

4-2008

## American Suburban

James Michael Ashworth  
*Rhode Island College*, [jashworth\\_0643@ric.edu](mailto:jashworth_0643@ric.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/etd>

Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ashworth, James Michael, "American Suburban" (2008). *Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview*. Paper 10.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact [kayton@ric.edu](mailto:kayton@ric.edu).

AMERICAN SUBURBAN

By

James Michael Ashworth

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

School of Graduate Studies

Rhode Island College

2008

*To Beth*

## Contents

1. Clubhouse
2. Under the Stairs
3. Hyannis, MA
4. Harold and the Purple Crayon
5. Hi-C and Calamine Lotion
6. Boston Whaler Blues
7. Indian Rock Farm Road
8. Warwick Public
9. Our Parade
10. Messy
11. The House on Saltaire
12. Montauk
13. Without
14. C A K E, 10 Points
15. Ullage
16. City Squirrels
17. Night Train
18. Piece by Piece
19. What's Left
20. Yard Debris Only
21. Neighbors
22. Sage Drive
23. On Hedgerow Drive
24. House on Brightside Court
25. "I'm Catholic"
26. Olneyville Square
27. Sedation Dentistry
28. Thursday, Post Road
29. Please and Thank You
30. Bad Breath and Audacity

I.

## Clubhouse

Please let me in the clubhouse.  
I have candy, dirty jokes and  
magazines of filth.  
I may not help your grade point average  
but I promise to cause it no detriment.  
I can help with geometry and algebra,  
or maybe help you with your piggy bank.

I wear cool clothes and don't do what I'm told  
all the time.  
But I won't wear your letters shamefully  
in public or at the local mall.  
I'm different, I know,  
but I don't care about the other clubs.  
They've always been too willing to let me be a part.

I can lend you secrets of the world you wonder  
yet only write about.  
Why watch movies in avid research?  
I can tell you who she is, or who they are,  
I can tell you what it feels like  
and the year of the car her father drives.  
I turn to new experiences  
instead of turning the page  
of another's recollection.

Please let me in the clubhouse  
and we can play your games.  
I'd like to know what's so special  
that I cannot come in.  
I doubt it's something I haven't  
pondered in anxiety, persona, or voice,  
nor dreamed a wet dream's nightmare  
about or viewed in some porno scene.  
All I can offer is perhaps what you don't want.  
Or maybe it is that you've wanted it for so long  
you've all given up.  
But maybe I hit my social prime in high school.

I just bought another blazer  
I'm not sure if it's your style or mine.  
I hope it's not too cool, I hope it's not too dull.  
I cannot change the way I look, or the way I talk,  
or my desire to become a member  
of the only club that I wanted to be part of  
that wouldn't let me in.

## Under the Stairs

I pass the chemical plant  
by the trestle on the way home  
and the smell of sulfur in the air  
brings me to the back door  
of the house on Boulder View Drive.  
Usually barricaded by a lawn mower,  
tools, and cases of silver cans  
with bold black lettering: B-E-E-R—  
you know, the old ones with the  
pullback tabs.  
Four wooden stairs out to the backyard  
we had a fort there,  
under the stairs.  
We would play with matches,  
hoard discoveries like old Playboys—  
that the perv at the card shop sold us—  
polished rocks, supposed arrowheads,  
candy, rubber snakes, and fake dog shit.  
Our prized possessions were daggers  
that we made with a bike handlebar grip  
and a stick sharpened to a dull point  
on the cement of our blacktop  
double-driveway, or on one of the large rocks  
that made our street a dead end.  
At school nearby we were told that  
Indians used them as drums,  
but now under the stairs, at age nine,  
they separated the neighborhoods  
and created rival soccer teams.  
We weren't supposed to go over there  
or to let anyone in  
so we stayed away and were told not  
to talk to strangers even though  
we knew their kids.  
Ryan was nice enough, even though  
he lived on the other side of the rocks,  
even though he had to take a different bus  
to get to school.  
We should have let him in.  
Maybe then the man at the card shop  
wouldn't have got to him.

Hyannis, MA

I was always willing to play the cruel older brother  
chasing you—two chubby kids running on the pavement,  
our feet black-bottomed and blistered  
from never wearing sandals.

