MICHELANGELO’S SEIZURE

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of English

by

STEVE GEHRKE

Dr. Lynne McMahon, Dissertation Supervisor
August 2006
The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
dissertation entitled

MICHELANGELO’S SEIZURE

Presented by Steve Gehrke
A candidate for the degree of Doctor of English
And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

_______________________________________
Professor Lynne McMahon

_______________________________________
Professor Francis Dickey

_______________________________________
Professor Tim Materer

_______________________________________
Professor Marly Swick

_______________________________________
Professor David Crespy
For Nadine and Chloe.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Lynne McMahon and Sherod Santos, not only for helping to form and re-form this dissertation, but for building a strong and nurturing department for young writers in Missouri. They will be sorely missed upon their retirements. Thanks, too, to all my classmates who gave the manuscript such close attention. None was more valuable than Jason Koo, who not only read many of these poems in their infancy, but also listened to me complain endlessly about the difficulties of poetic composition, about how I might never write again, or worse, write poorly for the rest of my life. Thanks, too, to Jessica Garratt, for helping along several of the early poems from the book. And finally, of course, to Nadine Meyer, who read and re-read and read again every poem in the collection, and who pushed me to fine-tune the poems yet again when I was ready to abandon them. Her presence is everywhere in this book.
MICHELANGELO’S SEIZURE

Steve Gehrke

Dr. Lynne McMahon, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The following is a book of poems based on the lives of several classic and contemporary painters, including Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Goya, Monet, Renoir, Magritte and many others. While the poems participate in the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, they also engage with each painters’ biography, as a lens through which to see each work. In the poems, many of the painters are reacting to a dramatic loss, transforming the pain of personal tragedy into art.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................... ii

ABSTRACT............................................................................................................... iii

1. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION............................................................................... 1
   “The Imagined Wound”

2. MICHELANGELO’S SEIZURES.......................................................................... 34

VITA....................................................................................................................... 107
In his essay, *Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh*, Georges Bataille connects the auto-mutilation instinct to ancient sacrificial rituals meant to intercede in the relationship between man and God. Bataille claims that, in acts of self-mutilation, “all the different elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice…enter into each other and become mixed together” in the self-mutilator’s psyche (Bataille 67). According to Bataille, “the demented part of the sacrificial domain,” (69) is the only one still visible to the exterior world. The self-mutilator, in other words, has condensed the ritual into an abnormal psychological instinct by becoming God, sacrificer and victim. Modern psychologists, on the other hand, point to the dual nature of self-mutilation, one that allows self-mutilators to “escape frightening feelings of emptiness, deadness, or depersonalization,” while at the same time “coercing family, friends and involved clinicians” (Rosen vii). While neither theory deals directly with artistic representations of self-mutilation (Bataille seems more interested in Van Gogh’s personality than his paintings) both are useful in considering self-portraits of self-mutilation (henceforth: SPSM), which, I will argue, mirror actual acts of self-mutilation in their political and psychological functions. Additionally, I believe these portraits preserve the ritualistic elements of a sacrifice, one that intervenes in the relationship, not between God and man,
but between artist and viewer.

**Typology**

Psychological professionals tend to categorize self-mutilation according to extremity (benign, agitated, crisis, psychotic) or cultural context (religious self-mutilation, puberty rights, self-mutilation in psychotic patients) (Rosen 5). Neither of these is particularly effective in typing self-portraits of mutilation. Benign acts (nail biting, ear piercing) tend to be inconsequential factors in portraits, while agitated acts (gang-related tattoos, punk-rock piercings) tend to reflect social allegiances more readily than a desire for self-harm. This leaves only the overly broad categories of crises and psychotic self-mutilation.

It might be more useful to type portraits according to their cultural context. There are a large number of feminists SPSM, for instance, and SPSM in which the artist has presented himself as a figure from Christianity. This technique might also be appealing to the art historian, as it relegates SPSM into already existing categories. But it leaves too many paintings either unaccounted for (where, for instance, to place Courbet’s *The Wounded Man?*) or as the single representation from their group. It muffles, rather than exposes, the links between SPSM.

Though the role of fragmentation in modernity would require a book-length study of its own, it’s clear that modernity’s dedication to the fragment in all its forms, including the bodily fragment, make it the ideal breeding ground for SPSM, and indeed the
majority of SPSM are found in 20th century art. SPSM are by no means limited to the 20th century, however. They can be found back as far as the 1500s, when self-portraiture moved from “the margins of Western art to center-stage” (Bell 6). Typing the paintings by period may be useful in revealing a periods’ attitudes towards portraiture, conceptions of self, and the role of the artist in society, but it absorbs SPSM into a time period rather than revealing the interconnections that I believe exist between them throughout time.

For instance, during the Renaissance, Cristofano Allori painted his likeness onto the head of Holofernes, but Francisco Goya also portrays himself as Holofernes in 1820. Egon Scheile drew himself as St. Sebastian pierced by arrows three hundred years after Michelangelo inserted his face onto the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew. Gustave Courbet and Frida Kahlo both mutilated their own self-image in response to lost love. Rudolf Schwartzkogler, and the Viennesse actionists, engaged in actual self-mutilation nearly a hundred years after Van Gogh cut off a piece of his own ear and gave it to a prostitute.

Typing the paintings by period would dilute these connections.

Instead, I will type the portraits according to the primary function of the mutilation: psychological, political or artistic. While these categories are meant to illuminate similarities between SPSM across time-periods and stylistic trends, it is important to remember that each painting not only is defined by, but also helps define, each category.

In portraits in which the primary function of the mutilation is psychological, the imagined wound is symbolic of the artist’s psyche. While this may be true of other SPSM, psychological SPSM present the wound as a response to a psyche that’s been damaged, often by forces identifiable through a biographical reading of the painting. In
some paintings, the mutilation might be a response to broader psychological anxieties, such as castration anxiety.

In portraits dominated by the political function, the self-mutilation is used not only to coerce or manipulate others, but also to influence public awareness. While the coercive function of SPSM sometimes operates in a manner similar to actual self-mutilation, that is as an attempt to elicit a response such as “nurturance, protectiveness, reinvolution, or angry condemnation,” (Rosen 48) from specific individuals, the political element in SPSM often serves a more public function. Feminist SPSM, for instance, often lay bare “the elemental feeling of violence which kindles eroticism” (Bataille 16).

Portraits that emphasize the artistic function of self-mutilation present the artist as a martyr for art, the audience, or personal aesthetics. These portraits often retain an element of sacrifice by presenting the artist as both victim and God-like sacrificer. The artistic function of SPSM often implicates the audience in the violence, especially in the hands of violent performance artists, such as Chris Burden, who actually invites his audience to participate in the mutilation by striking him with a hammer. In these cases, the audience stands in—in the sacrificial metaphor—for the community that demands sacrifice to appease the Gods.

In some portraits, the mutilation serves a secondary function. The Viennese actionists, for instance, equated bodily mutilation with both aesthetic and political freedom. Frida Kahlo’s paintings are both biographical representations of her own interior, and also “operate in wider contexts of significance such as Mexican politics, modernism, and gendered discourses” (Meskimmom 80). While placing her portraits
under the banner of Psychological SPSM suggests the primacy of the painter’s wounded psyche, thus allowing us to use the psychological terminology and theory of actual self-mutilation in our reading of the painting, it’s important to recognize that the mutilation’s secondary function is political. The walls between these categories, in other words, are permeable rather than solid.

I would now like to present exemplary portraits in each category, as a way to demonstrate the various functions of mutilation in self-portraiture, as well as to show how employing psychological terminology and theory normally reserved for cases of actual self-mutilation can deepen our readings of SPSM.

**Psychological Function**

Though the psycho-biographical approach to self-portraiture has been criticized for its supposed inability to “transcend personal details…and enter those details into a wider context” (Meskimmom 79), I believe that this approach to SPSM not only permits us insights into the artist’s psyche and thus the painting’s personal symbolism, but helps us discern, from these paintings, larger psychological truths. While “in most cases, self-mutilation is an impulsive act” (Rosen 70), psychologists have been able to parcel out the “sequence that begins with loss and culminates with the commission of the self-mutilative act” (Rosen 183) in the following manner: 1) loss or perceived threat of loss; 2) mounting tension; 3) disassociation or depersonalization; 4) irresistible urge to cut; 5) self-mutilative act; 6) tension release (183). SPSM may have less to do with the actual mutilative act and more to do with the “irresistible urge to cut” that is so often
accompanied by imagined self-mutilations. While SPSM offer little evidence of the release of tension, psycho-biographical studies of SPSM do often allow us access to the “loss or perceived loss” (183) that acts as a trigger for the eventual mutilation, along with the feelings of mounting tension and depersonalization.

Frida Kahlo consciously mutilated her own image perhaps more often than any other painter. Though her self-portrait, *The Broken Column*, makes reference to her actual physical disfigurements, Kahlo has intensified the self-mutilation to represent the unique psychological ramifications stemming from her bizarre and “horrific tram accident as a teenager” (Meskimmon 78). Though the accident is well-documented, even the most pedestrian description retains its ability to shock: “Kahlo was impaled on a metal handrail that entered her lower torso, breaking her spinal column and pelvis and exiting through her vagina” (Lindauer 55). The painting, completed in 1944, nineteen years after the incident, undoubtedly refers to the accident. Kahlo’s broken spine is represented in the painting by a broken Roman column that is exposed by a wound that stretches from her neck to her lower abdomen. Additionally, Kahlo has pierced her own image with dozens of evenly placed nails.

“Kahlo’s psychological and sexual health are [also] implicated” (Lindauer 56). The sexual connotations of the accident are self-evident. Kahlo went so far as to remark “the accident is when I lost my virginity” (Lindauer 58). Critic Margeret Lindauer suggests that Kahlo came to associate the violent penetration of the accident not only with sexuality, but with “a forced penetration, or rape” (Lindauer 58). Kahlo’s continual engagement with self-mutilation imagery may be attributed to the fact that adolescents who’ve been physically or sexually victimized often continue to cast themselves in “the
role of a victim” well into adulthood, and establish “a distorted and alienated body image” (Rosen 66). Kahlo’s triggering loss was a bodily alienation that “the psyche processes as a loss of self” (Rosen 69).

In *The Broken Column*, Kahlo has both mutilated and sexualized her own image. The damaged spine actually serves to accentuate the breasts, and a sweeping white cloth seems to be unraveling at her waist. Though tears streak the cheeks, the face itself “maintains a stoic expression,” (Lindauer 59) hinting at the depersonalization that psychologists claim self-mutilators employ to “escape the anguish associated with loss” (Rosen 186). The painting not only presents us with an act of self-mutilation, but refers directly to the loss and depersonalization that leads to the mutilation instinct.

