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### Poetic Accessibility

In an automated society of efficiency and instant access, it is easy to lose sight of the necessity of the arts. Yet this situation illustrates precisely why we need the artist. Without the artist we reduce everything down to its utilitarian functionality or its market-value.

But the artist steps into this environment of “much and many” and calls the community to slow down and to encounter the depth of its experiences. Through representation the artist reminds us of the import of those experiences. Through re-imagination the artist restates what we already know in a way that compels us to thoughtfulness. The artist encourages us to focus.

Every day, each person is confronted with multitudes of messages and concerns all vying for his/her attention. We value options and information. But because of the sheer volume of information, it becomes nearly impossible to process all of it well. Rarely are we able to give any *specific* bit of information more than a cursory glance. But the artist points us to specifics.

From those specifics we are able to derive meaning. From those meanings we are able to derive a sort of narrative. Art provides a way for us to share that narrative, and by doing so, it allows communities, and even whole cultures, to transmit and/or amend their values. Thus, the conscientious artist has both a respect for, and a healthy mistrust of, the rules of his/her craft as well as his/her society, always looking for improvement.

The artist does this not only by pointing to the apparently beautiful, but by also pointing to the mundane and even to the ugly. By refusing to disallow any subject matter, the artist

achieves a paradoxical accomplishment: While focusing the audience on specifics, the artist gives his/her audience a fuller vision of the world.

This is indeed the goal of my own poetry, and it seems to be the concern among contemporary American Realist poets, specifically, B.H. Fairchild, Stephen Dunn, and Billy Collins. Various aesthetic choices that these poets make reveal this concern, and have influenced my own writing by clarifying to me what it is that draws me to such poetry. Perhaps the most obvious aesthetic choice in this regard, is these poets' focus on ordinary subjects.

By focusing on the ordinary, these poets broaden the accessibility of their works. Rather than dwelling in lofty abstractions, these poets typically write about the concrete realities that surround us all—places, people, and things. Rather than writing for a purely academic audience, these poets write about subjects that connect with airplane passengers, divorcees, machinists, theatre-goers, and parents. Their writing expresses a belief that one does not have to be a scholar in order to be thoughtful; one need not have read Hegel, Nietzsche, or Chomsky in order to have meaningful questions about history, God, or authority.

Their writing also suggests that the abstract concepts that concern us are best understood in terms of the actual moments that involve us. By focusing on particular events, the poems of Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins mirror the process by which we filter our understandings of the world, i.e. through our experiences. This focus reveals a conviction that life is best described, not by grand, sweeping statements or complicated exposition, but rather, by *comment*, moment by moment. These moments are pieced together, in all of their variation, peculiarity, and contradiction, to form a more truthful depiction of human experience.

But it is not only the ordinary and concrete subject matter alone that draws me to these poets; it is also the voice in which they typically write. Their rather straightforward way of

writing separates their poetry from the lofty academic style of so-called “language” poets because it focuses, not on complex linguistic conceptions, but on the natural flow of conversational speaking. This conversational tone invites a more general readership due to its down-to-earth quality. However, Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins still retain a precision that can only be preserved through careful attention to meaning. Thus, this conversational style is not primarily about broad readership, as is evidenced by the difference between the style of these poets and the vaguely lofty sentimentality of greeting cards and hit songs. Their poems possess a depth and an authenticity that are found in the *interplay* between precision and conversation, rather than in the expectation of either academic or pithy profundity.

This particular voice is obtained through attention to concrete and ordinary subject matter (as mentioned above), but also through word choice, sentence structure, and form. Word choice is perhaps the most obvious aspect in identifying the voice. Words are chosen, primarily, based upon their precision of meaning. However, this is also balanced with the often competing value of the poem’s prosaic flow. The syllables, sounds, and associations of a word that would otherwise be the best choice, may produce more *lyrical* problems than the word’s absolute precision of meaning may justify. Thus, words may have to be changed (or changed around) in order for their rhythmic, phonetic, or connotative qualities to be considered of greater value to the surrounding line(s) or to the overall poem. Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins navigate these competing elements in a way that preserves the integrity of the intended voice.

