw a lot from Dickinson's letters, and the notes do attribute some of those debts, but, like Eliot, she makes notes that send me elsewhere to read, instead of terminating some discussion about her poems and their quotes. If a poem is at its most epic when it is the least self-contained, then I can call both poets' intertextuality epic—it points away from their poems by refusing to illuminate any clear meaning bound up with its inheritance, and it suggests reading those intertexts by refusing closure in the notes.

Here, too, the word "web" becomes useful, since it suggests a system of connecting threads that hold no causal connection or hierarchy suggested by some masterful interpretation—when I read Dickinson's letters, I find that Brock-Broido has given me no key to them, no mapping of what doesn't matter in them, no way around re-enacting her immersion there. What I get is the sense of one poet present in the

other's work, suggesting something more overtly social than a conclusion about it: that I read her, that I dive in. What *The Master Letters* suggests is that this immersion, this absorption won't erode my own voice, though it might illuminate where other voices already compose its tones.

If "public" suggests "popular," then it's also good to look at the intertexts in this book that aren't canonical, or aren't poetry at all. This book may be the most canonical of her three, in the sense of setting its intertextuality most among poets seen as great—where *A Hunger* goes as far afield as Empedocles and Manute Bol, and *Trouble In Mind* takes the tack of its blues standard title through news archives' narratives of suffering, here there is a lot of Dickinson, a little Shakespeare, and a tendency to quote other poets who have lived in anthologies for a long time. In the midst of this richness of tradition, though, the allusions outside of it take on its air. She occupies a place between the High Modernists' remixing of the canon and Ashbery's careening gleefully free of it into "Daffy Duck in Hollywood"; she links the canonical with pop.

The best example of this linking in *The Master Letters* may be "You Can't Always Get What You Want;" my eye always finds it in the table of contents before I know it, and, before I know it, the poem's opening draws me in: "Light of your loins—I have been to the ruins & come back with art." It's partly drawn from *Lolita*, as Burt points out, and it's thick with an elegance that skirts parody but doesn't fall into it. What it does, like the notes to the book, is to give a kind of linkage that doesn't co-opt or proscribe. I won't listen to the Stones or read Nabokov with the sense of some great lens wedged between me and them; but I find them less rigidly stratified in my mind,

more in a harmony suggested by Brock-Broido's masterful lyricism. Later in the poem, the Stones return again, after one of my favorite parts:

Soon the tubercular dusk will enter my chamber like a bloodcolored candle snuffing out, this early in the afternoon. There are no sorcerers left, only mechanics to fix things as they break down.

You get what you need. (37)

The uprush of baroque lyricism, followed by that fragment of the song, seems to offer a mix of doom and matter-of-fact assurance, but it does something more core, more meaningful because free of meaning: it mixes the song with the high music of Brock-Broido's language, in my thoughts. That linkage, that harmony, for me, is an epic event: I am experiencing a multiplicity of voices from different registers, each one with its own, implied audience, so that a sense of presence comes with my reading, and connection with others who could be reading, too.

This epic ethic, of drawing on a broad swath of intertexts, may grow the most egalitarian with "Haute Couture Vulgarity." By this poem's point in the book, intertextual references encountered include Otis Redding, the Brothers Grimm, a sign at Ted Bundy's execution, an Eliotic touch of James Frazer, and Elvis, along with a number of poets. This poem takes its title from William Logan's review of Brock-Broido, and, doing so, adds another Barthesian facet to the one of intertextuality—the poem is framed, by the title, as someone's reading of her work. This might also be said to take intertextuality to its most public, hence epic, point, by including the audience as a presence on the page. The notes mention this quote, along with the one from

the same review, that Brock-Broido is the poet laureate of *People* magazine; they go on to cite an article from that magazine as inspiration for the poem—the ultimate in an epic shaping for its content, maybe. Of course, the poem acts as an argument against the review, transfiguring the news of some nuns and their tv into a richly baroque, superbly worded scene:

a mummer's wave to Media, the  
angst of evening news in the blackened blue horizon of a vulgar supper-  
time, at the long Holy table of austere woolly feast. There will be ruin in  
unwelcome worldliness.

There's a parody of the review's attitude inherent in the last sentence—worldliness as a threat to a poetry snobbery closed unto itself. The homage to Creeley that ends the fourth stanza—“*Then why not buy a goddamn big Winnebago—& Drive*”—echoes this democracy, one that includes the canon, hence Creeley, and the noncanonical, hence Creeley's Winnebago. The intertext that ends this poem acts as a signoff, and is Dickinson—“*All very naughty, & I am naughtiest of all*”—a way to play the poems' parody of obedience to poetic tradition, while showing how that tradition thrives on the haute naughtiness, the refusal to be embalmed by expectation, that makes a porous, public stance a kind of life force, and not capitulation. It's a force that, again, contravenes the sense of the poet as voice in isolation, and one that can transfigure even Logan's attack into a gesture, masterful and parodic, of welcome (44-45).

There's not a lot of Shakespeare in *The Master Letters*, compared to what there is of Dickinson, but what there is points back to Brock-Broido's epic sense of audience. Burt points out her use of *Romeo & Juliet*, and, before a little survey of that, it's worth

noting what she doesn't use. If she wanted to be more avant, and less pop, she could have either headed for *King Lear*, where Keats and sundry others have settled, or gone for something more charged with theory, like Carol Muske-Dukes adeptly does with Richard Burbage. Instead, she invokes the play that basically everyone knows, and, more than one like *Hamlet*, everyone feels some interpretive toehold in, through middle school English class or the Leonardo DiCaprio movie. It's also worth noting that her own notes mention the quotes from the play, as well as the only slightly more obscure one, from *The Tempest*, in "For the Lustrum"—"*Or else my project fails, which was to please*"(53). That one also reaches me easily, with its simplicity and the democratic nature of its aim, compared to, say, Eliot's wish to purify his tribe's dialect. There's a mix of ease and magic in it, as in the moments from *Romeo & Juliet*, partly because of where they're from, and partly because of what she does with them. The first is a title, "A Gloomng Peace This Morning With it Brings," again a relatively understandable line, and what follows, at first, colors in its thought:

The sedative of frost composes  
Its infinity of dormant melodramas

On the glass.

What follows takes this gorgeously baroque moment of objective correlation into a litany of the transcendental and everyday—"sieve / & specter, root & disposition"—and then the plumbing of a number of abstractions that can be tied back to romance—"submission is a form of brawling / Of the hearts, & one is Sped . . . ." The second quote from the play makes the play bookend the whole poem, parodying Mercutio with a

Shakespearean pun: “A plague on both our wills” (41). That last word may suggest both Shakespeare-as-persona and the multiplicity of identity that’s everywhere in the book; regardless, it hints, like the poem, at a reader who could be reading Shakespeare from a movie screen.

