

GRAND OLE OPRY

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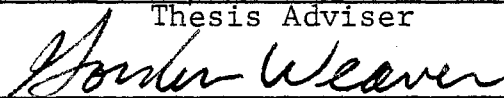


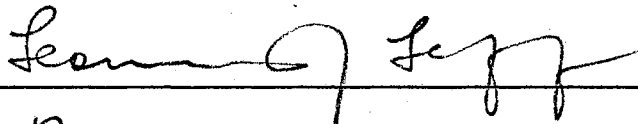
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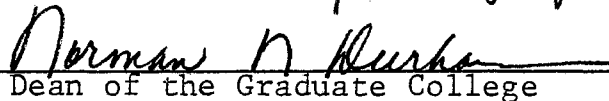
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I	
Grand Ole Opry	5
Highway 22 Quarry at Cecil	6
Maiden's Prayer	7
What Grandmother Told Me When I Got Cleo's Trunk	9
Cousin Mindy's Christmas	11
A Finer Man	12
PART II	
The Junior League Cookbook	15
Lost in a Subdivision, Looking for the Pool	17
AT ROADSIDE: Arkansas Naturalism	18
The Pretty Man at Art School	19
Stringy-Haired Woman in a Laundromat	20
The Television Evangelist's Young Wife Casts Out Demons at Sakowitz	21
The Order of Their Future	22
In the Art of Knitting by Hand	23
PART III	
Saint Stephen, Saint Agnes	26
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

INTRODUCTION

Grand Ole Opry is a collection of poems representative of the work I have done in poetry from 1979 to 1981. Some marked changes and development have occurred in my work since I began this project. These poems demonstrate the growth of my personal aesthetic as it has solidified in my exploration and practice of the craft.

The poem "Grand Ole Opry" is perhaps a good place to begin as it was, after a fact, a bridge for me. In this poem, my main concern was to develop, through a persona, a narrative voice that was direct and seemingly unmanipulated by the poet. To achieve this distance, I put the action of the poem inside the persona's psychological awareness; therefore, the poet seems not to be in the poem at all, or at least to be very distinct from the persona and her station in life. The dialect given to the persona is intended to inform the reader of her social and geographic locale, but it is never intended to evoke condescension.

In contrast, "Highway 22 Quarry at Cecil" is centered around images visible to the persona and to the reader as described by the persona. The emphasis is not on the mental activity of the persona but on the images that stimulate her and suggest the imagined image of the women

in the quarry.

Although both poems rely heavily on psychological progressions, one works strictly internally while the other operates on the external level. Those poems in the collection working on the concrete, external level are less dependent on persona and more on imagery, which perhaps suggests that they are more "realistic"; however, those poems that make use of psychological realism (in the Jamesian sense), although actually heavily manipulated by the poet, seem to be less affected by the poet. Both techniques are integral to the poems in this collection, dependent upon the nature of the dramatic situation and whether or not the tone of the poem is ponderous or narrative.

"A Finer Man," one of two formal poems in the collection, is a poem that relies heavily on the persona's recollection. The sestina form is appropriate as the repetition of end words gives the form its ponderous nature. The narrative of the poem occurs exclusively in the persona's memory and is, therefore, subject to her embellishments. On the other hand, "Stringy-Haired Woman in a Laundromat" is an essentially exterior narrative as sparse as the furnishings of the laundromat. While the objective of the detail in the sestina is to show specifics both psychological and tangible, "Stringy-Haired Woman" approaches the subject objectively, pulling back from the situation suddenly while allowing the reader to deduce the

true essence of the situation.

"What Grandmother Told Me When I Got Cleo's Trunk" is intended to be narrative in the strictest sense. The poem's only purpose is to tell its story. The narrative is linear and does not attempt to make any leaps or move into the mind of either Cleo or the persona. Any exploration of the character's or the persona's motives must be imposed by the reader. Similarly, "Maiden's Prayer" relies on the persona as storyteller, yet the persona does impose some limited speculation on why the character, Evertt Dunning, is preoccupied by the song. Again, the poet must decide which will inform the reader best, an interior monologue, an exterior, almost catalogue of detail, or a combination of both.

The personae of these poems tend to have a colloquial and occasionally bucolic voice. With this almost rural tone, the title Grand Ole Opry seems most appropriate as the Opry originated as an amateur hour where locals could perform their music. Although the setting, dialect, and characters in the poems generally draw from a rural background, they are not intended to rely on this regionalism for meaning nor for the true essence of their passion. I would like to think these poems could happen anywhere; I just left these people where I found them.

