

## **UC Irvine**

### **UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

Poems

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xt607qb>

**Author**

MAURER, JAMES NICK

**Publication Date**

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

*Poems*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the  
degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in English

by  
James N. Maurer

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Michael Ryan, Chair  
Professor Amy Gerstler  
Professor Chris Davidson

2018



## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vi
SONG	5
LOSS OF THE CREATURE	6
PUNCTUM	7
FOR ELAINE	8
A MARKET IDENTITY	9
THE HOUSE PAINTERS	10
A JOKE THAT NEVER ENDS	11
HE ACTUALLY STABBED A MAN	12
TRAINING MANUAL	13
THE PROBLEMATIC MAN	14
THE MUSEUM OF PAIN	15
THIS IS THE STORY	16
THE CONTROVERSIAL SCIENTIST	17
THE GOOD MEDICINE	18
ETERNAL POEM	19
LANDSCAPE AT THE GETTY	20
ONE AND THREE CHAIRS	21
VIEW OF TOLEDO	22
SUMMER PARTY	23
NEW SWIMSUIT	24
LAST LIGHT	25
UNTITLED (BLACK ON GRAY)	26
AFTER THE RAISING OF LAZARUS (AFTER REMBRANDT)	27
THE DEAD CHRIST	28
PRE-EXISTING CONDITION	29
I LOVE THE WHOLE WORLD	30

# ABSTRACT

*Poems*

By

James N. Maurer

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Michael Ryan Chair

This manuscript is a collection of poems written during the past three years; having undergone extensive revision, they will serve as the foundation for a full-length collection.

## SONG

The palm at the end of the mind, the mind at the end of the song, the song at the end of a moan, the moan driven into a friend, the friend that ends in the end, the end that begins in a hand, the hand that begins with a palm, the frond that begins to fray the end of the mind slips away...

## LOSS OF THE CREATURE

Where did the creature go, slinking down the canyon like an ancient disappointment? Why did it slide into the slime bronze river? Why did it die in the mouth of another creature's creature? Churning in the copper belly of an unbelieving compendium of names? Where will it end up, drifting toward the sticky insect clambake? The river goes on and on split by misremembered rocks and unrationed banks. In the liquid moon is a feeling overworn, then catastrophic, like a cactus thirsting, splitting. Like a cryptic hazard or green blizzard. Like blame or worm. Like the flippant lure of fishing creatureless. Like anyone, anywhere.

## PUNCTUM

Just look at that infant diaper at the base of this tree with the red bottlebrush all the birds love to eat. The birds wake up unable to swallow their small screams like the backup beeper at the jobsite across the street. In the book on photography, innocent means one who does not harm. The book on looking says the photograph is an agent of pain, freezing life into what it's not. Each gaze is a desire to possess or be possessed. There is no book on innocence. Out here on the lawn the sun is behind a cloud. Where have you been all my life all my friends? I don't have enough pictures of you. I am looking for a camera that will capture the facts. All these ghosts.



## FOR ELAINE

Do plants feel pain? I want to ask the retired science professor whose kitchen floors I've just ripped up. In her T.V. room, there are some fossils in cases and house plants propped up like patients or hung from the ceiling. She's taught physiology for thirty-five years, that branch of science that seeks to understand what keeps the body alive, functioning. Her home, a private arboretum, is hedged in from the street. All morning she's been gardening, moving around like one in her prime though in her late seventies. She's kind, active, cultivated: on the house surround system are concertos and sonatas. I'm suspicious of classical, having seen it sinisterly used in those cartoons—the soothing ordered sounds dissonant with impending violence. A rhapsody then exploding bright red stick of TNT or a Prelude silenced by Elmer Fudd's shotgun pump. But isn't this the classic way to listen to classical? in a house full of windows and crown moulding? Stoneware, china, pottery, pathos, ficus, figleaf, and spathiphyllum. For a moment I feel green, then heaving in the tumbled stone I'm sweating again, lifting up the cracked tile, hacking with a chisel and pointer at shards stuck to the cement backer, then pulling up the fasteners from the wood turned black by water. Her subfloor, though well-worn, is probably workable. As I'm vacuuming up, the dust rattles across residual mastic shadows, I see in the doorframe her eyes, waiting to speak. Her paper flesh bundled into slick dark waders and a white floral blouse, she says, I'm going into the koi pond, now. Will you check on me if I'm not back in fifteen minutes? And if I'm drowning, call 911? I laugh and say, sure, and we both keep working.