Another important feature of the voice is sentence structure. Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins use a variety of sentence lengths and structures to influence pacing, flow, and tone. Short sentences tend to simplify things and can speed things along. They are also used to focus the

reader on specific elements, usually nouns or noun phrases with clear connotations, that attempt to generate a desired impression.

Long sentences typically require more effort on the part of the reader, and thus, slow things down. These sentences are often full of subordinate clauses that elaborate on (and often suspend) the main clause, thereby guiding the flow and pace of the descriptive progression in a certain way. In these sentences the reader is encouraged to let the description develop before fully understanding what it means. This requires a bit of trust on the part of the reader; however, Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins' commitment to concreteness typically provides the reader with an anchor. But these long sentences can serve another function. They can also mimic a sort of inner, rambling dialogue that reinforces the conversational tone through its unpolished appearance.

The voice is further supported by the poets' choices concerning form. Typically, these three poets write in free-verse, which allows for a more natural tone than can be achieved through the classical poetry forms. Without external structural constraints, these poets are given the opportunity to structure their poems in a way that supports their intended voice. Stanza separation, line breaks, visual spacing, and the overall length of the poem are each used as a vehicle for that voice.

But though this is an opportunity for the free-verse poet to make the most of his/her poem, it is also a responsibility. It becomes the poet's obligation to choose what structural decisions are appropriate. In Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins, these choices seem to be made according to how they affect the flow, shifts in idea, and overall balance of the poem, which are all important aspects of creating the voice.

Up to this point, I have been talking about these three poets generally, because of stylistic similarities and common attributes among their writings. However, each is unique in his specific

orientation within the general aesthetic that I have, thus far, broadly defined. Likewise, while orienting my own writing within this goal aesthetic, I intend that it should also be found unique. But in order for that uniqueness to be recognizable, I will demonstrate the overall aesthetic and its component parts as they appear in specific examples: first, in a poem by each, Fairchild, Dunn, and Collins; and then in selected poems of my own.

### **B.H. Fairchild**

I deal with B.H. Fairchild first because, of the three, he is the outlier. In the collection I used as my primary text for Fairchild, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, his poems (as well as his lines) are often much longer than the other two, and his poems possess a greater overall loyalty (or at least a nod) to traditional structure. Sometimes he uses tercets or quatrains that even rhyme at times. But he usually writes in large stanzas with lines of nearly the same number of syllables. However, Fairchild also varies his structural approach by, sometimes, totally blurring the line between poetry and prose, structuring his stanzas like paragraphs.

Yet, his primary commitment to writing about blue-collar life places him squarely in the middle of my “ordinary subjects” aesthetic. The title of the collection, and the poem that I am analyzing, “The Welder, Visited by the Angel of Mercy,” demonstrate this perfectly. I have chosen this poem for its subject matter, and because, according to Fairchild, “...the present book, in various ways, grew out of this poem” (123).

As is characteristic of Fairchild, in this poem he refuses to let the reader forget that his subject and setting are ordinary. On nearly every line he reiterates this fact with words like, the truck’s “twisted tongue and hitch;” “fields / of short grass where cattle moan;” “a Patsy Cline tune” being sung by the welder who simultaneously “smokes his third joint” as he is “*fucking around in a ditch / on the road to El Paso ass-deep in mush melons*” (54, italics original). He

even gives us the welder's name, Roy Garcia, thereby pinning to the man the most particular, and yet ordinary, of all things a reader can expect to learn about a character in a poem. The concreteness of Fairchild's words anchors the reader to a very specific character in a very specific setting and situation, thus revealing the important connection between subject matter and voice.

For Fairchild, subject matter and voice are inseparable, knit together through word choice. If he is to talk about common subjects, he uses common words. Very few words in a Fairchild poem require the reader to use a dictionary. Verbs like "trimmed," "sobbing," "reaches," "forgetting," and "clamps" litter the narrative. He speaks of cattle that "moan and drift," and of the man "Flipping the black mask up" (54-5). The reader needs no specialized academic knowledge in order to understand and appreciate this poem.