“That Same Vagabond Sweetness” does as well, by embedding easy-to-understand quotes from the Friar, like a refrain, around the middle of the poem:

A pack  
Of blessings lights upon my back.

*There art thou happy.*  
The noise of the world’s tracks

Made magical alarms me. *There*  
*Art thou happy, too.* (65)

Like the Prospero quote, and the Prince’s line used as the title, this represents simple, accessible Shakespeare. But the goal is not to make Shakespeare more accessible; this brings me to my last thought about her intertextuality, that really, ultimately bucks against Barthes. These poems don’t read or reinterpret any of their intertexts, or take any of them as master; they hyperlink other texts, embedding them so that they can be reread, not with any reductive interpretation, but with that light of Brock-Broido’s superb lyricism in their white spaces.

Another kind of light, in the sense of lightness of touch, can be seen in her treatment of America, which never emerges with the dead weight of an epic’s presentation, full of ponderous authority and metaphor-shored hegemony, but still plays a consistent role in her work. It can be seen as less a theme than a hoard of

aphorisms and panoramas, as early as *A Hunger*, where the persona of Birdie Africa portrays it as a “dark continent”(6), and the narrator of “Lucie & Her Sisters” refers with an archaic sort of abandon to herself “dislocated from the swarm on a flight from the desert of West Africa to the New World” (41). Most recently, “Freedom of Speech,” an elegy for Liam Rector, takes the work of its title into ekphrasis of autopsy photographs—freedom of speech as, partly, freedom of sight, and then of embedding what it finds in lines that fit her baroque tropes to his memory: “Your heart was a mess—/A mob of hoofprints where the skittish colts first learned to stand . . .” (345).

In *The Master Letters*, both of these treatments of America, as the location of archaism and aphorism, meet, in a way that can be seen as epic, not because of some nationalistic goal, but, again, because of how public, how broadly accessible their references are. It can’t be said that, with “Pursuit of Happiness,” she tries to enshrine some spirit of the Declaration of Independence; it can be said that the ease with which the reader is likely to recognize the title makes a wide kind of linkage among a potentially wide number of readers, and that the poem’s way of twisting free of that reference, in turn, frees the title from the archaically epic weight of transporting some transcendental ideal of America. What it gives us, instead, is just that pursuit that it refers to, of happiness with the language and play with persona that follow. Like LANGUAGE poetry is maybe meant to do, it becomes malleable linguistic material for a wide variety of readers by dodging away from the imposition of some particular meaning that would project a very specific reader from a narrow, ideologically ironclad point of view. Since the poem remains grounded in the public stance that its title

implies, it mixes the public with that really democratic activity, for epic work that undoes the imperial work of epic poems. It may be what Stewart sees as a mock epic function, of using epic devices against epic ends (298).

America doesn't have much of a presence in *The Master Letters* as far as page space goes; there is almost as much about Britain, and more of a cohesive focus on it in poems like "And Wylde for to Hold." But its distribution and depiction make it a singular presence, and one that builds on work done by Berryman. The ever-helpful Stephen Burt has written about links between Brock-Broido and Berryman in terms of their shared focus on fame, and their tendencies to subdivide the "I," and so making a connection between *The Master Letters* and *Dream Songs* ("My Name is Henri" 134). Herb Leibowitz mentioned some potential connection between her work and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which gives a precedent for her continued references to America as the New World, which outnumber her mentions of America by name in *The Master Letters*. If anything, she gives us a fragmentary view of the country in its colonial stage, and one that shifts uneasily among different narratives, to seem like the opposite of lustrum—a consistent note of obscurity, a baroque sort of murk into which we can read parody, as well as accessibility.

We can also read Brock-Broido's invocation of both Berryman and his mistress, not only because his poem is more explicitly set in that era, but because his America is only ever the New World, wintering and dark, and it's a kind of site of self-dissolution that lets him take shape as a Bradstreet that belongs explicitly to his own conjuration and hunger, not to the Browningsque work of dramatic monologue. His Bradstreet is

essentially a marionette, used by him for an extended lament over his own inability to take in the Modern, and the confessional kind of license that he demands, the implication that he feels worse about his treatment of her than his readers can, remains the moral problem that ghosts his Mr. Bones, as well. But his America stays a stage setting, a deliberately synthetic kind of backdrop, still too coherent to be seen as only language, but on its way to that state, of a signifier snarled among dissonant elements, a state of being free of meaning. He's finally unable to stop being Berryman, Agamemnon to history and its semiotic heroics, and so lapses back into that dead sense of epic, the one that builds nations on guilt kills.

But his New World almost becomes a space in which the reader can play with the linguistic relics of history, and the territory that he gains is not lost on Brock-Broido, even if he is unable to keep it open for himself, or for us. Her New World references ultimately eclipse his, as does her treatment of Bradstreet, partly by her masterful lyricism, and partly by the more deliberate erasure of his mark from her own representation of literary history. This erasure takes place in "Carnivorous," and in what she doesn't write about it in the notes to the poem. Its opening couplet opens up the New World for the second time in the book, after "A Brief History of Asylum":

I was lying loose from God. Strange is it not best  
Beloved, in this New World, in this skinny life,

Intemperate with chance, my spirit quickens . . . (18).

The notes mention Bradstreet—"the first line of the poem alludes to Anne Bradstreet's

confession”—but not Berryman (79). His lines, “For at fourteen / I found my heart more carnal and sitting loose from God,” quotes Bradstreet more directly, and Brock-Broido’s use of “carnall” later in “Carnivorous” points to his poem as a more immediate source for her (Berryman 34). But Brock-Broido’s notes, as mentioned before, seem less like lenses than maps by which to point the reader to other texts that should be read, meaning, I think, an invitation to read Bradstreet free of Berryman’s speech, and its hegemony. That Berryman himself helps to pave the way there is to his credit, and it is credit given by Brock-Broido in the interview cited by Burt, where she “credits [him], despite ‘all his hysteria,’ for some of her distinctive tones” (“My Name is Henri” 135). Her New World, also, has roots in his, and might even be said to bear his confessionalism’s martyrdom, his savagery toward himself, in its getting free of him, to move closer to the reader.

