

10-16-2008

# Hello, Clothing

Phillip Scott Cunningham  
*Florida International University*

**DOI:** 10.25148/etd.FI14061570

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Cunningham, Phillip Scott, "Hello, Clothing" (2008). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2694.  
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2694>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University Graduate School at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HELLO, CLOTHING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Phillip Scott Cunningham

2008

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Phillip Scott Cunningham, and entitled Hello, Clothing, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Richard Sugg

Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 16, 2008

The thesis of Phillip Scott Cunningham is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean George Walker  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2008

© Copyright 2008 by Phillip Scott Cunningham

All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

*To Alexandra*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of these poems first appeared in the follow journals: *The Harvard Review*: “Leica” and “West Avenue”; *Pool*: “Fugue ‘52””; *Cider Press Review*: “Weekend in L.A.”; *Court Green*: “Sonnet Against Walk the Line”; *Tigertail, A South Florida Poetry Annual*: “Afternoon Screening of Voyage to Italy”.

Thank you to Denise Duhamel, Richard Sugg, and Campbell McGrath for your insight, instruction and dedication to this project. Additional thanks to Alan Shapiro, Major Jackson, and Kevin Young for providing literary guidance along the way. Finally, thank you to my family for your love and support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HELLO, CLOTHING

by

Phillip Scott Cunningham

Florida International University, 2008

Miami Florida

Professor Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

HELLO, CLOTHING is a collection of lyric poems about the connections between human beings, following an ekphrastic model that seeks truths about the world “second-hand”: through the language and images of other artists. A large section of the poems address the life and work of composer Morton Feldman, while many others explore the world of cinema or photography. The poems are particularly conscious of received forms. The collection takes to heart Harold Bloom’s assertion that “every poem is about another poem” and interprets this dictum as a celebration of formal structure. Whether through a traditional model such as the sonnet, sestina or villanelle; a stanzaic form derived from Elizabeth Bishop; or the re-writing of a single line by Denis Johnson, the book attempts to re-invent the work of its own inspiration, with the goal of discovering the inexhaustable pleasure of repetition.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Stock Footage.....	1
Three Cameras .....	3
Café Vs. Diner .....	7
Ode on Amplitude.....	9
A Brief History of American Film.....	10
Six Photos by Jason Fulford .....	12
Super 8.....	15
Geospatial Blues .....	18
Ode to Longing .....	20
Japanese Student in the Village of Pittsburgh .....	23
If I Must Be Shot.....	24
Afternoon Screening of Voyage to Italy (1953) .....	26
Love as Practiced in Scorsese's Mean Streets (1985) .....	28
Sonnet Against Walk the Line (2003).....	29
Two Diaries.....	30
Murakami's Jazz Bar '78.....	36
Haiku Masters Take Manhattan .....	37
The Die Hard Poem.....	39
Throwing Up in an Airport Restroom.....	41
Haiku Masters Honeymoon in Vegas.....	43



Weekend in L.A. ....	46
Blues for George Plimpton.....	49
Stanely Fish Falls in Love .....	50
Two Funerals .....	51
West Avenue.....	53
Last Gig .....	55
Driving Over the Freeman Highway Bridge at Dusk.....	58
Theatrical Trailer for the Forthcoming Poems About Morton Feldman.....	60
Examining a Carpet.....	62
Morty the Muse.....	64
Bunita Marcus Says.....	65
Feldman '78.....	66
Fugue '52 .....	67
Biography, Notated Graphically .....	70
NYU, Day One.....	72
Dr. T.J. Feldmanberg.....	74
NYU, Day Two.....	76
Projection 2.....	77
Arlene Feldman Says.....	78
Cedar Tavern.....	79
326 Monroe Street.....	81
Portrait .....	83
Brian Eno Says.....	85

Untitled.....	87
Compositional Math.....	88
Two Aleatory Composers Drive Out to the Country .....	90
Death Sonnet.....	91
Feldman Dry-Cleans Boulez's Underwear .....	92
Bunita's Dream.....	93
Antiphony = Morty + Barbara .....	94
Answering Machine .....	95
References.....	97

## STOCK FOOTAGE

The witness found in a nearby ditch

A man's cheek shaved with a knife

What disturbs the boat's thin wake

A rocking chair, as viewed by mice

Christ's knees: knobby & hairless

Mud stuck to the tongues of boots

Sweaters drawn and quartered on needles

Coffins stacked upright like books

Sea turtles chased by submarines

Handkerchiefs on foreheads when it's hot

Robots walking through power lines

Pennies lost by astronauts

*It's true we have not avoided our destiny by weeding out the old people.*

JOHN ASHBERY

\*

*I'm fearful of flying, and flying is fearful of me.*

MCLUSKY

## THREE CAMERAS

*for Alexandra*

### I. HOLGA

On a mountain, we came across two mountain  
goats, parent and child, standing upright  
on an impossibly-angled slope.

When they saw us, they froze,  
four black eyes like buttons, celestially-fastened  
to the fur of their white coats.

The grass was deep green; it had swallowed  
eleven months of snow and dusted the blue sky  
with fast-moving clouds that surely blurred  
inside the eyes of the goats.

Or didn't, for how do goats survive without  
seeing the world in deadly focus?

Those eyes, so highly absorbent even now,  
still assessing the level of my aggression  
while mine, in opposition, smear the colors  
on the edges and force them to pose;  
this is their yearbook photo.

I adjust the focus, guillotine the light,  
and the narrative goes into motion.

## II. LEICA

Through the viewfinder's view  
a second frame  
comes into view,  
framed by the single panel of the window's edges  
where the wood meets the pane  
of glass. The eye's ledge  
  
suspends mostly sky  
due to the window's height  
and the position of her body  
lying on the nearby bed,  
focused on the light  
as it passes through the window, camera, eye.

Laundry  
dries from the balcony grates  
of two facing buildings, like similarly  
cut keys, the shirts and sheets  
unable to decide if this is waiting or fate  
with nothing underneath.

At least the satellite dishes understand

their endings,  
waxing full of bland  
third acts, fastened fast  
to the cracked cement wall's pending  
collapse.

### III. POLAROID

Electric fence border, white  
moat of dark matter  
requiring a boat no one's built  
to cross to the land of people  
  
you no longer know, never knew.  
Someone held you like a gold pan  
and shook  
until your soul filtered through.

I never owned that coat!  
I've never been to Kalamazoo!  
Those dreary nights  
face down in a shoebox,  
  
all they wanted was to visit you,

to feel the singular flash  
your eyes bestow, the gilded  
rubber stamp of delight.



## CAFÉ VS. DINER

I.

The waitresses are from Kansas or Paris—no one can tell,  
not even the regulars drinking tea and ordering  
the specials off the mirror—car accidents of brie  
and apples, lentil soup served in bowls  
like old skulls tipped over. The succulents  
in the middle of my table fall asleep. Rain fills  
the shallow tray of street, gilds the chandelier  
whose fallen leaves line the window sill.  
Desires, like pages, ebb and neap inside my chest  
and the chef puts each one on the charger  
before the thought has even left—a rabbit,  
skinned and baked into a roll of dough, curried rice,  
my chair re-upholstered with Lucite,  
my first and last cigarette of the year.

II.

Bathed in radio waves, the air rushes past,  
paying no mind to the window's framing  
of the daytime moon,

the kitchen's deconstruction  
of the body's dial tone  
into the clash of knives and spoons.

Held still by linoleum  
and the ether of coffee, I'm staring  
down the cryptic

message of some memory's  
downloaded attachment, a.k.a.  
I'm alone.

It's Sunday. The waitress cares  
less about me  
than the ketchup running low.

## ODE ON AMPLITUDE

She's not necessarily social,  
does not always seek a crowd's multitude  
and quickened pulse, how multiple souls pull  
toward one another, combine and transmute mood.

She can be sorrowful, pale, and lonesome.

She loves rooms all but deserted by light,  
rats congregating in a white-washed steeple,  
black box recording as the airplane succumbs.

She is not disturbed by the loss of life.

She loves a person, but not his people.

