

I CAN'T SHUT MY EYES

A Thesis Presented

by

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Submitted to the graduate school of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

May 2007

Department of English

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Something Vague and Incorporeal Insinuates Itself into the Afternoon" is for Charles Wright.

In "Have You Never Wished Your Father Dead-" the lines "Where is the crown? / Who took it from my head?" are from Shakespeare's *The Second Part of Henry IV*.

"Grief" is for Arthur Kirsch.

The phrase "Joy has been a habit" in "Evening After Reading Jack Gilbert" comes from Jack Gilbert's poem "Rain."

I would like to thank my advisor Peter Gizzi for his careful reading of this manuscript and for his encouragement.

A special thank you to Jack Driscoll for his constant help over the years with my poetry writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Influences

My earliest work relies heavily upon the so-called confessional poets, but my influences also range toward the work of the high modernists (e.g. Pound, Williams). The first books I read were all personal narrative, influenced by such giants of the 1950s as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop. Their emphasis on fresh rhythms, voice and diction informs "Sailing Catamaran with My Father" (24), an early poem representative of this period of my writing, which relies heavily on personal experience and narrative detailed through image.

Robert Creeley and William Carlos Williams stand behind the short poems in the manuscript. I hear the music of these poems in the way that Creeley is known to have heard Williams' s poetry. After each short line I hear a hard end stop followed by a pause; Creeley is said to have heard Williams read and realized that he had formed an entire poetics based on his incorrect belief that Williams read in a jagged rather than smooth fashion. Another important moment came when I read Creeley's introduction to his *Collected Poems, 1945-1975*: here he states how all voices, every type of diction and all subjects are all fair game for poetry. In my short poems I concentrate on everyday dialogue, disrupt the normal rules of punctuation as we do when we speak, and focus on double entendres; the slippages often reveal more about us than we would like to admit. Pound was also a seminal influence. While I had great difficulty understanding his longer poems in my first encounter with them, the importance Pound attached to a sharp image in a poem like "In a Station at the Metro" or in his rediscovery of Chinese poetry stands behind such poems as "10,000 Questions about Home" (4), "Mortgage" (10) and

"Thinking of Wang Wei in Mr. Jefferson's Gardens" (16). In these poems the lines are shortened, with attention paid to the lyric moment.

Translation

In *The ABC of Reading* Pound stresses the importance of translation for a developing poet. As part of my studies at UMass I studied Italian and translated about 40 poems. The goal of the exercise was to hear the music of language more clearly. Often times I read passages from Dante out loud that were so difficult I could not possibly understand them. This created a heightened perception for the material substance of language—its rhythms, its malleability, and its limitations. These lessons appear in the layout of the final poem in the manuscript where I use the space on the page and sounds to suggest temporal themes and the limitations of memory; previously, I had used clumsy constructions with repeated words to create this effect.

Inspiration and Subject-Why Write?

In a famous letter to his brother and sister describing why he writes poetry, John Keats calls the world the “vale of soul making,” and asks how we forge that soul except “by a world such as this.”¹ In other words, we are touched by—for lack of a better description—a higher power when born, but the soul must be developed, and only through interaction and reflection upon the world can we become more human. To my mind, this curiously ties into a modernist notion (I say curiously because the modernists attempted to banish the romanticists to the pages of history) that paying attention to the concrete object plays a major role in poetry. In devoting ourselves to the particulars, we

¹Letter to George and Georgiana Keats dated April 21, 1819.

are able to get at what T.S. Eliot called the “objective correlative,”² the feeling that connects to or is evoked by the object, the *spiritus mundi*, the spirit of the world.

In a roundabout way, this ties back to the very first poems I wrote. In his poem "In Memory of William Butler Yeats" Auden writes, "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," but how many of us are hurt into poetry? Indeed, sadness and grief are considered the sources of truly great art. My first poems arose out of intense emotion, but they all lacked clarity and particulars. Through revision (literally re-seeing, from the Latin) and expressing feelings through the image, I began to make the poems more concrete, communicable, but have still tried to maintain a sense of mystery, what Keats called in another letter to his brothers "negative capability."³

This approach, however, does not necessarily mean that my all poems are biographical. While these poems discuss divorce and children, I have never been married and do not have kids. This does not make those poems any less significant to me. While these poems may have been conceived in the imagination, they required just as much reflection as anything I might have written about that I have lived through, and are just as much a part of that soul making process that Keats described. We often credit novelists with the ability to create fictions, but because of the dominant poetics of the 19th century and the more recent confessional generation, we are less inclined to attribute this flexibility to contemporary poetry. I don't deny that the manuscript can be read through a Freudian

² Eliot writes in *The Sacred Wood*, essays on poetry and criticism, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion. . . ."