Rather, in order to fully appreciate this poem it is preferable that the reader merely be at least twenty-five years old and acquainted with Midwestern colloquial life. But the tone and narrative of the poem can be understood by nearly everyone. It takes no scholar to see that the man's life is as out of control as his truck with the blown tire, or to understand the symbolism as he "tries to weld his truck and his life / back together" (55). The reader comes to understand these things through the specific moments of experience with which one can relate, in the poem: the truck crashing, the frustrated thoughts of the welder, the moment of the welding and its consequences. These experiences become the vehicle for meaningful comment, which comes to the reader in the form of a narrative. Fairchild tells the reader a story.

Herein, one can begin to see the connection between the voice and the means of expression. By using narrative as his primary medium, Fairchild can do so straightforwardly. Thus, he begins by setting the scene, "Spilled melons rotting on the highway's shoulder sweeten

/ the air, their bruised rinds silvering under the half-moon;” and then introduces the action, “A blown tire makes the pickup list into the shoulder” (54). He then gives some distinguishing characteristics about the protagonist: he says that he is a welder, and mentions the joint, before revealing the welder’s inner monologue. He returns to setting, and then to more action as he builds the climax where the man “touches rod to iron, and the arc’s flash hammers / his eyes as he stumbles, blind, among the fruit of the earth,” before the conclusion in the grass (55).

Fairchild’s story and voice are uncomplicated. However, that is not to say that they are trite.

Something is still required of the reader in order to fully engage this poem. The reader must grapple with the significance of the closing lines about waking “once more into the dream of Being: / Roy and Maria at breakfast, white cups of black coffee, / fresh melons in blue bowls, the books in leather bindings / standing like silent children along the western wall.” The reader must also deal with the “Angel of Mercy” in the title, and who is “*at St. Benedict’s studying Augustine*” (54-5, italics original). Fairchild introduces these things yet does not expound; that is left to the reader. This is a function of Fairchild’s voice, which, reveals that ordinary things, and ordinary people (be they characters or readers), possess a complexity and beauty that cannot be dismissed on the basis of their being commonplace. Fairchild takes *all* of his readers seriously.

Thus, he is not afraid to challenge his readers in other ways as well. He is comfortable with using longer sentences that guide the reader through his descriptions. “A blown tire makes the pickup list into the shoulder / like a swamped boat, and the trailer that was torn loose / has a twisted tongue and hitch that he has cut away, / trimmed, and wants to weld back on” (54). Here, the main point is that the man is about to weld the trailer hitch back on after a wreck. But Fairchild takes the reader through the *parts* of the description in order for the reader to see the whole picture (when he/she finally gets there) more vividly. He begins with the cause of the

wreck, then describes the way the truck moves as it comes to a stop. Then he points to the trailer, then its hitch, and finally the three-pronged action of cutting, trimming, and wanting. It is not until the last part of the sentence that the reader has a good conception of the entire scene as it includes the protagonist. Like a good storyteller, Fairchild builds suspense.

Furthermore, Fairchild is also fond of using his characters' own voices to reveal their personalities. Thus, in this poem, he rambles on with the direct thoughts of the welder in order to show the reader more about the protagonist in this story. But Fairchild is not about complicating things. It is his narrative bent that encourages these choices. At times, he will go to the opposite extreme and will let mere phrases or, even, single words stand alone as descriptive sentences. He uses, "Stars. The blackened moon. / The red dust of the city at night." in order to create a particular feel in the story's setting.

Additionally, Fairchild's affinity for balance creates a consistency that supports the reader throughout his poems. This poem is divided into eight stanzas of four lines, with each line containing thirteen syllables. But though this construction produces some surprising line/stanza breaks, the rhythmic and visual consistency nestles the reader into a comfortable groove from which to experience the narrative.

This narrative consideration is perhaps the cornerstone of Fairchild's voice. It takes into account subject matter, word choice, sentence structure, and form. In Fairchild, ordinary people can read about ordinary things in a way that allows them to see that the common, both within and without, can be experienced as parts of the deep and meaningful stories his poems become.

