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Wild Embrace

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WILD EMBRACE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Timothy Burton Hatch
June 2016

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Approved by:

Juan Delgado, First Reader

John Chad Sweeney, Second Reader

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ABSTRACT

WILD EMBRACE is a collection of poetry that explores the themes of abuse, survival, and fragility. The speaker of these poems, older and distanced from the abuse, asks what it means to be a survivor, and explores our obligation of compassion that, as human beings, we owe one another.

While much of the work in this collection is rooted in personal experience, it is not intended to be read as memoir or autobiography. Many of these poems may have begun as lived experience, but between memory, the transcription of memory, and their final form on the printed page, they have been run through a variety of embellishment, artistic license, and shifting narrative forms.

The poems in this collection attempt to capture a heightened emotional truth that can't be attained by mere reporting of fact. WILD EMBRACE sifts through the ashes of suffering and loss, and constructs a mythology as personal as it is collective.

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Badlands Literary Journal: “Pequot’s a Fruit”

Apeiron Review: “Multiverse”

The Vehicle: “Loathing Las Vegas”

East Jasmine Review: “Psychedelic Codeine Mobius Strip,” “driving”

MungBeing: “I Found Your Hair Ties,” “wild embrace”

Creepy Gnome #3: “The Bear”

DEDICATION

Above all, I dedicate this to my wife, Annette. This degree, all my education, all my accomplishments would only be “someday” without your hard work, patience, and support. Literally nothing without you.

To my MFA family, Bolin, Allyson, Nikki, and Alex. The last two years has been one of the best experiences of my life. I’ll never be ready to give up seeing you all on a weekly basis. Also, to the Magnificent Six: Rosie, Orlanda, Eva, Chance, Mouse, and Elisha. Nothing is the same without you. To my professors and mentors: Juan Delgado, Chad Sweeney, and Julie Paegle. The three of you gave me the key to the cell I’d been living in. Thank you. Professor or student, I’ve learned from all of you, and I will carry you with me the rest of my life (barring Alzheimer’s, of course, no guarantees).

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*"I don't need again to learn the bitter
lesson that everything I love is a flame
between two fingers."*

-Donna Hilbert

The written word has been my chosen medium of expression since I was a boy. I remember wanting to be a journalist before I knew the word "journalist." Clark Kent and Peter Parker both worked for newspapers. That had to play a huge role in my early desire to write. That was maybe seven, eight years old. By the time I was ten I'd completely turned my back on journalism. In those two or three years I continued to retreat more and more into the escapist hero fantasies I was reading, and I grew to realize that journalism belonged to the real world, which was made of beatings, verbal attacks, explosive tempers, secrets, lies, and the dysfunction that goes with all of it.

In the comics I read, Spider-Man beat up the bad guy. In the real world, the bad guy beat me, so the real world could go to hell. I still consider that to be the rational decision. Somewhere in the middle of all that, I realized there were people writing the stories I was reading and my small world exploded with possibility.

On Saturday mornings, I'd watch an episode of *Super Friends*, and then sit at the kitchen table with a pencil and notebook, creating worlds and characters to inhabit them. I'd do that for as many hours as I could get away with before my dad came in and kicked me out of the house for the day. My dad believed that kids were supposed to be outside as much as possible. Indoors was for school and sleeping. My dad didn't argue, he just hit, so I'd put on my shoes and go find my bike.

It's impossible to discuss myself or my early life without discussing the abuse my dad dealt out. He beat me, yes, but his real weapon was cruelty, both verbal and emotional. He was emotionally explosive. Laughing and joking one moment, deeply, viciously mean the next. He could destroy me in what seemed little more than an afterthought. Nothing I've just written illustrates his almost artistic application of cruelty as the story of the Happy / Sad Face Paddle.

Happy / Sad Face was a paddle my dad used to beat me with. It was only in my life for a brief period of time. My dad says my mom made him throw it out. My mom claims not to remember it. Whatever happened to it is irrelevant. I've carried it with me since before kindergarten, and I imagine it'll be with me when I die.

Happy / Sad Face was about the size of a ping pong paddle, not quite as round, definitely thicker, made of pine. A happy face was on one side of the paddle, a sad face on the other. I have hazy memories that they were drawn

with felt-tip markers, in bright, almost garish colors, like you'd see in a Saturday-morning cartoon.