³ Letter to George and Thomas Keats dated December 21, 1817.

lens, but I would like to believe that criticism of it could extend beyond that. While Wordsworth or Whitman and their transformative "I" stand behind this project, the excesses of Blake and Borges were also major encounters in my development as a reader.

TEN THOUSAND QUESTIONS ABOUT HOME

I

On my glasses 40 degree drizzle.
What was I doing on my bike,

covered in business casual
and wind. Gun gray sky.

At the bus stop students held umbrellas,
scattered epaulets. A car pulled up and a driver

leaned toward the passenger door.
Yellow light spilled.

Someone folded up a cell phone.
Someone walked away.

Already the leaves turn.

II

Who said, "Wherever I go there I am?"
Watching the leaves spin in my yard

I thought I said it. You said, "No,
Wang Wei itinerant in the mountains."

No matter where you are
The autumn deepens in the village.

III

Today during my walk
a woman I've seen before said hello.

Another didn't. A dog chained
to a tree barked until I came over,

kneeled as it licked my hands, my face.
Bent over I found a silver chain.

I picked it up and put it back down in the dust.
I tell you this because soon the snow arrives
and covers this story.

IV

Is this it?

The months pass.

Night after night
I sit on my porch
while the katydids drone the same story.

Again the horizon line dips into the dusk.

In the darkness
the small house
against the sky.

JOURNAL OF ONE QUESTION

March has undressed me.
Fractals, angles and frost.

Pines gather moonlight.

I'm undone by the wind
and what blows by-
how the dead see us,
snow tossed sky, erased tracks and drifts.
Ice scratches the dormer
when they let go.

HAVE YOU NEVER WISHED YOUR FATHER DEAD-

I a child, he at war, the wind blew
under the moon's watch.
I walked asleep to his bed.
I dreamt he held me in one palm.
I cursed his name.
Now I'd erase all I've said to hear
his voice outside my head.
Then I do, from the chamber, Where is the crown?
Who took it from my head?
Touching it I saw: we were dead,
he and I, dust, and the crown, hot, bled.
I saw no faces.
When I return
I'll beg.

RAIN

Patter after the heat wave.
Me rocking my chair, eyes

closed. Threads of light, aftershock
searing the clouds. Wind howls.

All the bay windows up. Needles pound
the pavement. Suddenly, creaking one room

over. My wife and daughter gone from
this house. The accident. All things I

can't throw out. Every night,
the nightmares, the breathless waking. Every

day, memory's erratic flashbulb.
It's worse than this rain.

I can't shut my eyes.

DISCOVERY OF LARGE SPACES LEAVING YOU

The in-flight magazine describes
crossing
one particle of
dark matter
takes light years

at the speed of sound

in your eyes
I saw a hotel with
a flickering light
the stars I stopped
watching

MORTGAGE

December's insomniac run.
Out of breath, doubled over.
Floodlights tripped under the moonlight.

MOON CALF

If Mother leans against the barn door in her nightgown, Father reaches into the bawling cow, delivers a stillborn, its one eye fixed on the moon as a healthy twin oozes out.

If I load the shotgun, lean it against a bale, Mother disappears to the house and the cow licks the healthy calf clean.

When Father mouths his prayers on the steps as I shovel, a single shot fires. When he returns carrying the body he says, "Enough. Hand me the keys on the peg," and walks back toward the yellow light of the porch.

If we have other halves we can't explain, I fill a hole all night and no place erases the moon's burn.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH LOOKS LIKE MY DAUGHTER

In the fog in the rain in the wind
I waited for death's black shoes
no one came
in my temple a throbbing wingbeat of crows

it is not easy to die
the angel of death is not here yet
these are my daughter's
flushed lips arriving

SARAH AND GRACE

What you read was not true:
I did not approach.
I hid, crouched behind bushes
to watch her pray. I understood little,
her words like sand.
I wanted speech,
a name for touch.
She placed her hands in the sea,
let the water slip through her fingers.
I had only this strange reflection.

The day she approached me from behind,
I turned and groaned.
She asked if I could speak. She closed
her eyes and waved a hand in front
of my face, odd benediction,
pity soft on her lips.

Each morning taught new words.
I learned the island and its senses.
The wind seemed to caress, not burn.
I named my heart.
The world seemed sweet
now that birds had names
and flight seemed possible.

But then he came, rising over the sand mounds.
Suddenly my body
not my body.

SARAH TO LOST SAILOR

Turn your world—
an island's
if dead. Take these rocks.
This book.