### **Stephen Dunn**

Stephen Dunn's handling of the ordinary is altogether different. Fairchild deals with the ordinary because, to him, that's all that there is. But in Dunn, one gets the sense that he is always

wanting to talk about big abstract concepts and that the ordinariness of his voice and subject matter are instruments of that desire. Thus, poems in the collection I have chosen, *Different Hours*, have titles like, “Evanescence,” “Optimism,” “Empathy,” “Luck,” “Art,” “Afterlife,” and “Nature.” Yet each of these poems deals with its title in an indirect way. Rather than trying to “get to the bottom of” these abstract ideas, Dunn merely comments on them by orienting them in the context of ordinary instances. In doing so, he is able to explore these things with “snapshots” while still admitting the ambiguity of these concepts.

In “What Goes On,” Dunn does this concerning relationships. The poem traces the story of a woman who has an affair, then gets cancer, and is later taken back by her husband. The story serves, not as a model that exemplifies some eternal principle about love, but rather, as an example of particular parts of love and relationships that may apply to *some*. It is this particularity that exemplifies Dunn’s understanding of the ordinary: the ordinary is not just about an average, but rather the substantive details that make up that average.

Dunn’s allegiance to the particulars is borne out in his voice. He often appears in his own poems, and as such, writes like someone who is talking about himself. Even when Dunn is describing the feelings and actions other individuals, his third-person statements sound as if they are coming from the mouth of whomever they are concerning. The observations seem personal. This personal quality comes, not merely from his insertion of himself into the poems, but through his ample use of qualifying adverbs.

While conversational speech is often overwhelmingly adverbial, good writing, typically, is not. But for Dunn, his use of adverbs gives his writing the conversational tone for which he is known. In “What Goes On,” he says that the woman “had *only* fallen / in love,” and “he held her *so* different now, / *so* thin, her hair *just* partially / grown back” (34, italics added). The adverbs

give the poem an added sense of particularity through the way that they personalize the poem, revealing Dunn as a regular guy, with friends, and problems, and questions not unlike the reader's own, yet, at the same time, not altogether like the reader's either. Dunn's focus on the particulars underscores his conviction about the ambiguity of abstracts.

This is further supported by his use of negation. In this poem, he uses many contradictory elements to describe his subject matter. He speaks of the "destructive revivifying passion," and that the woman kept the cancer "to herself until she couldn't / keep it from anyone." He says, "The chemo debilitated / and saved her." He describes her friends "rejoicing with one / and consoling the other," and that they "had seen her truly alive / and then merely alive." In a similar contradictory juxtaposition, Dunn says that "what she felt / felt almost as good as love had, / and each of them called it love / because precision didn't matter anymore" (34-5). By doing all of this contradiction, he admits the difficulty of pinning down just what, exactly, any one thing is. He is able to say something about the intangibles with which he is concerned, while letting the reader know that he is not trying to say too much.

Dunn's voice is also revealed in his brevity. In contrast with Fairchild, whose poems are usually much longer, this collection of Dunn's contains only a handful of poems that exceed thirty lines. In "What Goes On," the poem has twenty-nine lines, which are separated into nine stanzas of differing lengths: four stanzas of three lines, four stanzas of four lines, and a stanza of one line (though not in that order). Likewise, the lines are of different lengths, with some quite short, so that this twenty-nine-line poem is markedly shorter than Fairchild's thirty-two-line one. This brevity serves various functions, all of which are consistent with his commitment to the particulars. First, it keeps him from saying too much about the abstracts. Second, it keeps his comments about the various characters, and those from their supposed perspectives, honest. The

personal touch is maintained because Dunn doesn't assume to be able to totally read his characters' minds. Rather, he makes mere inferences that a reader can trust.

Furthermore, because of the brevity, the sense of particularity can be found in each line. Rather than relying on formal consistency to anchor the reader, Dunn focuses on providing the reader with strong individual lines on which to stand. In this poem, each line, either, stands alone as a strong entity, particular in its import, or, surprises the reader in regard to something in the line above it. "What Goes On" has strong stand-alone lines like: "we watched her life quiet," "alone, happy for the narcosis," and "she kept it to herself until she couldn't," followed by the lines (in order): "into a new one. Her lover more and more," "of the television. When she got cancer," and "keep it from anyone. The chemo debilitated" (34). Additionally, in all but one of the instances of contradiction previously noted, the contradiction comes just after a line break, surprising the reader each time.