PART I

Grand Ole Opry

"Oh, I wish I had someone to love me."
--Country song lyric

It's raining into the trailer,
and the curtain's as sippy
as wet biscuits.
It's too hot to shut up the house.

My hair's all bushy
blowed by the box fan.
He likes it like this--
too thick to tie up.

Goddamn little fish--
mess of sunperch
in the black grease,
it pours back easy
with the skillet slung
over the coffee can,
cutting back hot and dark
into the yellow lard.

He says he's sorry we can't go out ever.
He says we do our dancing at home.

My feet and belly's swelling,
my apron's cutting in so tight,
and the radio's playing
that song so sorrowful
about how whiskey and blood run together
and how nobody prayed.

Highway 22 Quarry at Cecil

A dead carnival
of quarry engines rusts
into blue pools. The horse stops
slapping hooves on the flagstone flat.
I lead him across the slick rocks
above fixtures and furniture
dumped by mobile home owners.
I hear a dogfight,
a pack hard after the weakest one.

Moving in the shadow
of the bank beside me,
I see the women I cannot be
afoot: mounted women
with ruins around them;
women with sons at Pea Ridge,
Calais, and Inchon;
women with daughters who scrape
potatoes and peel onions.

Fence rows,
cow paths, and power lines
run from the quarry to the state
highway where the sound of fleeing dogs
is silenced. Its distance moves
so quietly beyond the rocks
the horse will refuse to climb
knowing we are lost.

Maiden's Prayer

"Moon on high seems to see her there
In her arms he belongs
and her prayer is a song." --Bob Wills

He takes the smooth
curved plow handles,
thinks of her skin.
The doeskin softness.
Stars shine on her
bare shoulders.

The tobacco poster
picture at the Green Frog:
The Indian Maiden
on her spotted pony,
the moon high above them.
The snuff pitch below.

Jack and I went home
to eat the same
light bread and onions
and listen to Bob Wills
broadcast at noon.
Everett Dunning and the mules
stayed at the bottom land
where there was no radio.

Everyday, a quarter mile
up the river road,
Dunning met us asking,
"Did they play it?"
If we heard the song
or didn't, he went back

*

to the mules,
the rows of unplowed sorghum.

Twice he heard
that song played
at the Wintergarden
where folks come
for pumphandle dancing
in rolled cotton socks
and spit-shined shoes.

He wonders what she prays for,
hopes it is love.
He takes his mules
on the ferry
back to Van Buren.

What Grandmother Told Me
When I got Cleo's Trunk

She pulled her corset tight
to cinch her waist small
like a wedding band,
levied the strings
up over the rafters
in her attic room.

Perching on the trunk
with the bluebirds and cabbage roses
on the lining paper,
she let her weight fall
against the whalebone
until her ribcage foundered.

Cleo was going to marry
one of those Coles
if she had to settle
for the old man,
though she was set on
Olin, the Holiness preacher.

She kept on every Sunday
so tight she wheezed
like Uncle Homer's emphysema
until what we told her about
happened. In the morning glare
we found her hanging

by the corset
head lolling like a dead starling's,
chest crushed like an egg,
air singing out of her

*

some old song,
heels banging time on the trunk.

Before my wedding,
I prized it open,
found a cameo, table scarf,
a Cokesbury, and a powder box
with some beads in it.
Silverfish had eaten the roses.

Cousin Mindy's Christmas

Aunt Shirley welcomes us
on the rotting porch
and clobbers the cats
rubbing against the door.

None of us comes
to this white frame house
since Grandmother died
except at Christmas.

Father feels he must
and visits Uncle Lloyd.
Inside, they are in pajamas
watching game shows.

We play with Mindy's child.
Her pink nightgown is jelly-blotched.
She drags a balding babydoll
its face a ballpoint tattoo.

Mindy has found nothing
in her twenty-one years
but this daughter who takes
a fork to her uncle's oxblood shoes.

She shows me what her lover gave
for Christmas: a shotgun
he is teaching her
to clean and shoot well.

Outside, she brushes sleep
from the blonde lashes, sights
the tabby on the doghouse roof
levels the barrel steady.

A Finer Man

I think of him for countless springs,
 feel the blade on my throat, death
 long after the bedclothes have lost his smell.
 I hear his pleasure in moaning *bitch*
 see his figure form out of the night
 that was cold as my breasts in his hands.