My dad was ex-Navy. When he came home from work at the end of the day, all my toys had to be put away, and the entire house had to be "white-glove clean." I was four. My toys were rarely put away when he came home. Usually I was playing with them. If my toys weren't put away, this made the paddle sad.

You never wanted the paddle to be sad, because the only way to make it happy again was for it to beat you. Crying also made the paddle sad. So when my dad reached for the paddle, which hung on the wall by the fridge, I immediately began to cry, which only made the paddle sadder. Which only increased the likelihood of a beating.

Put an image in your head of a four year old, scared out of his mind, tears glistening as they run down his flushed, pink cheeks. Now imagine him trying to force a smile through the terror he's feeling. Imagine him desperately trying to convince one of the people who's supposed to love and protect him the most that he's not actually terrified, because it's the only hope he has of making the paddle happier.

Cruelty. And withdrawal into the sci-fi & fantasy landscapes of my childhood. I was in my early twenties when I made my first attempts at serious writing, and as much as I loved the escapist literature I was reading, I found myself repulsed by it when I wrote it. I'm sure there are several chapters I could

write about the complicated psychology behind that, but I think the short version is that I didn't want to ruin my escape by understanding it. I still don't.

My earliest (successful) writing was mostly humorous op-ed style pieces written for local 'zines, and eventually web sites. I'd developed a sharp, occasionally mean, wit as a way of combatting my father. As a younger person, I could try to make him laugh in the hopes of displacing his anger. As an adult, I could fire insults back at him and go home to my apartment. Every attempt at artistic expression, however, would go unseen. The vulnerability of putting something real into the world and asking people what they thought was more than I could deal with.

That changed, years later, when I attended my first poetry reading and open mic in Pfau Library, at CSUSB. There I saw more than a dozen people stand at the podium in that room and read their poetry into a microphone. Some of the poetry was great, some really wasn't, but the *entire* audience cheered, supported, and encouraged the people at the podium who were taking risks. I felt everything change that night and decided to write a poem and read it at that podium.

My earliest attempts at poetry felt like stumbling around in the dark. The first poem I was genuinely proud of was called "The Bear." It's about a young boy being chased by a bear, who we quickly learn is actually the boy's father:

against the table, a coat of forest

green, already peeling, names

carved into it. I can smell
the Coors and Camels. He laughs
and I do too. I will

survive this. He leaps
across the table clawing
for me. His enormous body
blackens the sun.

This was an important poem for me, for a few reasons. First, it was a memory poem. The vast majority of my most successful poems are based (or sometimes just begin) in memory. This is one of the earliest memories I have. I was camping with my parents, my dad had been drinking, and became furious with me for reasons I can no longer recall. This was the first time I wrote a poem that felt like it had emotional honesty.

The poem ends as my father leaps for me, his body blacking out the sun. This poem is based on a memory, but the end is clearly dramatic writing. The memory actually ends there, I can't remember the beating that followed, but the final image is clearly there for dramatic effect. I struggled with this for a long time. I was worried about the truthfulness of what I was trying to capture. I

wondered what my obligation to the absolute truth was when I was writing about actual people.

Ultimately I decided that the emotional honesty I felt the poem conveyed was more important than any “historical accuracy” I wanted to be faithful to. My memories are sacred, my stories are not. My memories are who I am. That should be left alone. My stories, on the other hand, can be revised, hacked apart, added to, and molded into whatever shape that best serves them. If I’m going to take myself seriously as a writer, I have to divorce my ego from the work. So long as I remain as respectful as possible to the privacy of others, and avoid outright libel, anything that makes the story better, poem or prose, is the right decision.

There’s some grey area there for sure. How can there not be when I write of my father’s abusive behavior? My only answer is that I have to be as sure as I can be, when writing about his behavior, that I’m writing about me and not him. That distinction might seem unimportant, but it isn’t. One of those things is artistic self-expression, and one of them is gossip.