To court her is to court biography, too,  
the short misery hung beside the art  
that deepens the colors, makes lines pierce through  
that weak metaphor you call a heart.

She'll protect and serve both light and dark  
but never gray, drab or atramental,  
though ash is one of her favorite hues.

The whole of her play has just two parts—  
comedy or tragedy, then the lull  
before she takes back the one she gave to you.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN FILM

Black and white or color,  
ninety minutes, three characters:  
one's evil, two are in love.  
A river, gun, piano or ladder  
finds a window, falls down  
the stairs, goes off or is crossed.  
A crane shot traces the geography—  
hallways leading only to ache and loss,  
roads that run west but not east,  
days that swallow the rest whole;  
short world wars; aliens  
good, bad, or comical.  
Underneath the floorboards someone  
hides, rots or masturbates.  
Everyone waits, has dinner,  
eats each other, or runs  
from the guy whose face is obscured  
by mask, hood, or the removed face  
of his mother. A stranger  
comes to town then leaves.  
If he dies by cross he was innocent

unless the pointed end  
was stabbed into his heart,  
in which case the world is filled  
with too much sex and greed.  
Time slows, chopped  
into countries, murders, or jokes.  
Christmas means it's time to take  
ourselves too seriously.  
Success, same as failure, costs  
too much and no one understands  
what she's given up  
until the close-up of the car's wheels  
spinning up dust or the clothes  
drop off desire's object  
in a room haunted by something  
like the scarcity of light.  
A wire must be cut.  
A man needs killing.

## SIX PHOTOS BY JASON FULFORD

### I.

The shrub's as high as the roof,  
rounded like a thimble but flared  
at the bottom, hovering  
as if hanging from a rope, shadow  
tucked in neatly. The leaves could be  
a blanket covering a bell that never rings  
but sits behind the chain-link fence  
obscenely—green genitalia, a source  
of pride. *Your shrub's not as big as mine.*

### II.

As if God had decreed, "One lamppost  
per night." Its light divides  
the field's chapped green from the sky's  
black forest. The crowd—  
two football teams, cheerleaders, and spectators—  
huddle close around the wooden post  
whose cap they fray with their devotion.

III.

Lines are always man-made.

A road is four of them, six including  
the edges, four more if you count  
the white telephone wires' bisections.

Grass, etched by mowers, is many.

Two more—the trees and brush  
brushed back from the road  
by prisoners in orange vests (not  
pictured). Two cars, two directions.

IV. & V.

Light splattered by a cloud's heel.  
Imitated by a fluorescent bulb  
throwing its big revelation against  
faux-wood paneling.

VI.

I counted—49 people  
at the pool in the summer.  
Almost half in the water.  
The rest in the borderland  
between the pool and the fence.

Shy of three dimensions,  
everyone's inside its aluminum argyle.

Trees and clouds billow alike  
from unseen stems.

The rest of us are what  
the corner of asphalt implies.



The numbers count down,

the film catches. Light

burns the frames open,

unfolds things

we didn't film—

sunsets undercranked

into awakenings.

Gian-Murray displaying

a seashell

so white it eclipses

his teeth

but when he walks

down to the beach

it disappears from his hand.

The ocean

hardly registers

as separate from

the sand.

Waves and dunes—

opposite angles

people swim in.

Skin holographic,

they throw Frisbee's or fake

flying saucers

like the ones

used by people

who claim to have seen Martians.

Night never comes.

Instead it's morning again.

Gian-Murray in bed

with his girl, their faces

battered by the light

from the window overhead.

Some fire has purified

this place without burning.

The couple emerges

from the water

understanding something

approximating

Heidegger's *Being*—

hungry for cheeseburgers.

The grill's coals are ashless.

Whatever happened to the film we made

about flip-flops, Provincetown

and infinite sadness?

## GEOSPATIAL BLUES

Her toes stick out  
where the leaves disperse

as if the tree itself  
gave birth feet-first

into a field of shadows  
and frozen dirt.

Flightless birds  
crash into the surface

where screen meets earth  
and pixels crack like

an eye test  
when nose touches words;

to zoom is to blur.

Turn the earth forwards

then in reverse  
and the surf breaks

the lake's spine,

the wind returns,

our legs re-entwine

like straps on a purse.

I was making love

beneath an oak in Ft. Worth.

Where were you

when they shot Google Earth?

## ODE TO LONGING

Hi, my name is

Seth, and I get high

on my ex—

t-shirts she left

behind, zip-locked

for freshness.

Zip-files of cut-

and-pasted emails

hidden in my “Unpaid

Taxes” folder.

Like some plants,

it’s a night bloomer,

and panties, I got

those, too, but

more insidious

is how I read

the Times in the same

order we used to:

Travel

Magazine

Book Review

Afterwards, I jump  
into an ocean wherein  
she's drowning just ahead.

My iPod's

an undead

karaoke machine:

whatever song is on  
my band's playing to great acclaim  
at the bar

she just entered.

"Who's that guy?" her friend  
says to her,

and then the light turns green,

but recently

I've been having trouble

projecting the dream,

like the nitrate is flaked,

or some douchebag taped

over the tape—

I've lost that losing feeling.

Some mornings

I wake up in a sweat,

terrified she's at the door,

ready to take me back.

Today she answered

when I called. "Hello,"

she said, as if

my heart were a dollar

she'd found in the wash.

Poor girl.

How do I tell her?

It's not her I want

but that *je ne sais* thing,

so I hang up, kill

the lights, crank

Mr. Mister's *Broken Wings*.



JAPANESE STUDENT IN THE VILLAGE OF PITTSBURGH

*After Jim Daniels*

Translations by Seiko and Soseki.

I'm into Warhol but not Carnegie.

My advantage card from Giant Eagle.

Andrew Jackson's hair: tender and legal.

Men stop to help carry my groceries,

kale, carrots, a can of *Iron City*.

The eggplant here is somehow more purple.

Taxi drivers drive me in circles.

Shinto gods live inside my school ID.

Sunday mornings the sidewalks empty

into pale yellow strips, then fade to black

as the street lamps pop off like bubble-wrap.

I wish that Hokusai could have engraved

the Allegheny's tiny, muddy waves.

## IF I MUST BE SHOT

Let it be in a Western, pre-Peckinpah,  
which is to say, bloodlessly,  
eyebrows penciled in,  
seven seconds to say my peace

then buried in an unmarked grave  
dug shallowly  
by a guy whose job it is to dig  
and afterwards drinks his pay.

I like blank slabs of wood  
on plots uncluttered by flowers or grass.

I have a minimalist aesthetic.

I like Clint Eastwood's toothpick.

I like the name Clint Eastwood,  
every syllable stressed the same.

It sounds like telephone poles  
passing by the window of a moving train,

but to Clint, it must be like a bell  
jingling above his heart's double-doors.  
There's no need for violence.  
Whatever's in the register is yours.

AFTERNOON SCREENING OF VOYAGE TO ITALY (1953)

I fell asleep and woke up in Tuscany,  
the sound of a roadster  
sailing through an alley of trees.

Who wouldn't want to be European?

Always a street fair,  
fresh figs and honeydew,  
baskets of dry noodles and coffee beans,  
bottles passed around  
between distant cousins,  
paid for in coins.

The sadness of American women  
exposed at last—

It takes an olive tree.  
A bicycle leaning against a church.  
A long stone path  
upon which to hold her hand  
and stroll to the aqueduct.

Did anyone even direct this?

Or did Roberto,  
sad and drunk again,  
leave his camera unattended,  
cranked by the wind  
and here it is, a love story.

## LOVE AS PRACTICED IN SCORSESE'S MEAN STREETS (1985)

Electrified by color, men slap each other  
up against metal security shutters, arms swinging  
like wind chimes in the breeze, like a woman's teeth  
in a fit of epilepsy. Her heart is the flames of a grease fire  
he sticks his fingers into, a fruit  
with sins like seeds he swallows then spits out.  
The world is a jukebox, a polyester suit.  
The world is sex. He regrets  
that women have more entrances than men.  
Each morning before he dresses, he hangs  
a sort of "x" around his neck.