The four mentions of the New World in *The Master Letters* all take the same form, as mentions of a present space, one that the speaker is in right now, that is lost as soon as the next line’s shifting into a new space, or some statement obscuring the old one—it appears long enough to come undone, and so empower the reader to both find an easy, American foothold, and to enter the far more public space of language undone from the colonialism that she ritually enters and sheds. These moments don’t come frequently in *The Master Letters*, but they recur in three of the book’s four sections, webbing them together for a sense of the book as a whole as a way of breaking down Americana for the sake of its own freedom. The two already mentioned happen in the

first section, and the third, in “Fair Copy from a Fair World,” follows an extended view of a hallucinatory Middle America in “Bodhisattva,” where “Muddy Waters many-handed” blurs the view of a guitar player’s blurred hands into a kind of Shiva figure (34). Her fair world, then, reverts to a more archaic space, the prose epistle holding scythesmiths and muslin; the poem takes the stance of aubade and draws from the hoard of old tropes where Brock-Broido breaks the epistemic down toward the epic, and remakes her New World there:

At five they loose the coppery churchbells on the parish here. Sky the color of a seam of swallows rushing on this old New World. Color of thrush, color of thrush. Then, there is quiet. (35)

There is no real “here” in the poem, except for the poem itself; the settings in the stanzas preceding and following are undercut by the same, exquisite articulation that makes “color of thrush” obscure the parish where we almost find a place for narrative. Likewise, the quiet that she refers to, the then in which it unfolds, happens less in some narrative space than in the reading of the poem—then, in this sentence, the quiet that follows the almost making and gorgeous breaking of sense. What makes it epic, the sign of a new, webbed world, is its inaccessibility to narratives like the one from which Berryman began to break free—America circumscribed by the values of its founders, and the stories of their hard work on its virgin shores. Brock-Broido doesn’t need to make this remove explicit, because the grace of her language makes its own, epic space.

The same can be said of “Treason,” which I’m tempted to say tropes its counter-hegemonic work with its title; even if it doesn’t, it achieves a freedom of its own. Like “Fair Copy,” it stitches antique motifs together with a rough cluster of theme that also

undoes any abstraction of thematic meaning. It centers around elegy for patriarchal figures, and then delves, in its last stanza, into the territory from which she watches them dying off:

When you become ill in your peculiar bed, in the night's sweat of your dreamless sleeps, by nullifidian Winter, I will come to you from the New World, ministering curiosity, dilating trust, enforcing it. (54)

There are no referents in the poem by which to track the speaker's journey—the place away from the New World, where “you” live, has no name or set of coordinates that can be mapped. Again, her world is one unmoored from history, and seems to belong to nowhere so much as the page, where the reader can belong, in reading, more than to any one country, with its old, odd codes. That this displacement means freedom is a sign of its epic nature—I don't read her New World in isolation, and the speakers don't imply that it is being offered that way. I find it in a network of broken tropes, where the speakers and other readers can be found together, anchored by some sense of a common, epic territory that countries can't quite be.

The word “epic” will only work as a lens on Brock-Broido's work if it shows her ways of freeing the reader from the epic ethics that Stewart draws from Bakhtin to align with war and nation-building; web, though, hopefully undercuts that possibility, and suggests the rich interconnections bred by her work, that do counter hegemony, hierarchy, and that essentialism core to both. Also, Brock-Broido's own use of the word can stand as a testament to its usefulness outside of a dire tradition of poetic conservatism, and inside of her work. It comes in “Self-Portrait With Her Hair On Fire,”

midway through *Trouble In Mind*, and hopefully an extended quote will show some of the richness of the context:

I cannot tell you this, not now, not ever, even  
In the letter I have written that is so epic

That if you were to open it, the pages would sail out  
In the wind like confection moths being born

In the thousands out of their sacks, blowing  
Away . . . (29)

The epic letter's contents are not revealed, and won't be, except as the bristling of a possibility that won't come to be. But the act of imagination that shapes that possibility, and, more, the deeply felt sense of connection with an addressee who's allowed to enter in to this dream of a letter that will never be seen, rest on "epic" for a sense of scope.

Assigning meaning to this fictitious, epic letter would reduce its impact, but I can't help thinking of *The Master Letters* as epic epistle, one that undoes the constricting work of both epic and epistle. Also, it's interesting to look at her redefinition of epic around the baroque trope of the moths, multiple and uncontainable, finding a kind of place in "Away." At that moment, my ability to see them with her slips into a sense of identification with them and the text that's been transformed into them by simile; my attention takes on some of the characteristics that Gorgias assigns to language, of motion and direction with some autonomy; the fact that he mentions it in his defense of Helen gives it an epic kind of weight—language as incarnated by an epic element that can be separated from epic narrative, and the values driving it (31). That

might stand for the epic effect of *The Master Letters* on the individual reader, and it is one that lights up the rupture between us and the lead edifice epic seems to be: it draws me in, and makes a link that's diachronic and synchronic at the same time, in which the sense of connection among readers and texts current and past dares to rest on a pre-lyric space, in which there is no speaking that is not a speaking to. Reading alone, I'm not alone. I'm some of a "we."

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**my America**

His Negatives of Dusk

My camera slowed me down. It is always  
so. I pay the price of my love, —perhaps  
my only love.

—*Edward Weston*

. . . all that returns to me of her . . . are a pair  
of . . . burning eyes . . . . But . . .  
you are the image of me .

—Weston to his son, Cole

## Dusk

It coats the clouds over  
Glendale in steel. Now  
I hear, in memory, *Eye*  
*of the adulterer watches for dusk—*

that verse in a voice that must  
be my mother's—hushed, earnest  
as the burn of the streetlights as they  
shutter to life outside.

But, my only love, I live  
in the dusk of a model's body—  
in its glow, pose, and transubstantiation  
to the other life of a photograph.

It breaks the eye free  
of city lights, free  
of our fever for each other.  
You who own my sight—in your lens,

in its tension, correct my overcorrections—  
lead me to the rose water  
of the darkroom—though I am numb to you.

## Night

Tina mia, this is the night after  
the night after I left you—so beautifully  
borrachito—you slurred *viva la revolucion*,  
called us all *desdibujadas*, even me—

your spherical aberration, blur in your world.  
I should have said *vaya con dios*. Couldn't.  
Out of sight of you now—I feel  
like I am no longer me. Like “I”

is a negative of something else.

## Aperture

My light: these things  
I loved you never saw:  
the smallest apertures can

capture—from afternoon—  
the monochrome of moon  
on night tide. The dear

sheets of palladium paper,  
though they will cost you, lend  
a texture to the nude that make

looking a form of touch.  
There are the secrets that can  
only come from a teacher:

just a touch of salt of iron,  
kissed with silver nitrate, will  
give an image the freshness

of *yes*. When you end a session,  
and the object or model seems  
to want you—do what art

wants you to. Know that it's a  
light—know that your touch  
for awhile was an aperture—

letting light into my skin—that  
it rendered me a lens.

## Critique of the Rose

Nothing but light comes in at the eye—

is why Yeats was mistaken. Love enters at the lens—  
where the very thing you're taking takes you in  
and the picture holds that meeting of your stares

—its charm becomes a harmony. Do you see?