Our disturbance at the Kahlo portrait is deepened by the erotic placement of the nails (the largest nail protrudes from the side of the breast) and by the vaginal quality of the primary wound, which has been violently penetrated by the phallic column. Psychologists tell us that the type of wound hints at the self-mutilator’s psychology. “Less disturbed individuals tend to cut, burn or disfigure an arm, leg, or stomach, while psychotics not uncommonly injure especially vulnerable and symbolic parts of their bodies, including their eyes, nipples, and genitals” (Rosen 117). This may also explain our particular disturbance at seeing Rudolf Schwartzkogler’s documentary photographs of himself with a bandaged penis, or Victor Brauner’s *Self-Portrait* with a mutilated eye. Psychotic mutilators are also more likely to “make deliberate patterns or designs with their self-mutilations” (Rosen 177), as Kahlo has done here with the fairly regular placement of the nails. The painting refers not only to Kahlo’s physical injuries, but to a psyche that came to associate sex with pain, and transferred that association into
masochistic tendencies.

While the composition of Kahlo’s portrait dramatizes several stages of the mutilation process (triggering loss, depersonalization, mutilative act), Gustave Courbet’s *The Wounded Man* acts as the physical manifestation of the changes in the artist’s psyche. X-Ray photographs have revealed that the painting originally depicted “Courbet and a young woman… asleep against a tree” (Fried 65). The painting was begun in 1844, but not completed until 1854. Courbet’s mistress disappeared with his son during that time, causing him great heartache. “My mind is saddened, my soul is empty, my heart and liver are eaten with bitterness,” Courbet wrote to a friend in 1849 (Fried 88). After she left, Courbet revised the painting, covering the woman with a cloak, changing the expression of the man’s face from peacefulness to agony, adding the sword and giving the man a wound in the chest: the transformation of the painting mirrored the changes in his psyche. Courbet seemed to be aware that he was documenting his own interior world, saying, “I have done many self-portraits of myself in various states of mind—in a word, I have written the history of my life” (Chu 186). Modern psychologists might attribute Courbet’s mutilation instinct to “inwardly directed anger as a result of interpersonal rejection” (Rosen 179), though it might also be seen as a “partial” or “localized suicide,” in this case the suicide of self-image, which gratifies the destructive impulses without subverting the will to live (179).

Of the many other psychological SPSM, several are notable: Van Gogh’ *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* for its portrayal of the results of an actual self-mutilation; Giuseppe Penone’s *To Reverse One’s Eyes* for the direct and haunting way it presents the depersonalization necessary for self-mutilation; Arnulf Rainer’s *Angst* for
naming its triggering emotion; and Chaim Soutine’s *Grotesque: Self-Portrait*, which represents an entire class of paintings that present a severe enough bodily distortion to be akin to self-mutilation without portraying an actual cut. Many of these paintings represent not only the self-loathing that accompanies self-mutilation, but a self-mutilator’s trademark “disorganized and diffuse” self-image, as well an “unfocused, scattered vision” caused by a self-mutilator’s fragmented cognitive state (Rosen 47).

While biographical material is often helpful in determining the primacy of the psychological function in SPSM, interpretations can also be made based on the iconography of paintings. Egon Schiele’s nude self-portraits, for instance, place the artist in an extremely private realm that hints at the private, internal, psychological function of the mutilation. In the following section, I will look at SPSM of a more public nature that use images of self-mutilation for political or coercive means.

**Political Function**

While psychologists “have indicated that the attempt to coerce or control the responses of others is one of the central dynamics of self-mutilators” (Rosen 49), that coercion is not necessarily restricted to interpersonal relationships. On June 3, 1963, for instance, a Buddhist monk, Quang Duc, set himself on fire to protest repressive measures being instituted against Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. The monk’s act was meant to exert influence in a larger social arena. Political SPSM use images of self-mutilation to exert influence, both in interpersonal relationships, and on the larger social order.
Psychologists have divided “interpersonal acts of coercion related to self-mutilation” (Rosen 48) into the following sequence:

1) mounting intolerable tension in response to a conflict or loss
2) insufficient response by those involved
3) the self-mutilating act
4) assurance of the awareness of the act by those targeted
5) these persons experience shock and recoil, and are alarmed
6) these persons provide the response desired by the mutilator

(Rosen 49)

While acts of suicide, or attempted suicide, tend to represent a desire for “permanent social disinvolvevement,” self-mutilative acts are often attempts at “social reinvolvevement, or a return to normalcy” (Rosen 50). Many artistic representations of self-mutilation act in much the same way. Caravaggio’s disguised self-portrait as the head of Goliath in David with the Head of Goliath can be closely linked to the self-mutilator’s desire to “reinvolve…[himself] in a social network from which [he may] have been feeling estranged” (Rosen 50). In 1605, Caravaggio killed a man, his former lover some claim, in a knife-fight and was accused of murder. In order to avoid the death sentence, he was forced to flee Rome, traveling first to Naples and then to Malta. During this time, Caravaggio made several pleas for pardon, each time finding the response “insufficient to reduce the tension” which his forced exile was causing (Rosen 48). In 1610, after several years of exile, Caravaggio sent the portrait to Cardinal Scipione Borghese as “a desperate plea the Cardinal should pardon him” (Langdon 384), thus assuring the Cardinal’s
“awareness of the act” (Rosen 48). Here, it was the image, as opposed to the Cardinal’s personal investment, that was meant to cause “recoil or alarm” (Rosen 49).

In the painting, a young, idealized David holds out the giant head of Goliath toward the viewer. The Cardinal would have identified himself with David, whom he would know as the keeper of the flock, or the second Father of Christ. Additionally, Caravaggio has bathed the figure in an Angelic light. Normally, when David is portrayed, he is seen as stoic, or ecstatic in celebration of the triumph of Christ. But here, Caravaggio has given the boy a contemplative, almost compassionate gaze that is focused on the head of the artist. Caravaggio has not only offered his artistically severed head in place of his actual head, but carefully inserted the Cardinal into the painting and provided him with the desired response. Though it’s not clear what effect the painting had on the Cardinal, evidence hints that the painting may have achieved Caravaggio’s desired result. By 1610, “the Roman art world longed for his return,” and “pardon was assured” (Langdon 388). Caravaggio’s imaginative self-mutilation had followed a coercive path similar to that of an actual self-mutilation.

More public coercive acts of self-mutilation act as both “a revolt against authority” and “an attempt to correct…destabilizing conditions the self-mutilator perceives as a threat to the community” (Favazza 191). When Michelagnelo painted his face onto the skin of St. Bartholomew in The Last Judgment portion of the Sistine Chapel, he was both revolting against the authority of the church and attempting to correct what he perceived to be a destabilizing force in the community. By the time he painted The Last Judgment, Michelangelo had come to see himself as a martyr for the church, often writing in his journals about the enormous physical and emotional sacrifice
he made for the fresco and the pope. By placing his face on the skin of Bartholomew, Michelangelo not only “suggests his unworthiness before Christ,” but also connects himself to the ideas of Christian martyrdom.

The face of St. Bartholomew himself is said to be Pietro Aretino, who was petitioning to become a Cardinal at the time. Aretino was “one of the fresco’s most virulent critics” (Mancinelli 171), leading the “calls for censoring the painting before it was finished” (171). The overt symbolism of the critic holding the flayed skin of the artist is complicated by the fact that it is also the critic’s own skin that he holds. The portrait hints at the reliance between the two men: one is the skin of the other. Michelangelo also hints at Aretino’s desire to become a Cardinal by elevating him to the position of a saint, but one who has flayed the artist to become one. Michelangelo has questioned his servitude to the church, and indicted a man he saw as a threat to himself and to the community.

More contemporary political SPSM include feminist portraits, such as Nan Goldin’s *Nan One Month after Being Battered* that serves as testimony to domestic abuse, while revolting against society’s pressure to be beautiful. Jenny Saville’s *Branded* imprints the feminine image to expose the self-violence inflicted in order to conform to the standards of beauty. Other times, political SPSM are attempts to connect the artist to suffering. Anselm Kiefer’s *I Hold All Indias in my Hand* transcribes the poverty of a country onto his own image. In the next section, I will show that when the connection to suffering is more personal, the primary function of the mutilation tends to be artistic.
Artistic Function

In her essay, “The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer,” Susan Sontag connects contemporary artists to the saints of Christian martyrdom:

For the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer…because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate that suffering…he transforms his suffering into art…discovers the use of suffering in the economy of art—as the saints discovered the utility and necessity of suffering in the economy of salvation. (Sontag 42)

George Bataille connects artists to suffering even more strongly, claiming that “Decapitation, self-mutilation of any kind in fact, is the necessary precondition for any artistic undertaking” (Bataille 65). This connection between suffering and art, which Bataille overstates, is the prominent feature of SPSM in which the mutilation functions artistically. When George Bataille connects self-mutilation to sacrifice, he also claims that self-mutilators must view themselves as “mythical, that is, ideal beings” (69) in order to reenact the sacrificial ritual. Similarly, artists use mutilation to present an idealized self, one capable of giving himself irrevocably to art.

In his Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows—used on a poster that announced a 1915 exhibition of his works—Egon Scheile not only invokes the “self-glorification and pathos of suffering” (Comini 149) by aligning himself with a Christain martyr, but indicts his audience as the agents of a senseless, brutal mutilation. It is not the
The Viennese Actionists saw self-mutilation as an integral part of the artistic process, often using scissors, razor blades, knives, and hypodermic needles to injure themselves during performance pieces (Kaye 105). The group, comprised entirely of young males (most prominently Otto Meuhl, Rudolf Schwartzkogler and Gunter Brus) adopted “the will to be free” as their slogan. Though this undoubtedly included political freedom from what they saw as an overly restrictive Austrian government, they also strived for an artistic freedom.

The group believed that violence was at the center of the artistic impulse, and
strived for the free admittance of what they saw as the true artistic drives (Kaye 103). The entrance of the body into their performance pieces was a necessary component for their performance pieces. The audience then is placed in a position of complete complicity, by which they must confront there own drives: the cultural instinct to be disgusted by the mutilation and to help the victim of the mutilation, versus what the Actionists might call their deeper precondition towards violence. They are also confronted with the further shock that these things are being done for their pleasure. Like Schiele, the Actionists present themselves as mythical beings willing to mutilate themselves not only for art, but also for the pleasure of their audience.

While the Actionists would most likely subscribe to George Bataille’s claim that “the artist is born of a wound that does not heal” (Bataille 64), they also used the body as a symbol for political repression, and at the same time attempted to embrace and display base psychological drives. Here, self-mutilation serves multiple purposes: psychological, political and artistic. In the section that follows, I will explore the ways these functions enter into a single portrait and interact with one another.