SONNET AGAINST WALK THE LINE (2005)

I met Cash in Delaware, carried his  
and June's luggage to their car five years  
before they died, and beneath the surface  
wrought by disease, the young man was clearly  
visible, the brash motel wrecker who  
hated everyone, who saw the bottom  
and brought it back with him, turned life into  
some kind of gorgeous Miltonian poem  
wherein the Devil falls upwards to find  
himself in a Frank Borzage film, run-  
ning up love's symbolic stairs. There's no mind  
that, once made, can be divided or un-  
done, nor voice made less deep by the mocking  
of directors, actors, scripts and blocking.

## TWO DIARIES

### I. Prokofiev, 1918

A summer morning, Alcatraz  
in the distance dull and flat, the city  
crowned with a gray wig and two lunatics  
swimming naked in the bay.

As the ship drifted to a stop, two agents  
from Immigration Control—one fat,  
one thin—boarded and asked  
politely if I would stay.

We retired to the ship's saloon  
where they tossed my bags.

“What is this?” they said.

“Music.”

“Did you write it yourself?”

“I did.”

“Play it then.”

Unaccompanied by violin, the sonata's  
notes broke like thought bubbles



in a newspaper comic.

The officials were unimpressed.

“Can you play Chopin?” the fat one said.

“Whatever you like.”

“The Funeral March then.”

I thought of Chopin’s loved one,  
dead and curled into a hole, and the salt-  
crusted hull of the ship’s instrument  
opened up its soul—super melodramatic;  
both agents’ faces relaxed.

“Very good,” the thin one said, with feeling.

“Did you know for whose death it was composed?” I asked.

“No.”

“His dog’s.”

Ah, the cells of San Francisco!

So large and imaginative!

Surely this country isn’t so bad?

## II. Flaherty, 1920 – 1922

I've nailed the Bell & Howell onto the cabin wall  
like a one-eyed metal trophy because it reminds me  
of burning the first film by mistake with a misplaced cigarette.  
Now the stakes are higher.

I have new financial backers and two Akeley's,  
a Haulberg electric light plant and a printing machine  
to screen the footage to the village as we shoot it.

Yesterday the Inuit claimed they could see the ice evaporating  
so I filmed the horizon in deep focus, and this morning  
we projected it. They clapped and cheered.  
I saw nothing.

This afternoon, while oiling the crank, Akeley Two fell  
into a shallow puddle like a popsicle dipping itself.  
I panicked, but Nan quickly picked it up.  
He and the others took it apart piece by piece,  
swabbing each snap and corner  
until the whole positively sparkled, taking turns  
as if it were an old ritual or Lincoln logs. Then all six hands  
popped it back into place, loaded the film  
and shot my face close-up, eyes deep-set, still looking stunned.

Who needs storyboards when you have their drawings?

Mythical bundles of charcoal, warm brown cabins  
and not a piece of shade anywhere. In the white liquid  
that makes no distinction between snow and sky,  
the dogs run together with the men.

Sometimes it's so cold on the hunting trips  
the film splinters inside of the camera  
and we churn up our own gears with the crank.  
Last week we used a roll for kindling  
we needed the fire so badly. The world here is generally so conciliatory  
to cinema that it shocks me when it tries to kill us.  
But only at the brink of starvation will the men eat my sea biscuits.  
There's no warmth in it, they say, and after a dinner of seal,  
it's true—their bodies steam in the igloo, layered with hoar frost.

Women singing—vibrations  
deeper than the earth's circumference allows.  
I put it on gramophone, but what is the pleasure  
in recording? Why must I capture everything?

On Walrus Island we gather with our impedimenta.  
Nan crawls on his belly towards the bull,  
nose thwarted by the wind. The harpoon lands,

and there's thrashing like I've never seen.

His mate swims in and locks tusks, tries desperately  
to pull him back into the dark slush, along with the hysterical Eskimos  
who are yelling at me to end this fight by rifle.

I pretend I cannot hear them. I'm here to crank  
and before long we're laden with meat and ivory anyway.

By hand we haul water for developing, gallons upon gallons.

It seems silly when all is water. I have a private theory  
that this is the location of the Biblical Garden, the ice the flaming sword at its entry.

Nan has told me stories of famine when men turned on each other,  
so flesh may be the fruit the author spoke of, though  
it's hard to imagine anyone running around here naked.

Manhattan—

As the film passes over me for what must be the millionth time,  
I worry that the crowd can't smell the castor like I can  
nor the stiff wind that hollows out the nostrils.

Will they figure out that half the igloo is missing?

Maybe Nan is too glorious for them or too brown.

But when he rips the seal from the ice hole  
they gasp and applaud (at themselves perhaps)  
and when he cuts out a single block from the wall and sunlight  
bursts in, there's a ripple of infinite recognition, a clucking

almost imitating the k's and l's of Inuit tongue.

Zanuck turns around and gives me a thumb's up.

When I told him I wanted to do a short film on New York,

he said the island's not exotic enough,

so tomorrow we set out for Samoa

but I'm already bored.

Sand, sun, coconuts—where's the drama?

MURAKAMI'S JAZZ BAR '78

Alice Coltrane, come in  
from the rain and sit on my Eames chair.  
The frame is bent on the joint,  
the leather cracked into points,  
but it's comfortable all the same.  
The fridge is stocked with Amstel,  
I love it's Lucite handles.  
I like things when they're plain,  
and I like you, Alice Coltrane.

HAIKU MASTERS TAKE MANHATTAN

*After Basho, Buson, Issa, and Joshua Beckman*

The beginning of New York—

a limo driver without a license

Pickpocket—

it's not you,

it's me

j crew

j crowded

Skateboarders—

you are the slaves

of skateboards!

Seen

through a movie screen:

one hundred million dollars worth of crap

Shoplifted half the day;

no one punished me!

All the time I pray to Jesus

I keep on

reading US Weekly

Next to the Starbucks,

a Starbucks

Having no talent,

I just want

a retrospective at the Whitney

Suffering, spending the weekend in the Hampton's, suffering,

the writer

keeps busy

These New Yorkers,

they just don't seem like

*New Yorkers*



## THE DIE HARD POEM

*From John McLane to Sgt. Al Powell, Five Months After the Nakatomi Incident*

There are times, and I won't lie,  
many of them involve alcohol,  
an off-balance stool and a spot just past  
the bar's last patch of light,  
  
when I'm overcome with missing you  
and nothing in the world adds up.  
Could there be, at last, a way for you and I?  
A different kind of congress in bullets  
  
and cigarettes, the distance built in,  
the connection too real to cheapen?  
Whenever I'm with a woman, I can't escape  
the desire to tie her up in linen  
  
until all trust is drained and we fall  
asleep like strangers thrown  
into love's holding tank, skin  
between us like an acid rain.

Sometimes I even long for the tower's murderous height,  
if only to be back with you, stretched  
across the broken glass and static  
like thieves on either side of Christ.

## THROWING UP IN AN AIRPORT RESTROOM

The Buddha says, Pain is the best teacher  
because She rids the mind of idle sounds  
and the self of narcissistic features.

I wonder if I did not beseech Her,  
years ago, to drop me here upon the tiled ground,  
a modernist shrine to my newest teacher,  
  
who raises Her lid up like a preacher  
to show me how to hold my ego down  
and strip my soul of its pompous features.

Pain doesn't tolerate indolent creatures,  
spiritual sloths, Dagwoods, and basset hounds.  
Action! she says (What a teacher!)

so I point inwards in order to reach Her  
and feel as if I'm just about to drown,  
ridding myself of these priggish features,

but instead of melding my speech with Hers,  
I cough and spit up something reddish brown  
that twirls and then, like the pain, disappears.  
On my home, I grab a slice of pizza.

HAIKU MASTERS HONEYMOON IN VEGAS

*After Basho, Buson, and Issa*

Even in New York, New York—

I long for New York, New York

Discarded flyers—

all that's left

of pornographer's dreams.