But the roses in your picture—though they mirror

the shapes of faces, and how they dissolve to  
become that abstraction called people —though  
they harmonize the shapes of naked space and

desert night, show the same need as the old,  
Pictorial world—they ask the eye to view them  
in a Romantic mist—view them into bloom.

That I gave them to you—may have been their

downfall. I won't send this letter to you.

## Form

There are no hours  
in still film.

There is no incoherence of

many points of view—as T.S. Eliot  
says of Bergson's words—that are  
as perfect as verses. There are only forms—  
lovely in their never moving. Only, by our  
understanding—

they may be raised  
or turned to rain.

The cypress on the highest overlook  
above the sea where I find my wide eye  
flying, free of the city, holds—in its one  
trunk—the likeness of a fire and our inner  
visions of outer space—that ultimate dark-  
room—stars—floating in its  
emulsion.

It was like you—holding  
so many forms

of flame in one body. That glow,  
my warmth, my form,

I was numb to your touch—I  
needed to be.

## Film

The motion picture that I saw last night—  
*Passion of Joan of Arc*—may be the best of a young art.  
It isn't from our country—or the one you've adopted—

where Diego's paintings hold the gaze of a public hungry,  
like you, for his view of revolution. It binds the eye  
like no still picture will—frames faces, so their forms

merge the portrait's aura with the art of stars. Joan—  
played by Maria something, from the country where you  
were born—wore tears the film lit silver—like a silver-

print would look on fire—its gelatin melting into rivulets.  
But that picture of you in tears—I took when they were  
only a glitter salting your skin—so the public would hunt

your face like a sky—for the one sign of rain. At that  
artistic distance—I could fix you without either of us  
burning.

## Two Nudes

Now,  
I find my Flora, poor, devoted girl, as I look  
through old negatives. In this one, she's  
the ghost of

Eve,  
pale hand to an apple, like her, made of silver  
light. The leaves above her head look like her eyes,  
blurred and

shimmering—  
gone—a garden I am exiled from. But I will  
make one of my new Eve—Charis, her apple  
missing

a bite—  
in the finished print, it will hold that same, blank  
radiance of a negative, of photographic paper  
before

the picture turned it dark.

You—my Modern garden—I left down south,  
and now you're exiled from that desert heaven,  
back to your mother country. There, please be  
as warm as I am in my desires—where I, like  
you—am free of me.

You, Nude

This nude of you—  
the best I took—  
was done from the azotea  
of our hacienda. If

you could look again  
at your counterpart's eyes—  
shuttered against the sun—  
full behind their lids

as the rose bulbs  
that lit our darkroom—  
and your lips blistered  
kiss-black—

you could tell me why  
your hands vanished  
under your perfect back  
as if tied by desire.

Thighs I could still whisper  
apart—why did they lay  
so far outside my frame?  
But what a pretty, prison

pattern radiates from  
her—a lattice of cracks  
in the patio and what a heart  
of hair at the root of her

torso—here, in this negative,  
transfigured into light.  
I will wash her from the glass—  
to make a new window

pane. Someday I may see you—  
through it—walking into me.

## Model

When you first sat to me,  
I still saw Modotti—only  
the model—only tiger-skinned

queen, the name that you grew  
in *The Tiger's Coat*, your stills—  
in all the moving picture magazines.

Now—when wind makes a model  
of the city in here, by sound—the  
traffic like breaking waves—or

frames, and by scent—the wash  
of exhaust, screened through the trees,  
mirrors the smells of your picture

being born—salt of halite,  
salt of iron—to bring me free  
of the forest of thought this negative

gives me. I'm a portrait of morning.  
Like a good camera—even thinking how  
my film could never still your picture—

I'm too Modern to be burning. Bright  
as a tiger—brighter. I wish it hurt.

## Darkroom

The rose bulb under the developer  
charges this dark  
with the color of a blush—of blood—of touch  
as it develops into red  
on the skin. Come home. Let mine in.

The men who came before me—Richey,  
left you a widow  
and the picture of him pensive and shadowed  
as Christ's father—  
as if he knew of us, and I know of no others.

Since me, they have been Modern, strong,  
rooted in the future—  
the revolution. You left them as I left you,  
like me—in exile.  
I say they couldn't take your gaze as I could.

Diego painted your hair over your eyes—  
a pour of dusk—  
the kind inside a rose bud—as diffused as he  
needed you to be.  
Who were the others? Picture—speak to me.

## Stay

You stay in the frame  
that my art made for you,  
its two views—siren of  
the giant, silent screens—  
Tina revolutionary, lover  
of the desert country—  
merged in this image  
of you—and more, the  
shine of cypress and sky-  
scraper come together  
in her—born in Pyro,  
on palladium paper. She's  
a frame for the gaze—she  
almost breaks its frame.

But your eyes were nothing  
like her undone suns.  
Your breasts were something  
like the country you  
took me to—its fluid sand  
the negative of desert  
wind. And as I have  
pretended you were her,  
pretend I'm a poet writing  
to you from the womb  
of the future. Pretend this  
white sheet of pencilled  
text is a lens wetted white  
with our shared breath.  
In that imaging—you're here.

Here, Stare

Yours woke me out of my  
Pictorial dreamtime—  
that was kindled by the portrait-  
maker's fever,

from centuries of framing mothers  
with children in gardens  
and on calvaries—I became the  
same demon as

machines and stones—but one  
that let me—like them—  
work. Was it in your demoness  
mummery—or when

you were me for El Dia de los Muertos—  
I couldn't look at you.  
I fear you grew to mirror me  
too much. I don't take self-

portraits, and could not take the one  
you had become. Picture, mirror,  
forgive me.

## My Sun, at Night

Even if you don't remember me,  
I do you. Even here—on the Point,  
alone—I see something in your bright,  
child's eyes—like an image of me.

They're not mine—should not be.  
I can't tell you how to use them—  
so listen to these notes knowing that—  
in art—I have made the mistakes any

camera can—not being human.  
Listen, I'm writing here where the sea  
is studio to the moon—writing you helps  
me leave the nightmare in my studio home

behind me—of my father, you in his lap,  
gun pointed at his eye. The critics liken my  
own eye to a gunsight. Yours are softer,  
like my mother's must have been before

their fire. That gentleness melts the lens.

## Order

But follow your own orders first—  
they're your eyes—not mine.  
And—sure—mine are part hers.  
Memory develops their darkness  
to mirror dark air around stars,  
that plays frame to their halos—

or anything banked so it will take  
an eternity to burn out—or to the  
flatness of a gun barrel, dark as the  
hide of a bible. Mine are lighter.  
The moon—that first aperture—  
shows the sort of order made here—

by tide on sand, by light—where it  
lands—and where it's missing. By  
day, I've captured the pools water  
has developed in stone, over millenia—  
shown their concentric rings,  
where you can see how they've

grown, how short our lives are—  
reflected in them. If you can show  
the thing itself, and so its eternity—  
you'll know an order higher than mine.