In writing about my own experience, I’m not saying anything the world hasn’t already seen. What’s important about my poetry...all poetry, really, is that it says, “Me too,” to anyone willing to listen. A few years back, I read an essay titled “The New Surrealism,” by Paul Zweig, and I ran into one of those sentences that changes how you see things. He was talking about French surrealist, André Breton and his use of automatic writing, which “gave rise to a series of

emphases, all of which elevated the 'magic' of unreason. Instead of the sentence, the purest element of language became the image," (Zweig).

Think back to the image of the four-year-old boy, trying to force a smile through tears and the terror of an inevitable beating. This immediately conveys cruelty, abuse, psychological torture, emotional scarring, and residual trauma one can only guess at. All with that one image. The "purest element of language" is the image. I can't think of a more perfect and simple truth for creative writing.

Suddenly I was drawing a straight line from poetry all the way back to 40,000-year-old cave paintings. I spent so many years of my life thinking poetry was effete, ivory-tower blather, that droned on and on about flowers. I was so wrong. Poetry is *primal*, it belongs on the walls of our caves, each poem, in some small way, defining the time and place in which the poet lives. Each one, a cave painting, saying, "I was here. I saw. I struggled. I lived."

Of course, my compulsion to say, "I lived," mostly comes from my certainty that I'm going to die. I'm haunted by death. Exhausted with it. 2016 was 12 days old, when my friend Gregory died. It's February 22, and small amounts of cancer have been found in another good friend and in my mother. My mother-in-law had surgery three days ago to remove the cancer they found in her, late last year. Twenty years ago, I'd have wondered what ancient gods I'd offended. As a middle-aged man, I know the truth of the situation: This is life. This is what it looks like.

If there's one word I had to stick with to describe life it would be "fragile."
Young, old, good health or bad, our lives are spider webs in a heavy wind. More than just biology, everything is fragile. Our minds are fragile. Almost all of us are one bad month away from sleeping in alleys. Social order is fragile, the political climate is fragile, the economy is fragile. Religious freedom, personal liberty, family dynamics, workplace environments: all fragile. Our hearts are fragile.

We have to take care of each other. Whether you believe in intelligent design or cosmic happenstance, as long as we're breathing the same air, we have to at least try. If there's a theme that runs throughout my poetry, it's that.

This started to become clear to me when I heard Donna Hilbert read her poem, "Deshacer." This poem addresses the grief she feels at the loss of her husband, how it has become a part of her everyday life, and how even though she's surviving through it, she still hasn't settled into it:

I won't repeat the dream
in which you leave me.
Let's just say I know the world,
how it alters in an instant,
that I awaken sick
in remorse and dread.
I can't face again the dinners
with other lonely women,

then late-night TV
until the dog and I can bear
to go to bed.

I don't need again to learn
the bitter lesson
that everything I love
is a flame between two fingers. (Hilbert)

Those last two lines will stay with me the rest of my life. I find those fingers on either side of the flame every bit as threatening as my father's hand, around the grip of the paddle. That image captures, so well, how precious the people in my life are to me, how desperately I want to hang on to them, how terrified I am of losing them, of being alone.

There's a very specific moment, this almost spiritual thing that happens, when I'm reading a great poem. I can feel it change me, change how I think, and I know before I'm done reading it, it'll stay with me forever. The first time that happened, I was reading a poem called "The Glass," by Sharon Olds. It's a poem about her father, who is in the hospital, dying. Reading it was almost painful, I honestly don't want to read it again, but it won't leave my memory:

the glass of mucus that stood on the table
next to my father all weekend. The cancer
is growing fast in his throat now,
and as it grows it sends out pus like the
sun sending out flares, those pouring
tongues. So my father has to gargle, hack,
spit a mouth full of thick stuff
into the glass every ten minutes or so,
scraping the rim up his lower lip to
get the last bit off his skin. (Olds)

This is the kind of writing I aspire to. Book sales be damned, if I'm able to leave my words permanently burnt in the back of someone's mind, I'll consider myself a success. Olds tends to focus on the physical body in her poetry, which gives her poetry tones of humanism and emotional truth. In "The Glass," she paints both a haunting picture of the treachery of our own bodies, and a beautiful picture of a daughter's love.

This emotional honesty is something I strive for with a poem from my manuscript titled "Dad Survives His Third Open-Heart Surgery." In this poem I'm trying, like Olds, to honestly describe the physical, post-surgery brutality endured by my father, "...plastic bladders. The two largest spill \ out of your bed, ending in clear \ specimen containers, slow-drip collections \ of blood and piss."