Remember the peanut butter & jelly sandwiches  
we had on the way out to the Cape—  
packaged in tinfoil, teeter-tottering on the edge  
of the second row seat,  
that fell victim to the musty sand-covered floor mats  
of the family caravan.

It was your fault that I forgot my glasses—  
blue, circular lenses, like the ones John Lennon wore;  
at least that's what the Phishhead cashier at that store  
in Provincetown said.

I left them in the side compartment of the backseat  
where you kept your multicolored bouncy balls  
that we got from the flea market  
where we stole those novelty pop fireworks  
you throw at the ground.

Maybe you would remember the rusty Chock Full O'Nuts can  
that we peed in so we didn't have to stop along the way.

I know, well, you've got to remember when the cops pulled us over—  
Dad was pissed.

That stupid Dunkin Donuts box we tore apart and threw out the window.  
Perhaps we should've thrown the donuts out instead.

I bet you do remember that beach with the huge wooden staircase  
built right into the dunes.

Mom and Dad were proud of themselves having climbed it up and down;  
they always were overweight.

I'm sorry, although at the time it was funny,  
my wet sandy towel, the crack on your lower back,  
the people whose necks snapped to look  
at the awkward chubbiness  
of our family vacation.



## Harold and the Purple Crayon

I look around my cubicle,  
gray ceiling and manila phone.  
I curse the white sterile walls.  
Why can't I draw on them  
a purple door that I remember so vividly?  
Or fill the electrical socket with green Play-Doh—  
the patchwork of a child, high in sodium, yum.  
To use snots as weapons:  
some, when rolled in a ball,  
release from your finger while others remain stuck.  
Likewise dead-or-live bugs in the kitchen  
or the mysterious scraps of toilet paper  
you find in the men's room  
serve as ammo to throw  
at the new girl in accounting.  
To make music with your armpits,  
mimicking farts  
with lips to closed hands.  
Now is not the same.

## Hi-C and Calamine Lotion

It was on a Monday I sat,  
late for work, in a pediatrician's office,  
waiting for my immunization records.  
How awkward to sit with mothers and children,  
sick and crying, with wet diapers,  
waiting for the prognosis of the latest  
sandbox plague.  
I should have made an appointment  
or had the doctor fax them.  
But there I sat, watching sick school children  
play Pokemon or whichever non-educational craze  
swept their elementary schools this week.  
One child stood alone.  
I watched him play with a plastic multicolored abacus.  
His mother hands him a juicebox,  
green and yellow like Slimer from Ghostbusters.  
Although it appeared a gallon in his hands,  
he took control, wrestling the wrapper off  
the red straw.  
How innocent he is, not knowing that straw  
will earn him detention in later years  
when he learns the arts of spitballs.  
He came toward me and I asked if he could do a tumblesault.  
But he bashfully returned to the leg of his mother,  
his perch to sit and wonder, perhaps,  
why he cannot talk to strangers, or perhaps,  
how the green elephant on the wallpaper  
got chickenpox.

## Boston Whaler Blues

Can't we just go fishing?  
Take that drive down Route 1  
with Allie's Donuts on the way—  
glazed crullers and coffee milk.  
The smell of our old wood paneled  
caravan uniformed in once tan interior,  
carefully littered with beach sand  
and remnants of youth and wet dog.  
It won't take long once we get to the cottage:  
a five gallon bucket with a box of frozen squid,  
the green tackle box filled with rusty hooks,  
steel leaders, four ounce sinkers and  
expensive lures we've never used.

Can't we just go fishing?  
Let's get farmer tans and just drift  
like the time we lost the propeller  
and had to get towed to shore by a jet ski.  
You and me on the Whaler,  
our lines in the water, talking  
like fathers and sons once did.  
Perhaps the fish below are  
immersed in the same debate:  
the son wanting to leave home  
to chase the bait;  
the father weary,  
well aware of the hooks.

You used to take a cooler of beer  
that we could've gotten in trouble for  
because I was underage.  
Now, you can't have booze on a boat anymore.  
It figures that now that I can drink by age  
we cannot drink on the water.  
But maybe that's why you won't go fishing.