**Ernst Kirchner’s Self-Portrait as Soldier**

Finally, in an attempt to demonstrate how these functions intermingle in portraits, I will present a reading of Ernst Kirchner’s *Self Portrait as Soldier*, challenging traditional conceptions of the painting as an anti-war portrait in favor of the complicated interaction between the psychological, political and artistic functions of self-mutilation. Kirchner began the portrait in 1915, and displayed it almost continually “beginning
In the painting, the artist stands before us, “depicted with historical accuracy” (Springer 7) in his Field Artillery Regiment uniform. The stump of the right arm sprouts from the rolled up sleeve of the military uniform, and occupies the lower center of the picture, so that the missing right hand is placed approximately between the artist’s and the viewer’s gaze. The gaze itself is removed, suggesting a deadened interior, or an internal wound with enough intensity to distract the artist’s attention from the external horror, or hinting that the missing hand is merely a “visible sign of inner injuries” (Gasser). A cigarette dangles from the artist’s mouth, reminiscent of the pipe in Van Gogh’s *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*. The face itself is strangely narrowed, flanked by the background images of two unfinished paintings, one of which contains the figure of a female nude.

Critical interpretations of the painting are varied, though most agree that the painting presents “the artist’s experience and perception of war as a total breakdown, both emotional and physical” (Ratgoff 136). Donald Gordon goes so far as to claim that “Kirchner shows by a wished-for amputation a deeply felt pacifism” (Gordon 145).

Those who, like Peter Springer, focus on the fact that the painting hand has been removed tend to agree that the painting presents “an artistic and sexual impotence brought on by the nameless horrors of war” (Springer 21). “Unable to paint,” Springer says, “he brandishes the raw and useless limb like an accusation” (Springer 21). Kirchner, Donald Gordon points out, has turned his back on the objects of art and sexuality, adding credence to Gordon’s claim that the missing hand serves as a metaphorical castration: “The paintings personal symbolism is one of paralysis and castration” (Gordon 102).
Additionally, critics have attempted to link Kirchner to the Christian martyrs with “the amputated hand as a saintly attribute” (Springer 20), Robert Hughes going so far as to claim that “Kirchner wanted to be seen as a mutilated saint, a victim symbolically unmanned by the army” (Hughes 68). Feminist critics have pointed out that Kirchner presents the victimizing soldier as victim, while others have pointed to the military tags displayed on the shoulders of the uniform to interpret the painting as an accusation against militarism’s ability to reduce “the individual to a number” (Springer 23) or “stifle every vestige of individuality” (Springer 41).

Though most critical interpretations agree with Donald Gordon’s claim that the painting “is one of the great war paintings because it so clearly and matter-of-factly indicts Wilhelminian Germany and chauvinistic Europe” (Gordon 102) and point to the political function of the mutilation, I would like to suggest that the function of the mutilation is primarily psychological and secondly artistic.

**Psychological Function in Kirchner’s Self-Portrait as Soldier**

Peter Springer points out that Kirchner’s service as a soldier was short-lived. He spent six months in a barracks far from the front lines, but never completed basic training:

> He never saw the front lines. He never experienced the horrible reality of the human slaughterhouse, never took part in the carnage of the eastern front or the trench warfare of the Western front… And finally, Kirchner was never wounded (Springer 34).

While Kirchner’s lack of duty at the front doesn’t disqualify the portrait as an
anti-war statement, it does call into question “Gordon’s assertion that *Self-Portrait as Soldier* reflects ‘trauma, martyrdom, and suffering in war’” (Springer 36). Kirchner’s photographic self-portraits as soldier are useful in discerning his attitudes towards war. While critics have attempted to fit the portraits into their conception of an anti-war Kirchner by claiming that “the room looks bombed, and Kirchner seems petrified into a surreal figure” (Springer 46), Kirchner’s stance (chest and one leg thrust forward) is almost patriotic. The uniform is impeccable, and an angelic light washes down over the soldier’s face.

Kirchner proved not to have the mental or physical strength to face life as a soldier. He was temporarily discharged from the army in December of 1915 and “ordered to seek medical attention” (Springer 36). His health continued to decline and by 1916, Kirchner was consumed by “depression, disease and melancholy” (Springer 41).

Springer’s own claim that “Self-Portrait as Soldier…clearly anticipates the possibility of his deployment as a soldier as well as its consequence” (ix) is more reasonable but he misreads the painting, I think, by claiming the position of the left arm “suggests a reach for support” (8). Instead, I would argue that the outward-facing palm of the left hand, as well as its limpness and the symmetry in the position of the two arms, suggests surrender. Kirchner has placed himself in a position to defend the objects of femininity in the background, which his inadequacy as a soldier forces him to surrender. He displays the hand, not like an accusation, but as proof of his inability to defend the feminine figures. “The work was too hard for me,” (Gordon 24) Kirchner wrote after his discharge. Psychologist Casimir Dabrowski points out that “day-dreaming about one’s own death, sickness, humiliation…develops itself on the basis of a feeling of inferiority,
and is a compensation for this feeling” (Dabrowski 22). Here, Kirchner indulges in an imagined mutilation to compensate for his inadequacy as a soldier. Indeed, *Self-Portrait as Soldier* is less a statement on the horrors of war, and more a statement on Kirchner’s psyche, which was poorly suited for military life.

**Artistic Function in Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as Soldier***

Though “it remains unclear just what inflicted the mutilation in Kirchner’s work, whether it was a shell or the man himself” (Springer 64), it’s interesting to note that, during the artistic process, the hand that does the painting is the agent of its own obliteration. If, as Springer claims, the hand “is Kirchner himself” (100) then the process itself becomes an interesting example of art as an act of self-annihilation. This may seem the happenstance of portraying oneself with a missing right-hand, but a close look at Kirchner’s *Self Portrait* from 1913, the year before the outbreak of WWI, suggests that Kirchner conceived of the idea of art as a mutilating agent before he imagined himself as a soldier.

The similarities between the two paintings are striking. Both show Kirchner in the extreme foreground with his studio behind him. The background in each is painted in similar shades of red, and in each an unfinished canvas emerges from behind the artist’s right ear. The angles of the cigarettes are nearly identical. Peter Springer’s description of the face in *Self Portrait as Soldier* as “frozen to a mask, the eyes…empty and sightless” could easily be applied to the 1913 portrait. The similarities are so striking, in fact, that it’s possible to imagine Kirchner actually used the 1913 self-portrait as a template when
he began work on *Self-Portrait as Soldier*. Springer points out that “the regiment number and the position of the jacket button show, this self-portrait [Self-Portrait as Soldier] obviously was not painted in front of a mirror, as one might have expected” (7). What’s most strikingly similar about the two portraits is the position of the right arm, which is thrust upwards in front of the artist’s chest in each. In *Self-Portrait, 1913* the hand holds three paint-brushes, indicating that it too is meant to be seen as the painting hand. Though it is still intact in this self-portrait, it is crossed at the wrist by what appears to be either another brush or an artistic tool. The angle of the left hand suggests a certain tension in the wrist, as in a downward slicing, as if the right hand were about to be amputated by the artistic tool. Together, the two portraits suggest a continuum: one just before the amputation, one just after.

Moreover, Kirchner implicates the viewer in the violence by placing himself between the objects of art (the canvases in the background) and the viewer’s gaze. The gestures that worked so well in interpreting the psychological function of the self-mutilation work equally well here. The artist not only attests to his inability to defend his creation by his gestures of surrender, but actually appears to be disowning the paintings. He holds the amputated painting hand before the viewer’s gaze, as if to say, “look, I couldn’t have painted them.” Kirchner has used the figure of the soldier to dramatize what Bataille calls “the relationship of a painter with an ideal,” (Bataille 66) but has failed to live up to that ideal. The self-mutilation in *Self-Portrait as Soldier* is an act of surrender, primarily psychological, and secondly artistic.
Conclusion

Applying psychological terminology and theory to SPSM not only deepens our readings of individual paintings, but may provide us with insights into the relationship between destructive impulses and the creative drive. Psycho-biographical readings of the portraits make it clear that the sequence of processes that leads to imagined self-mutilation often mirrors the sequence that leads to actual acts of self-mutilation, whether those acts are aimed at coercion or psychological relief. Many times portraits retain elements of that sequence in their composition and personal symbolism. Additionally, many acts of imagined mutilation retain elements of a ritualistic sacrifice, with the artist formulating an idealized version of himself, one capable of fulfilling the role of a “god, who is…one with the victim” (Bataille 69).

Speaking of Michelangelo’s depressiveness and self-destructiveness, the psychologist Casimir Dabrowski writes:

Becoming accustomed to suffering and realizing that it is connected with our own minds, that through its intensity and its interweaving into life it constitutes our personal property, causes in such individuals…a fervent worship of suffering and death. (Dabrowski 52)

Here, Dabrowski hints at a relationship between suffering and the creative act which falls outside the scope of this essay. It’s clear that the mirroring relationship between representative acts of self-mutilation and actual self-mutilative acts can enlarge that discussion by presenting us with a self that forms, in its own image, a suffering that is a necessary component of creation.
Bibliography


Self-Portraits of Mutilation: A Partial List

Cristifano Allori, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1610
Robert Arneson, *California Artist*, 1982
Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait*, 1969
Leonard Baskin, *Self-Portrait at Age 42*, 1964
Herbert Bayer, *Self-Portrait*, 1932
Hans Bellmar, *Unica*, 1983
Hendrick Ter Brugghen, *David Praised by the Isrealite Women*, 1623
Victor Brauner, *Self-Portrait*, 193
Gunter Brus, *Self-Portrait*, 1964
Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971
Carravagio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610
Marc Chagall, *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers*, 1912-13
John Coplans, *Self-Portrait (Back with Arms Above)*, 1984
Gustave Courbet, *Self-Portrait: The Wounded Man*, 1844-54
F. Holland Day, *The Seven Last Words*, 1898
Nan Goldin, *Nan One Month after Being Battered*, 1984
Francisco Goya, *Nada. Ello lo dice*, 1819-20
Ernst Kirchner, *Self-Portrait*, 1913
Ernst Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as Soldier*, 1915
Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944
Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932
Frida Kahlo, *Memory*, 1937
Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940
Frida Kahlo, *The Little Deer*, 1946
Frida Kahlo, *Tree of Hope*, 1946
Rene’ Magritte, *The Wizard*, 1951
Angus Mcbean, *Self-Portrait*, 1947
Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, 1536-41
Giuseppe Penone, *To Revere One’s Eyes*, 1970
Arnulf Rainer, *Angst*, 1969-73
Reni,
Lucas Samaras, *Self-Portrait*, 1975
Egon Schiele, *Nude Self-Portrait*, 1910
Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows*, 1915
Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *Documenta V*, 1972
Chaim Soutin, *Grotesque: Self-Portrait*, 1922-23
Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889
Hannah Wilke, *SOS Scarification Object Series*, 1974-82
Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait (Talking to Vince)*, 1975
MICHELANGELO’S SEIZURE
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Self Portrait as the Head of Goliath
I.
Self Portrait with Doctor
Monet Going Blind
At the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp
Renoir, Arthritic
The Broken Column
Michelangelo’s Seizure
Late Self Portrait

II.
The Death of the Virgin
Magritte in New York
Self Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows
The Death of Pointillism
Vanitas for Robert Mapplethorpe
Jackson Pollock Driving
Francis Bacon In His Studio

III.
The Burning of Parliament, 1834
The Machine Gunner’s Letters
Gassed
Double Elegy
Self Portrait as Soldier
The Raft of the Medusa
The Death of Sardanapalus
Goya at the Madhouse
.
“...that gaze which is not merely a messenger of the eyes, but at whose window all the senses gather and lean out, petrified and anxious, a gaze eager to reach, touch, capture, bear off in triumph the body at which it is aimed, and the soul with the body.”