At the same time, I wanted to be sure not to get too detailed with the physical description. Everyone knows hospitals are unpleasant, they don't need that spelled out for them. Also, I'm writing about my complicated relationship with my father, and the truth of the event that inspired me to write this poem, is that my father was in a position of complete vulnerability. Because of that, I feel an obligation to write as honestly as possible without going for the easy shock value of what he looked like, lying in his hospital bed, with a tube down his throat.

So rather than focus too much on the physicality here, I turn inward, to myself and my not-always-pleasant thoughts, in order to capture the emotional truth of this moment:

If you'd died under the knife, things
would be so easy. You'd be
the father who could never live
down his mistakes. I'd be the son
who didn't learn how to forgive
in time, and everyone would understand
the burden of my guilt. I could
be brave in the face of grief. Live
my life. It would be an easy

easy lie.

This confession gives the reader a glimpse of the complicated relationship between the father and son in this poem, and (hopefully) delivers a similar emotional truth as the “glass of mucus” in Sharon Olds’ poem, or the “flame between two fingers” in Donna Hilbert’s “Deshacer.” I think it definitely works on some level, but is my poem as successful in this as theirs? Will it stay with someone the way their poems stay with me? I have no idea.

I believe it’s my job, as a poet, to define the time and place in which I’m writing. Obviously that’s a huge, impossible task, so maybe it’s better to say I believe that’s the job of *all* writers. I believe we work together, instinctively, without necessarily knowing it, to accomplish this. If you take a broad sample from any creative output, any media, any genre, and organize it by decade, you can see the values (sometimes implicitly, sometimes just trace elements) of the time and place in which that work was produced. And when work from different decades is examined side by side, you can see those values shift in ways both great and small.

Nina Simone said something very similar to this in an old interview, “An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians...I don’t think you have a choice. How can you be an artist and NOT reflect the times?” (Simone). Even if my role in that is nothing more than telling a few willing listeners who I am and describing to them

the world as I see it, my poetry exists in conversation with other poets, not only of my time and place, but whose work touches on similar, or even identical themes.

I wrote a poem called “Cold, Dead, Tiny Little Hands” in response to the multitude of gun violence in our country, specifically school shootings such as the one at Sandy Hook Elementary, in Newtown, Connecticut. More than a year has passed since writing it and while I stand by everything it says, I consider it a failure. The inspiration for the poem came from wondering what all the children who’ve pointlessly died in school shootings would look like if we just threw all their bodies in one huge pile. It’s a horrible thought, but I’ll defend it as no more horrible than all the individual graves. Thankfully, it’s short:

We exist in darkness
a permanent shadow of children
piled miles high, thousands
more every year, leaving
the atmosphere, as if to say,

We hate it here. At the base,
the weight of the children
collapsing on top of each other
pressing them, separating
mealy solids

from desiccated oil.

For miles around, the free air
no longer breathable.

First off, I think the greatest shortcoming here is the overly preachy tone. I tried to diffuse that a little bit by the use of “we” in the first line, but I don’t think it was enough. Also, if speaking for other people is arrogant, speaking (*We hate it here*) for dead people you’ve never met is probably the definition of hubris.

Mostly I wanted to include this poem to underscore Nina Simone’s point of not having a choice in reflecting the times. I wrote this poem because I felt the need to say something about the continuing atrocity of children dying in school and, in the act of writing it, provided myself a bit of free therapy. Ultimately, that might be the only good this particular poem does and I’m fine with that. Not everything I write needs an audience.

Also, however, I wanted to use this poem to point out that I struggle with the difference between shining a light on an existing problem and exploiting it. Earlier I wrote that I wanted to avoid the shock value of what my father looked like lying in his hospital bed. I wanted to stay away from that because I wanted to take care not to exploit my father or his situation. And where I succeeded in not doing so with that poem, I utterly failed with this poem. The lines, “pressing

them, separating \ mealy solids \ from desiccated oil,” is clearly intended to upset people and force an emotional response.