## Work

—but I'm nightfishing with sight as my line  
—finding, in a tide pool as lovely as the tubs  
of our darkroom, a something that grabs  
my glance—a pair of ghost crabs, in the phantom tango

of romance—art to me—harmony to them.

Don't be afraid to stand—like I am, like a tripod  
—or to go on your knees, for the shot you can't  
reach by other means. There, pull the aperture  
close to your open eye—in your mind,—I

mean like dusk—like us—let one be mirror  
to the other. Looking, break in.

### Obsession

The fog soft-washes the cypresses metallic,  
like the negative of the skeletal car—half-buried  
in beach sand—that I took in what they will call  
my dark period. Its twist and dissolve could

keep me here a year—looking for the perfect  
print—raptured, by always chasing, never taking

its Modern form of dream. Don't stay as deep  
as me in the fever—every waking second—of  
the work. It will chill the radiance in pictures  
now fired by your childlike wonder. Make that

glowing a focus—controlled by your love of this

art, of its vision—then let it intensify. Make yourself

look into him—your model—your other—and,  
last, in looking—make yourself into a frame.  
Don't be a machine—the image of me that has  
kept me free of love. I won't let you. I won't

## Camera

When she was gone,

I became numb—  
knowing only by the smoke of my own breath,

yes, Father had let the wood in the stove burn down.  
He couldn't build it any more than meet my eyes.

To him—they were hers—

the relations memory needs to make with what we see.  
Unseen, I took my life with automatic hands—

clear as a lens, and unfeeling. If Kodak had not outgrown  
them, I'd give you the Bull's Eye he left on my bed, then.

Its hide was black as a casket—

but rounded like a house's corners, and holding the text-  
ure that the photo of a rose buries in the eye. Pick

one of its children—one that fits in your hands, and feels,  
not automatic, but living. It will hold your hands

with its order, like a father's,

and seem to lead you. Let it

lead you to me.

## Love

If I could lead you here,  
you'd see this lunar syn-  
thesis—of glitter onto water—

is mirrored by cities  
of plankton, phosphorescing  
on the surface—all those

house lights—living—moving.  
In the lens's own eyes, our lives—  
like theirs—may flare.

If I miss you—if you are  
an image of the distance  
I have been from me—still,

there is your stare (yes, is)  
in the likeness of sky on sea.  
Where you are—in the heaven

or negative of my imagination,  
if in a window filmed with cold—  
in a dark room—there's a star

that can be found only by your art.  
Lean to the lens. Wait for it  
to take on its own brightness.

Focus on your own sight—  
the first twist of the light.

One

In the harmony of thought and writing,  
you're here—

finding your way over stones to feel  
the tide climb your ankles. With me,

you breathe in the love smell of the sea—  
let it develop

into pictures of lovers—of birth—of  
cities. That scent, lensed into thought—

it renews the moon, and I can see its own  
seas as—not eyes,

but the negatives of dusk, of leaves. Stay  
safe in your dreams. I imagine the cameras

you invent there—slow enough to show how  
rust grows on iron,

into its form, showing how form is nothing  
but what it holds—fast enough to capture

the not-quite-static lives of planets—or of an  
aperture small enough

that, in it, everything becomes a sun.  
Image of the One, you—like light—

were kindled in a vision too bright to be mine.  
I will whisper

the splinters of a prayer—into waves  
that hold a sunrise the color of skin,

that you always live in someone's Eye.

my America

Among the lesser known works of American photography is a . . . Limited Editions Club publication of *Leaves of Grass* with reproductions of . . . photographs by Edward Weston. But the group . . . has hardly been noticed and commented upon . . .

—*Alan Trachtenberg*

This I should tell you; there will be no attempt to “illustrate,” no symbolism except perhaps in a very broad sense, no effort to recapture Whitman’s day . . . with *my America* . . .

—*Edward Weston*

## California

They have asked me to illustrate his—  
are they poems—they look  
more like the captions from a book of photographs  
not to be made. So I'm  
going from the camarado California's shores were  
—Point Lobos holds still as many images as waves  
make lensing its broken  
stones—the tide of women who made my gaze  
an imitation fate.  
Here I have celebrated myself—alone.

I write myself in this—what is this I'm writing—  
not an entry in those daybooks  
I develop my myth in—to be sold as  
the great photographer's journals.  
This writing is different—not a close-up.  
Not apotheosis. Why do I feel that way  
as well about the pictures to be taken—  
that they will be forgotten as too unweston—  
why is that my hope?  
I will take them to have taken them—not  
that they may be seen.

Charis is starting Walt—our car—downshore. We're almost  
gone—like the time of the photographer—who is  
hungry to justify the ways of eye to mind. I—we—  
will drive past maps. Blind.

## Nevada

Here the old tropes are broken down to ghosts—  
or are they broken open?  
The ones I—not loved—but used to become—  
I have been frame-numb—a mechanical  
eye. My hands shake now training the Graflex  
on these ruinescent dunes—  
none of them shaped like anything—no  
signifying—no bones. They make  
a broken chain up to the city—  
heat waves unfocus its buildings into mist.

My light is spent—the sky's kind of light,  
since an aperture only opens so far.  
Too, whatever silver nitrate kind of light in  
me used to bloom whenever my gaze made  
a thing into its image.  
Beauty was never my horizon—only that  
glow that said “there is the picture waiting  
in the shape of that naked branch”  
—“not on the surface but the unseen depth  
mapped by the shadow on the nude”—  
“it is waiting to be taken”—  
each shape only pointed past itself—  
the photographer's gaze hazing through  
earth into the heaven of a negative—  
as cold as light—like light invisible.

Here we will camp for the night.

## Arizona

The reservations are silverprints—but  
rust-stained with clay—earth turned  
into gray-red fields by how many million  
years of this heat-boned wind, now  
flowered here and there into the gas pump,  
the store front.

When we buy supplies, the Navajo girl at  
the counter turns her eyes to the floor—as I  
have ordered how many models to do.

There was never presence in a  
photograph—neither did I find it a form of  
mourning for the thing it depicted—I know  
no presence or mourning—I am numb.  
Was. But this state—this desert—is a form  
of motion—I shoot sky that holds the ghosts  
of old tribes—I frame them by some force  
I don't quite know. The pictures I make are  
not me. Not Westons. But they never  
were. I never was me.

## New Mexico

Its newness is fixed in its many  
stones—hills full, bearing shapes of half-  
turned faces, muscles, calla lilies fused  
with nudes—we let Walt coast past them to  
recover—we lens this odyssey in the haze  
he makes.

Our car bearing his name—like our nation  
in this war—like the photographer's steel-  
eyed need to hound the modern—  
it misfits, it is dissonance. The idea,  
between us, developed like a smile.  
Hers mirrors mine—a child's.