The stanza separations also support Dunn's theme of particularity. What the lines breaks start, the stanza breaks intensify. Thus, the stanzas in this poem change according to shifts in idea and focus. The first stanza introduces the affair, and ends with the line, "we watched her life quiet," while the next stanza begins, "into a new one." At the stanza break, her old life is contrasted with her new one and what it becomes. The next stanza provides the shift from that new life to the introduction of her cancer. Another abrupt shift takes place at the end of this stanza, where it ends, "...and one day" and the next begins, "her husband asked her to come back—" (34). The fifth stanza deals with them together in light of the cancer, and the sixth, with what becomes of their relationship. The next stanzas shift to talking about the friends of the couple. The seventh focuses their connection to the couple in the past, and the eighth shifts toward the present, leading to the single line of the final stanza—a thought to "offer a little toast

to what goes on” (35). Each stanza has a unique focus – a unique perspective – that highlights Dunn’s “snapshot” methodology.

That methodology provides the means for Stephen Dunn to deal with the abstract concepts he wants to deal with in a particular way. He discusses ordinary subject matter through a personal and conversational voice in order to *mention* something about larger ideas. His specific observations attach a concreteness to the intangibles of life by locating specific parts of them within definite contexts.

### **Billy Collins**

In Billy Collins, one gets a third unique angle on the aesthetic of the ordinary. While Fairchild focuses on narrative strategies that emphasize setting and blue-collar characterization, and Dunn particularizes abstracts through the medium of personal stories, for Collins, he crafts his poems in a way that makes the ordinary seem like a springboard for daydreaming. One gets the feeling that Collins always begins with an ordinary subject – an experience or an object – and then lets his mind wander off with whatever associations may come, casually beckoning the reader to follow. His ability to observe the tiniest details and then extract from them stories and significance is astounding. Yet, it is not altogether unfamiliar, but rather like an adult version of the imagination so often found in children. The reader is then invited to share in the experience of his imagination.

That imagination fills the pages of the collection, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, and is exhibited (and actually mentioned) in the poem, “Genesis.” “Genesis” is an intimate poem that covers the hypothetical thoughts of two lovers on a late night. To Collins (presumably), the woman in the poem says, “I like a man with a flexible mind” (23). Collins then proceeds to show the reader that flexible mind by imagining himself “as one of your [the woman’s] ribs— / to be

with you all the time, / riding under your blouse and skin, / caged under the soft weight of your breasts” (24).

In fact, right from the start, this poem begins with speculation. The woman speculates “that maybe Eve came first / and Adam began as a rib” which leads the poem’s speaker to the aforementioned wonder about being one of her ribs. A final speculation is hinted at in the final line when the speaker mentions counting her ribs as if to see if he really had sprung from one, “my fingers doing the *crazy* numbering that comes of love” (23-4, italics added). For Collins, the ordinary realities which surround him seem always to be encouraging him to think, not so much about what they are, but what they might be.

Furthermore, since his poems rely heavily on his own activities and what he thinks about them, his voice is unaffected and intimate, as if he is speaking not so much *for* a reader, but *with* one. The reader is invited into the daydream and can even become included in the text itself. Thus, Collins will occasionally use parenthetical explanatory remarks as part of the poem, as in “Good News,” where he writes, “For example (and that’s the first and last time / I will ever use those words in a poem)” (22). Typically, he includes the reader by more subtle side remarks like in “Genesis.” He says, “It was late, *of course*,” and “your favorite rib, *I am assuming*,” (23-4, italics added).