How awkward it looks

throwing up—

the rich girl

In this world

we walk on the roof of hell

gazing at advertisements

Frozen bank account—

I'd borrow

the stripper's dollars

A field of Midwesterners—  
as if Steak n' Shake  
had flowered

Free vodka,  
can't see my hands  
—interesting!

Don't worry, ATM's,  
I play poker  
poorly

Sound of a buffet;  
old people,  
four p.m.

Engaged bachelor,  
snow  
in both nostrils

Don't know about the people  
but all the buildings here  
are enormous

You go,

I stay;

two lawyers

## WEEKEND IN L.A.

### *I. The Getty Center Via Carol Rosenberg*

We're not lost in haze. The stones are dark  
because people caress them, transferring  
the oil of their skin onto the travertine  
and a fossilized leaf appears, the winter's odor,  
  
ribbons of compaction, outstretched  
faces, cold signs. The two axis  
intersect at twenty-two and a half degrees.  
The sun burrows into nooks and crannies,  
  
splays out onto the stone palette  
feathers, fishes, shells, and leaves,  
poplar and alder, statuesque Italian  
cypresses bathed in aluminum panels.  
  
The spaces are as important as the buildings.  
The site determines everything.



## II. *Larchmont Beauty Supply*

The names of things are the best part by far:

glycolic seaweed Sepulveda Jar.

## III. *A Birthday Party in Koreatown*

We're dressed as the Elderly—

oxygen masks, walkers, wigs,

veins drawn in purple marker, acting

as if we really might die

and the way we're drinking, maybe we will.

I was standing by the window,

gazing into the empty elementary

school across the street, remembering

how yesterday it was full of children

like tapioca balls in the swirl of the courtyard,

and suddenly I fainted.

#### *IV. Majestic Golf Land*

I played Groucho Marx in high school, the mustache  
and chewed cigar. I even ad-libbed, with lifted eyebrow,  
a line about a “stamp-ede at the post office,”  
so I can’t help but wonder  
here where the balls blossom from the ground for Devon  
and I to launch them into the Hollywood sign, the calyx  
of helicopters and a blue screen of undeveloped sky,  
if I hadn’t decided that acting was beneath me,  
could I too have a prepaid card and a Japanese  
toilet seat that heats up and calls my name?

## BLUES FOR GEORGE PLIMPTON

In old Manhattan, fellatio in Latin;

Plato on the rocks.

Roach on drums,

conversation comes

packaged with argyle socks.

Wine spills when glasses

clink. Cuffs couple

what curt words can't quickly link—

tan girls in white skirts

playing desultory singles.

Who's serving? I'll serve.

## STANLEY FISH FALLS IN LOVE

Let us declare this bed a sovereign nation,  
Its flag, the sheets under which we unite  
The many-pronged arguments of moonlight,  
This congress's bicameral desires

Represented by these corporal texts, the soft verbs  
we run our fingers against, and where  
our original intent reveals itself—the panoptican  
Inside which we're willfully imprisoned.

Transform us, O Milton, into greedy bundles  
Of appetites, rev our engines of exclusion,  
Subtend our tolerance at the edge of ourselves.  
Lead us, at last, into tyranny's paragraph;

For the world, which seems to lie before us  
Like a blog of failed regimes,  
A rogue enclave beyond the heart's fleshly plain,  
Really does have certitude, joy, and peace  
As long as we remain in constant strife,  
Cannons eye-to-eye in the middle of the night.

## TWO FUNERALS

*March 5, 1953*

Spring—four instruments  
approximate Tchaikovsky over Stalin,  
his body a mothless cocoon in Moscow's center,  
still attracting companions: several hundred trampled  
and every one of the city's unwilted  
flowers, as if he could still get up  
to check each petal.

In the opposite direction, carried by sixty rotating hands,  
the great instrument Prokofiev,  
his coffin weaving through clots of tanks  
and the corpses who  
for several days won't be boxed and processed  
but left as a warning to those who might dare  
to resurrect before their leader has a chance.

In the apartment—paper  
flowers, a recording of the man,  
his rival Shostakovich kneeling and overhead  
the country's last untapped resource

once again grossly over-manufactured

but slowly sipped by all the lips

not yet sewn shut.

## WEST AVENUE

The morning after the hurricane left—  
the same morning Foxy Brown discovered  
the night before she'd gone deaf  
and staggered into the kitchen  
to bang a pan against the oven and wonder  
where the sound went when it left it—  
here, in South Beach, winter had moved in:  
leaves in the gutters, cold wind, and salt  
scattered across the roads the way, elsewhere,  
plows plant it in the wake of clearing snow—  
just shy of haphazard. Cops were stuck  
on top of silver ladders, rescuing cats  
from trees hollowed into jack-o-lanterns.  
The heavy-set alcoves of the shops,  
like concrete caves jutting into the promenade,  
held one sleeping occupant each  
on a bed of cardboard and palm fronds.  
Even the tripled eyes of the traffic lights  
were lidded shut as cars lined up  
for gasoline in rows that reached back across  
Biscayne Bay's gray-white gloss,

everything clean and pressureless, leaning  
towards dusk, silent as a pencil-drawn scene  
depicting Lazarus waking up.



## LAST GIG

*After Denis Johnson*

Night disperses calmly  
into an uneventful dawn  
marred by lamplight

but dark still  
as the last few kids  
emerge from the bar,

clutching warm beers  
and limitless capacities  
for good.

They're the same in every city—  
crescent armpits, pink  
faces eclipsing

all signs, like the one  
they're tossing bottles  
at, shattering glass

onto the asphalt.

Occasionally, an office-bound sedan  
passes by—

someone

they wouldn't trade their cigarette butts for  
or the moon

slips

a little farther

into the firmament,

tied as she is to virtue

and her curfew—

the clang, clang, clang

of a corner store's metal security

door rolling open,

meaning the world's goods

are ready to be sold

and we're alone, leaning

on the van's bumper underneath

the pointed yellow badge of some officer  
of the peace, come to send us running—  
I'm referring to the sun.

DRIVING OVER THE FREEMAN HIGHWAY BRIDGE AT DUSK

*“Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,  
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,  
where we cannot see”*

*-Elizabeth Bishop*

Four geese in the field  
behind Miller’s pond, plucking  
shredded corn between  
  
rows of broken stalks. Rust  
stuck to the water tower  
where the bolts have come loose,  
  
the canal flashing white  
around the pylons, the fisherman gone,  
their lines hanging severed  
  
from the bridge. The only ship left  
is the scarlet *Outfall*, sunk into the marsh  
reeds like an Easter egg, its red

hull eaten by barnacles.

Someone tore the door off  
the cattle barn and threw it

into a ditch. Someone laid  
the road, dug holes for posts, forgot  
to mow where flowers swallow

crosses whole. More direct  
meaning will not come, just a sign  
declaiming the number of miles

left until Pennsylvania, and a town  
therein some optimistic soul  
called "Bethlehem."

THEATRICAL TRAILER FOR THE FORTHCOMING

POEMS ABOUT MORTON FELDMAN

*In a world gone terribly distracted, one man sits alone...*

[Close-up of Feldman at the piano, his pulchritude shooting bolts of heat lightning into the fibers of the screen]

*They said he was obsessed with work*

“I’m just saying, lock the door and sit down and work.”

*They said he didn’t know what it is to be a composer*

“I don’t know what it was to be a composer.”

*They said he was experimental*

“I have always found it more beneficial to experiment with fountain pens than with musical ideas.”

*They said he didn’t understand art*

“What was great about the fifties is that for one brief moment—maybe, say, six weeks—nobody understood art.”

*They said he taught at SUNY Buffalo*

“I teach...I don’t know what I do. What is teaching?”

*They said he wanted everyone to get out of music*

“I want everybody to get out of music. It’s too difficult...It’s very, very difficult. It’s very, very difficult. Music is very, very difficult.”

*They said he was a legendary lover. Well, no one is on record as saying that, but how else does one explain Arlene, Bunita Marcus, Barbara Monk, and the others?*

“There was a deity in my life, and that was sound. Everything else was after the fact.”

[The silent sight of one sustained note]

[Fade Out.]