## Indian Rock Farm Road

An aged birdbath serves as an eerie reflection  
of its once white color,  
reminded by the flakes and chips of paint  
strewn about the unkempt lawn,  
as it splits the symmetry of the backyard.  
The two paddleboats overturned,  
tarpaulin-adorned,  
adjacent to the Sunfish in their resting places  
of off-season months.

The old wooden swing there between the trees  
creates a shadowed hideout when the sun is high.  
How it caused turmoil among siblings and cousins—  
“Open Sesame,” some could enter.  
“To the dungeon,” others could not.  
The chains that supported the swing  
cost Mark the tip of his youth  
and backyard football stardom.  
“Better a finger than his life,” Aunty Laurel said.  
Severed, it dangled from the chain,  
forever tainted like the thick rope  
that hung loosely from the big oak tree.

There, up on the hill,  
an old couple used to summer there.  
They were always “discontent with their marriage.”  
That’s what our parents told us.  
But we knew something happened.  
We were told to stay away from that tree,  
because of its story and all.

Warwick Public

As I look up at the ceiling,  
lights suspended, bulbous,  
looking like breasts,  
I think of the asbestos-ridden  
drop-in tiles of my elementary school.  
Lost on a school trip,  
I panic and scan the stacks,  
nine years old again,  
dreading another encounter  
with the drunkard janitor  
whose ramblings escaped the  
surgical mask he wore.  
Now, fifteen years later,  
I think he may fear bird flu,  
or contracting HIV from the junkie  
in the bathroom  
dishing out blowjobs for a buck.  
I'd like to think he actually read  
those books whose pages he turned  
so tenaciously with latex-gloved hands.  
Maybe he actually knew who Whitman was  
and that he liked the cock  
and the idea that Shakespeare's sonnets  
were written for a teenage boy—  
this library literally excites him.  
And here I sit and wonder  
what drove this old man to madness.  
Perhaps, we are alike,  
and wonder if Whitman would care to know  
that his leaves are paperbacked and dusty  
on the bottom shelf.

## II.

### Our Parade

Last night I made my bed with you  
under the sheet.

Tonight, you're one-hundred-ninety-three  
miles away, again.

You don't take up too much space  
and little comfort is lost in our debate  
over who will get the "good" down pillow—  
even though it is mine.

Another night we'll say our goodnights  
over the phone and our discourse  
will consist of your noted absence  
from the nook of my chest and shoulder  
where you fit perfectly.

I worry more when it's you that makes the drive  
and I'll admit that you travel more often  
and I am left to lose sleep in contemplation  
of days-and-nights gone by  
without you here with me in my bed.  
I can only hope for fifteen hour days of exhaustion  
when you're not around  
so I may lie quietly,  
staring at the digital display  
of my alarm clock  
knowing that I won't fall asleep.

## Messy

I took the last cotton ball  
from your drawer  
where you keep your things at my place.  
I used it to tone my skin  
with your astringent,  
cleaning my face temporarily  
with your texture.  
I dare not use your other stuff—  
shave gel, smelling of lilac and something flowery,  
deodorant, strong enough for a man,  
clearly made for a woman,  
a purplish-pink razor, and your toothbrush—  
actually, I've used that several times.  
But those Orbit gum wrappers  
I find all over my car—  
in the door,  
on and under the front seats  
are different.  
I caught you last time,  
although in a cute way,  
your sneakily subtle approach  
to dropping a wrapper in the ashtray  
as if to trade  
for a quarter, nickel, or dime  
for coffee.  
As if your stuff in the drawer  
doesn't take up enough space,  
I found three of your Starbucks' cups  
in my backseat.

## The House on Saltaire

Tonight, like so many nights,  
*Cooush*, I hear the sound,  
the splash of the sea.  
Salty transparent like the sweat  
that drips from my brow to lips.  
“Kiss me, I’m not crying,” I call out.  
No answers except the wind  
briskly blowing across the bay.  
I imagine you would be as tearful as me,  
when the smell of untraveled places  
enters your nostrils  
by means of the sunset wind.  
It’s not painful or harsh like low tide,  
I think, wiping my wind-induced tears,  
looking out towards Block Island and the Sound.  
“You’re not far from there, a few miles or so  
from point to point,”  
but the Whaler will not take me that far—  
not against the waves of a southeastern wind.  
Tonight, like so many nights,  
I’m not there,  
I cannot be.