It is the subordinate information that gives Collins’ poetry its unique personal touch. These side comments produce his characteristic reader-inclusive air and his imaginative speculations make his poems read like they are thoughts straight out of his own head. These thoughts usually appear in the poem in subordinate clause after subordinate clause, in very long sentences. For example, “Genesis” is set against the backdrop of a specific ordinary situation – two lovers drinking wine before going to bed – but the real substance of the poem takes place in

the subordinate clauses. The entire poem is twenty-five lines composed of three sentences. The first two sentences are finished at line eleven, and from lines twelve to twenty-five is one single sentence that begins, "I like a man with a flexible mind..." and then continues on to describe the man's speculation about being the woman's rib. But it does not stop yet. It moves from the speculation at the table to his counting of her ribs as they lay in bed much later, all in one sentence. The main clause is essentially: You said such-and-such, and I raised my glass to you and wondered such-and-such. But it is precisely the "such-and-such" that matters.

Additionally, it is not only the "such-and-such" that matters, but also where that "such-and-such" leads. Collins is not content to merely wonder. He lets his wonderings lead to wanderings as they lead to further associations that he follows through whatever twists and turns they may take, until they lead him back to something similar to where he began. In this poem, that is exactly what happens that takes him from imagining what it would actually be like to be the woman's favorite rib, at the table, to talking about counting them as she lay asleep later. He says that he assumes that he would be her favorite rib "if [she] ever bothered to stop and count them / which is just what I did later that night" (24).

Far from being a barrier between Collins and his reader, these wandering sentences provide an air of expectancy because of their connection to normal thought patterns. While linear thinking must be taught, this type of free-association comes naturally, and while it may not be the most efficient way of thinking, it makes for an enjoyable ride.

But though Collins' poems read like the daydreams of a wandering mind, it is not as simple as that. It is not in simply sitting down and writing every thought that comes into his head that makes his poems worth reading. To do so would leave the reader constantly feeling lost and asking, "How did I get here?" Collins realizes that he is able to connect with a reader's sense of

imagination only through the careful imposition of structure upon the communication of his own imagination. He knows that the paths of association in his own mind will only make sense to a reader to the degree that those associations are shared. In order for this mutual understanding to take place, Collins connects the dots for his reader by slowing the associative jumps down. He often does this by confining the associative leaps to very specific contexts. By placing his poems in very limited time frames and locations, Collins reduces the possibility of the ambiguity of his words.

Furthermore, Collins is always reminding the reader that he has not forgotten him/her. At times, Collins will address the reader directly, as mentioned above. But he also gently helps the reader through his thought process by breaking down the individual steps of association into bite-sized chunks with his stanzas.

Like Dunn, Collins' stanzas are separated according to shifts in idea and/or focus. But while Dunn's highlight the contrast between ideas or moments, Collins' stress their connection. In Dunn, stanza breaks act as a sort of *breaking off*, but in Collins, they are better understood in the sense of *taking a break*. Or, instead of being a barrier, as in Dunn, they act as a bridge. By dividing his thought process into its component parts, Collins is able to emphasize how each part fits together, thus making the constantly morphing stream of ideas more manageable for the reader.

That is not to say that his stanza separations come at transitions that are hard to follow, but rather that they come consistently at changes of perspective or focus. Thus, in "Genesis," the first stanza sets the scene, while the second focuses on the speculation of the woman. The next two stanzas each begin with an easy transition to follow: a change in speaker, first the man, then the woman. The fifth stanza then moves to the perspective of the man as one of her ribs. The

sixth stanza – only two lines – provides the crucial transitions between imagining being a rib, in the fifth stanza, to lying in bed and counting the woman’s ribs, in the final stanza. Instead of creating the surprise and separation of Dunn’s stanzas, Collins’ come at natural intervals that make sense to the reader.

Thus, Collins’ voice places him within the aesthetic of the ordinary by pointing out the ordinariness of a wandering mind. In his poems, the reader is reminded of the beautifying quality of the imagination upon the objects and events of everyday life. Collins’ imaginative observations of these ordinary things reveal that observation need not be merely passive, but can become something creative, something in which one is actively involved. His ability to communicate the meaningful associations of his own imagination in ways the reader can comprehend reveals not only an attention to the details around him, but also a skillful attention to the processes that brings those associations about.