## EXAMINING A CARPET

I'll lie here awhile until you return, John,

under the fan, uncurling like a fern

on the damp floor of the jungles you left for.

From just one loom come infinite patterns

or so says your last bottle of Sauterne,

the phonograph drunk on Debussy records.

I grew up with the sound of a floor loom,

the treadles banging as the shuttle turned

and dove back and forth between the heddles.

My grandmother's took up half the living room.

In Turkey, the wool comes from high altitudes

but it's the city that holds the patterns

in its memory. So lose one, lose all

the artistry, no matter how much silk goes in.



It's a fine life wool leads, while it lasts,  
riding the sheep's thick coat of fat

until shorn and put into symmetrical  
stars, florals and arabesques—sacred threads

that do the work that fails the tongue,  
like Procne's son inside the cauldron's urn.

No God could have dyed a color this blue;  
it requires an imperfect concern,

sitting down to the same task every day,  
memory unspooling in a wordless pool,

the moon's robe falling whole and threadless,  
colors rising—abrash—from the sun's burn.

Who can say to where they disappear?

At least we know where the dessert wine goes:

out of the bottle and into Morton Feldman.

I'll lie awhile until you return.

## MORTY THE MUSE

You look like a moon in the photo of you  
inspecting the travertine at the Getty—

reflective, pale, half there  
behind a screen of emptiness.

Other times, round and open as a silver diner,  
laughing with friends or over the piano,

bent down like a sharpened pencil,  
cigarette in your lips like a stick

inside a river. Glasses, half full  
of eyes, magnified.

BUNITA MARCUS SAYS

A moon, yes, tidal, bright,  
as Keats said, “in lone splendor hung aloft,”  
but also a “soft-conched ear”  
permeable, nocturnal.

His voice never passed puberty  
but carried it with him like a kite.

Sometimes he seemed to be asking permission  
to speak, from silence I guess.

His body was soaked, like a boy’s, in need  
and glowing as soon as it was exposed.

Sometimes he turned away—his love went through  
phases from new to full  
but even when wrong or whispering  
or thousands of miles distant,  
I felt a gentle, inescapable pulling.

The snow in Buffalo blows mostly to and fro,  
burying cars along the avenue home.

No one's inside to turn their radios on  
so silence plays silently to no one—

rows of sunken clouds, domes  
of metal, leather and snow.

This time of year, I can't leave the windows open  
so the television's on. News from  
Berlin—students scaling walls—blows monotone  
like a fog horn or an always-ringing phone.

Down below, heavy-clothed  
men emerge from their homes  
to un-bury the things embraced by snow—

almost exactly at dawn, the engines turn on  
and I open the lid of my piano.

I.

I was sitting and reading  
when the ache came over me.

It was Feldman,  
his thin tie and square glasses,  
cigarette dwarfed by his fingers,  
the elegant wave of his hair.

There he was, chatting with Cage  
at the corner bar that stands for all corner bars.

It was early in the afternoon.

They sat in a booth by the window  
drinking coffee.

Somewhere, a beautiful woman was dying  
but they were unperturbed,  
flicking their words across the table  
like the heads of matchsticks.

II.

It was Feldman drinking coffee.

I was sitting and reading

the elegant wave of his hair.

They sat in a booth by the window

flicking their words across the table

when the ache came over me.

Somewhere, a beautiful woman was dying:

thin tie, square glasses,

cigarette dwarfed by fingers.

It was early in the afternoon

at the corner bar that stands for all corner bars,

but they were unperturbed,

like the heads of matchsticks.

There he was, chatting with Cage.

III.

Somewhere a beautiful woman was dying

like the heads of matchsticks.

There he was chatting with Cage,

cigarette dwarfed by fingers.

It was early in the afternoon.

They sat in a booth by the window

but they were unperturbed.

I was sitting and reading

at the corner bar that stands for all corner bars

flicking their words across the table,

his thin tie and square glasses,

drinking coffee,

when the ache came over me.

The elegant wave of his hair.

It was Feldman.

## BIOGRAPHY, NOTATED GRAPHICALLY

Queens, 1926. His mother rushed from the factory  
in an ambulance—irregular silences  
interrupted by a metal bell ringing from the roof,  
the pinging making tiny cages of sound  
inside which she draws her heavy breaths,  
trying to will the car to the emergency room.

Nothing but pianos inside Steinway's basement.  
He'd been permitted to leave the factory  
alone, with a blank check, and now he's breathing  
in the European maple trees manufactured into silent  
chests, impatiently waiting to find each sound.  
He chooses his favorite, runs a finger up one edge.

Mme. Maurina-Press taps her fingers on the failboard,  
forming the rhythm with which he must fill the room  
with honest, intelligent sound.  
She doesn't rush him as thoughts of the factory  
crowd his head, all those little coats and mittens waiting  
for heartbeats, arms, hands, and breath.



The apartment's so crowded it's hard to breathe.

He's standing with O'Hara and Rivers at the party's edge,  
music and conversation creating a kind of silence  
into which Larry complains about the heat,  
and Mort, fresh off of a ten hour day at the factory,  
says, "You're a painter. Break a window."

A student at Darmstadt asks about the meaning of sound  
and Morty sucks in an enormous breath  
that drains the room. "Composition isn't a factory—"  
he says, "set the dials and out come the notes  
properly dressed in your concept. There must be room  
for feeling. For response. For silence."

The inside of the car is coated with it  
as he and Cage drive back from a concert. Mort's sound  
asleep, his open mouth so huge it's like its own room,  
until something startles him awake and he says,  
"Now that things are so simple, there's so much to do."  
The road bends, and he falls back asleep.

NYU, DAY ONE

*“In 1944, Feldman enrolled at NYU, but dropped out after a day or two.”*  
*-Alex Ross*

Introduction to Indo-Asian Religion.

I pretended I didn't have the text

so I could look on with the red-head—

“Leah,” she said her name was.

Ashkenazi, freckled, Upper West.

I had a cup of Greek coffee

and the Tribune on my desk,

“De Gaulle Liberates Paris”

I asked her what she thought of Webern;

she said she preferred Prokofiev,

especially Peter and the Wolf.

I whistled the latter's tune,

conducting with my paws but

in my enthusiasm, spilled the coffee onto

De Gaulle's moustache, ruining

the suit my uncle'd bought me

the day before and her book,

a picture of Shiva's arms

splattered brown. “Idiot,” she said,

but when I pulled out my own  
and offered to trade, her face  
betrayed a look of mild pity,  
which I translated into a date  
for that evening. Lukas lent me  
ten bucks for new pants.

As if he had been dipped in sleep,  
upside-down.

As if sight were measured by the thickness of one's glasses and light  
projected a different film inside his mind  
than the one we got on our flight.

As if he didn't believe in answers arrived at except by magnified study in low light, on  
Steinway lid's, after multiple false guesses and trips to Turkey for metaphors,  
after he'd already questioned the pre-conditions for *before* and found them preposterous,  
hanging thinly  
like the last thread of pastrami on rye bread.

Can we take a break for pastrami on rye bread?

Now back to the facts—

He weighed 300 pounds.

He wrote music.

He wore wrinkled suits—fedoras and jackets drafted  
into service by the gravity of his puissance,

an atom of a man

orbited by long strands of attention

that he's forever combing back into place.

He looks down at me as if from a billboard constructed over my desk,  
as if my face were a fossilized leaf on the western wall of my head.

## NYU, DAY TWO

In raincoats, Harold and I took the subway in.

It was one of those late summer days.

Nacreous light from high, unreachable windows.

Downward-facing bulbs casting something else.

The belts of the proctors lined up with their buttons, the right triangles of their noses, their crotches.

When I said my name, a woman with motionless hair looked down a long list until she found it, then crossed it off.

She said to take a pencil from the box. The clop, clop of heels on wax.

All eyes dropped to me as if by gravitation. Rows and rows of heads, anxious to give back what they'd taken.

Immediately, I spotted Leah, her hair arrested into a scarf, and next to her, the same kid we'd seen at the movies, gussied up in jacket and tie. What can I say about his glasses except that they were too thin to matter?