## Montauk

For the first time in eleven days,  
I lie alone in my bed  
after having to press my clothes.  
Tomorrow will come,  
and for lunch I can only hope  
for some fresh Italian bread and cold cuts  
instead of heading over to East Lake Road  
to try that seafood place above the fish market  
raved about by the locals.  
We watched the sun fall into the water—  
red and yellow extinguished behind the breakers—  
and we waved to the fishing boats  
returning from a long day.  
Now only scenes of you and me remain:  
walking down the pier  
admiring boats we could only wish to afford—  
I wonder if that one was really Billy Joel's.  
And what about that hundred-footer?  
I can only imagine.  
We sat poolside with drinks—  
yours a bay breeze, mine a rum and cola—  
and speculated who owned the white Bentley  
in the parking lot of the yacht club.  
I still can't believe that cars and boats that expensive  
just sit there in place all day.  
The cork knocks of your espadrilles  
on the docks echo rhythm of these days gone by.  
No more polo shirted, sunglass-tanned, flip-flop bliss,  
equidistant from tennis court and poolside bar.  
Today vacation has ended;  
tomorrow, our distance from one another  
returns as routine.

## Without

I go out from time to time  
knowing that I will not see you  
leaned at the bar,  
browsing songs on the jukebox,  
or outside having a smoke  
and simple conversations.  
Thanks to mobile phones  
I may hear from you—  
God-willing there is good service—  
as if satellites play a significant role  
in the night's direction.

I visit the men's room to have a chat  
and with no one around,  
I attempt to rationalize with my reflection  
in the mirror in front of the urinals.  
I realize it all becomes useless—  
my dry-cleaned button-downs,  
my matching brown shoes and belt,  
even that more-white-than-blue striped  
J-Crew shirt you bought me.

You know the one:  
"It's supposed to be wrinkled."  
Yes, that one.  
I like it a lot by the way.

But it's wasted,  
unnecessary,  
like each spray of Burberry cologne.  
Although I love the fragrance,  
it is worthless as my Pure Sport deodorant,  
and my crew-neck t-shirts  
that hug my body  
and appear pressed  
when I'm without you.

## C A K E, 10 Points

It was yesterday that I sat beside you  
and beat you at a game of Scrabble  
over shared coffee  
and a piece of marble cake.

When did it come into standard  
that I have to play by the rules  
while I watch you steal tiles and  
use the dictionary to find a word  
you've never heard before  
as if I'm not paying attention  
to your every move.

It's almost painful to let you "have  
the triple word score" and record  
only twelve points.

I suppose it's okay after all  
because you invited me to play.

I won and I got to eat your cake.

But as usual, you drank all but one sip  
of the coffee

not because you didn't want to share  
or because you felt bad that it  
started off as mine

but mostly because you knew that there  
were crumbs of cake backwashed to the  
bottom of the mug

like the Q you threw back  
into the bag for me to use.

That's okay because I like crumbs  
and all of this  
was quite delicious.

Oh yes, you left me the Q.

Q-U-I-P, triple word score, 45 Points.

## Ullage

I can only hope for smooth sailing  
when I leave you behind in New York  
with the new puppy  
and the hustle and bustle  
of superficial competition.  
Although it never is easy to leave,  
once I hit Grand Central Parkway  
there's no turning back—  
at least not this Sunday night.  
It becomes hard to keep the car steady  
when the wind blows side to side  
one hand on the wheel  
the other changing songs on the iPod,  
adjusting the volume and heat controls  
while also readily available  
to answer the phone in my lap—  
I keep it on vibrate  
so I can feel you calling me.  
Another week ends, another week a drone,  
in trance of anticipation for the next time  
we can play family again.  
Our hectic parade,  
a procession of short visits,  
New York this weekend;  
Providence the next,  
as we continue our short visits  
to appease our hearts and our minds.  
This mutual philanthropy—  
an effort to compensate for lost time  
and those Mondays to Fridays  
where we long for days  
closer together  
and more mundane.