## A MARKET IDENTITY

There was this little bug in my soda. Weak nugget ice grazing the white styrofoam cup, straw scraping the straw chute like a flute, mind drifting out the window trying to imagine what the next batch of superheros will look like. The soft drink is an instrument of *carpe diem*. Their anticipation of our anticipation makes our anticipation their anticipation. No matter how glam or thrash, the end isn't here. My friend you wouldn't go to the superstore with me and I admire that but I was hungry and I'm cheap. This bug wasn't really in my soda. It was on the lid near the plastic hive marked *DIET*. Like a small bow untied, alive.

## THE HOUSE PAINTERS

He starts painting intent on using  
one thousand gallons of gray  
house paint. It's taking years. She sits  
on the bed alone, drawing in the evenings.  
He thinks she could be the model but  
she's melting. She says, I'm not happy  
about the not knowing. Is he painting her?  
Each day it isn't enough so he keeps going.  
Something needs those cans empty.  
I sort-of hate this painting, she says. Me too, he says.  
More years pass. He dips himself into the paint.  
She dips, too. They hold each other  
like paintbrushes loaded with revision.

## A JOKE THAT NEVER ENDS

He loves the surface but the surface is long  
You can be right but wrong in the long run  
Some say that rain on the pavement is a song  
She says that shade is the future of the sun

We lie on concrete against the cushion of stars  
They shoot like slashes in the curtain of dark  
No one will answer the martian in us on Mars  
Knocking and knocking and no sign of a spark

## HE ACTUALLY STABBED A MAN

He'd been nobody's sweetheart in ages, never been to a beautiful ski town, never learned to Slalom or Super G. He grew up in a zero traffic light town where they filmed *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* without the standard studio shrapnel. He saw the movie *Benji* and he saw the movie *Die Hard*. He lost a finger in county. He lost some hearing at the *Whiskey*, some friends to Hesperia. He sprang up like creeping thistle through the slabs of pavement. He was born second to last of several. He was first to lose a job. We used to live together. He lives in a field now. And he actually stabbed a man in the head with an ice pick and the man lived. They both continue to live.

## TRAINING MANUAL

Thrushes are a species of bird  
We love that and that is how we feel  
Our company is a sub-company  
You can't sugarcoat the facts  
In deforested forests listening for birds

At the completion of this module you will be able to:  
Care about coastlines  
Make contact in a state of crisis  
Be visible, predictable, and prepared  
Describe a single object or scene

Please review the following before beginning your first simulation:  
Melisma is the singing of single syllables  
As if to scramble or suspend the meaning  
Saline water composes much of our hydrosphere  
Thrush songs are considered half-haunting  
And may cause pain when swallowing

Imagine you're night diving in the sea  
A door is left open on a sunken ship  
Things swim through that once walked that once swam  
This is clear, descriptive, and thoughtful because  
We may have been whales before all this  
We could be more than this

## THE PROBLEMATIC MAN

Recognizing that his very existence was problematic, the problematic man became resigned to calling attention to this problem anytime he was in the company of others. Unfortunately, this was a primary part of the problem: that each time he explained the problem of his own existence, he diminished the existence of others by taking up their time and attention. He grew into the habit of always mentioning it before sharing his opinion on something. I know this is problematic, coming from me, he would start, and I know my calling attention to this problematized state of affairs changes nothing, in fact, it may be implicitly reinforcing the status quo where problematic people take up everyone's time with their problems, but I feel I need to mention it before I tell you who my favorite comedian is... at which point, the conversation hit a wall and everyone suddenly needed to get home to their loved ones and favorite T.V. shows and the problem was solved.