She motioned for me to take the seat below them where her brown Mary Jane's were dangling over the edge.

I caught up to Harold just before he tucked into a deli and we ordered turkey sandwiches with extra mustard and two cokes.

His face was confused and hurt, sliced in half by a shadow.

"Nothing to explain," I said. "It wasn't for me."

## PROJECTION 2

*Score by Morton Feldman*

No staves, notes or bars, just boxes connected horizontally by black lines, vertically by dotted ones, and another box inside each one containing either a symbol unmarried from the world it comes from—*ceci n'est pas un diamant!*—or the faded gray of aged paper Xeroxed until expressionless, a.k.a. emptiness. The names of the instruments written on the left-hand side in capitalized letters: TRUMPET and PIANO at the edge, FLUTE, VIOLIN, CELLO, a little further in, each corresponding to a row of schematic spaces—rooms perhaps on a blueprint for a roadside attraction's corresponding inn, some of which don't even have an entrance or share, through the wall, a long single bed with another. Others have a mini-bar or club chair specified by a letter or number. The dotted lines could be curtains or fences and *Morton Feldman* in black cursive pen? The decorative hedge at the complex's entrance. This is the kind of hotel you can enter any time you like but not check-in, where the recommended length of stay is each-room-each-for-one-week. Guests should be advised to pack a light. The cigarette buffet's open all night.

ARELENE FELDMAN SAYS

I was his first bride.

I slept on the left side, tied his tie.

I was there the night Cage came into his life,

Webern sounding like a creepy lullaby.

Otherwise, I stayed behind

when the city became his favored wife,

the tavern carrying him to the next day's light,

sounds unfolding like, like, like...

"Not tonight, Arlene. I have to write."

From beneath, he was the sky—

just the right size.

When undressing, the moon

shoving airplanes aside.



## CEDAR TAVERN

Faces spoked around  
an ashtray, the booth  
too rectangular so they pull  
up a few chairs to make a circle—  
on the wall's end, the last  
two lean in on elbows.

John invited him.  
Everyone else's a painter,  
poet or curator  
and they're all so thin,  
bracketed in jackets, hands  
stroking chins.

He hesitates—there's no room  
for a stranger so generously proportioned...  
the conversation, directed in,  
doesn't notice him  
standing behind them—

lips meet glass rims,  
lucky strike boxes  
get opened and emptied  
and has long has it been?

A minute? Ten?

John's still in the washroom  
and no one seems to have heard,  
"This is Morton Feldman."

So he just listens in until

Cage comes back.

"Why are you standing?" he asks,  
and everyone turns to Morty  
who says, "I thought this  
was the non-smoking section."

326 MONROE STREET

I walked up five flights and there was John on a straw mat, the East River behind him like a black carpet leading nowhere.

We drank tea from glass mugs, our breath clouding the window pane and I thought about how my grandmother used to shake her fist at me and say, “Know everything, think everything, and do nothing.”

At John’s, there was never anything to do.

Snowflakes fell in the shape of white orange peels, and we thought we could hear them.

We thought they had sounds like telephone lines going dead.

Six weeks later, I went back downstairs because one shouldn’t overstay his welcome.

I walked up five flights, and there was John, a straw mat beneath him like a carpet flying nowhere. Overhead, a helicopter sliced out pieces of the sky that fell onto the balcony in the shape of white orange peels, and I thought they had sounds like angels accumulating.

In the Talmud there’s an angel named *Forgetfulness* and as I walked up the five flights of stairs, I thought I could hear Her. I thought She sounded like breath clouding a window pane.

There was John, sitting on a straw mat he’d bought from a guy in Golden Gate Park who said he was a fallen angel. I brought my Talmud

and we sat and read as the storm blew across the East River  
like the blades of a helicopter. John's radiator was broken.  
We could hear the water wheezing through it, but it wouldn't heat up.  
He didn't keep any furniture then. He said it made too much noise.  
We almost froze staring out the window, waiting for the first sound to appear.

The year was 52 or 53, and the neighborhood was a compound  
for people like us who thought they could hear things.  
I rented the apartment because John's was five flights up.  
The East River was on the other side, but  
I could only see it from John's window, and that was my excuse  
sometimes for stopping by to drink tea.

My father and my grandmother lived together for fifty years without saying a word to  
one another,  
the space between them like a black carpet, a telephone line gone dead.  
Sitting inside of it, doing nothing, I learned to hear it.

I walked up five flights, and I thought I could hear them.  
"That's you," they said.

PORTRAIT

*“My piano always plays Feldman. If you play Chopin, Schumann, Mozart, on my piano  
it’s always Feldman.”*

*-Morton Feldman*

In his apartment’s only room,  
granite head  
angled toward the keys, eyes

                    ballooned by  
glasses, his fingers fall  
or hold fast against  
the air, knuckles

                    pull  
the tendons almost out of the skin,  
shoulders, neck, and brain—  
mechanical wiring

                    obscured  
by tie and blazer, thin cigarette  
on his lip—the exhaust pipe.

He's too large

for his instrument

and certainly the stool, a pin

the head of which is him.

Angels dance there

in the form

of hairs that have lost their grease,

short-winded stories

spin, the tongue

rests

for this evening's trip to the tavern.

On the tip of the forebrain, theories

effloresce.

e Repetition is a form of chang  
ge Repetition is a form of chan  
nge Repetition is a form of cha  
ange Repetition is a form of ch  
hange Repetition is a form of c  
change Repetition is a form of  
f change Repetition is a form o  
of change Repetition is a form  
m of change Repetition is a for  
rm of change Repetition is a fo  
orm of change Repetition is a f  
form of change Repetition is a  
a form of change Repetition is  
s a form of change Repetition i  
is a form of change Repetition  
n is a form of change Repetitio  
on is a form of change Repetiti  
ion is a form of change Repetit  
tion is a form of change Repeti  
ition is a form of change Repet  
tition is a form of change Repe

petition is a form of change Rep

petition is a form of change Re

petition is a form of change R



## UNTITLED

All my songs are shuffling  
so at first I think they've ended.  
I can hear the train  
rattle and squeak. I check  
the screen—Rothko Chapel.  
I downloaded it last week  
but can't figure out  
what's the train, what's the piece.

COMPOSITIONAL MATH

*“Consider the time needed for the sound to reach the audience from the stage, and to return to the stage.”*

*-Edgard Varèse to Morton Feldman*

or the time it takes to get to the Cedar and back

minus seven cigarettes

minus one discussion of Pasternak

plus time re-gained

writing haiku's with Frank

about snow—

whether it rises or falls

or never falls nor rises but

is lost

minus a lecture at the club

two hours or eight

on when a painting's finished

minus music for Pollack's film  
paid for with a drawing in Indian ink  
of what, he's not sure

a few seconds tick off each time  
you even pronounce his name  
or consider climbing

that steep path up to Cage's new farmhouse—  
your shortsightedness makes it dangerous  
and thus the gulf—

the spaces between people are  
always actual  
and between us

that's especially true—  
for all my listening, I don't know the first thing  
about you.

## TWO ALEATORY COMPOSERS DRIVE OUT TO THE COUNTRY

The car door opens, emitting Feldman.

“What’s that smell?”

Cage replies, “Chlorophyll,” and Feldman  
doesn’t approve. “Flowers  
and trees should be potted,  
dwarfed, stunted by smog.  
This orgy is disgusting.”

A team of crickets rubs their legs, the snap,  
crackle of the unconductable.

“You know what this smell means?”

Feldman says as a million things  
riding the wool hairs of his jacket  
grow one-one-millionth of a centimeter.

“There’s not enough people.”

## DEATH SONNET

Humming from the awning, some disco song  
says nothing in French. The ash tree decays  
and Mort's alive again, his body splayed  
across the Jersey sunset, a long  
strip of orange fragrant with what I'm on.  
I feel lost at sea. Birdlessly amazed,  
watching the sky for ships, as if the day  
had not departed already into song.  
Trail of bread crumbs, take me past the plains  
of Asphophel and let him follow.  
Re-frame my eyes to match his glasses.  
He's passed me, playing trumpet for Apollo,  
while on Mott street, it's beginning to rain—  
arms hailing taxis like long meadow grasses.