## City Squirrels

As a cab nearly runs over a squirrel  
in the street near Central Park,  
I notice all the clusters of leaves  
strategically placed in the tree branches  
with the diligence of survival.  
We too scurry around the city  
from place to place—  
Penn, maybe Grand Central,  
to the subway and through the streets  
to find a small Italian place on 57<sup>th</sup>.  
We take a cab to cheat time  
to our reservations before the show  
and pass a homeless man  
building his nest for the night.  
While we spoil ourselves,  
free to come and go  
from the island to the city—  
he rushes to find and collect  
leaves, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags,  
forced to create refuge from refuse  
while we talk over dinner  
about design places for our second home.  
Blocks away and hours earlier,  
the beats and bulls waved papers frenetically—  
some snatched, some crumbled, some fell to the floor—  
the mess of garbage created;  
for some, savings lost;  
for others, toilet paper gained.

## Night Train

It's not often that I ride the train  
into Manhattan by myself.  
Although the dulled blue and red seats,  
worn by time and its travelers,  
provide comfort,  
sinking with a familiar sound  
of air escaping through any holes  
or unstitched seams.  
I look around at the train's inhabitants—  
good thing we are all headed to the same city,  
for the running lights above  
take their turn to shine.  
The posters are run down like dated drapes  
from your great-grandmother's living room.  
This one here is for Mama Mia on Broadway,  
from two summers ago.  
The luggage racks are no more than twisted metal.  
The sways of the train take me side-to-side,  
shake me back to the sixth grade  
and the school bus which shook  
like a crackerjack box on wheels  
tossed along the road like the  
magazines, coffee cups, and flyers left behind  
on the floor of this train.  
And I will spend the rest of the ride  
trying to avoid the half eaten donut  
the man next to me has placed between us  
on the seat after pronouncing it "stale."  
A pen rolls to my feet.  
It doesn't write, it scratches.  
*Screech*, the train brakes  
and the yellow light above the door flashes  
as I hear the conductor's voice,  
"Penn Station."

### III.

#### Piece by Piece

Here we are in the failing nation  
where we are too proud to pay rent  
and not upper-middle enough to pay our way.  
So we mortgage our lives  
piece by insignificant piece:  
a car, a purse, clothing, and jewelry,  
a two hundred dollar wallet  
with not enough cash carried inside  
to purchase movie tickets, a tank of gas,  
a gallon of milk, a loaf of bread.  
Hope comes in rumors of a tax refund  
to purchase instead of paying down  
maxed out credit cards or  
the principal of your mortgage.  
Do what they tell you—  
it's good for the economy.  
Short sell your house or they'll foreclose.  
You can always file for bankruptcy  
and have a shot at it all over again  
in ten years time your coveted credit  
will bounce back like the market.  
At least that's what they tell us.

## What's Left

Took a drive around the neighborhood,  
I think it was Thursday.  
I found no more milk containers on stoops,  
no newspapers in driveways,  
but foundations of homes  
and a broken alabaster lion—  
fragments of Greenlawn Avenue  
a couple of streets away.

Every time I drive around  
a dozen more houses are gone.  
A year's time will pass  
and the rest will be bought out,  
bulldozed over,  
and left to decay and collect graffiti  
and idle brown-bag passersby—  
a neighborhood full of ruffians  
that drift around Winslow Park  
where kids used to ride their bikes  
and recreational leagues prized the fields  
as location for softball and soccer.

I suppose the Airport will take  
my street, my house,  
Jessica's, and Dustin's,  
and soon,  
the whole neighborhood.

Some would say  
it's probably for the better—  
despite the noise, the jet fuel pollutants,  
and increased traffic.  
But I've lived here longer than anywhere else—  
an eighth of a mile  
from that runway.



## Yard Debris Only

My hands rub against the bamboo rake,  
forming piles and blisters,  
while wind-chapped skin and  
a hangnail bitten too far down  
draw blood.

The smell of a dampened October afternoon  
averts me to childhood and being hit  
with a soccer ball in my venous chubby thigh.  
While the chilled breeze of early November  
reminds me to leave the window open  
and not wear socks to bed  
so I may enjoy the cold sheets.

I wonder about the green sweatshirt  
I used to wear as a young boy  
and why I chose to chew holes in the sleeves  
to stick my thumbs through.

Holes larger than one left by a rusty nail  
in just the right spot  
so it disables wear for occasions  
outside yard work.