He comes to me with dream-slow hands
 moving over the bedsprings.
 His flashlight cuts into the night.
 I stay beneath him as death.
 He covers my face with a pillow. *Quiet, bitch.*
 I take in his menthol smell--

dry tobacco odor, the smell
 of gin or some bad hooch he got his hands
 on before he came for me, mottled with birch
 shadows outside the open window he sprang
 through, eyes promising death
 if my screams bled into the night.

Tonight is like that night.
 Through the screen, juniper smells
 drift, hand in the curtains: a death
 relatives refuse to revenge, wash their hands
 of the matter and me. Another spring,
 swelling rivulets that whisper *bitch*

that promise a rebirth:
 I must walk there tonight,
 soothe my scar in the wellspring,
 breathe in a sweet smell
 that cleanses like the laying on of hands,
 the only miracle in this death.

This face I see, not of death
not some stalker who cries *bitch*,
but a man who takes my hands,
has a ring that cuts the night,
his flesh a finer smell.
I will marry in the spring

the smell of spring.
Nights pass through my hands.
Quiet deaths, births.

PART II

The Junior League Cookbook

"Recipes are merely guides."
the editors of *Little Rock Cooks*

Looking for something
to do with this eggplant,
I pull it down from the shelf:
A Cook's Tour of Shreveport.
Gone With the Wind letters
sweep across the spine.

The chapter headings run
"Sauces and Accompaniments,"
"Shellfish," "Wild Game,"
and "Use Your Chafing Dish."

Entries are embellished
with a personal note
or added suggestion:
Serve in a nest of English Peas!

Doodles in the margins
highlight the recipes:
"Sesame Drumstick Fondue"
has a peg-legged pullet
with a crutch.
"Lamb Cucumber Aspic"
shows a bibbed sheep
knife and fork in hoof.

"Saint Francis Cheesecake,"
named for the hotel in Helena,
is graced by a robed Holy Man
flanked by fauna and flora.

*

He cups a wedged portion
as if it were the Host.

Mrs. Augustus Fulk, III says
Men love this dessert.

Lost in a Subdivision, Looking for the Pool

Garden hoses coil yards
in bonds of green plastic.
Jumbled and square, ranch-style
houses--Monopoly tokens
thrown onto their lots like dice--
no trellis or chain link
dividing front or back yards,
barely room for the meter reader
to squeeze through to the next house.
At the road's dead end
I wheel into a slab of a driveway.
In the midst of that Mid-West
red yard, a ceramic bird bath
dry as a dry county
a blue plaster jay
clipped to its rim.
Next door, a youngster eating
sugar-powdered doughnuts
stands on his concrete slab
just beneath the flapping mouth
of his family's mailbox.
In his fist, a black rubber snake
mouth painted gaudy red--
he shakes it at me.

AT ROADSIDE: Arkansas Naturalism

*action, inclination, or thought
based only on natural desires
and instincts*

We took that long drive
down the interstate
taking the first exit
passed the winery
to the blacktop
looking for a spot
because at ten in the morning
the air was fine.
There were hours to get
to a football game.
The sumac and sugar maples
were urgently red.

We pulled off,
slipped through barbed wire
and someone's property,
tromped over dusty Wonderbread sacks,
Dixie cups, and jockey shorts in the kudsu,
but because the sand burrs

stuck to my stockings
and your trousers
sent us back to the road
we spent the half hour
plucking at each other
making it

to Little Rock
in time for the kickoff.

The Pretty Man at Art School

That summer I sold art supplies
at the paint store
Mr. Cullers asked me
if I ever saw
a man uncircumcised.

Just the pretty man at art school.

Imagine the surprise
when instead of nose or posture
the girls noticed the foreskin
while trying to catch the gesture
in his back, arms, thighs.

I had. He showed me anyway.

I knew it would get a rise
out of him if I said anymore
about the pretty man at art school,
so I eased over where we stored
glass and moulding and hid my eyes.

I quit and went back to art school.

He used to come by my place
with malt liquor or gin
but I ran his ass out
when he threw a crumpled ten
and five ones in my face.

At my house, a man is nothing but a man.

Stringy-Haired Woman in a Laundromat

Down rows of washers
lids flapped back
in bright yellow green
fluorescence,
she stands firm up
to the gold machine
holding a measuring cup
of fabric softener
waiting for the cycle
to stop.

Her pelvic bones bounce off
the washer in its spin,
her hips push back and rock,
eyes fixed, not focused
unaware of some local
scrawling with his last quarter
jagged letters on a dryer *BROKE*.