--Marcel Proust
When, in Naples, estranged
from his paternal Rome,
Caravaggio dreamed the boy
he killed back onto the tip
of his blade, his sword bending
again under the boy’s sudden weight,
he worked all night, with oils
and dread, and self-love, which is the eye
at the center of our grief, altering
the lines of the lips, darkening each hair
on the beard, and swirling his gaze
into the giant’s eyes, until his own face
bloomed like an exiled flower
from the stalk of Goliath’s neck,
loose veins dangling like roots, and when
he had finished, two brushes drying
on a windowsill, the city
blushing with an early dawn
below, he could hear
the sellers’ carts being wheeled
into the marketplace, he could sense
himself, each painted atom,
in a mound of fruit spilled into the street,
the arc of his life, for the first time
in months, cast out beyond his fear,
so that he knew there might be
some small portion
of pleasure, even in the dying,
some sweetness. Then,
because the murderer inherits
the sins of the murdered one,
or because of exile and arrogance,
all those miles to Rome, like the stations
of the cross, because of anxiety,
or the fruit sellers, outside, calling forth,
greedily, their own portions
of the day, the most famous
painter on earth felt his death
warrant flutter like a flag above the Rome
inside of him, and when he turned
back to the painting, when he stared
into the spotlight of his face, his head swinging
in David’s hand, like a lantern,
as if it might guide them, fearless,
through the valley of their myth,
he felt the self evaporate,
the way a reflection is absorbed
into a stained-glass window,
so that he could pray not for pardon
or forgiveness, but for the boy he killed
to be called forth into the frame,
into David’s face, made tender
by the slaying, resurrection light
all along his skin, so that he
could ask with humility,
and for more than himself: of sins,
are all our paintings made?
PART ONE
SELF PORTRAIT WITH DOCTOR

after Goya

Heat-struck, bleached, a sucked pit
rolling in the mouth of his fever, he lies there,
ready for the leech,
anxious, brave, his soul stamping
    in the bull-ring of his consciousness,
but fragile too, a blown-glass stomach,
    the bones in his wrists like chalice
    stems, the first leech soft upon his skin,
    like a brush-tip, like a tongue,
the doctor probing,
    trying to look inside,
as if he might drop his lantern
    into the sinkhole of the lungs,
    then scooping
    his arms around him from behind,
so that Goya dreams
    he’s a soldier
being dragged from the front,
    the beautiful Spanish dust kicked up
into his eyes, the doctor urging him
    to cough the bullets of infection
out, though when Goya feels the rim
    of the water-glass flush against his lips,
    it’s as if the reared-back horses change
    to marble in his gaze, rifles
losing their erections,
    bullets leaving only clothes-lines
in their paths, so that he’s hiding himself away again,
smuggled in the basket

of laundry his mother carries

through the yard, wobbling, trying not
to let her see, the wind

fluttering the shirt-tail of his hair,

his body
turned now to equal parts tenderness

and rage, the crossed swords

of his ribcage being raised
even as the doctor prepares
to dunk him in the washing tub again,

using his forearm like a blindfold

to protect the eyes, though,

all at once, Goya glimpses

his own face, a watery self-portrait

that wrinkles through his mind--

which is how I saw him that morning,
in the dialysis room, more than a dozen years ago,

strung between my draining tubes as the machine churned

the blood out of me,

his face wrinkled and pale,

flapping like the tail of a deer,

a streak of white that I followed

through the green forest light of a seizure.
MONET GOING BLIND

Work of the eyes is done, now
Go and do heart-work
On all the images imprisoned within
--Rilke

1. Remembering Camille

It’s like the art of making a woman
  blush from across
the room, that kind of looking--
  hollowing, aggressive--
but internalized now, so that even
  as he feels the light
glinting off the buttons of his coat,
  as he hears the light
playing his buttons like a flute,
  the avalanche
of his beard teased into a mist,
  as if at any moment
he might begin to float, he can’t help
  but think that he is merely
old, the watery self flowing
  always inward now. He holds
the brush, not like a baton
  to the music of the shore,
not like a scalpel or a key,
  not the way a mother holds
a spoon to the child’s mouth,
  but almost, yes, like an arrow
he is drawing, with experience
and love, from the chest
of a dying man, so as to let the wound
bleed out, the way,
years earlier, when he’d looked
deep enough, into church-
stone, or the impossibly intricate mind
of the haystack, he’d
slowly remove the injection of the gaze,
he’d begin to reel
the gaze in, so that the jeweled
secrets, the hard pitted light
at the quietness of objects, would leak
into the air, would haunt
the exterior--a membrane, a mirage.
It’s blinding, he thought,
the pace with which the mind
converts light into more
than itself, that holy photosynthesis,
into field dust and mood,
into memory, the infinity of twigs,
linseed upon the grindstone,
bits of oil paint splattered in
the snow, like colored bird-
droppings, his wife once
joked. And when she lay
dying, the doctor saying his good-byes,
Monet, knowing he shouldn’t,
stood before her, already mixing
the colors, a drip-cloth
unrolled across the carpet,
three-legged easel
locked in place. Awash in a torrent of blankets, she lay all night for him, a reluctant muse, drifting through the insomnia of lanterns, as he swayed at the edge of her bed, almost fatherly, but doing something she couldn’t quite name, not quite a blessing or a spell, but trying to lure something out of her, something she wanted, all at once, desperately to keep, until there was sweetness in the air, something she could have sworn was a mist of her perfume. At Giverny, standing on the platform he had made, with brush cup and easel built in, pulleys anchored to the bridge, Monet remembers her as he lowers himself through the wind, as he walks out everywhere on the diminishing tightrope of his sight. Her whole life, he thinks, packed, with the landscape, into memory’s foolish mothball light. Below him, the lilies,
shifting and tethered,
appear as footprints across the water,
the tracks perception
leaves, though all motion
is exterior to them,
a display of current, of wind.

Once, with his second wife,
in Venice, a pigeon landed
on the tips of his fingers,
then disappeared into his sleeve.

A moment of panic,
the coat shucked off in flurry,
the pigeon loosed,
and his first wife floating towards
the ceiling again as he stood
there shivering, the coat
lying rumpled at his feet.
2. Self Portrait with Cataracts

*It’s appalling, the way the light escapes--*

*Monet*

Because art gives our own loss
back to us, camouflaged
as beauty, because the self,
distilled, echoes back
through harbor stone and lily,
through rose-arch
and wisteria, he paints, finally,
himself retreating
into the foxholes of his eyes,
his whole face smudged
beneath the cataract’s gleam,
drowning in the broth light,
one eye covered completely
when he paints,
the other planetary in the atmospheric
glass, his monocle,
gold-rimmed, radiating scowl-lines
around the eye, so that when
he places the canvas on the floor
as if to look on a landscape,
he sees, among the white-tipped reeds
and the bridge-line
frowning across the wrinkles
of the face, two birds
where the eyes had been,
their feathers tucked in,
heads bowed, not moving at all,
    though their feet paddle
desperately beneath. Hovering
    like that--ethereal,
not a self, but a wave
    curled up out of the self,
so its reflection is its source--he feels
    a storm break inside
his face as a light mist rises
    from the paint, the way,
years earlier, the ground floor
    abandoned to the flood,
he stood, upstairs, watching torn
    leaves smeared across
the water, violent and seductive,
    like the trail of clothes
across a bedroom floor, although--
    he remembers remembering
this--it was February, so that he
    was watching, not leaves,
but the ruins of his own uprooted
    garden, a flotilla
of marguerites and bellflower,
    processional of blue
thistle, pink sumac, Alice,
    behind him, shivering
in the bed, feverish, leukemia
    passing through her,
poisonous as color through a leaf,
    the hook of each breath
unstitching something inside,
as if she were becoming
the rattle in the shutters,
    as if she were slowly turning
herself into the window
    he was gazing through,
so that he knew, even then,
    that he would never
not be looking through her,
    each morning, in the mirror,
his face laid on top of her face.
    When she died, he prayed,
one night, for whatever comes
to lean down over him
and pluck the flowers of his sight.
    Going blind, he imagined,
was a way to feel her
    leaving him again, as his first
wife had, his whole life now
    like a fist loosening from
around the moment of his birth.
    But the hand keeps
longing for the weight
    of the amputated brush,
and his hand, freed finally from
grief, like a moth
from candle wax, would unfurl
    each stroke from the memory
of tendons, of light, as now,
    leaning down
to darken out the eyes,
    he remembers, at the window
again that night, seeing,
    on the surface, like a tiny
lighthouse tumbled from
    the shore, the lantern
he had hung one morning
    in a tree, still lit, the severed
branch holding it up above
    the waves. And how later,
when she grew silent, he held
    a small mirror just above
her mouth, then swiped, almost
    thoughtlessly, a finger
through the breath
    he’d captured on the glass.
THE ANATOMY LESSON OF DR. TULP

after Rembrandt

The split body is taboo, must not be looked upon--
not even by the doctor, vacant beneath the charcoal of his hat,
his hands working on their own, one cleaving

the muscles open for the light, all sexed leaves and petal-swarm, sheared away from the trellis of the bones,
the other hand mirroring the motions these muscles

would permit, which is where the students look, trying to see
the cadaver’s reflection in the doctor’s skin, like Perseus
capturing Medusa in his shield, as if one glimpse of the dead

man’s soul might turn their coppery faces into stone. Audacious,
self-adoring, a devil’s tail of hair silking down his back,
Rembrandt will not be distracted, not by the book-light

texting the body, not by the dumb-show of the doctor’s
hand, not by the muscles in his own arm which constrict
and separate as he paints, as he prepares to flatten the body,

make it into color, shades of light, perspective, what the soul
might be if he could capture it, like a moth trapped in an upturned
glass, the suffocating wing-flutter arrested on his brush,

though it’s his own soul he unearths, of course, the cadaver’s
skin turning slowly into the frozen, winter-light of memory,
the plagued and anemic village of his childhood, all ice-floe
and broken arteries, a mud-horse breaking an ankle in the slush,
reared back, the death-cart toppled in its wake, the dull-eyed,
naked bodies spilling through the artist’s mind, the death-flies,
the stench. Is this what I have to wade through, he thinks,
the sloppy intestines of these streets, art like a rag pressed
against a gagging mouth, a way to hold the horror back?