FELDMAN DRY-CLEANS BOULEZ'S UNDERWEAR

Extra bleach, extra starch, he said.

He was visiting from Paris, heard  
my family's business was the best.

"I'm leaving for Chicago on Monday to conduct  
Mahler's ninth, you know, the one  
stuck half way between the past  
and the future." Yeah, I said,

like these stains we won't be able to get out  
unless you cough up an extra buck.

"Robbery!" he screamed, and I explained  
in America you get what you pay for.

"Is that why no one plays your scores?"  
he retorted and stormed through the door,  
forgetting to take his ticket so

I stole his fancy European panties  
and sold them to this Chinese guy  
who likes that stuff. When an intern  
came by, asking for Pierre's laundry,

I gave him back some splattered  
boxers instead, a note attached that read,

"Compliments of Jackson Pollock."

## BUNITA'S DREAM

Inside the body of the piano  
where I used to lay the phone's receiver  
to play my songs to your distant ear,  
the coat of our shadow appears re-sewn,  
laid across the grid of strings and hammers  
like a parting gift—I pick it up  
and put it on, but it's immense.

The sleeves hang almost to the floor,  
and when it billows from a gust of wind,  
I start to feel my body's openness  
as if you had been the part that held it closed.

Distraught, I try to pull it off,  
the fabric wraps around my throat,  
and next thing I know I'm in the closet  
exhausted and rolling in my clothes.

To reassure myself, I try them on  
but nothing fits like it did before—  
I'm thinner. Dying's diet works.  
Your weight's been lifted whole.

ANTIPHONY = MORTY + BARBARA

As dusk brushes

the boats from Lake Erie's blackening coat,

the lock plunges into the door's bronze fist,

it clicks, and they're alone.

Nuclear shelter.

No fly zone.

Strike up Stravinsky!

Let the speakers bleed out their quickening yolk.

Bring water in case a fire breaks out.

The bed's full, the sheets are closing.

Hello, Night. Goodbye, Clothing.



## ANSWERING MACHINE

Hey Cage, it's Morty  
calling from the after  
-life, pick up  
quick, the rates here  
are awful and I only  
brought two drachma.

Here's the thing  
about post-existence:  
the food's bad and  
there's none of it. Everyone's  
stuck in his own  
compartment. I just sit

at the switchboard, tuned  
to your channel or Barbara's  
or Bunita's or strangers  
in Istanbul. I never did so much  
listening while alive, at least  
not to other people.

It gets old!

A man's got to complain, too

or it all becomes a blur

so here's what I have for you:

you dress like a slob.

Egad, those baggy sweaters!

No wonder Lincoln

Center's deserted.

Death's boring

so I'm breaking out

but I need your help.

I think my part of

hell is a storage facility

in Hoboken. Tonight

drive around and call

out my name. I'll be

the one banging around,

cursing in German.

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

READING LIST FOR CREATIVE THESIS 2008

“HELLO, CLOTHING”

by

P. Scott Cunningham

Reading List:

Ashbery, John. *The Tennis Court Oath*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1962.

I bought this book just after September 11, 2001, long before I decided to write poetry seriously, after reading a few lines from it in the New York Times. The author of the article seemed to think there was some kind of “twin tower attacks” prophesy inside of them. But, as a former tennis player, I was more drawn to the name (even though I knew it was referring to the historical event, not the game). Ashbery’s surrealism is a little more subdued in this early work than in later ones. The poems are still difficult, but difficult in the most friendly way possible, and the book taught me about the power of one line, that if it can surprise and delight the reader, it can re-orient the meaning of the entire poem.

Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. The context for the poem “Flaherty’s Notebook” was derived from this survey of the development of the non-fiction film.

Cage, John. *Silence*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1961. A collection of experimental writings by the influential California composer. Some sections are lectures; some essays; and some are merely word experiments that could pass as language poetry. Most useful to my project is a lecture composed entirely of anecdotes, some about Morton Feldman. The structure of relying content solely through anecdote, though not cited as such, certainly was derived from Feldman's own lectorial style.

Coffin, Charles M. Ed. *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Donne's use of the conceit prefigures its popularity in 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry. His unofficial title as chief of the "metaphysical" poets is somewhat misleading; by exploring human relationships through extended metaphors he makes what was ethereal, physical, and not the other way around. In contrast, his fellow metaphysical poet George Herbert uses conceits in an effort to distance the human soul from the world around it.

Friedman, B.H. *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*. Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000. *Eighth Street* is essentially a reprint of an older, out-of-print book called *Morton Feldman Essays*, but with enough of a difference in material that ideally, a collector should own both. Unfortunately, the older book is nearly impossible to find, though I was able to peruse it in the offices of Dr. Orlando Garcia at FIU. This book collects various essays, linear notes, and lectures by Feldman about music and art, particularly the art of his New York School friends Jackson Pollack, Philip Guston, Mark Rothko, and Robert Rauschenberg, plus the poet Frank O'Hara and the composer John Cage.

Hass, Robert, Ed. *The Essential Haiku: versions of Bashō, Buson, & Issa*. New York:

Ecco, 1994. The authoritative collection of the three masters of Japanese haiku, Hass's translations were the models for my own satirical haiku. While rhetorical phrasing has become a central element of contemporary poetry, Basho et al demonstrate that image is the only poetic device that can stand alone.

Hoagland, Tony. *Donkey Gospel*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 1998. Hoagland proves that a poet can be funny without sacrificing seriousness; in other words, that comedy is just as fine a road to meaningful emotion as melancholy. His poems always connect from beginning to end in sonically- and logically-sound fashion, and though their meanings can be very dense, he always provides an easy entry point for the reader, either through his thoroughly modern diction or a contemporary subject matter. Beneath the comedy lies a deep skepticism about American life.

Heaney, Seamus. *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Heaney's mythical renderings of Irish and Norse history are close as modern poetry comes to its ancient religious function of making sense of an irrational world for a specific tribe of people. The exact opposite of solipsism, Heaney writes for and from an entire island's consciousness. His keen attention to etymology imbues every word with multiple meanings, even as he paints harrowing pictures of violence, love, and death.

Jackson, Major. *Leaving Saturn*. Athens: Georgia UP, 2002. The prosodic love-child of Frost and Brooks, Jackson has inherited both of his parents' attention to form while introducing his own sense of rhythm and idiom. Like Brooks, Jackson enjoys writing inside the personas of people he feels are emblematic of American

culture; like Frost, who first said that “sound is sense,” Jackson is loyal only to his ear. Like both, he is committed to simultaneously harvesting the outer limits of America’s vocabulary while mythologizing its casual conversation.

Johnson, Denis. *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly: Poems Collected and New*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Johnson’s style is wild and imprecise, occasionally disappointing in its hurriedness, but at his best there’s no one better at extracting lyricism from the dark side of the modern American world. A master of torqued, inverted syntax, Johnson’s greatest lines unveil themselves like circus sideshows—what we thought we were seeing was only the beginning. Like Tranströmer, he notices God in almost everything, but not because of any overriding personal belief system. Johnson’s poetry only identifies how littered the American experience is with false advertisements for the sacred.

Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. London: Belknap, 1991. Besides serving as a model for several of the “odes” in my book, Keats is the master of the high-romantic lyric, and the first English writer to successfully break open Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter into a more modern vernacular and syntax. His ekphrastic poems are some of the best in English.

Matthews, William. *Search Party: Collected Poems*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

At once smart and bawdy, Matthews displays an utter lack of fear on the page. Rather than allowing his chief subject matter to weigh the poems down in sophomoric self-pity, he elevates the narrative of his life to the level of a dramatic performance. His approach to form has an American sense of individuality and

ingenuity but springs from a rigorous classical training and sense of tradition rather than a egoistical effort to “make it new.”

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. (1965) New York: First Perennial Classics, 1999. Plath demonstrates the lack of distinction between language and being. The power of her poems is that her pain is still alive inside of them. Their formal compression, their non-maleness, and their anti-academia marks them as decidedly American, even as she invokes imagery from the European tradition.