We'll turn them,
make his yours.
They've never bled.
See the sea to wed
all things living, all things dead.

Drink.
You can't return.
Drink me. Worlds will burn.

THINKING OF WANG WEI IN MR. JEFFERSON'S GARDENS
-University of Virginia, 2006

Wind last night, and the temperature dropped.
The autumn sky is clear in the distance.
Red burnishes the maple leaves, tiny flags.
Two birds fly away, and a branch quivers.

The heat's glaze has disappeared overnight,
and now the dead have no chairs to sit on.
I feel ghosts move and the passing of time.
Squirrels chatter their odd alphabet.

Somehow I fit in back here,
path through the garden filled with tiny pebbles.
Soon the dead leaves will blow into my hair and onto my clothes
piece by piece like a colored quilt.

NEGOTIATING THE TERMS OF OUR ARRANGEMENT

I

An inch of water surrounds the utility closet and bathroom while I'm at the gym. The condo maintenance man: if I come all the way out there in this storm I can't do anything that I can't tell you on the phone so there's no point, see.

Me: I want to go get a drink with some friends if I can leave this without more flooding.

Him: Yeah, wait, that's my cell phone ringing. Take care, buddy.

II

Without calling you
pack your toiletries, sheets and books
in trash bags,
hand me three letters.

There's an SASE.

There's no dog. She's in CT.

III

Not the tsunami but the thing behind it. When an acquaintance goes to Sri Lanka for holiday I don't hear from her for two weeks. Waiting for her picture on the evening news while ripping up carpet.

Or Nina Totenberg on NPR interviewing: the earth shifts every eleven seconds.

I tell you this because-I think-I heard, when you said goodbye, in your voice, a movement.

IV

A ridge runs the length of the living room.
 The contractor: I could grind it down,
 but that's a day,
and two men, and a whole lot of dust.

V

Crawling on the ground.
I smack my thumb. The hammer.
Walls' slant.
On my knees filling gaps.

VI

Dusk. The frozen Mill River
seems Arctic and cracks.
A thin sliver beneath the floes.

Weather never stops.

EVENING AFTER READING JACK GILBERT

Suddenly this defeat.
This wind.
The snow whirling
over the frozen lake
which shifts.
A terrible cracking.
The shanties' pale outlines
against the night.
The news
of my brother, not
my brother.
My hands ring
then bury
my face.

I have been easy with trees
too long.
Too familiar with rivers.
Joy has been a habit.
Now
suddenly
this wind.

THAT OTHER ANIMAL

In Santa Monica a fog rolls in each morning that will not lift. But this is my vacation and I wander through it. Tourists collect at a small theme park by the pier where street musicians line the walk, staccato and offbeat, and noise erupts from the games. Music blares from tinny speakers, and a stream of water shot into a clown's mouth sends off a bell.

Further down, past the park, the crowd thins to fishermen dotting the railings, their patient blank faces. Few wear shirts. Their bodies, burnt by sun or work, suggest an oil painting: indistinct brushstrokes against a languid sky.

Beneath, sliding between the pier's legs, a shadow tethered to the tide and waves, in then out of view. The fishermen anchor their spots. Should I tell a lifeguard that no one should swim here because the slow striped animal might strike? No one swims under the pier anyway, and how long before it disappears?

I don't believe in prescience, but the week before boarding the plane I dreamed I was fly fishing on a bridge suspended by only ropes between two cliff walls. Of course I couldn't cast into the depths with a fly rod, but there I was, and there were fish at least a yard in length limned in the dark. And even if I couldn't see them I'd have known they were there; I felt them, and it was as if my whole life had been spent learning and practicing how to cast so I could succeed there.

It occurred to me then there was someone behind me, someone broad shouldered with a knife and a smile I'd seen somewhere years ago. Then I woke and wandered the house without waking my wife who seemed so far away tangled in pale sheets and moonlight.

Each time a wave unfurls its curtain to reveal that shadow I am back in the night where the water falls away beneath the stars. I cannot tell the animal beneath me from the seaweed washing nearby or what I dreamed. Behind me stands a man gutting baitfish. He nods, then grins.

A fish four or five feet long, a tiger shark perhaps, and if no one else saw it, then what? Somewhere, sometime ago I was approached. No one said anything, and for many years I practiced my cast alone at the lake near our house. The tide's pulse shifts and brings in a cloud of sand then blue. Screams from the roller coaster catch in the wind's throat. The sky holds me close, and the fog does not let go.

THE DOOR

You can do nothing for it—
a door hears the promise
of a key turning, but that
is the true province
of the knob. A door
has nothing so exact
as the click of opening,
nor does it possess the fields
and wide metaphors of windows.
It has an ear for beginnings
but concerns itself more
with departures.