It’s almost paralyzing now, the stillness of the corpse’s face,
the sprung bowels, the wet and marbled muscles turned
over in the light, then the sound of something tearing, and a darkness
revealed in him, death in the upturned soil of the heart, venomous,
swift, so terrifying that it must be taken in with a shadow-
glance and peak, like a poison downed in sips, like the one scene

I can’t quite imagine from my life, corpse-like beneath the surgery lights,
the doctors masked, slowly breaking into me, like outlaws gathered
around a safe, the tissue-spreaders, the clamps, the dead man’s kidney
coiled atop the surgeon’s hand, already polluted, the infection hidden,
like a flame at the center of the coal, a piece of death lowered into me,
though I can’t see any of it until I see it in Rembrandt’s scene,

the doctor, in his witches’ hat, one hand clamping the tendons,
his other training its shadow on the wall as the dead man reaches
through the puppet-sock of the doctor’s robes to take control,

and Rembrandt, unblinking, seemingly unchanged, works
and waits for God’s love to come down, sharp and cruel as a spade
which misses, again, the swifter beast coiling back inside of him.
RENOIR, ARTHRITIC

He’s up early, considering the body,
its wetness, the bladder
like a puffer fish, the bowels
swallowing and swallowing,
mucus, come, blood, the soft crab
of the heart, darkly breathing,
the lungs spread out in the chest
like wings of a manta-ray,
not to mention the rich coral
of brain, the whole body
a trapped sea, netted in the skin,
perception itself just the motion
of the waves, the boat-wake
of experience healing into memory,
so that lying there, waiting to ring
the tiny silver bell that brings the nurse,
he feels his arthritis like a drought
inside of him, knowing the curative waters
at Bourbonne are no good, no good
the medicinal drip, his hand bruised
this morning where the brush was
strapped to it, though perhaps a bit of cloth
might be used between his fingers
and the wood, so that he can
continue to paint, to become
his rose-filled models, to feel
the elasticity of them, their fluidity
even in the hard desert-turtle
of his hand, so that he can continue
staring through the three-pronged compass of the easel, until he gives the signal and the canvas is raised before him, like a sail, and he begins to work, leaning forward, squinting, drifting towards the horizon that he makes.
Hair blown back, wind-lines capturing
her waist, the central wound
hung from neck
to navel, like a scarf one
wears to accentuate
the breasts, she stands before
us, pierced and
martyred, an air-brushed St.
Sebastian, the nails
arranged across her body,
like a dressmaker’s
pins, as if to hold the skin
in place, though it’s
the eerie radiance of her face
that ignites the gaze,
like a blast of rain that touches
gasoline, so that there
opens in me a room
in which she paints,
morning-light, palette and a bowl
of fruit, half-a-dozen
pillows stuffed behind her back,
her spine, like a stack
of broken plates, aching to keep
her head in place
as she dissolves into the pattern
of the nails, like
an acupuncturist, or as if she’s
sticking pins into a map,
each instant of her life a city
I don’t have access to.
When I pretend that I can knot
the nothing of our pasts together--
her surgeries and mine--
I understand that I have not suffered
enough, that it’s myself
I keep being grafted to,
that I am just a voyeur
in the scene, the hard knuckles
of her gaze slamming the door on me,
so that the room dissolves
just before--I’ve imagined this--
Diego leans down to unbuckle
the orthopedic straps
that hold her pelvic bones in place.
When it happened, finally,
on the preparation bridge,
where he had stood all morning
grinding the pigments, grooming
his brush-tips to a fine point
so that he could thread Eve’s hair
like a serpent down her back,
his head rocked forward on the bell-chain
of his spine, the catwalks
rattling as he fell, a paint-
bowl splattering the ceiling,
then spinning like a dying bird,
to the cathedral floor, frightening
the assistant who--trained
in such matters--huffed up
the footbridge to wedge
the handle of a wooden brush
between the mouse-trap of the teeth,
to keep the master from biting off
his tongue. Did the choir-box
fill with angels? Did the master
feel the beast rising up in him
to devour the pearl of heaven
at the center of his brain? If you
were that assistant, kneeling
next to the stampeded body,
smelling the quicklime in the air,
the boiled milk of plaster, seeing him
tangled in the body’s vines, voiceless,
strained, would you call it rapture?
The assistant didn’t either, didn’t even
consider it, or think to pray,
but sat watching as the spirit clattered
back inside of him, like a chandelier
lowered from a ceiling--
and when it was over, he thought
he heard the artist curse softly
as he surfaced, a small word, violent,
so that when the master walked outside
to get some air, the boy sat atop
the scaffolding, eating his orange
and letting the fruit peels fall,
like drips of flame, feeling freer
in a way, almost glad. Outside,
it was fall, the city proud
with chimneys. Ragged, clouds
of plaster in his beard, his mouth
hollow, aching like an empty purse,
Michelangelo could still hear
the tortured voices on the ceiling
calling out for completion,
amputated, each face shadowed
with his own, which he would paint,
one morning, with the witchcraft
hushed inside his veins,
on the flayed skin of St.
Bartholomew, crumpled, fierce,
with two dead bugs crushed
into the paint, like that bit of terror,
he would think, sealed inside
of everything He makes. Is this what I have inside of me? Must heaven be achieved with our pain? Now he lifted his fingers to his lips, to the wasp’s nest of his mouth, and withdrew, with the ease of spitting out an apple stem, a tiny splinter of wood that had sunk into his tongue.
Outside, the city suffocates, infected with death-carts,
    ash-heaps in the yards, beds
    burned or dumped in the canals,
some stained, some with imprints sunk in, like canvases,
    he thinks, the whole history of art
swept forward on the current of our loss. Contemplative,
cold, his vision stepping out
to the balcony again, Rembrandt sees
nothing that he needs, and so retreats back
    into the castle of his inwardness. If the soul,
he thinks, is a stone dropped in the center of the face,
    the face sealed back over it, but wavering,
    changed, then this morning he must paint
more distantly, self-love abolished to the province
    of the weak, the mirror turned away from him,
the canvas laid out on a stretching board, the brush-tip
    revealing, beneath the splints of the initial lines,
    the eroding cliff-edge of his brow,
the tumbles of hair almost statuary now, gray
    as chilled breath, each gesture unwrapping
the package of his face, the way he longs to unravel
    these loose bandages of age. For years now,
    watching himself aging in the paint,
he’s felt the two ends of his life advancing towards
each other with their lances drawn, a confrontation
that ends, always, with Saskia on the bed again, her body thinned
to a field the horses of her illness ramble through,
the smell of snake oil and vinegar
in the room, the soiled sheets, her lungs shredded
by the bloody cough that even now

he hears echo through the house. When she died,
he could not see, for days, through the dusting
of his grief, until he revived a painting
he had made of her, humble, unadorned,
and smothered her not in the sores that inhaled her
in her final days, but in a velvet skirt and furs,
peacock feathers in her hat, her drowned light
resurrected into pearls, as if death
were the ascension into royalty, or as if to make a gem
of her, something he could store in the jewelry box

of memory. Even now he needs just a glimpse
of it before he turns away--the dust, light-struck,
catching in his throat--to crush
the whole scene into the eyes, or so he can place a lock
of her in the middle of the canvas, rendered
in a penetrating, venomous light, a dab of death
in the orpiment, like light from a keyhole,
as if he might look into her dying as he paints,
like a boy who kneels before a door, mischievous,
full of wonder, until that other, colder self

drops the curtain of his face back over her again.
PART TWO
Not humility, but the animal inside
that brought him here, the artist fugitive,
pensive beneath the rafters of a barn,
hiding out, his hands shamed with blood,
the future coming at him with a knife
as he plumps the hay together for a bed,
then kicks it astray, his interior lightning-
struck, made visible by the suddenness
of his crime, the blood-thrum and God’s presence
hammering inside of him, the man’s face
carved onto the tablet of his memory, Caravaggio
pacing, tearing at his shirt, wanting God
out of him, thinking, isn’t that how the Virgin
felt, water-broke among the horse-stench,
the slop, pain thornig deeper in her side
with each heave, the child crowned,
Joseph dumb-struck, trembling, one hand
ready at the blood-pail, one hand turning
the shoulders, trying to unscrew the child
from his mother’s heart, though Mary
only thought out, I need it out, and the animals
around them lie down in the straw, already
hungry for the after-birth. But it’s her death-
scene that unveils itself inside of him now,
Caravaggio feeling the images encircling
his heart, the way men close around a fight,
the eyes floated out across the surface of her face,
the body pale, breached, something glittering
swifted off in a confusion of wings, though she
must be in red, he thinks, the sun setting in her
dress, the Apostles astonished by its crimson
folds, their faces darkened by the shadow
of the savior’s hand, the master turning them
away from the body, from his first temptation,
the nipple that ripened in the child’s mouth,
deep and red as the inside of a plum,
the infant desire flaring into blood-lust
when the breast was pulled away, like the fury
we feel when love’s withdrawn, which is why
he killed him, Ranuccio, his once-lover, the artist
pinning a corsage of blood onto his chest,
Ranuccio falling, stung, reaching dumbly
for his breast, like the gesture Caravaggio
will give the Virgin’s hand when his canvases
are brought to him, as if she were buttoning
her dress, because she was also the first to tell
the child no, wasn’t she? The first to deny him.
MAGRITTE IN NEW YORK

“I hate my own history”

Magritte

Looking out upon the hushed

glass towers, the catwalks

and metal spires, the top

of the Empire State Building,

like the spike on a soldier’s hat,

the whole city, he thinks, built

by an imagination more savage

than he’d guessed, Magritte sees his own

mother lit up beneath the candelabra

of the Brooklyn Bridge, lifting her nightgown

up above her knees to mount

the moon-slick railing, the night behind her,

cotted with the traffic

of the stars. He can see her slippered

footprints winding out behind her

like the punctured roll of music

a player piano has eaten into song,

so that he can almost hear

a singing as she falls, foghorns

in the distance, gulls startled from the girders

when her gown peels up

around her, like an umbrella opened inside-

out, like a woman lowered

through a cabaret, which is how they found her

on the shore that night, more than forty years

ago, her head bound inside

the nightgown,
though he can still hear the lantern
creaking in his father’s hand,
can still see the light passed
across the water-toughened nipples,
the glistening hair, the cleft
between her legs. He couldn’t help
but think of her kissing him
again, how once he’d felt
her tongue, soft and pink,
like a bird hatched open
in the nest of his mouth.
Do you understand?
He had never seen a naked body before
and even now, remembering it,
trying to see through the fabric to
the face,
a darker image curdles up
in him: two lovers,
entwined, a bed sheet wound between their heads.
Is this how inspiration works,
he thinks, one image corrupted by the next?
Tonight, looking out at the radio
towers, at the ice-bergs of cathedral spires,
he can’t stop hearing her footprints
singing in his brain, can’t stop drawing,
from an imagination
more savage than we’d guess, the exact line
of his mother’s breast,
the moon unwinding its turban
across the waves, as his father leans down
to check the wrist for life, his mother’s arm turned
over in his hand, like a water-snake twisting
its belly towards the light.
SELF PORTRAIT AS ST. SEBASTIAN PIERCED BY ARROWS
after Egon Schiele