I watch the leaves fall in peanut brittle colors  
slow motion to the lawn.

The crumbling of dried leaves  
under fast moving cars on Main Avenue  
remind me of how quickly the workweek will pass.  
And I will be here another weekend  
because Mr. Burnstein is too lazy a neighbor  
to care about the leaves being blown  
from his yard to mine.

## Neighbors

There was always a better chance of  
hearing an argument than seeing  
a light shine from the house  
across the street.

Oftentimes there were angry voices  
yelling about  
money,  
the car payments,  
the cesspool,  
the mortgage,  
the pitbull  
chewing something up,  
again.

It was always later in the day  
that I would see her—  
her car, rather—  
and the garage door opening  
and her silver car entering  
the darkness that possessed  
that house.

At various times of the day  
I'd see his white van,  
a mobile advertisement  
for Bill's Cleaning Company,  
parked in the drive,  
there in the morning  
and there at night.

I hope they went somewhere bright  
when they actually did leave;  
because for all the money I heard about,  
one of them should have seen some light.

## Sage Drive

A candle burns with its flicker and flame  
in my mother-in-law's suburban living room  
a little too close to a Raggedy Andy doll  
rested at the foot of an antique lamp  
complimented in color by its shade.

The dim room shades a polaroid,  
out of place and without frame,  
of the Virgin Mary's reflection  
in some glass office building in Florida,  
I am told.

A Boyd's Bear is there as well  
propped in a seated position—  
a thought of but not sought after collectible  
I am sure—

placed among knickknacks and nothings  
inside this cramped three-bed, two-bath  
with a finished basement on Sage Drive.

They park their cars against the grain here  
with no threat of a parking ticket, tow,  
or timed meter running out.

A phone rings, it's Diane,  
the neighborhood gossip queen,  
second marriage, stay-at-home mother of three,  
spreading rumors of a break in on Brierbrook Avenue,  
two streets away.

"Lock your doors," she says,  
"for the rest of the week anyhow."

## On Hedgerow Drive

I wonder if the birds came today.  
Filled their bath last night after work  
and the feeder by the kitchen window  
early this morning.  
I tend not to open the garage doors  
because it startles them.  
Though they leave gifts of color  
on my car when it's left in the driveway.  
The spring will come soon  
and I'll wake them on weekdays—  
stretching, chest forward, arms back,  
like the birds in the front garden.  
While I have the luxury to shower or bathe,  
they rely on me for fresh water.  
They test the water with their toes  
as clichéd cartoon humans do.  
I'm sure the birds were here today,  
although I didn't find them there  
by the blue and purple slate walkway  
or anywhere around this place  
that is not theirs nor quite my own.  
In thirty years time,  
the bank tells me this will all be mine.  
But I'd rather have no responsibility  
and come and go on a summer breeze  
with the knowledge  
that I can always stop down  
and test the water.

## House on Brightside Court

Oldest child, last one home,  
I locked the door,  
turned out the front light  
that brightens our three-step stoop  
and reaches and reveals  
the cracking concrete and decay  
of the driveway.

Little Alyssa wanted some water  
before bed,  
so I turned to the fridge—  
a week old, half-eaten rotisserie chicken,  
fat gelled over, better off in the freezer.  
There's plenty of ice when you're not here  
and I don't have to hear Mom bitch about  
you chewing it, the sound of your frustrations.  
I turned off the maker this morning, good.

I went out to dinner again  
'cause you weren't around  
to do whatever it is that you do  
since Mom works seventy hours.  
I bought sugar today—  
you know how she loves her coffee.  
I set the automatic brewer  
for quarter of five in the morning.  
I hope that's early enough for her  
to fill her cup  
before another twelve hour day  
to come home to TV and your snoring—  
morning comes quickly, sometimes four hours.  
She'll iron her scrubs and spray perfume  
to extinguish the decay  
that surrounds  
this household  
gone astray.

“I’m Catholic”

She had dyed black hair;  
black surrounded the white  
polka dots on her oversized  
vinyl purse.

Alone she stood, while others  
sat, leaned on, and knelt below  
the church pews.  
Her pale calf trumped her thin ankle  
as it disappeared into a silver dance flat  
leaving no clue as to what color her toenail  
polish was on Good Friday.