## THE MUSEUM OF PAIN

In the museum of pain you have to play a game with assorted torture devices that litter the cold cement floor. Some of the instruments rattle while some clang, all of the instruments cause pain. All of the nobodies are somebodies and all of the somebodies are hardcore chained. Most people don't like it. It was the idea of a tired mayor's young nephew.



## THIS IS THE STORY

We begin like flowers looking  
into water. Turns out the water  
isn't all that great. It's full of lead.  
At the bottom of the pool,  
it's written there, plain as water.  
We look to the air. There is nothing there.  
In each of us is a bag  
of beginnings. The bag is spilling.  
All the dirt is on the floor now.  
The dirt fills the room  
with the smell of earth,  
then the room is solid ground.  
The flowers are encased in solid thought.  
It's written there too, in the black gasping stems.

## THE CONTROVERSIAL SCIENTIST

After years of research, he started planting elephants. But elephants are not plants, his colleagues exclaimed. Elephants do not have roots. Ah yes, but they have trunks, haven't they? Just like trees you see, he said. But these trunks are not tree-trunks. There are no branches on the elephant, they pointed out. What do you call those white things protruding on either side of the trunk then, he pointed out. Those are tusks, they are like teeth, they chastised. They are also like birch branches, are they not? You are a goddamn idiot and you will never amount to anything in this field.

## THE GOOD MEDICINE

I want to call my dad tonight. So I dial his number and a woman answers. Hello this is Hillary Rodham Clinton, how may I help? Hillary, why do you want to help me? I just want to help in some way. May I speak to my dad? Your father is with Bill, they play leap frog on Sundays. Would you like to speak to Bill's saxophone? Sure, put it on. The saxophone says something remarkable about the current political situation—would be difficult to translate here—but it really put my mind at ease, which is a good thing, because I was calling dad to see if he could put my mind at ease. He's a doctor, you know. He specializes in the good medicine. Yes, of course I know that, Hillary says. I was the one who found him for Bill. That's right, well is it cool if I come over? Sure thing, Nick, I am just frying up a couple lemons for dinner with Bill's saxophone. Great, I'll bring Uncle Heartache.



## LANDSCAPE AT THE GETTY

*"The work needs to have a certain longevity. It lasts longer than we do."*

*-Richard Meier*

Wood is warm but may splinter. Steel is cold but durable. The blinds are plastic Venetian, the color of cigarette paper, flimsy over large windows in their grey alloy outlines. Outside, light Travertine from Italy is here in L.A. White cylindrical rails slice up the mild winter sky. I'm sitting at a thickly lacquered table after sitting through a lecture on Cezanne's *Still Life with Apples* delivered by a bestselling, aging Marxist professor who, quoting Beckett, came to the conclusion that, despite the comforting commonality in Cezanne's choice of objects: the wine bottle, little saucers, apples—the blue coverlet was (indeed!) a bourgeois artifact. Then there was this difficult part about abandoning personality to the chaos of sensation and *landscapality*; I didn't really get it. Then the clouds rolled in low and hairy in the skies and I asked the professor, *Do I exist for the landscape or does the landscape exist for me?* And he replied, *At a certain point in his life, Cezanne gave up on outlines and single perspectives; as a result, if you look at his paintings for too long you'll realize that your life is an illusion.* So I left the lecture to sit at this table made of wood, these golden frozen ripples—this is maple, shaped like a stand up paddle board, twenty something feet long, something solid I could at least try to surf if the Great Wave finally hits today until I eventually tumble off into the crushing cold white water washing over this anomic architecture and all our bodies disappear like bubbles in crepe batter, from this cold decadent platter.

## ONE AND THREE CHAIRS

*after Joseph Kosuth*

These umber bar chairs  
sit in a sequence before the bar  
with cracked leather and bare  
curved slats for support.

When I was moving out  
I put my small only chair  
in the passenger seat  
of my pickup and thought:

this is the kind of thing  
I have to know more about:  
chairs sitting in chairs,  
thoughts sitting in thoughts.