Of course, an emotional response is what I’m aiming for with all of my writing, but there’s an honest approach and a lazy approach, and how you get there matters. In the end, I think the only successful part of this poem is the title, which is an obvious play on the NRA slogan, “I’ll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hand.” It’s interesting how often hand imagery occurs in my poetry, and so frequently in a threatening context. In this case, the threat is the implication of a hand holding a gun, but everything seems to point back to my father’s hand, holding that paddle. Ultimately, I chose not to include this poem in my manuscript because the title is the only thing about it that works.

There’s an interview with Andrew Hudgins titled “Halfway to Symbol,” in the May, 2013 issue of *The Writer’s Chronicle*, that I keep going back to. In it he says, “But my bedrock sense is that poetry, or at least my poetry, should be just what you say – clear and musical. And I’m strongly drawn to narrative. Those are the things I love most,” (McFadyen-Ketchum 41). From my earliest attempts at poetry, I consciously tried to avoid writing poetry so bogged down in symbolism and / or hidden meaning that it could mean anything. I will never understand the point of intentionally-vague communication. If the meaning of my words is lost in the art of my words, I’ve failed as a poet.

Everything I wrote for the first year was free verse. I imagine that’s true for a lot of beginning poets. Free verse, for me, was a permission slip to focus

on artistic use of language; playing with line breaks, learning how to write a decent simile, things like that.

At some point, though, I think it's important to explore form. If nothing else, you have to have a working understanding of structure before you can deconstruct or subvert it. I eventually began to see that giving my poetry a meter wasn't a restriction. Sometimes, through imposing a metrical beat, I found I might see the work in ways that was invisible to me when I was breaking lines for other reasons. Sometimes the work would take a different direction as a result.

That said, I think my most successful poems are the poems where the content dictates the form. Denise Levertov discusses this in her essay, "Some Notes on Organic Form." In her essay she states:

In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds, acting together with the measure, are a kind of extended onomatopoeia—i.e., they imitate not the sounds of an experience (which may well be soundless, or to which sounds contribute only incidentally), but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture.

(Levertov)

There's a poem in my manuscript called "Breathe Him Close," which is written in a form intended to capture my perception of the experience of holding

my friend's newborn son. The anxiety being expressed in the poem centers around the difference in size between my hand, huge by adult standards, and the hand of a baby, only a few weeks old:

He reaches for something
to hold. I give him
my finger. His fingers
are too small to close
around it, and he yawns
and they stretch, and I
extend my fingers, too
keeping his tips
on mine.

I'm not sure I can explain the psychology of the short lines other than to say they "feel right." This is a moment of heightened perception, intensely focusing on the two sets of fingers. And even though the short lines create a faster read, they force (hopefully) the reader to slow down a bit and really pay attention to what's happening. There's very little action here, an adult hand touching a child's hand, but the size comparison ("my finger. His fingers") creates its own relevance, which is so often how the perception of experience works.

And as the poem continues, the marveling at the difference in size gives way to terror at the revelation of how easy it would be to harm the baby:

He pushes
his four fingers, each one
shorter than my fingerprint,
into my index, and they bend
backward, just a bit,
and like desert
flowers under a storm
of horses
they could bend a little more.

And again, the presence of a threatening hand reveals itself in one of my poems. This time, of course, the threat is coming entirely from my hand, which underscores an anxiety I feel every time I consider becoming a parent myself.

When I first began writing about my own experience, I found it extremely difficult. I decided to write about a fictional me to get past this, and it was incredibly liberating. After the first few poems, the fictional me started to resemble actual me less and less. He'd married much younger than I, he had a daughter with his wife, the wife was then lost to cancer, and on and on. I think on

a subconscious level, I was putting myself through horrible scenarios to see how I'd survive them.

Shortly after starting the MFA program, I found I no longer had the same trouble writing about my own experience, and I stepped away from that fictional me. Unfortunately, when I went back to look at that older poetry, it now felt mostly disingenuous. I chose to completely revise the few poems that felt like they had potential, writing out as much of the fictional element as possible.

The poem that went through the most changes is called "Endless Stories," though it's now been revised so many times that title no longer feels right. In fact, the first draft of this poem was (lazily) titled "Laura Makes Bacon." "Laura" is the fictional daughter I've since written out. For a long time, the poem's primary tension came from the speaker struggling to be a good father to his child, while they take care of his abusive father, who is now old and dying:

She takes the skillet off the heat and turns around, staring up at me. "Is grandpa dying?"