 When we would like
to go back
it is there.
Enduring.
Blank faced.
Doors understand.

VANITY

You've been staring
at the mirror running
your tongue
over your polished teeth
in private all your sweet life

but your cheeks sink
so just hurry up
and get your candy
ass into bed—it's spring
and already the white falls

DIVORCE

in the bureau
your clothes here
under the dining room table
everywhere I see you

this morning in the kitchen
I've been cleaning all fall
on my knees

or

this morning
on my knees
I've been cleaning

all fall in the kitchen
another strand
of your hair

SAILING A CATAMARAN WITH MY FATHER

Today the wind pushes the waves into a pulsing
fury beneath the charged blue summer sky. Half-hidden in clouds,
the sun lights the scattering spray and the long rolls
of waves that lift our boat up, then continue under,
following in the constant wake of each other's passing.

I lie down, staring up. My father
lets slack rope run through his hands, and pulls it to a taut stop,
salt water raining like kisses
on an old wound. He leans and yaws the boat up
on one side, the wing beneath me slicing through waves.

"Ten years since I've last done this," he yells
to the instructor, his gaze wild behind wet hair.
Watching him now, I can almost forget the years
of pale office walls, the dark annals of divorce courts.

The instructor takes back the line and draws a new bead
toward a buoy to bring back. My father leans out
and over, one arm extended toward the striped beacon growing larger
with every flashing moment. He grabs on, his face suddenly desperate,

and later I imagine if the single shaft of light falling down
on him had been the path of an eye looking from the sky
what it might have seen:

as if that buoy kept the turbid ocean whole
and separate from the raging wind
and our tiny lucid boat,

as if my father's strained arms
could hold on against that moment's passing, hold out
against any force that might ever bring him back to land.

TXT MESSAGING

I Read in a Book Somewhere

snow falling faster than time
in my headlights
on this back road winter
without an ending

*

Dog

She sd yeah it's ugly
but if you look at something long enough and it's yours
you learn to love it

*

Overheard at the Dumpster

She sd I hate fall
cause it only leads to winter
she sd october is not a season

*

Rich

She sd my parents are going to the Cape to summer. He sd
where I'm frm
summer's not a verb

*

Driving Home During Christmas

Passing above the lip
of a quarry it seemed the snow
was the spidery breath of the dead.

*

Thinking of You After a Month in Italy

The Arno like glass beneath the full moon.
Your absence has become a presence, flecked.

*

February Journal

Winter's wick is lit and smudged. Blood thickens.
The landscape quickens us,
and we're burnt.

*

On her Birthday She sd the 30s Are the New 20s

People live longer n look better. Yeah
bt yr 10 years closer to when you die
I sd n flicked a cigarette

*

We Can't Name Until We've Seen It

Starry sky almost brakes and skid
the bear blurs (wheels) the iced road-
a snow bank and the unseen

*

Conversation

He sd I have no interest in talking
about death. She said yes
bt it has an interest in you

*

Whatever You Do Don't Dream in Black and White

Absently I push a number
on the tuner.
Static's a language too.

*

Summer

A chirping cricket tissue held.
Outside, rain. I shake the white. Nothing
falls, nothing's sound.

*

He sd Is It Serious After the Doctor sd

Well she sd I'm not dying-
at least not faster
than I was before

*

She sd Can We Really Afford This Night

He sd what's the point of not having any \$
if you can't spend it
every once in a while

*

Landscape in the Key of C

Clouds dressed in white suits with no place to go,
go there anyway,
tab across the sky's blank page.

*

Summer II

August and its white gloves, its ten thousand hands
rearranging clouds. Military sword and glimmer.

UNLIKE MY NEW SHIRT

I do not breathe well
I wrinkle and am deeply stained
it will not rub out

after lunch
you run through me like a flaw
in fabric

GRIEF

Somewhere near the end
of the century
everything seems
shitty and vague,
anonymous and small.

So young, and already
a winter
so endlessly winter
it turns into one story.
Loss, eloquent cloud.

Perhaps we all carry grief, a map
exposed and hanging
from our sleeves, or hidden,
a sign of what's to come, weigh us down.

No matter what century
grief's script
always a disaster—

blank kills the king
the prince kills blank
blank kills blank
everybody dies.

And always a survivor
left standing
before impossible light.

Right now
I'm wondering why
Horatio doesn't receive
the last lines.
Maybe because he stays
in the white swath
of virtue,
hasn't earned the right
to speak on such matters.
No matter.

In a corner
we learn rage
well enough to speak
in the pages
of grief's library.