But this state—as we've driven—has faded  
our names. They don't mean.  
They don't be.  
They may frame us, but, when I tell myself,  
sing to myself, "Edward," it blurs and  
burns as the stones flow  
backward, past us. Santa Fe, heat-wet  
streets all populated with contrasts—the  
coppery vendors of peppers and fish,  
eddies of sweating white men whose power  
surrounds them like towns that house  
fever dreams, in galleries in which pictures  
hang, flags of the countries only  
to be visited by eye.

## Texas

The land in this state looks  
closest to gold, but it sits with its  
grass so mowed down by the sun, its every  
shallow hill not like the contours  
of a body to me now, more echoes  
of some planetscape mixing lunar dunes  
with the tiny, light-eating planes inside the  
eye—golding over when just this type  
of light drives in.

Charis—metallescent with sweat—  
fixes me with a gaze that looks like mine—  
subtext of a shutter clicking—her  
composition light—her body blank  
to me. We pour through cow towns  
where crutch-framed soldiers hunker,  
suffer—eyes recording nothing but what  
was—hands jerking the rifles their crutches  
become as Walt shoots backfiring past.

I find myself shifting  
tripods in the back seat—then my shaking  
hand is keeping hers on the wheel  
and squeezing its grip  
so that we won't slow down.  
Their medals are the color of the dust.  
I would only hold them in its filter.

I dream—that night—that I'm Matthew  
Brady—taking pictures of the Union dead.  
Whitman always follows me—finding  
muses' mouths in soldiers' wounds.

## Louisiana

This is someway  
I have never travelled—this high a  
highway—over water so full of trees—  
it glitters like salts of the developer  
we didn't bring with us—the road pours us  
toward New Orleans.

The cypress leaves shiver apart. The knees  
they shade glow—looking far older  
than us, far more contorted than  
our war on old forms—only to be  
taken by an aperture of their own era—  
only obscura. I don't know where  
we are. I love driving—  
with my mind's eye closed.

So why do I carry this feeling with me—  
dark-filtered thrill framed by such a numb,  
sweetening as we're here  
in the famous graveyard—  
each mausoleum camera-square,  
with so many images in them sealed  
free of the reach of me—raptured.  
They say, "photographer, can you see  
need?" But is that what draws  
me to the Quarter, too—the crosses  
fogged by Spanish moss, the  
fleurs-de-lys burdened with beads—  
the mazes of angel faces—the levee where  
the water trembles like the tender lens  
buried inside the eye—oh  
home—why—

*[cont'd.]*

Photography was poetry first—is it  
still—and are they in mutual  
independence, as James has it,  
when one finds, as I do near the sea,  
language webbing everything into pictures  
waiting to be taken—  
everything here flooded by that  
style of light—that lets us praise  
the fameless now—lets us turn  
back into the crowd.

## Mississippi

Money ran down low enough to pull  
us to the road—that now plows  
through these rowan oaks—this frame  
of rain—we seem to be still—  
flashing over water—windshield  
a blurred world—kinematic—like that  
baptismal pull of the darkroom trough  
where the image is reborn,  
this photo of a road recedes  
in sheets of water—we are driving into  
a picture—and we can barely see.

One feels so pulled under by  
rain that great—it mutes thought  
into that flat awe lovemaking used to  
break me into—some hush come  
from the mental and chemical—  
if they're not the same.  
A Kodak sort of soul—storm  
whited out by overexposure.

But, oh Lord, no more. I grow—  
not old—past saturation with that  
post-Romantic sort of want—  
it asks for baptism, but takes it  
in fragments of ice—splinter lens of sex—  
crushed shutter of love—no whole  
forms. Let us worship the rift  
between these pieces. Call it lyric—  
but it is film. Amen.

## Kentucky

Into this garden of a state—we are  
charging as light might into an infant's  
eye—how it must plow in that broken-  
open ground, burning the nerves  
it surges into—how it might never  
age there as the inner eye never  
changes. And have I?

The images these mountains house.  
They are everything I've seen—been.  
They are the furrows of the California fields  
I would look through, chest in the dust.  
They are the arcs of the first girl  
model who sat to me nude, when she had  
shed her fear, and I was numb to mine.  
They are the stars that have  
crashed into a secret part of our country.  
They are more alive than me.  
We are like things they think into being,  
and we only know how to hold  
onto this horizon-anchored course  
they end and end. But  
the rush and blink of shutter click—  
the image in its fission with the flesh  
of a negative—inseparable from our  
charge toward their slopes—they are  
negations, of shape, of association.

So many shots taken in this state  
will not be sent back to the darkroom—the  
owl in the hollow tree—woods that spread  
their feral selves over a river of drifters—  
the small towns falling back into the  
mountains' shadow gowns—movie palaces  
where we see photography woven into one  
stream for a story—  
—the dream-numb  
it holds us floating in, like mountains' sight.

## Georgia

Here, war forces us to slow down—  
its glisten in the eyes of the women I find  
working in government stores,  
the offices where we search permission  
to shoot the most American shapes—  
the wide streets where light  
meters the cars,

the shop where the war in our own engine  
shows itself as smoking, broken pistons—  
fixed in this state of foundations and slow  
change—we, too, made new—  
or only broken down.

Images rain like tracer fire  
into our days here—glory of the  
storyteller in the shelter  
of a broken porch—war acted out  
by his hands  
making shadow soldiers on the old wall—  
Sunday dinner in our honor where  
Mayor No One says a blessing under his  
breath so no one will think to look for his  
weeping—  
The segregated everything—  
my wife at rest in the scattered bloom of  
afternoon—  
my wife living the truth of muse to me—  
my blind state when I put away my  
equipment—its way of calling me always  
back—

then the vision blinding everyone—  
soldiers coming home. Then—for us—  
back to the soldier's home  
of the open road.

## South Carolina

Here where the powerlines die  
down to sky alone—as it meets the sea  
and they are made by haze  
into one panchromatic sheet for the eye to  
develop whatever of memory breathes—  
let whatever of us rests—rest.

Gulls are falling like giant  
handfuls of developer—salt of iron—salt of  
saintlike halite—developing  
an empty self that Whitman's endless yes to  
mind has sired us away from—  
this isn't his, this manifest destiny of  
coming undone—

I shoot mine with my naked eye on  
sky and waves—developing them in that  
always-breaking frame—slow—  
moment by moment—  
foam follows foam—  
now rising higher than my  
blood ever did in my tide of women—  
body as prosthesis of the camera.

What broken roll of a wave  
makes me see her here who died so few  
years ago—Tina mia—mi camerado—  
saint of the nation made of art with the  
spherical aberrations of tradition cleansed  
away—  
she was the gaze made flesh—  
Tina, mia, mirame.  
The sea is blinding me—but  
I can't close my own eyes.