These are the moments I hate. She's the moon in my sky, but goddammit, I hate her questions, sometimes. No one ever told me how to deal with this.

“I think so. I’m really worried he is.” I want to keep talking, to explain things to her ‘til I’m blue in the face, to help her understand what’s going on, but my voice breaks and I have to stop.

She takes my hand in both of hers and says, “It’s okay, Daddy, I’ll help you.”

And I look at her – all eight years of her – and I realize she’s got me.

While it’s interesting to note that the child in this poem takes her father’s hand as part of a reassuring, almost healing action, that’s about the only interesting thing happening there. Reading it now just makes me cringe. The first version of this was supposed to be a prose poem, though it honestly just looks like prose to me. Eventually, I broke it into lines:

She looks up at me. “Is grandpa dying?”

No one ever taught me how to deal with this.

“I think so. I’m worried he is.”

I want to keep talking
to explain things
until the words scour away
the cancer
but this fucking house is swimming
in words, literally written on the walls
and my voice dies.
She walks over to the sink.

“Come on, pops. I wash – you dry.”

The line breaks are pretty terrible, but it's been cleaned up into something less embarrassing. Eventually, I realized the main problem with this poem was that it had strayed miles away from the emotional tone I was shooting for in the first place. Also, there's too much drama. Almost melodrama. It's hard to take seriously.

So, when I last set out to revise this, I took two passes through. The first was to remove anything that didn't feel authentic to my own history. This meant taking lines like, “I walk through the family room where he held me \ to the wall, forearm to throat, \ past the living room where, on Christmas Day, \ he told me how sad I made my mother,” and turning them into something that felt more truthful:

I walk into
the family room, the darkest room
in the house. The remains of a marlin
he caught in Mexico, the horns
of a giant steer, a boar's skull, hang
on dark, wood-panel walls. We
stood together here, in 1980,
when he promised me he'd stop
drinking. I walk out, past the living

room, where Spode bone china
plates, untouched by food, are housed
in Victorian cherry wood cabinets. I was
reading Daredevil comics on the floral
print couch, Christmas morning, 1988
when he came in and told me *real men
show appreciation for their mothers
on Christmas.*

The rooms have now been given a little life, a little history, and the drama
has quieted down a bit (and it's much closer to the mark as a result). The next

step was the big decision about what to do with the daughter. I decided she was only in the poem in the first place because she represented the anxiety I was feeling, and continue to feel, at the prospect of becoming a parent. The idea that I might continue the cycle I've had to live through terrifies me. It became clear that in order to paint a more honest picture of that anxiety, I needed to speak more directly to it:

For a long time, I believed
all my pain began right
here, twenty years before
I was born. But all that pain
isn't even mine, it began
in the house my grandfather grew up in
or the house his grandfather
grew up in, and I wonder how far

back the houses go. How many
more generations of broken men raising
broken men can a family claim? I stub my cigarette
on faded bricks and head back in.

And that, finally, feels much more authentic to who I am, to what I'm trying to communicate with my poetry, and so this version of the poem made it into my manuscript.

I've done my best to let my poetry remain as close to the truth as possible, but there's a point where I have to do what best services the poem. There's a world of difference between telling a story that lacks authenticity, and creating a myth from truth. The authenticity I strive for in my writing is less concerned with various levels of reality / accuracy, and more concerned with the emotional pitch of the story I'm trying to convey. To put it another way, while my poetry is only *partially* faithful to my actual experience and perception, it aims to be *completely* faithful to my emotional experience and perception.

One of the darkest poems from my manuscript, "Concerto," attempts to capture the severity of the physical and emotional abuse I endured as a kid. The actual experience was my dad poking me in the chest, calling me an idiot (and worse), and then breaking his finger. On my chest. When I went to shower that night I saw myself in the mirror and my chest was covered with literally dozens of fingertip-sized bruises.

When thinking back on that, as a poet, I remembered the dark bruises on my pale skin, and got the image in my head of musical notes on sheet music. I then thought of my dad's finger coming down (another threatening hand image) and saw a conductor, and from there, the title just appeared (which *never* happens to me), and I began writing:

Deep, sharp pain in my chest pulls
my eyes up to his lunatic glare, right
hand raised, index finger extended.