All form is under the anxiety
of being looked at,
of being looked into,
gaze after gaze rippling
through the body, like sound waves,
until the entire body
is a listening, is a scream called back
in all directions
from its core. At home,
watching Wally
in the stutters and twitches
of sleep, I can mine,
without touching, a whimper
out of her, then the flickering
of eyelids, like moths slowing
themselves to land,
until I have teased
her awake with my stare.
When we fuck,
we are two mirrors
pressed together, each filled
with the other’s emptiness.
After, we sit and talk,
and I watch the flaws
settle back into her face.
Here, I am refused reflection,
refused color. Wally smuggles in
pencils in her hair.
Mirror-less, unseen, I am fed
   straight out
into my perception, exiled
   into mop-handle
and rags, into cell door,
   my attention coiled
into bed springs,
   the frightening imbalance
of a chair. Down the hall,
   men sing to each other
across the rows, invisible,
   trying to melt the prison bars
with their singing, to charm
   the bars into snakes.
Each morning, in the murky,
   tadpole light
of an early dawn, we stand
   beneath the showers,
as if beneath halos, our pores
   opening, releasing
their steam, as if we might bind
   together in the air,
as if, floating among soap bubbles
   and groans, we might form
a collective deity. But objects
   keep commanding us--
spigots and drain holes erupting
   through the fog--
their presence echoing so deeply
   that their weight must be
what’s holding us in place.
I have taken the body
to the edge of collapse
in exchange for my release.
I have translated the body
into snarl, into deadfall
and crumb. I have prayed to be flayed,
walking naked
through an eruption of bees,
and I have woken
not to birdsong or the echoing
of hobnails down the hall,
but to the sound of my own angelic
twitching, the nerves
like a chorus of plucked strings,
a quiver of quivering,
a hundred difficult muses
launching their instructions
through the air. Even now, I wait
for their arrows
to enter me, like pins into a voodoo
doll, each pulled straight
through, so that it hauls a piece
of flesh away--hunks
of fat, the meandering veins--
their arrows made impotent
when my outline finally crumbles
at their feet. Model
for my executioners, mirror-less,
my shadow bricked
into the wall, I stand, body
slack, abandoned
to its perpetual slouch, though
one hand rises now,
palm open, like a handshake,
or an offering.

*Let them come for me,*

I think, *let them take*

*the painting hand first.*
THE DEATH OF POINTILLISM

after Seurat

Drought, gravel, broken glass, the houses
    in the distance like toppled carts
abandoned in the street, the channel
    narrowed to a wind-plucked hair,
to a broken guitar string shriveling beneath
    the song-less trees. No wind,
no rain, no motion in the scene, so that he must
draw time, the shadowed quiet,
the weightless air (the greatest feat, Seurat
    once said, might be to make art
seem like work again), must break
    the landscape into seed, each kernel
pearled with light, like the globe
    Vermeer hung from a young girl’s ear.
But how to re-assemble these crumbs
    back into wheat, how to heal
an evening sky grown ripe with stings,
    the mind working to un-mince, un-shred,
like trying to take back that shattering thing
    that can’t be unsaid? Like light,
he thinks, lying is made of particles, words
    dropped or muffled with a cough,
so that he sees the channel narrow to a life
    he keeps trying to navigate--the wife
erased from speech, the un-willed son--
    until days from now, stricken,
his breath peeled back to a switch that beats
    and beats inside his chest, he bids
his parents to his bed to stand next to them,
    the four of them like directions
on a compass, each face a distant port,
    so that he understands there is no reaching
them, that like a choir rising, at its end,
    to a single voice, life is mended only
as it evaporates, the body swept up into a sandstorm,
    he imagines, scattered, then rebuilt
around its missing core, as if he might die
    exactly as he paints, with a shattering
that reforms the whole. Already, though,
    he feels his lies uncoiling inside
of him again, charmed from the basket
    of his body, his parents vanished,
his son God-knows-where, and a world away,
    his wife, at the sink, crying, snapping
peas, looking down into her hands,
    into the peeled back husks and at
all the withered globes torn open to the light.
1.

He wanted only to live long enough to see the fame,
and for years he was God of the rhino whips
and studs, God of the anus, cinched like the top of a purse,
of the well-timed press release,
gossip carved by the knife-edge of his tongue,

the whole muscled world lounging in the perfume of his gaze,
the open mouth of his camera lens inhaling
every pose, until he had captured them: the chiseled,
the gorgeous, the famously ornery.
Now the fear grows out of him, the way a boy’s dark hair

falls over his face, so that he’s blinded by it,
so that even when he sleeps
with a light on in his room, he thinks his own breath
might extinguish it, his lungs fire-cleaned
and drained, AZT patrolling in his veins, his spine

a whipping post to which the tortured body clings,
though, for the press, his body is the mess
at a party’s end, the buffet wrecked by a hundred passing
appetites, the magazines reporting AIDS
as if it were a fashion trend, he thinks,

though having the clippings read to him, each morning,
he understands more deeply that dying is his fame,
doctors and flowers always on the way, the heart monitor’s coverage
around the clock, loved ones, fans,
the spotlights of their prayers, all of them breathless

as they wait for his soul to step out from behind the stage,
    as if it might shine above him when he dies,
like his own marquee.

2.

Or, he knows, some hoping
    it might come out stained, black
as a furnace door, or the slip-card that concealed

the cover of the magazine he stole, sixteen
    and too ashamed to pay, the blind man
behind the counter chasing him for months inside his dreams,
    calling Thief! Stop that little fag! In hell,
his mother said, there was a clock that chimed each hour,

    you will not get out, you will not get out, though yesterday,
    hobbled by a coughing fit, blacking out,
he felt his body folded into a paper boat and released
    across a stream. What happens
to all the undeveloped film inside the mind,

to the boxed up wardrobe of our fantasies, he thinks,
    as he lies with a sketchpad flopped across
his lap, bed-sore, uninspired, one eye blind,
    the other weak, numbly scribbling
the knotted tie of his signature a hundred times,
“his final odd piece of ego and pornography,” they’ll say,
   “a ball of yarn unrolled from the center
   of a narcissistic mind,” though he sees it as that thicket
   of tangled selves we leave behind
when the soul has picked the body’s locks,

his own body now like a photograph
   torn up in rage, so that everything left behind,
he thinks--memory, art--is left in pieces, like shells
   abandoned when the tide withdraws,
though already another tide, muscular, enormous,

moves inside the muted room with starlight
   curled inside its breaks, so that he feels not scared,
but awe-struck, dwarfed, like a small boy hurrying
   to scrawl his name into the sand
before it is erased by the censoring waves.
Mile by mile, the road unwinds backwards
through his mind, until he feels the whole system
of highways and interstates inside of him,
masculine, instinctive, its form constructed
to let the motion through, though lately,
beneath each line, the underpass

of his second thoughts unfurls, doubt eating away
at each canvas, like grub worms
beneath a field, so that he’s drawn
into the spread roots of the painting
that isn’t being born, his instinct fracturing,
like spidered glass, until he’s nearly overcome

with the desire to let the paint can drop, boot-prints
wandering the frame, or something subtler,
a few lingering brush-flicks, olive-drops
of color splitting open on the vines,
as if even his failure could be his own,
which may be how he’d feel, he thinks, if his tires
angled from the road, the asphalt curling off behind him,
like a whip swung at him and missed,
the car turned over, its beautiful underside
of struts and muffler pipes glinting
in the light. Does it have to be like that now, he thinks,
amputating, swift, the roulette ball of our random lives

dropped into the basket on some universal wheel?
Or can its motion be reversed? Raging,

baffled by the critics, he’d held

a knife up to a canvas and shouted, “you ought
to be able to slice a painting open like a chest.”

And what would he have found?

Veins? An orchard grove? Some other tangled life,

like the one sliding out beneath him

as he drives, a woman’s head on his shoulder, the oil-
drippings of her hair spilled across his shirt, knotted,

intricate, random as skate-marks

on a frozen lake, the road polished to mirage,

as if he could dive into it, he thinks,

the pond of what-he-might-have-been,

that other world, where he turns, no,

doesn’t turn the wheel, and the radio turns to static,

and the road keeps winding out before him like a wick.
FRANCIS BACON IN HIS STUDIO

1.

Like a man sitting inside his own decay, 
the mine-walls of decorum chipped away

by the chisel of his inwardness: cartons 
and rags, the snake-skins of a thousand

empty paint tubes among a garden 
of brushes, mixing tins, toppled cans,

cigarette butts, wrappers, every interior 
exhausted, except his own, which breaks all form

open to search for the seed of itself, 
as if it were a con-game, the jewel

passed from shell to shell, while the dumbstruck 
artist searches the rubble for the one lost crumb

that can solve the surface, the one that dropped 
when the flap of skin fell open on his face.
Long before the flap of skin peeled back like a corn-husk, he thought, *how odd it is to have been born with a face at all*. He kept imagining its imprint in his mother’s womb, solidified there, like hand-prints in concrete, though his real face kept changing, like the surface of a lake, carved by stress, aging, the lightning quick switch-blades of other people’s glances, so that each morning he had to sweep away the old face with a lather brush and splash a new one on when he had finished. Not a mask exactly, but like wearing a weather-map, or the face of a clock, which isn’t worn, but drawn and erased and redrawn by the erratic light inside a room, so that he felt like a character from some cartoon, caught inside those claustrophobic boxes, like panels of a triptych. Always the face wobbled, like Cezannes’ fruit, so that he kept having to adjust himself to fit behind it, as if he were trying to get comfortable inside a straight-jacket, squirming, his face turning
around him like a globe, as the soul tried to worm
to the surface, to wriggle through the coils and twists
of thought and eat the light before it was extinguished
in the cells. Working one night, a fissure perforated one side
of his face, the web loosening around the spider of an eye
until that flap of skin slouched forward, like a woman fainting,
that dramatically, and his darkness spilled into the painting.
PART THREE
THE BURNING OF PARLIAMENT, 1834
after J. M. W. Turner