## North Carolina

We have been driving up America's  
first coast with our car shaking all quiet  
away—  
making the drown sound wind will  
when lensed by high waves—  
binding the senses the way they can seem  
to cleave to one seen thing—  
if one can cling and be free of desire—  
if that isn't a kind of blindness.

The waves take my gaze and re-  
fract it back in ruins. My thoughts pause—  
their negatives fade away—  
and in that bath of the planet—  
gray-scaled by gray sky—see this silver  
flicker like the beginning of the first  
motion picture.

Which one was the first to deliver me from  
being here—was it Birth of a Nation—  
the close-ups made faces  
at once giant and shining and gone—like  
Mother's in her fever's deeps.

She could not be reached  
in the last week of it—her eyes  
would blaze—its twin slaves—  
and I was just another picture  
they cast back into the outer darkness—  
and so I waited with her  
to be taken—taken under.

## West Virginia

How blurry our journey  
is making me—or is it that I feel my lack of  
focus—out of the glass trance the west is?  
My wife beside me—icon at rest—  
even beaquesque in sleep—  
I have made a place of—to always  
journey in but not quite find—  
developing the fever for leaving her in the  
lens flesh is—like my poor Flora—  
who played Eve for me in my  
misty-eyed beginnings—

there—hide your clothes  
outside of the frame—look  
like you're hiding nothing—put  
your hand up to that apple a little  
too far from you—don't take it—don't  
eat—I'm taking you  
for them to eat by sight.

We were premodern—the old  
Pictorialists  
with gray faith in the picture as  
the place where paintings met world,  
without that sense of selflessness  
that makes a painting sing.  
I felt them sheltered in her own,  
too-noble form. I self-exiled  
from the garden I had made of her.  
She raised our boys—  
but they were still small images of me.

*[cont'd.]*

What work have I done among loved ones—  
to help them—to  
shelter them from numbness  
instead of from me?  
Some stumbling thing in me  
brings back the vision of a poor winter—  
when I had to erase  
negatives to use their glass as windows—  
how the frost brought out  
the trace shapes that remained—  
bodies—faces too—  
I saw through.

Sex has been another  
way to block the light—the hood  
thrown over the photographer's head  
so that he might be projected  
into the work itself—  
flash of powder in the nerves—  
another picture—another her.

But this state that bears  
a cut part of my name—  
it holds more soldiers floating  
in the image of home—they  
look at me  
with the same sort of war against feeling  
that I know as my own.  
Whatever different rains of tracer fire—  
they share the same breaking  
as me. May we share  
a way of breaking free.

I'm tired—I need her  
to hold me—if this breaking frame  
feeling is need. I would tell her—  
but can't quite say her name—  
because it is my own.

## Indiana

Young buds of corn are starting to spark here—  
so deep their green—  
they bring back the auroras  
made by rare plankton constellating the sea  
near Mexico—more, the forms of so many  
shapes I've remade in gray—  
graven there in still film—still now as this  
field in which wind makes  
not-quite-breaking waves.

Leaving brand names' landscapes,  
we've been delivered  
into this—is it still—when the field seems  
to—not speak—but show our speaking  
as almost nothing—a  
hushing—spark to a star?

We're a state away  
from what must be called home—  
where the boy whose blindness I am was raised—  
where Mother turned into a  
burning—whiting it out—my beginning—  
so that going back would mean  
leaving the me that I am—dam against  
that past—I am the image  
living in the camera—  
not quite the thing depicted—  
not quite its transfiguration  
into negative—what would I be with  
that me reattached—no—  
we won't go there. We stay  
in this place away from here.  
I ask her if she sees  
the corn stirred as if by a child-sized me  
wandering in its sea—  
where he can breathe. She says yes.

## Massachusetts

It hit when we drove over the border—  
Whitman was a fiction.  
His lines were captions  
raptured from pictures, his self  
a negative to Brady's way of making them—  
the war dead all piled into  
forms less of presence than  
ghosts or                    foundation stones.

Formlessness has presented us  
more with a chorus of broken forms—  
I see or some you sees through me—  
and my old obsession with the thing itself—  
quintessence—  
turns on Boston Commons into so many  
splinters of ice—look how the crowds  
house real children, with their own ways  
of gazing at the bay so its light stays with them—  
the ships in it mix with their own care.  
They are here—and there.

Have I made  
my own sons into ghosts of me—  
by my living this fiction—  
self as motion  
and mechanism—only holding onto letting go  
of what clings too much?  
They seek me out—they try—they become  
too much like me—making ghost cities  
out of women—making images home.  
I would go back to them—  
if any self of mine had ever been with them.

*[cont'd.]*

Now on an unbroken torrent of road—  
a tarmac arc that runs us  
up north—I seem to be dreaming—  
seeing as hallucinations or film in the  
cinemagic imagination—  
a broken cosmos of all my still lives—  
nudes fused to cityscapes to the smolder-colored  
bells of the peppers critics have sexed to death  
to ruined temples of the sun  
to the many planes skin colonized  
by my gaze—so many  
broken—or is it open—roads.

“Go forward”—that’s my wife.  
How long have I not been moving?  
How long has nothing been moving me?

Vermont

The mountains here make broken outlines  
of a drowned kind  
I dimly recognize—then lose in the jade  
haze they exude and I think into—then  
focus—yes—their caldera walls hold ice  
in mercury circuitries—  
like wiring on the slides of blue-black rock—  
like my father's factory looked to me—  
before I knew how to look through things.

The single tree so near the nearest peak—  
form of a nerve  
then form of a girl—hides her  
bark in a few nitrate-silver leaves—  
like a wife hiding her face from the soldier  
holding his condolences in—  
her husband still alive in that space  
out of time. Why do I now find her  
at that slant of mountain too high—  
like the crown of my  
father's head was—for me to quite touch—  
even by sight?

He bought me the Bull's Eye when she died—  
shape of a casket—size of my joined  
hands—saying look through that  
dark glass and you'll see.  
The lens was mine before I was the lens.  
His voice was of one gone.  
The frame of him remained.

## New Jersey

Here the factories look  
like steps the eye might climb  
toward the storm of New York—  
near a sea we vision full of enemy submarines—  
would they look like iron-gray  
mermaids—there where  
the waves make a gray roil  
kind of like film touched with a match.

But now the towers before us are  
pouring up bone-opal coal smoke—like  
my thousand cloud studies have all been  
traced to this one source—here  
where their forms are born—or—no—  
where the same shapes that clouds make  
may be seen in the deepest  
work of machines—form was  
made by that blank faith  
I may now leave behind me.