...

Like a conductor's baton. He brings it down.

Stupid.

His finger stabs my chest so hard
I wonder if he's drawn blood.

Fucking.

Another stab digs in me
up to the first knuckle.

Loser.

I've never hurt like this.

Abuse is a theme I keep returning to with my writing. Not just child abuse, but the variety of abuses that abusers tend to inflict on others. In the poem, "Christmas Morning," also included in my manuscript, I show the verbal abuse my dad casually passes out to whoever happens to be in the room with him, "We

have thirty seconds of quiet and coffee // before Dad tells Annette her leopard-print heels look / like a prostitute's."

In my poem, "Hilltop Sunset (Father's Day, 1985)," I attempt to show the lasting psychological damage inflicted on abused children. The lines "A pill bug, exhausted / with conflict, curls away from // the dinner light clawing through / windows below," attempt to show how even something as mundane as a lit kitchen window at sunset can appear menacing to a child who lives in an unstable home.

Returning to "Concerto," the intention was to show the severity of the abuse, but as I continued writing, I wanted again, to show the unknown consequences of abuse. The point of the poem was to show the brutal reality of how people can mistreat each other. As I came to the end of the poem, I had similar intentions as I did with "Hilltop Sunset."

I wanted to end with an intentionally upsetting image that would show how abused children internalize the hatred and self-loathing abusive parents reinforce in them.

I thought of the "musical notes" left on my chest by my father, and I realized that sheet music is made up of musical notes written on staff lines, and I wrote the following:

In the bathroom, I stand
shirtless under the humiliating glare

of the fluorescent, and I count 37
fingertip reminders that I'm stupid
and worthless. I take the blade out
of my father's safety razor and lightly
drag it across my chest, slicing
staff lines for my father's notes.

I stand back and look at myself: Bloody
sheet music for a bastard's concerto.

I was never a cutter. I've learned plenty of self-destructive habits over the years, but cutting isn't one of them. But the image is powerful. Note that the damage inflicted in the beginning of the poem came entirely from the father's hand, and by the poem's end, the son's hand has inherited the same, violent tendency. As I continued to think about it, I began to feel that it was too important to leave out. Unlike the central image I used in "Cold, Dead, Tiny Little Hands," I don't feel that this image (a fictional image of myself) is exploitative in any way. Emotionally, it rings true.

The other theme I keep returning to is that of loss. I've written several poems about the loss of my friend John. In "Helping John Piss," I wrote about the pain of being with him through his final days, "I see more / of your naked body than I ever wanted to. // Below the knee, your right leg is a map / of

waterways: inlets and estuaries / of varicose veins. Your left foot, ash- / black and dangling, just fails to reach the ground.” The loss I’m writing of is his loss of adult independence, the loss of his ability to do something as basic as standing and urinating. I’m also writing of the loss of our friendship as equals. With the loss of his ability to physically move through his day unassisted, he now relies on me, and others, “I bring you upright and help you these last painful inches.”

Aside from the loss, part of what I wanted to explore in this poem was the gift I was given in being able to take care of a friend. This should not be taken to mean that it was a good experience, but it was an opportunity to engage with a person in a way I never had before. There’s an unseen, but very-real barrier, in this country, between men who are friends with each other. We shake hands, maybe we hug, depending on whatever variables, but these moments of physical contact are brief.

While helping John to stand in the emergency room, we were forced into extended physical contact with one another, “You begin to fall backward but my right / arm hooks under yours as my left catches / your back. Your ancient skin, a purple and brown / archipelago of bruises and liver spots, smooth / so different from your calloused handshake.” This contemplation of another man’s body was unique for me. I’ve never held another man that way. Truthfully I hope not to have to do it again, but the gift of this experience is that I know I can. I know I can be there for someone I love in a moment of need and that I won’t leave him, so I can find someone else to help.

The gift I was given is the destruction of that unseen barrier, which I feel happens in the poem, as John begins, finally, to urinate, “Your hands fumble under your gown and our eyes / lock in to each other, in silent agreement.” Several people have asked what that agreement is and why I don’t explain it. The agreement is that, as friends, John and I can do this. I can help him stand so he can spend the little strength he has, emptying his bladder. This is something we can get through and still be friends, dignity still intact. I don’t explain this in the poem because it would ruin the moment, dispelling the tension that’s been built up to that point.