Reece, Spencer. *The Clerk's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Reese's overlong rhyming couplets speak to the loneliness and pent-up emotion inherent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. His lines read slowly and carefully, as if the author were afraid of them ending. His evocation of Bishop is an excellent model for imitation.

Roethke, Theodore. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. (1975). New York: Anchor Books, 1991. Reading Roethke for me is like eating vegetables. It's not the most pleasurable option but it may be the most beneficial in terms of improving my language. Roethke focuses almost exclusively on the “real” world outside of his consciousness. Even while French and German philosophers are detaching language from the world around him, Roethke's poetry asserted the physical connections between words and their objects. More than any other American poet, when Roethke says “tree” he means “tree,” and his belief in this relationship between signifier and signified anchors his poetry against interpretation, drawing the reader closer to the world he inhabited.

Ross, Alex. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Ross, the current music critic for the New Yorker,

surveys the last one hundred years of classical and popular music, eschewing a narrative of linear progression in favor of highlighting individual composers as they reacted to their contemporary artistic and political situations. The section on Morton Feldman, a favorite of Ross's, does a good job of explaining his music, influences and legacy.

Schubert, David. *Works & Days: Collected Poems*. New York: Quarterly Review of Literature, 1984. Ashbery's small critical book, *Other Traditions*, brought Schubert, a relatively unknown poet from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to my attention. His language sounds about fifty years ahead of its time, even while it adheres to an 18<sup>th</sup> Century sense of formalism. He has Rimbaud's sense of youthful doom, coupled with a zaniness that pre-dates O'Hara's. He may be merely a lesser version of Hart Crane but he's more consistently charming.

Schuyler, James. *Selected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.

Critically, he's a lesser poet than his New York School pals O'Hara, Ashbery, or Koch, but only, I suspect, because his output wasn't as large or daring. I think of him as the urban James Wright—he also lets the land speak for itself but the message is much more hopeful, though no less significant.

Shapiro, Alan. *Old War*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Shapiro's poetic lineage follows the canon out of Greece and into Woody Allen. His poems in this newest volume, like the Greek epics of old, take on the personas and narrative lives of heroes, but instead of Odysseus, Shapiro speaks as an alcoholic country music singer and a Jewish comedian from the Catskills. His lines are always metrically



precise, and he employs rhyme as part of his poetic effort to make the tone of the poem echo its emotional stance.

Tate, James. *Selected Poems*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1991. While Tate's early poems about his father lyricize loss in new and surprising ways, the meat of the volume is the prose poems he was writing in the 70's and 80's. Frequently depicting a speaker trying to find his bearings in a world just slightly different from our own, Tate's mini-narratives engross the reader in full sensory experiences where the dominant emotions are hilarity and melancholy.

Tranströmer, Tomas. *Selected Poems: 1954-1986*. Robert Hass, Ed. Hopewell: Ecco, 1987. Tranströmer sees the sacred in everything. His deep landscapes don't discriminate between natural and man-made (he often prefers airplanes to birds), but in his word choices lies the animistic delusions humans can't shake. His language is rich without being overripe.

Villars, Chris, Ed. *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987*. London: Hyphen, 2006. A beautifully-constructed book by an amateur music critic and curator of the authoritative online site for all things Feldman, *Morton Feldman Says* gathers most of the interviews that had been languishing in the library at SUNY Buffalo and many others that are printed for the first time. The book also includes black and white photos and reproductions of some of Feldman's early and most influential scores.

Walcott, Derek. *Selected poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Walcott is the Seamus Heaney of the Western side of the Atlantic, in that, like Heaney, he speaks for a people and is capable of performing all possible poetic operations.

Militarily speaking, his armory is full—there’s no form, meter, or technique that he can’t employ masterfully. Morton Feldman said that the definition of skill was being able to do whatever one wants, and Walcott is one of the select living few in that club. The music of his words is infectious.

Young, Kevin. *To Repel Ghosts: five sides in B minor {sung by the author}*. Cambridge: Zoland, 2001. Young’s sense of rhythm, metaphorical chops, and unique skill for riffing on commonly-known phrases makes him one of the most musical living poets. Like any great song writer, Young has an innate ability to get his sound stuck into the listener’s head. His books frequently adopt song forms such as the ballad and the blues and use them to a similar effect: communicating one clear emotion. Possibly the most consistently ekphrastic poet alive, Young’s artistic obsessions, ranging from film (*Black Maria*), music (*Jelly Roll*), and art (*To Repel Ghosts*), dominate his subject matter. Almost everything he writes is a “remix” of a received form. While his debut *Most Way Home* is a great model for a first book, his study of the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in *To Repel Ghosts* was an indispensable model for my Morton Feldman project.

## Concentration List:

### Formal Innovations in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry

Beckman, Joshua. *Your Time Has Come*. Amherst: Verse, 2004. In a series of informal

haiku about post-September 11<sup>th</sup> New York City, Beckman demonstrates that any form can become instantly refreshed in the right hands. Whereas most modern haiku sounds overly nostalgic for its rural Japanese roots, Beckman's miniature images evoke the hectic pace of modern urban life while retaining the heart of the haiku form: the indelible image.

Berrigan, Ted. *The Sonnets*. New York: Penguin, 2000. A member of the "second" New

York School of poets, Berrigan writes with a similar loose-ended enthusiasm as Frank O'Hara, but he's much more of a surrealist. (His main parentage is Guillaume Apollinaire.) When he was writing this series of seventy-nine sonnets (He wrote eighty-eight total but cut nine), Berrigan was reading John Cage's *Silence* and John Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath*, and the aleatory and dissociative methods outlined in these two books, respectively, influenced his decision to repeat whole lines from one poem to another. As a result, the gap between one line of a Berrigan sonnet and the next can be immense, and the surprise generated from the space grants the poems a freshness that never dissipates.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and

Giroux, 1983. Bishop dominates the page, not by displaying the catholic virtuosity of Heaney or Walcott, but by making an offer to the reader that he/she can't refuse: an entry into her singular consciousness. Her eye is the sharpest there is for landscape both natural and man-made, but rather than flatly describing

things as she sees them, Bishop dramatizes *seeing* itself and in the process, remakes the world. Formally, she is massively inventive, putting her stake on many of the most famous forms—sonnet, villanelle, sestina—while inventing many of her own.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Brooks is slighted even on the cover of her own book, where a blurb reads, “Probably the finest black poet of the post-Harlem generation.” She is much more than that—the urban Frost. Able to reconcile the speech around her with a pleasing iambic structure, Brooks writes with precision that sounds like spontaneity. Never content to dwell on the inner self, she examines with Bishop-like coldness the people around her, rendering them whole and alive.

Frost, Robert. *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. New York: Library of America, 1995. Too often dismissed as some kind of backwards-facing traditionalist or “cracker-barrel” philosopher, Frost innovated American meter to a degree that is still being felt through the work of modern masters such as Kay Ryan, Alan Shapiro, and Major Jackson. Basically, anyone who tries to put modern idiom into iambic clothing pays a debt to New England’s finest. Morton Feldman once said that the people you think are radical are sometimes really conservative and vice versa. Frost is the latter. He wasn’t engaged in advancing Modernism’s narrow objective of de-centering the Western tradition; he was doing something much more avant-garde, namely, rescuing it from the Victorian hamper.

Williams, C.K. *Selected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. Williams redefines both modernist free verse (inherited from Eliot) and the long line (inherited from Whitman) in American poetry. His narratives, which are never strict narratives, delve deeply into the political moment without ever dissolving into common knowledge, and his long, sinuous lines evoke the prosaic form of an essay without ever losing their lyrical force.

Williams, C.K. *Selected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. Williams redefines both modernist free verse (inherited from Eliot) and the long line (inherited from Whitman) in American poetry. His narratives, which are never strict narratives, delve deeply into the political moment without ever dissolving into common knowledge, and his long, sinuous lines evoke the prosaic form of an essay without ever losing their lyrical force.