The Television Evangelist's Young Wife
Casts Out Demons at Sakowitz

I just think of him Hallelujah
as I get off the elevator
standing there by the Aigner bags
beating his wings together
speaking in the voice of temptation

*Tammy I want you
to buy those sling-back shoes
lewd foundations
a snake-skin jacket
patent leather vest
and crotchless panties*

Sweet Jesus I say
In his name I rebuke you
I rebuke you I rebuke you
just throw my charge cards
in that old devil's face
rip free of my sweater dress
half-slip push-up brassiere
sheer-to-the-waist hosiery
and gold serpentine chains
climb on the cosmetic counter
witness to all
who would hear
Praise the Lord I am free
of the vestments of sin

The Order of Their Future

They hunch over the cracked
driveway, reading an oracle.
She spreads her yellow culottes
hips grown wide from childbirth.
His gut porches over the girth
of khaki shorts as he leans
pouring poison into the slab
once hospital sheet white.

Clumps of grass, running vines
gorge the hairline cracks
feeding the one
important break.
Smudging with her thumb
she directs, he applies
caulking, a generous drollop
to the deepest crevice
a grey tumor
the first tire flattens.

In the Art of Knitting by Hand

I set my knitting basket
in the backseat floorboard.
I feel the sweater growing.
First long like a sock
then wide like an afghan.
Its cables unwind--

In the middle of July's scorch
I decide to knit you warm
sweaters, buy skeins of English
tweeds, French braided yarns
in cardinal, lapis, hunter green.
Stacks of patterns: vests,
scarves, and handbooks.

The heat drives me under
the window unit's one good vent.
I cast on stitches, counting.
Losing count. Trying to remember
the width of your shoulders in inches.

In the mountains of *Sangre de Christo*
you try on a sleeve--too long.
I rip out the rippled yarn tightly
back into perfect little spheres.

One hair's end
loops out of the cable pattern--
one of mine shed in the windy heat.
Pulling with my crochet hook
makes the whole row pucker.
I clip it. Later, I find strands
in the ribbing. You say *Leave them.*

I pluck a long hair
from behind my ear
wind it around the slate grey yarn.

Knit it in.

PART III

Saint Stephen, Saint Agnes

"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Sion,
then were we like unto them that dream."

--from "The Psalter, Psalm 126,"
The Book of Common Prayer

"You're a Christian martyr. Just a Christian martyr."

--from The Glass Menagerie
Tennessee Williams

I.

I thought the only thing wrong
with Anne Pollock was Polio.
She came to my birthday party
even in her braces rode
my Welsh pony around the paddock
dots of pinkness growing
round on her white face.

We half-helped/
half-carried her to the tree
where we ate ice-cream animals
and played party games.

I thought they called her that
because her family owned a Jewelry store.

II.

Jewish women--sixtyish--husbands
gathered on golf greens
assumed wicker rockers
on the Arlington veranda.

*

After baths in adjacent spas
they played Mah Jong.

Though I usually lost
sometimes I joined them
after school or in summer
playing them for lunches
at Mollie's (thin corned beef
on poppyseed rolls with pink
horseradish). They usually bought.

Afternoons, the sun too harsh
for aged skin, they wandered
into my mother's gown shop
to ransack the salerack.

One yellow-haired lady
tried on everything in the store
in size 14, then left it
all on the dressing room floor.

As she walked out. Francis hissed
after her *Dirty kike*.
Mother fired her.
You are paid to pick things up.

Francis didn't know what it meant.
Her husband should have told her.

III.

I sit in a Munich beergarden
with my new husband thinking
how well we travel together.

*

After seeing Dachau
we are not festive.

The glass cases of hair
were unreal
shavings a barber
could have left there.

I think of my new mother-in-law
Lutheran, her coffee table
loaded down with slick
books on the chosen race.

Curt talks about his uncles
on the Muhlheisen side dying
in an Austrian work camp.
Uncle Kendrick was in
Korea with the Navy.
I can claim no uncles
dying in any war.

Walking under the tram
we pause beneath the trestle
with a young British couple
waiting for a train.

He tells of his last wait
at his particular stop
when a body was overrun
beheaded on the track.

I hang back, paces away
keeping distance from
the gutteral language
I can almost understand,

*

the honking sirens.

I imagine a crowd clotting
around us for a glimpse.
We don't even hear brakes
as the train pushes by.

Saint Stephen, Saint Agnes
Sweet Jesus the need
we have for martyrdom.

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