### **My Own Work**

I have tried to show how each of these poets fits into the aesthetic of the ordinary in a unique way. However, it must also be remembered that their methods and emphases are not mutually exclusive. Aspects of each these poets’ styles overlap, thereby allowing them to be classified together. In a similar way, I intend to demonstrate how my own poetry fits into this aesthetic through my work’s intersection with these overlapping features, while also demonstrating my own unique approach. This approach is guided by two primary considerations.

The first of these is my two-pronged regard for the ordinary. On the one hand, like is most apparent in Dunn, ordinary subjects provide me with localized and specific contexts through which to explore abstracts. Whether unusual or mundane, my experiences and observations always have me asking myself about what they mean, or rather, what they *could*

mean about the world. I am always looking for new perspectives, and the sheer volume of ordinary things around me provides me with an unending supply of alternatives. My poetry reveals that commitment to search the ordinary for significance.

On the other hand, like Fairchild, I have a strong conviction that ordinary subjects possess intrinsic value. Things are not only significant because of what they can mean, but also because of what they are. Thus, I am not only concerned with discovering what an ordinary subject can talk about, but also how to talk about ordinary subjects in a way that appropriately represents their inherent worth. The ordinary subjects need not only be symbols, but also what is symbolized.

The other guiding principle for my poetry is my belief that a poem should be developed rather than dictated. Trying to exercise too much control over a poem's progression of ideas or associations detracts from its ability to lead to unexpected conclusions. If the poem is allowed to develop more organically, it can surprise the writer, and thus, the reader in refreshing ways. (This, I believe, is what leads to the refreshing surprises found in the poetry of Collins.) Thus, writing a poem is more about discovery than decree. In the words of one of my professors, "Writing a poem is not about having something to say. If you have something to say, write an essay."

This collection of poems represents my intended purposes throughout. Poems like "Windows," "Bobbie J. Harper," and "Reflections on Barbieri's *Study for Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*" clearly demonstrate my goal of drawing comment about abstracts from specific instances. "Crickets," "Geology," and "Fine" represent the converse – talking about ordinary concrete things and situations in a way that brings out their intrinsic beauty. Additionally, poems in this collection represent their organic development in the surprises that many of them contain.

This is most apparent in “B,” “Airplanes,” and “Long-Haul Team Driving.” Of course, these goals are not exclusive to individual poems. The exploratory air that weaves through these goals causes them to overlap in various poems in the collection.

Furthermore, it is that same essential feature that helps to create the voice through which I communicate my subject matter. The attitude of exploration that underlies these considerations gives my voice (I hope) a sense of honesty and vulnerability. I realize that I do not know all of the answers, nor do I want to try to convince anyone that I do. Neither do I intend for my poetry to sound proverbial or sagacious, but rather, authentic. Furthermore, this posture of discovery influences my desire to be innovative. I do not want to be innovative for the sake of being so, but because it is necessary for the exploration that I am attempting.

Perhaps the poem that exhibits all of the aspects of my goal aesthetic most concisely is “Long-Haul Team Driving.” It tells the story of a woman who drives a tractor-trailer and of her male driving partner as they prepare to take a trip. Toward the end, the reader discovers that the two will be in a wreck later that morning and that the woman will die. But the death is not the point of the poem. Rather, the poem is more about intimacy. Thus, in it, I explore this abstract theme through the medium of a concrete story.

But the concrete subject matter is not only a means of communication about an idea. I also try to deal with it in such a way that the concrete realities themselves stand out as beautiful. Thus, the first lines read, “The air is cold this morning. But crisp. / Clean.” The short direct phrases intensify the descriptions’ autonomy. Then, “She walks across the frozen gravel / in her steel-toed boots, work coat the color of burlap, / and heavily gloved hands in pockets.” None of this says anything about intimacy, but instead, centers on the *things* as they are, straightforwardly and without comment. In other instances in this poem, things are described more inventively, in

order to give the reader alternative ways in which to view those things, thus bringing out their latent beauty. An example of this is when the woman “climbs aboard the back of the trailer / to open what seem to her like / barn doors enclosing treasure hidden / beneath cardboard hay bales.” The actions and setting of this story are not only important in what they can describe, but also what can describe them.