Supposedly devout male parishioners  
collected offerings—  
their grandchildren play basketball  
in CYO recreation.  
Members of the congregation softly placed  
coins in the velvet covered baskets;  
the more they give, the more they care.  
Not to be found out as cheapo or sinner,  
others offer the kind that folds.

Lines formed and I was told we were  
to go “venerate the crucifix,”  
and myself ignorant of where to kiss,  
in a hurry was humbled to kiss his feet.

Afterwards, I looked to find the girl in black—  
like me, younger, out of place,  
perhaps to joke about our cluelessness  
or maybe a vain inquiry on how many germs  
she thought were on that wooden whatchamacallit.

## Olneyville Square

He stands in the August heat,  
bearded with clothes and a heavy coat,  
transferring change from a coffee cup  
into his pants pocket.

Around his neck, a cardboard sign  
made from a pizza box  
and a nylon cord  
from a bundle of newspapers  
reads "I NEED CHANGE,"  
in black marker.

Earlier in the morning,  
I saw him reading the paper,  
sitting atop the stack from which it came,  
as I waited for the pharmacy to open.

I followed him curiously to the stationary aisle  
where I saw him shove a Sharpie into his pocket  
so quickly, as not to be seen,  
that it ripped its seam.

Hours later, he paces frantically  
looking through his pockets  
to quiet his grumbling stomach  
or the voices inside his head,  
only to find a hole.

## Sedation Dentistry

Take a Xanax,  
a couple of milligrams—  
There you are—  
it will help you  
relax.  
Fall  
while your eyelids  
flutter.  
I'll put you under.  
Personally,  
I like the nitrous effect:  
laugh, then sleep,  
while I poke and prod.  
My hands finding their way  
placing my implements aside.  
Drift fingertips  
up your skirt.  
Need a little Astroglide—  
Vaseline will smell too obvious,  
afterward.  
After all,  
this is for my pleasure  
at your expense.



Thursday, Post Road

A path cleared in the middle  
of a two-way street.  
Cars pulled over on each side,  
forced to follow suit and stop,  
I looked to the left and to the right.  
There were no children  
crossing with teacher,  
nor was there a pregnant woman  
with toddler at her side,  
not even a boy scout helping  
a geriatric struggling with groceries  
trying to cross.  
Just an obese lady  
riding a bike nearly in the middle  
of Post Road, listening to her iPod.  
I began to feel bad for the bike seat  
but then I heard the screeching siren  
of the fire truck  
that ran her over.

## Please and Thank You

I pretended not to make eye contact  
with either of you at the bar.  
It was nice to finally meet him face-to-face,  
isn't that what I'm supposed to say?  
You introduced us,  
but I was fine not saying hello.  
He and I had no genuine embrace,  
no friendly handshake, conversation,  
nor laughs, as if we were meant  
to be friends.  
But I knew his face and name already  
from dance pictures hanging near your bed  
in your dorm room—  
I felt he was watching me when I used to  
come on your bare breasts.  
I reminded him that I knew who he was  
when I kissed you on the cheek, goodbye.  
I shook his hand and another time it happened:  
I'm just some nice guy you knew from undergrad  
that he has conveniently never heard about.  
I'd almost rather that he knew  
that I fucked you  
five years ago.

## Bad Breath and Audacity

I saw a lunch aide from my elementary school  
at the local pharmacy the other night.  
We used to call her thunderthighs  
in the yard at recess.  
But that night, I was able to pass by her  
to get my toiletries.  
Surely I could've chosen another aisle.

She still has oversized glasses  
as uncool in '93 as they are now.  
Her body is seamless,  
having no defined hips, stomach,  
ass, nor breasts; just a protruding  
bulge of sedentary lifestyle.  
She wasn't as large as I recalled—  
it's been over a decade since  
I saw her last.

I was ahead of her in line as I  
realized there were some  
spearmints to the left of me.  
I stepped out of line.  
I'll admit I've called others out  
for doing so,  
But I stepped right back into line,  
still ahead of old thunderthighs.  
I bought my things and was on my way.

Out to the car now,  
I turn the key with my foot on gas  
and caught myself looking  
in the mirror,  
distracted.  
She stepped in front  
of my car.