He can see the flames settled deep in their faces,
that reflective urge he's noticed lately in the skin,
all the onlookers hypnotized,
tipsy in the half-shells of their boats,
some praying, some clasping jugs of wine,
as they turn towards Parliament, rooting themselves

into the mud, the strangled chain of each anchor turning
spinal underneath, like the smoke that unknots
continually above, almost umbilical,
though it anchors the sky to the dead,
the consumptive, industrious smoke, marbled
with ashes and grains of exploded glass, on its way to convert

the screams of the dying into rain. Walking out along the dockboards of his vision, a glob of yellow
on his palette, like a coin
he dips into with his brush,
as if the whole color might be spent
on the extravagance of flames, Turner feels the fire

become a small glow that fills him as he paints,
like a secret growing in importance,
as if, when he lets it back out
into the landscape,
it might restore the holy mystery, might end
the authority of shape. Palette knife, mineral spirits dissolving
in a solvent cup, umbrella pluming from the mud,
each brushstroke a flamboyant wound, the way,
in his father’s barber-shop,
for the first time being shaved,
among water froth and steam, the gleaming metal,
soap stirred onto a lather brush, the scissors chirping like a beak,

he felt, as punishment for some forgotten sin, his father
twitch his wrist, just slightly, to make
a nick into his skin,
the crushed petals of his blood
darkening a cloth, the moment already clotted
in his face. Though now, as his father’s gesture renews itself

as paint, as epileptic flinches on the canvas,
each motion quick as flipping a watch lid
closed, the past awakens
into candle-dust and hue,
a match-stroke grown into the flickering landscape,
so that, standing there, with the wind-caught flames slurried

above the bay, he begins to see the present as a shore
from which to watch the past disintegrate,
the way, bored, he traced
his outline onto the steam-fogged window of his father’s shop,
then let the cold leak in, and breathless, watched himself

evaporate, his ghost-self trapped in the suffocating
glass, as he imagined being tossed
through the window
of his own body, the body
shattering behind him. And doesn’t
freedom, at last, have to be like that--fracturing, bold--

the self a border we cross and cross into flames, which,
even now, are less a destruction
than the eviction of what lay,
for years, ripening within,
each board erupting with the sizzle passed
down through the wick of his veins, the coin-glint

from Parliament’s chambers swirled into the paint,
as if its arguments and pleas, the deep red
gloves pulled on
by the executioning judge
could be sewn together in the blaze. Once,
with sleight of hand, his father polished a coin into a cloth,

then tossed the bankrupt fabric in the air, as if the money
might lay vaulted in the steam, though
at the time, confused,
awe-struck in his father’s light,
he felt as if the coin might be locked
in him, hard and inextinguishable, radiating beneath

the skin, erupting, like the spirit, through the pores,
though later, sweeping--now the image
slides out behind the paint,
as Parliament collapses
in a heap--he found the coin, still
smoldering, beneath the mound of a day’s forsaken hair.
THE MACHINE GUNNER’S LETTER
(as Otto Dix)

1.

How, you write, will I survive? With instinct, trigger-eye,

the soldiers like turtles flipped over in the mud, limb-flail and broken shell. These thoughts move through me as I write, a telegraph tape

slipping through fingers. The lumberjack, they call me,

timber in the field, green blemished by red-splatter, like leaves at fall’s beginning. Behind the gun, I am eternity, I am time looking out

from the inside of a clock, the click-stop finger that marks the finish line. My body, knuckle-ache and recoil, records each loss,

tally-marks on the black slate of the heart. I am the vomit-taste in the mouth,

what they know is watching, though they race towards me as I hand death out, a parade-master tossing candy to the crowd. Later, under star-flutter, the night opening parachutes as it falls, I have to pick, like needles from a pin-cushion, the splintered death out of me. How once, I made your body gleam, the tongued lips, boot-polish on the nipples, your skin rubbed with orange peels. I could have, then, painted beautifully. Now, even the most gentle touch dissolves, my finger harp-strumming the trigger, grenade pin held between the teeth. Love, all night the gun, cartridge oil, rivet, barrel clip, puts itself together in my mind.

It’s so quiet out there, I can almost hear the maggots trash-picking the fields, or the final woman-call a body makes. Someone should rat-skitter through the foxholes, the moonstricken thistle-bush, and close their awful, glowing mouths. Someone should, mercy-handed, swift, sew this trench-line closed. Tomorrow, more men will ladder the trench wall, mud-faced, horrible, caravan towards me in the dawn.

How will I survive? I will kill the same man over and over until I’ve killed them all.
Shell-glow, tracer flare, shock troops huddled in a dawn field
affixing their masks. These glints of beauty, aren’t they
just the gilded edge of the sword, a muffle for the cruelty?

Mother, I’ve seen boys
with bat-poison in their veins, rabid, climb the trench walls
and let themselves be shot, have seen the recruits, target-faced, naive,
linger on the fire-step, their heads bobbed above the parapet,
like trench-line puppeteers. I have pearled the bullet deep into the broken
oyster of each face. Last night, a hole opened in me and closed.

I dream-walked through the fields, unharmed, healing
shell-holes with a touch, the seed-bag of my body slowly
tearing open as I walked. When I woke, rats at my boot-leather,
the moon with its machete at my throat, I could hear the shrapnel sing,
could hear the instruments of war play themselves inside of me, the
whole trench an orchestra pit where I conducted
the music of the gun, each snap-trigger note moving backwards through my hand,
until my body was the absence of a song, a white-nothing firing at the advancing
troop-line of the dawn, at the field-breath, at the mist,
the building sea-wall of the dead, all chest wounds
and buckle glint, bayonets of sunlight breaking through the fog.

I remember the kitchen-light,
bathwater boiling on the stove, you lice-picking
my hair, fingernail and turpentine, dropping them,
one by one, into the lantern flame, hovering above me with bible-verses
in your voice, the curse of rodents, locust-plagues, telling me
we are, each of us, earth-sky divided in the veins, death a way to sort the filthy
from the clean. Fingernail and turpentine,

who will pick these memories out of me?

The corpse-light rising from the fields,
the nail-hole of each nerve opening as I up-tilt the gun,
    like a conductor marking the crescendo
    of a song, my aim noses skyward, as if to kill
the emptiness I know is there, the emptiness that rots inside of everything, inside
our ration packs, the quick-lime, inside the ripening
grenades, inside the shit-fumes that smoke the air, inside the burnt-out
sockets of the gassed, the beehives of their lungs,
inside the canteens of our hearts, inside the boot-water rats,
the maggots that punctuate each corpse, inside the dead laid out
    all night upon the field, open-mouthed, code-breakers baffled by the language
    of stars, inside these words, inside everything I paint,
inside the quick-saluting boy I death-sloshed against the parapet, the dog-tags
    already torn from his throat, inside the spirit of the boy,
mother-trained, following orders even as he dies, a hand held up
    at the exit of himself, then waving him through, waving him
into kitchen light, bathwater boiling on the stove,
    where you first told me of the polished soul, where,
as if to demonstrate the violence with which it enters us, you pressed
a fingernail sharp against my cheek, shining, bullet-tipped.
GASSED

after John Singer Sargent

They might as well be walking towards a firing squad, blindfolded, single-file, a guide wire strung between them, each man a wounded Theseus crawling back up from the underworld,

though this thread leads only to the infirmary, where the gas will shut their bodies down, will move between the bodies’ rooms and snuff each lantern out. The dying grasp at their pant-legs as they pass, as they wobble along the duckboards just above the mud gasping at their feet, the steaming trash heaps of the dead, the battlefield sloppy as a butcher’s floor, all blood and aftermath, the dusk-glint of God turning to put his knives away. Looking out through the insect eyes of his mask, fatigued, Sargent can’t quite believe he’s not imagined them, called them up from the foxholes of a torched and rubbled mind, a mind battered by three weeks at the front, burrowed into itself and paranoid. At home, he worked slowly, sitting for days with his models, spoonfuls of pigment tapped onto the scales, working the empathetic muscles until he could roll the stone of each face away. He painted through the nights when the black-out curtains fell, Paris, light-starved and feverish with sirens, the newsstands charred, the smoldering grill-pits of bombed-out cars, the city blown back, in scraps, through his memory,
so that even now when a flock of poisoned birds begins to fall, one by one, into No Man’s Land, like descending souls, he sees them as cathedral stones, Saint Gervais collapsing

again with his niece inside, Sargent, astonished, absorbed, but not quite there, brushing the air-borne plaster from his coat like snow, watching the wheelbarrows teeter under the rubble-weight, the stretchers hauling off the faithful dead, one man mouthing, for eternity, a final hymnal note, and the girl’s face erased but everywhere, in the rag-pile of the church, reflected

in the cobblestone, his mind, in pain, unable to see her death except in metaphor. Even here, where the bodies are given a brief skeletal radiance in the shell light, as if he really might see into them, he edits the horror out, no vomit, no severed limbs, the faces a touch too bright, each man with his hand on the shoulder of the one in front of him, like elephants hooked snout to tail, the men washed and strung along the line, as if he might make our soiled history clean again. Or is it just another drop of poison stirred into the wine,

he thinks, a way to make the wretched tolerable? What else could he do, an old man who knew by now this war would be the end of him, who knew even if he could paint

the blistered, naked bodies, the shit streaking down the inside of a man’s thigh as he walks, the white angel-maggots burrowing into a face, his mind, at its core, could not help making things
beautiful. With the night turning purple as the gas disperses through the atmosphere, Sargent works with his mask slung across his shoulder like an extra face, letting his inspiration filter all doubts away as he sutures the men back together with a pencil tip, as he feels them moving through his thoughts like a line of text, written nearly a century later by a man with a book of paintings open on his desk, who sits and watches the rain fall into the empty flowerpots outside his window, which he can’t help seeing as the upturned helmets of the dead.
1. Edith Schiele on her Deathbed

Flickering, erased, her face claims him
as it defeats itself, the citrus cheeks,
windsock of her pony-tail,

though he sees this only inwardly,
in his reversible gaze. The rag of the real
face, lacquered, medicinal,

might be lifted away, might be wrung
out in the sink, as the soul might be twisted
from the body as she squirms

in a claustrophobic sleep, the sheets
soaked in ice-water, a heat in her
that could sizzle grease, the tugboat

of each cough dragging up a bit
of lung, the fetus dead or dying,
the radiant spill of cells starting

to poison it, the ember of each cell
darkening as it falls, the snake-
skin of the umbilicus closing down.