But also, I don’t explain it because I’m not the only person to have gone through something like this. And to explain this moment to someone who doesn’t need it explained, would ruin more than just the moment, it would ruin the poem. Not everyone will come to my poetry with the same life experience, and it’s perfectly acceptable that not everyone will read those lines and have the same understanding of what’s happening. In fact, it might be better that they don’t. It might allow them to read the poem again, years later, and have an entirely different experience.

“Across the Room,” also included in my manuscript, is a poem I wrote about finally allowing myself to grieve the loss of my friend, several weeks after his death. I’d refused to allow myself to mourn, for several reasons, and my body and brain responded with a sort of “perfect storm” of stress, severe acid reflux, indigestion, and an anxiety attack that landed me in the same emergency room

as the previous poem. There was a child crying for his mother on the other side of the ER and when I realized what was happening, I joined him, “Three weeks gone / and I haven’t given you a tear. // I curl into a sideways prayer / on the gurney. Across the room / the boy wails for his mother.”

More recently I wrote a poem called “Make Them Dance.” It begins with the viewing of John’s body. In its absence, I saw his soul. Who he was, everything that mattered about him, didn’t dwell within his physical body, “you, this empty thing / in front of me, an abandoned / Cadillac, left to rust...” The poem quickly turns into a meditation of how much I miss him, which in turn becomes a celebration of the gift he was to those who knew him:

in a long-forgotten wheat field I
want to see your face
again, see the smile that says

yeah, this is happening as you
play slide guitar with a burning
candle in a room of screaming

women, the smell of possibility
everywhere

I want to watch you raise the dead

again, with a pick and six
strings, make them dance, John
feral things, make them

sing a three-part harmony with God, sing
a rage of life
sing a story into being, sing of life...

One of the most fascinating things (if I'm allowed to be fascinated by my own poetry) is that every instance of hand imagery, throughout all the John poems happens in a positive context. John's hands fumble under his hospital gown as he is finally able to relieve himself. The speaker's hands come together in a prayer as he lies on the gurney, weeks after John's passing. And finally, John's hands, painted in an almost supernatural light, make people dance and sing as he plays the guitar. Unlike almost every other instance in my manuscript, the hands in these poems are restorative, healing images.

As I've already stated, the dominant theme throughout my manuscript, whether I'm writing about abuse, loss, or love, is fragility. I feel this understanding of fragility is something that comes to most of us as we age. I certainly hope so.

I first came to CSUSB four years ago, to finish my undergrad degree. I was in my early forties then. Now, as I finish my MFA, I can see fifty barreling down at me, not even trying to be sneaky about it. Four years, and I feel like I've only cleared my throat. It's a strange thing to switch gears so late in life. Some of my closest friends are grandparents already, and here I am, about to put on a cap and gown, and shout, "Look out, world."

When my life is over, I hope the people who know me can point to a shelf of books and say, "Look what he did." Given the harsh realities of time and the economy, it's entirely possible that shelf will only be a stack, no taller than a salt shaker. These things are beyond my control, and have nothing to do with why I write. I believe a written poem is its own reward. Sometimes someone wants to publish it, sometimes you even win a prize, but the reward for the work, is the completion of the work. The benefit is the community you get to be a part of.

In five years' time I hope to have transitioned from my current job to teaching at a community college or university. I hope to be applying for a tenure-track position, or possibly already working in one. That would be wonderful. But whatever I'm doing to pay my bills, I'll be writing poetry, and I'll be engaged in the community of artists and activists I've been so lucky to get to know. I'll be working in outreach programs, teaching workshops, applying for fellowships and grants, and submitting my work to journals and publishers.

In five years' time, my wife and I will be foster parents. I'll be a father, and I have no idea what that's going to look like, but I know that when our child looks

at me, instead of a paddle, I'll be holding a pen. Or better yet, a paintbrush. Or maybe he'll be holding the paintbrush, and I'll be teaching him to paint on the walls of his cave.

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APPENDIX
WILD EMBRACE