Until then we're tucked
in the margins,
lost to the silence
that flows from and stops the mouth
all at once,
blossoming and stuck.

SELF PORTRAIT IN ROME CIRCA 1999

Surveying the Trevi Fountain,
Per piacere, Signore, una foto.

Half-smile,
whiplash of light burnt into the negative's dark:

inchoate questions sewn into his eyes,
pidgin language pebbled on his tongue.

Heart beat and blood rush.

Coin toss and flash.

The unknown slipped behind the drawn shutters.

Smells he can't decipher, children he doesn't see laughing.

The clouds rapt in gray beds.

There's an answer
in the waters' sibilants
and the old men's mumbling he can't hear.

Now walking toward the Spanish Steps with a leather pad,
sits down and starts: "*Dammi la propria parola*"

give me the right word.

Make the language raise steps to the sky.

ARIEL

1

I met myself. He slept
and undressed me, and I watched
myself walking through dreams.

2

Moonlight passing through splinters,
tiny bars.
Moon then cloud.

3

He freed me.
I owned no reflection,
no mirror in the sea.

4

He became an island.
His daughter
still his daughter mouthing holy penance.

5

His nightmares: knives
splaying sun. Boats dissolving.

Such howling as I could not quiet
with my hands, reliquary vapors.

I am no carpenter of bodily love.

6

At midnight he bids me: *fetch dew*
from the still-vexed Bermooths.

I fly to the harbor to strip
dew from silky reeds.
Tears added to this unction
no man can carry.

7

If flesh were mine
I'd touch sky and nerve against rock.

8

Time ancillary to moon and sea.
Solitude in sweet air with wings.

MEMORY LIKE STATIC SPARKING UNRELIABLE AND WORN

Yellow light
and odd buildings.
Driving in the snow, then rain.

I'm sorry I'm late.
There's been more dying.

I sit with it and the walls' pallor.

I thin the past, walk down steps.

Maybe you stand by a window as I turn the key
back out of the car frozen
where the rain or the snow and the headlights

*

pick up my shadow
walk down a boat ramp
in Boston Harbor with Carolyn Korizinsky.
I fidget with my tie, she waits

for my kiss but I back away and that's that. Or,
she's lifted into air,
wedding reception,
my date takes the dance floor half drunk,

breaking up with someone in the middle
of nowhere. Hours later she pauses
the light's edge, the gravel parking lot?

It's many years before I could touch anyone
after he died. I freeze there,
moment to moment

snow caught in the streetlamps below

where bodies crowd the streets

where women kiss my cheeks
where time zones, sheets and knuckles

*

tap against the backstop fence.
After jogging, doubled over.

In the other field
a boy my height fires the ball to a child standing in a corner.

In the other field

I'm five, my brother running
toward a ball sends it, shock on his face as he runs
and I watch
from where I spent my life

with or without my brother *hello goodbye*

*

where the arc and the sun and the clouds gray

days alone on the bench and hitting
against the wall or anyone
who sits down,

Cambridge, Mass. public courts,
Dennis Enderly shouting, "Like a hammer,
not a girl." Or after school

practicing, then climbing the hill to watch lessons.

The wire fence. The wall as it darkens.

Turning in bed, knees gone,
my wrist cradled in a brace,
can't sleep, can't run, I count Agassi backhands

down the line,

cross-court, my wife,
(maybe I'll have a wife)
drifts away, a palm in my hand,

hospital lights, a slap and cry
or a hand closing my eyes where I see
the ball, shadows at net
where a boy or a man hits running and explosion

*

splashes by the Connecticut River
a merganser
shakes its head, the heat,
where am I—wading a river,
Florida because my brother and father,
crickets and frogs,
a neighbor's TV.

Steps in empty docks dense trees.

Thinking I can pass the test until the sand disappears.

It must have been a pond,
because flecked pastel houses,
screened porches where my breath
shortens where my feet don't reach
the ground, where the water pools
the cold where the sun my gasp and the surface breaks

*

home from college we go to his office? Power cut
furniture tipped papers scattered
a coffee maker
I carry in my luggage or boxes

through many moves,
houses where no one asks
where the sidewalk, the crack and the hospital lights

*

dust streaming through the windshield,
I'm hunched
over the wheel on I-91 about to miss a plane as I pass
a school bus.

Do I chase the bus

or walk to school, the neon lights?

130 mph blurs faces or they hold so clear, I'm through

security, my suitcase in my arms, my keys in my fist

my temple throbbing footsteps.

The stewardess smiles. This happens
all the time in the long glass hall
where the plane's wing, the terminal and the blue