The sun, like a curled fox, unwinds
into dawn outside the window,
and Schiele tries only to sketch her
as she fades, to see how few lines
he can draw her in. If he could share
the thinning fact of her, like an ice-
cube passed between their mouths
during sex, he could recreate her dying
when she’s gone, the pages flipped forward

so all that’s left is the fossil of a cheekbone,
or the bottom lip, like a last splash of liquor
rimmed inside a glass, and then less than that--

the dark crumb of a mole, the eye’s
packed ash, some irreducible flake of her,
like the one infected cell, just now,

he inherits from her breath.
2. The Death of Egon Schiele

Three days later, that cell like a shout
that calls the rebels
from the woods, like a mis-struck note
that pollutes a song,
or the first drop of rain upon a shoulder,
has turned his body
to mudslide, to oil-spill, a disaster
that finds no town near
and so destroys itself, like the shot
that killed the Arch-Duke,
Schiele thinks, though what’s inside
of him, he knows,
was fired straight from the rifle
of his Edith’s mouth,
the infection like a drop of poison
in him now, slithering,
expanded into memory, the gasoline
fumes of his breath,
as the bed begins to take him in,
an unrolling of muscles
and roots, as if he were trying to embrace
Edith below, death
a loneliness that won’t be resolved,
or as if he were shoveling
trenches again, uniformed, sweating,
blind in a forest
of spade-handles, fatigues, curses,
weeks without knowing
where Edith was, or with whom,
as he doesn’t know now,
a thought that crawls through him,
as all his thoughts crawl
down the ladder of themselves
and other thoughts come
to spill the earth back over them,
though it’s him they’re digging
into it, isn’t it, his body a stretch of dirt
that must be cleared
away, the men circled above,
their faces all cigarettes
and mud, the shells launched
above their heads leaving
tracings in the air. “Mother, I need
the oxygen!” he calls,
and the black-hearted spades
keep erasing the weakening earth.
SELF PORTRAIT AS SOLDIER

after Ernst Kirchner

We’d like to imagine some clean remove.
Because the mind can’t absorb the shrapnel-spray,
the nails and shim embedded beneath the skin,
a shortage of anesthesia at the front,
the pauses in the sawing more awful
than the sawing, we’d like to think the arm

was shortened by some hard-swung bayonet, the arm
made level with its sleeve. The mind, at the front,
amidst the casual bootlace cross of bullets, the awful
ripening of grenades, finds no easy remove,
no retreat from teeth blown free of heads, the arterial spray,
the doctor, too late, pulling back the curtains of the skin,

his hand disappearing into the quicksand of the skin.
Even consciousness, eventually, longs to be removed,
though the body may not obey, may not embrace the spray
of arms falling from the sky. Arms and arms,
Kirchner just now gets the pun. Afloat in the awful
bathwater light of his studio, the suffocating front

like a fog inside of him, death counts from the front
and Wagner on the radio, the weakness in his arms
spreading to his hands, any or all of it so awful
that he stuffs the hand, like a shell, into the barrel of his skin,
a loaded sacrifice, as if one wound might forgive the spray
of boys across a continent, as if once removed
the hand might re-order the world, the front
dissolved, trenches rising into trains, bullet-spray
verticalled into rain. All night, from its sleeve, the arm
sinks and surfaces, the hand erasing itself from the skin
of the canvas, raised before the artist’s gaze, which seems removed,
deadened, so that what we feel isn’t empathy, but some awful

self-recognition, the feeling that what is awful
about the world is what is awful about us, that the front,
the war, the chemical past has been transplanted beneath the skin,
that it inflates in the blood cells, dark, un-removable,
echoing through gene-pools, shaping the ethereal spray
of consciousness, fired in the kilns of arts and arms,

so that even if, as Kirchner dreamed, we could spray the past out
with a hose, all skin and awfulness, the form of thought the front
has left us with is armed against our quietude, our sweet remove.
THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

after Theodore Gericault

It’s like standing all day on a trapdoor, the anticipation
worse than whatever waits below, the raft
rigged beneath their feet, cursed, their ship decomposing
on some tribal shore, and the life-boats,
where finer men eat with knife and plate, unburdened

when the captain, maddened by his crew’s slow pace,
cuts the tow-ropes, as if to drop the curtain
on this make-shift stage, the frayed-rope ends sinking
in the waves, a birth-cry rising from the planks
as the deserted men watch their noble brothers float away

on loaves of bread, already eyeing the water-jugs, the diminishing
shoreline of each man’s chest, the water
saying what have you done, what have you done as it crests
across their feet, the horizon taking down the sail
each wave-tip makes. And what have they done? The sharks

of paranoia circling the crumb of each man’s faith,
the sail ragged as their bodies on its wooden
spine, and a trail of corpses left behind, like campfires
abandoned on the forest floor, burnt-out,
some men slipping off the edge, a few throats slashed

in the middle of the night, their clothes ripped off
and waved, not like rescue flags,
but like handkerchiefs thrown down at the beginning
of a fight, death the admission that must be paid
for each new day, the flesh used, at first, for bait,

until the saliva triggers in the glands, and each corpse
  becomes a suitcase that’s been rifled through.
Like a lid removed from a pot of stew, Gericault thinks,
  years later, toxins steaming up when the skin
is peeled away, the body laid out in the basement of the morgue,

where he’s come to copy death in a plague of lines,
  the canvas still half-finished, adrift somewhere on
his cottage floor because, though he’s seen the arm-muscles
  made thin at death, like strips of wax, felt the teeth
ground down to nubs of chalk, he can’t quite finish it.

He’s brushed the bodies together on the canvas, like a stack
  of leaves, aimed the arrowhead of the sail away
from them, so that the viewer must feel the desperation
  of their reach, only the dead looking out,
save one man that he’s cloaked in an aura, a crust of red,

who wanders the sea-bottom of his own ravaged mind.
  Still, there’s something unfinished in the scene,
something not quite said, until, later, in his uncle’s
  bed, floating on the buoyancy of hips, he
and his aunt rowing towards completion, her body

splashing up through the bottom of his own, he looks
  down into the smoke and oil of her eyes
and feels something like a mutiny rise up inside
  of him, so that he understands he really
could leave his uncle weeping on the floor, overthrown,
though, all at once, he feels marooned when he has come, 
  his aunt turning away from him again, 
dressing quickly, sighing, “What have we done?” 
  so that watching her smooth the covers 
with her palm, the canvas remakes itself inside of him again,

the scene shaded now with all the broken oaths of France, 
  lives cut off by the velocity of guillotines, 
the constitution unrolled like a carpet for the King 
  to walk across on his way back to the throne. 
He will make them see the sail as a royal crest about to fall

from the edge of their gaze, a tortured flag twisted 
  in the hand of the final healthy man, the bodies below, 
monumental, cold, all he has to stand upon, which is how he feels 
  as he’s ghosted from his uncle’s home, defiant, 
mean, on his way to build, from this suffering, a new regime.
THE DEATH OF SARDANAPALUS

“I have seen the death mask of my Gericault! To die among all one has created, in all the passion and vigor of youth...”

--Eugene Delacroix

Operatic, bold, the sultan laid out in his ghostly robes,
   all ruined luxury, opium-faced, reposed,
the whole scene, candlestick and drapery, about to be torched,
   the Kingdom spilling its jewels at his feet.
Here is suicide made opulent, harem-girls rubbing oil
   into their skin to make their corpses gleam, sword-blades singing through the horses’ throats,
a slaughterhouse concerto, and Delacroix, frenzied
   as a conductor beneath his dark symphony
of hair, trying to paint the motion in, as if one symbol-

  crash of inspiration might ignite the scene, the horse-blood, ashes, drops of poison in the wine,
the rebels just outside the door, the sultan thinking, let them conquer nothing, the pearl-dust
of a vanished history, though it’s France he paints,

playing the sheet-music of its past on a foreign instrument,
  an elegy for the cities Napoleon plundered
in retreat, plucking what he could from the grape-bunch of each city’s gems, the rest left to shrivel
  beneath the bee-storm of a blaze, or the monarchy restored,

like a slow internal bleeding, though to love the self,
  Delacroix thinks, is to love our ruined history,
the shadow of his country’s borders collapsing in his veins,
the way, at death, the edges of the body flee,
so that it’s Gericault he calls into the scene, horse-thrown,
capsized, his body being swallowed by the dust-storm
of its own retreat, each breath like a nail yanked from wood, and his paintings, those bent and mournful faces he made of the insane, arranged about the bed, as pallbearers, Delacroix thought then, the master having sealed himself into the asylum of each frame. Ragged, obedient, feeding twigs of Gericault into the furnace of the sultan’s face, Delacroix feels the master taking hold of him as he paints, the way in a lesson he’d latch onto a wrist, the ego heeled when the master tightened the collar of his grip, as if to paint as someone else was to paint blameless, unconstrained, like soldiers touched by the King’s spirit as they fight, though it’s just another romance, isn’t it, like Gericault thinking heaven lay scattered in the paint,
or believing the sultan, robe-swaddled, wrapped in the darkening clouds of his defeat, condemning and condemned, feels each wound open in him a corresponding scream, while his most faithful servants, open-mouthed, insane, swallow jewels wrapped in cubes of bread, thinking they’ll smuggle a piece of the master’s soul with them to their grave. Don’t they know, by now, that no earthly thing--not mercy,
skin or oil--will stop the invasion of the blades?
GOYA AT THE MADHOUSE

So this is where a love of the imagination leads,
Goya thinks, boarded-up inside his deafness,
quarantined, silence inside of him like embalming fluid,
the whole scene swirling around him as he draws,
as if he’s come here to watch a storm from the quietest
of rooms, to feel each scream wash up
against him and retreat, men grappling
with each other, some naked, some muddied with
their shit, one man hung in chains, one eating
his shadow off another’s back, though most wander

through the mine-shafts of their interiors, oblivious
to the rubble of the others, curled up or sifting
through the hourglass of sleep. So this is where it leads,
the hieroglyphic mind, the grapeshot
of our fantasies ignited in the groin: self-pollution,

widow’s mites, leprosy. Last month, fevered, chattering,
the dust-gnats of infection devouring
the petals in each ear, he saw, above him,
a ceiling hung with snakes, constellations
in his bed fleece, lice in the dark hair of the night,

the doctor drawing a vial of ashes from his wrist,
so that he felt himself disappearing,
as if he were being devoured by the larva
in the doctor’s eyes, by the madness
rising through the infinity of roots the mind unrolls
through the flesh’s darkest soils, madness carving
its way up the totem of the spine,
prehistoric, raw, from the body’s Godless aquifers,
until he began to see thought
as the salt the body’s stormy ocean twirls weightless

through the air, our chain-linked logic unable
to keep caged the animal of our history,
each revolution giving rise to the bloody code,
the Inquisition, the guillotine.
So this is where it leads, starvation, dunking tubs

and whirling chains, the attendant in the corner with
a lashing stick, our reason the mortar
with which authority lays its bricks, these men
the windfall apples of their age
or strapped, from birth, into the wheelchairs of their destinies.

So this is where a lifetime of painting leads, staring up
all day into the rotunda of the mind,
drawing now one man with a paper crown, one quailed
beneath the soft beak of a Hussar’s cap,
trying to suggest a balance in the filth, as if the inmates

were working towards a common goal, like shipbuilders,
as if the madhouse might rise
on a battlement of shrieks, each inmate walking
the gangplank of his sanity, he thinks,
like the time, as a boy, he found himself trapped
atop the catwalk in a barn, the ladder dropped below,
    sealed inside the asylum stench
of straw and pigeon shit, the dark complete,
    until, creeping forward, he popped
the hay-loft window and looked upon a landscape

he could not reach, the crops fenced in by stone,
    the farmhouse too distant for his screams,
which is how he felt when his madness finally broke,
    lofted, alone, waiting for art to let down its ropes
and lower him back into the flattened world below.
VITA

Steve Gehrke was born in Mankato, MN in 1971. He holds a B.S. in English from Minnesota State University, Mankato, an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas, Austin, where he was a James Michener Fellow. His first book, *The Resurrection Machine*, was selected for the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and published by BkMk Books in 2000. His second book, *The Pyramids of Malpighi*, won the Philip Levine Prize, and his most recent collection, *Michelangelo’s Seizure*, was selected for the National Poetry Series and is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. Next year, he will join the faculty at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, where he will be moving with his wife, the poet Nadine Meyer, and their daughter Chloe.