## VIEW OF TOLEDO

*after El Greco*

No more people  
you must have thought  
in a time when people  
were so popular

Holy Toledo  
you must have thought  
in a place that continues  
on after you're buried in it

Anticipating elimination you eliminated  
yourself and everyone else  
leaving your dark  
and strange view

behind you

I like it, thanks

## SUMMER PARTY

Ladders, ladders, take us up to everything, to where words go blank in the blue sky that is an eye crying into an unfinished shoe. A wonderful fume cooks the crowd as the lime green town car speeds away toward the remote column of words behind the rain. Into the drip, enter ladders. They start in pink frosting. This is my birthday cake. This is my favorite tree. The leaves are black and white. The stems are all are erased. Their thoughts of me drown inside the people I love. Life cuts them into slices. The pool flies next to a paperback. The fire pours into the forest. These hot winds won't give. These little branches have been growing all wrong, all summer.



## NEW SWIMSUIT

Again, it's the back of a car. Again, on the hot leather. And the totem of tomatoes, that's how it works. Have me on this floral blanket. Yes, touch the inside of my gums. I am the world's worst professional diver, diving like a can-opener into the outline of the world's second-worse professional diver outstretched above a seismic void, wearing a brand new floral swimsuit cut from the blanket that created these undeniable desires. My face, a tomato in the garden. Your arms, backward and forward slashes. The type of thinker that needs an evening drive. Tonight, where the car is going in us is so critical. The sky is never green. The clouds are never vertical. I am sorry for the ages. That's why, it matters...

## LAST LIGHT

It's the last light of your life. It's the last time you'll see light. Here comes the flat orange ship sailing over the coffee table to take you away. You will be a building now. Many people will pass by, getting on with their lives. You will be a boarded up boarding school. Something once useful. Isn't that nice? Leave that saucer and the afternoon tea. There will be no need for them in your new life. No, no, leave the christmas tree...

## UNTITLED (BLACK ON GRAY)

*after Mark Rothko*

What's missed  
about gray  
is the way  
it frames  
the void  
way it  
blends the  
pitch this  
warm gray  
lower left  
and cool  
adjacent  
a tightrope  
of smoke  
and ash  
and black  
slowly  
enfolding the  
indefinitely  
brushed  
surface spilling  
between fear  
of here and  
fear of there  
as when one  
split by light splits  
toward terror  
the beginning  
of the end  
one might  
see or say.

## AFTER THE RAISING OF LAZARUS (AFTER REMBRANDT)

*after Van Gogh*

Lazarus is light  
yellow the sun  
dark yellow  
the dark green  
near black of  
the onlooker  
looking away  
from Lazarus  
is slightly mixed  
into his gaunt  
unsallowing face  
death comes  
and or it goes  
yellow-green or  
green-yellow  
the woman nearly  
falls amazed  
her hands lifting  
a hint of green  
to blue the same  
blue in white  
above Lazarus'  
cured red eyes  
same blue  
that's dark inside  
the opened tomb  
Lazarus later  
will spread  
back into.

## THE DEAD CHRIST

*after Andrea Mantegna*

A mouth hangs in the dark  
corner severely cropped  
hovering over the wrinkle  
and puncture of feet  
and hands curled in  
the agony of torture  
the agony of death  
cold and foreshortened  
deformed and swollen  
beneath a suffused  
tint of crimson  
two more mouths  
frown and hang  
in a relentless blue  
unnaturally elegant  
crying over half  
the body draped  
in the arid  
alabaster perfume  
and the other half  
naked like buttress roots  
obeying cement  
in the slow unending  
presence of evening or  
his gentle hands are  
curling into fists  
as if in agreement  
with the pain  
leaving his face.

## PRE-EXISTING CONDITION

They said I had a pre-existing condition. Which I took to mean that I existed before I existed, and while I was there, in that state of pre-existence, I am also here, existing. What's it like? It is like growing up to be an infant. It is like working for a lifetime and never receiving a pension. Like airtight faith in the flytrap present. Like blinking a doggerel out in morse code on a hostage tape. Like my father's note that read, what do you think of the literary merits of this note? Like analyzing the prison sentence for its music and control of language. How it goes from story to something more associative, all those pillars of light at the end and repeated incantations. And the cold silent earth beneath the long wet grass down river from the North Kern State Prison graveyard.

# I LOVE THE WHOLE WORLD

*after Agnes Martin*