With this poem I can also exemplify my commitment to my poetry’s organic development. From the first, I knew the situation on which I wanted to base this poem, and I knew that the woman was going to die. But I was not sure how it would play out. Neither did I know that it would end up being primarily about intimacy. In fact, when I reached the end of the poem, I knew that it wasn’t exactly about the woman’s death, but I could not quite put my finger on what it was about. But through analyzing and revising this poem, its theme, and the structure that carries that theme, became apparent. I discovered that the story is structured so that each successive stanza intensifies the degree or type of intimacy.

In the beginning stanza the woman is revealed, alone and self-possessed, a sort of self-intimacy. The second stanza introduces the tractor-trailer and a sort of intimacy between the woman and the objects of her activity. In the third stanza the man is introduced, as is the beginnings of their intimacy. In the final stanza, the reader encounters three distinct types and degrees of intimacy between the two: in the second and third lines, that of paramedic and patient, and pallbearer and the dead; and as is hinted at in the last line, of lovers. (“She knows the feel of his hands.”) Thus, the surprise of this poem comes, not only in the unexpected death, but also in the fact that the death is not what the poem is really about.

That element of surprise that comes through my poems’ organic development helps to keep my voice honest. First, it steers me away from the detachment of overly intellectual

pretentiousness. If I am not sure what exactly my poem is going to say, there is a much smaller chance that I will feel the need to soapbox or to try and wow everyone with verbal prowess. On the other hand, part of that honesty requires me to admit that I want a degree of lyrical style to ornament my poetry.

In “Long-Haul Team Driving” I use a variety of word choices, sentence structures, and line breaks to bring out that style. When it comes to word choice, I like to focus on sound. Thus, in the first few lines I have *cold, crisp, clean, coat, and color*. Later, I have *sinews, synapses, purpose, and barn, beneath, and bales*. That is not to say that I primarily choose words based on sound, but rather, that sound often influences my mind’s process of association.

In this poem, I also use a variety of sentence structures. At times, I use short choppy sentences in succession, as in the first couple of lines, and again in the last stanza with, “He squeezes / the wheel tighter than usual. She can tell. / She has studied this event before. / She knows the feel of his hands.” At other times, like in the sentence spanning from line sixteen to line twenty-one, I use much longer sentences. I often like to construct these sentences with the information in the subordinate clauses being more important than the information in the main clause, like in, “He’ll take the first / leg, unaware that he will be her paramedic / and pallbearer in about 200 miles.”

With line breaks, I make decisions based on three different things. The first of these is how it affects the flow of the reading. Though poems are meant to be read straight through the line breaks without punctuation (as in prose), most readers will naturally pause a bit at the end of each line. In order to maintain some natural continuity for the reader, I will, at times, break my lines according to the flow of speech patterns. This is what I have tried to do in the lines, “and climbs aboard the back of the trailer / to open what seem to her like /...” Yet, I also like to take

into account how a line break frames a single line to stand on its own. Thus, in this poem I have separated lines in such a way as to preserve the integrity of lines like, “barn doors enclosing treasure hidden /” and “the grease smeared on his forearm, already, /...” Finally, I will also make line breaks based upon how it emphasizes the last word in the line or its relationship to the words in the line below. In the second stanza I do this with the lines, “connected by mechanical sinews, synapses, / and purpose,” and in the final stanza with, “...unaware that he will be her paramedic / and pallbearer...”

This attention to the lyrical aspect of my poetry, through word choice, sentence structure, and line breaks, does not detract from the authenticity to which I aspire, as it may seem. Rather, in the same way that I want to write about ordinary *subjects* because of what they mean *and* what they are, I also want to use and orient *words* in ways that convey the quality of their meanings, as well as the excellence of their external features of sound and shape.

The constancy of this two-sided view is apparent in each aspect of my poetry, and is what gives it its own unique orientation within my goal aesthetic of the ordinary. My attitude of poetry as exploration encourages me to discover whatever I can from the ordinary subjects both within and without – whether those things are the things, people, events, and words around me; the thoughts and feelings within me; or the creative activities that proceed from me – so that I can find, perhaps, new ways of communicating with others the meaningful realities that make up our ordinary lives.

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