But making is the way of this state—  
factories past factories—  
smoke molding smoke—so I see  
my own mechanics no more as past—  
if I don't burn these  
pieces of writing—these photopoems—  
or—no—these ends of me—  
who will you be who read them—  
and what technic will you take away—  
and if it doesn't start with some  
lessening of self—let that be  
the stutter that keeps you  
from capturing the perfect aperture—  
let the best lens be the one the image picks.

New York

On a balcony too high to see  
its people now—I take long shots  
of a man who looks to both of us

like Whitman's negative. His hair  
is short and neat as mine once was—  
cut by the first her one morning

before church. The light makes his  
face a profile on a Roman coin—silver  
developed by volcanic ash into ghost

skin—given completely to this real—  
here—city. There are no towers  
up here but us—but all that keeps us

up here is holding on. One look too  
loving—in one wind—we're gone.

He aims to stay the king of industry—like  
the kind the ones who came before me  
framed in mist—not Steichen  
with his iconicities—not Stieglitz  
with his infinite city and no living citizen—  
how have I been plucked from them to be me—  
to have my eye? Who am I to be in their city?  
No—I went close to take one of his face—and I know.  
No—I am on some plateau above know.  
He is Whitman in his way  
of leaning into space—as if it can't help but hold him  
because of his need. They are the same kind of child—  
I know by how like them I am.  
My own hold on her most  
demon hours of fever—when it was a lens

*[cont'd., no stanza break]*

between us. Then I learned to lean  
into my own vision—to believe  
it was my own. But there she was—is—  
a city burning down. Hold me up—  
however much it sings. Hold me down.  
Those were her words.  
I see them now, when I can't look at her.

## Maine

We need no figure  
to mark the furthest point of our  
journey here—though we've now to turn  
around and find a road that circles the City—  
then to California,  
I feel some burning thing when thinking back to you,  
like the bark of those trees we hold onto  
so the sea below the Point Lobos cliffs  
won't pull us in. It stays  
under the skin.

Maybe I'm writing these to you—  
beside me—love—  
shudder of those stone thunderclouds  
molten over the coast—  
wind that pulls the water into roads  
and over into broken borders—  
all those eyeless, even i-less life  
forms torrent in—only  
kelped shells to hold them—only  
the glowing  
salt creates against their many-tinted skins.

Maybe the numb I now let go  
has been the holy kind  
like the inside of an eye's—feel—that kind of tide—  
may be what pulls us to the lighthouse  
at the end of the jetty  
—its beacon drowns the horizon—  
down to its smallest citizens—  
and so our stumble up the crumbling steps  
is illuminated too—  
there are no pictures to be taken here—  
only this blind eye—making day—  
taking nothing—but loving.

To protect them from the perils of publication  
he slashed at his Daybooks with a razor.

—Nancy Newhall

These fragments are cut out of what history will see  
as me—the technician—the owner of a vision—the  
one who gave photography a body—the machine.

These writings, these are from an image  
of a man, developed by life in the way that eyes  
do—without mother—without a country—in the  
solution that darkrooms mark with the rose color  
of burning oil or cooling blood,

—art has none of its own  
moral force—like fire, already blind and sometimes  
blinding, it hunts its own home.

I am numb when I'm unseen. I'm  
only me when I'm seeing.

But Blake also says "Every Eye sees differently as  
the Eye." In the studio—in the camera's baptism  
of flash and afterimage—whose Eye have I become

But photography never turned into the work of the  
eye alone—the whole body is folded into its  
making

And the lens has no essential sight—it defers to ours

the photographer should  
not be like a filament of platinum—whatever Eliot said about  
poets—but an aperture—capturing nothing

photography is poetry's ghost  
photography is dead—so I hold it close

I am not Edward Weston—  
nor was I meant to be. I am like a camera hidden in  
skin—buried there to take the pictures that only the  
eye can find

I have been—behind my camera—like a chameleon—taking on  
the shape of what sits in my field of vision—but I have no hue  
of my own—no pattern to return to when this transform is over

The critics will miss it—what my best work unearths

And I can see Charis—her irises are tintypes  
of midnight—her stare seems to pin me to me—I  
will marry her. Though, like a lens, my  
edges might distort her

photography hunts unreality—like  
all of the mechanical arts—and  
they are all mechanical—even the  
one of coming undone

Now—the clouds grow—are molded into  
ghost studios over Tropicó—models made naked  
and shaped by the wind—I see my Tina there—  
my eyes take the most ancient kind of flight

in her body made of white water—why  
do I find myself praying to her

the best photographers are not masters of themselves—they are  
mastered—but by what

I have never loved anyone—except in that  
framed way of a scene to which the camera warms  
like a living thing—all of the elements of you are  
in place—nothing troubling in the mise-en-scene—  
I take you—one shot—two—then you may go  
away

I have not loved my son at all—but when  
he follows me to the beach—holding my  
old Kodak Bull's Eye—I see me—I can't  
breathe

a photographer is always invisible—and only at that point  
in which the photograph eclipses him—or her—and at  
that point I have lived—almost lived

each photograph maps what was lost—not like an elegy—but a map  
back to it

To her alone—and Charis—I said,  
after *Pose*, after their clothes had buried the floor,  
*Open your eyes*

Of course I was her fever—Mother's—her murderer—  
that red developer in her blood that made it run lava-  
hot—that was my child mind's secret—and it still is—  
and I am still that child—burning

However many women I manipulate—and multiplied  
into the nudes the public needs from me—there will be  
millions—I will still be seeking some sympathy—some  
completion in them  
the Modern deifying of desire is my work—  
or is it that sanctity coming undone

The Virgin's portrait I develop in my mind—  
overexposed in the darkroom, it washes her out like  
ash & blinds the viewer out of the power of any gaze.  
Is it freedom—is she looking back at me?

I imagine it panchromatic—the rush of color  
there—the fade-red of blood painted on wood, and  
her robe is no longer the exact black of a dilated eye,  
but a dark that holds so many colors.

Or she is herself—a quintessence in which  
dusk and love can run as one. The critics won't be  
riveted—this image will never be taken by them  
as image of my life. They'll see her in their dark-  
room dreams. I don't take her—I take her picture.

the photographer's eye—in a fine kind of frenzy—rolls  
from his own apparatus to its limits—and makes the  
known unknown

## VITA

Chad Parmenter is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the University of Missouri creative writing program. His poems have won the 2005 poetry contest of *Hotel Amerika*, and the 2007 poetry contest of *The Black Warrior Review*. They have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Harvard Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Pleiades*, *Quarterly West*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Literary Review*, and elsewhere, including *The Best American Poetry 2007*. His critical article, "Eliot's Echo Rhetoric," appeared in *Yeats Eliot Review*, and a paper based on it won the T.S. Eliot Society's Fathman Award. He served as Assistant Director of the University of Missouri's Center for the Literary Arts, where he co-founded the Center Reading Series.