

Convergent Dualities:
The Explorations of a Developing Poet

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Senior Honors Capstone Project

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Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of my thesis I have received a huge amount of support and encouragement. I have grown exponentially as a writer and as a person as well. I wrote my thesis at a turbulent time at Gallaudet University. The support and encouragement I received from these people during this time at Gallaudet was invaluable and without them I would not have completed my thesis. I would like to thank my first reader, Dr. Shirley Shultz Myers for her guidance and her criticisms. Each time I received a draft back from her, it was covered with red ink (and many other colors for that matter) and for that, I am extremely grateful. To Dr. Doug Miller for his insistence upon coherence throughout my paper and to Dr. Jennifer Nelson for her guidance in laying the stone pathway of theory throughout my paper, I am equally as thankful.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Jane Fernandes as a reader in absentia for her work on my thesis during the early stages as well as her support and encouragement throughout the writing of the thesis. I would like to thank my parents, Samuel and Sharon Cetrano for their complete and utter support throughout my academic career, they have been my teachers through life and without them, I would not have reached the level I have today. I would also like to thank Jennifer Blohm for her support when I was about to toss my thesis, my laptop, notes and anything even remotely related to the thesis out the 7th floor window of Clerc Hall and to Dr. David McAleavey for giving detailed responses and insight to all of my questions.

~Jonathan Cetrano

Table of Contents

Mapping the Path of My Discoveries.....4

**Hard Won Wisdom: Advice to Aspiring Poets Based
on my Personal Experiences.....6**

Moving from Experience and Insight to Poetics.....18

Wolfgang Iser and Reader Response.....21

**My Conversation with Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence
Ferlinghetti.....27**

Discovering Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Poets.....29

Analysis of Ginsberg’s, Ferlinghetti’s and my Poems.....37

My Emerging Voice.....50

Conclusion.....54

Works Cited.....56

Appendix of Poems.....58

"Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old."

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Mapping the Path of My Discoveries

Much poetry is written only for the self, without regard to the reader and to commonly accepted writing standards. Poetry written for the self is usually amateurish and will not be published without polishing. An aspiring poet must work consciously to modify his or her poetry and at least become semi-proficient in the craft before attempting to be considered for publication. This capstone illustrates the point I have reached in my efforts to transition from an aspiring poet to a more polished poet.

The idea for this project sprang from my own experience as a writer of amateur poetry. I am an aspiring poet and desire to be published. However, a major block to my progress as a poet has been the absence of a formal and practical education in the process of writing a poem and analyzing my own style. With this project I lay the foundation for future publication by looking at the evolution of my self-education. This work has eased my transition from a rough, blank-slate poet to a person who has a working knowledge of the field and craft of poetry and an awareness of literary influence on my own poetry. I hope my project eases the transitions of other aspiring poets if they can learn from another's journey, especially from my mistakes.

This paper begins with an exposition of my own wisdom as a writer, culled in part from experience gained through writing and in part from studying the advice and poetry of other poets. In addition to the school of hard knocks, my development over time as a

poet also has been informed by a more academic examination. This examination involves two approaches.

One approach falls within poetics, that is, theories or schools of thought about poetry. Although I spent time learning about the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School of writing, I came to understand that the theoretical framework of Reader Response theory explained my self-education more accurately.

Concern about the response of the reader to a text has been documented as early as Aristotle's time. According to literary critic Charles Bressler, "in the *Poetics* Aristotle voices concern about the effect a play will have on the audience's emotions" (76). modern Reader Response theory (also called reader oriented criticism) has its beginnings in the 1920s and 30s, but it wasn't widely used until the early 1970s (Bressler 76). Today's interest in the audience's response to artistic creation dominates the field of criticism. Poetry is especially subject to this form of criticism because the compressed language invites more active reading. I found that Reader Response theory best explains the process of my development as a poet. Moreover, it justifies my responses to poets, and I also can use it as a vehicle to improve my writing by better understanding the emotional responses to specific instances of my poetry.

The second academic approach frames my work as a conversation with two poets who were major influences in my work, a conversation I explore through the lens of Reader Response. My writing has evolved in the context of two established poets whom I acknowledge as the major literary influences on the development of my craft, the beat poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and especially Allen Ginsburg. I will examine three of my poems best exemplifying their influence and the maturation of my writer's voice.

Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti's poetry addresses public ills and forces people to acknowledge society's problems. Their work is particularly effective to me, a deaf poet, because, as I will explain, their imagery relies often on concepts that can be easily translated into American Sign Language (ASL).

To further illustrate how the theoretical analysis of Reader Response re-frames my understanding of my self-education as well as the evolution of my writing style and voice, I analyze two poems by Allen Ginsberg and one by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I conclude my self education as well as demonstrate the evolution of my writing style with Reader Response analyses of three of my most recent poems. Taking the critical analyses of all of these poems together should make clear the maturing of my craft and the emergence of my own voice.

**Hard-Won Wisdom: Advice to Aspiring Poets based on my Personal
Experiences**

From recent experience as a poet learning about poetry, the process of reading, writing and thinking like a poet, I have found that people who write poetry do it first and foremost for themselves as a cathartic process. For a few, it is written for themselves and others. In either case, the process is highly charged emotionally. As a writer, I want to see my poetry affect others, I want my poetry to be shared with others, and I want other people to enjoy my poetry. I consider it a gift to be shared, explored, improved upon, and used. A part of this emotionally charged process of writing, reading, of sharing and

accepting criticism (both good and bad) includes intellectual as well as emotional work: it is well known that poets read and are influenced by other poets.

My foray into the world of poetry came during the sixth grade. My English teacher allowed us to turn in poems for extra credit. Soon, I started to like writing poems, enjoying the way my words looked on paper. Poetry helped me to explore things that I had never explored before such as images presented as emotion, of showing rather than telling. I continued writing poetry all year, and, before the end of the school year, my teacher told me that I had won a citywide poetry contest that she had entered me into without my knowledge. I was ecstatic; I had the chance to recite three of my poems in front of an audience in the dim, wood-paneled auditorium of my local public library.

One drawback to sharing your writing, however, is that you may experience the worst feeling an aspiring writer can have, embarrassment or, in its extreme form, humiliation. The humiliation can be crippling. After I won the poetry medal and told a few people, some reacted negatively by mocking me or tittering at the thought that an overgrown boy like me wrote poetry. I was embarrassed and stopped writing poetry.

In that same library several years later I had a second experience. I met literary great Robert Cormier, author of more than a few books that I had read during my time in junior high school. He wrote such books as The Chocolate War, I Am the Cheese, and After the First Death. His books are books that chronicle typical teen angst, such as being bullied in school, which is the subject of The Chocolate War. Imagine: a real, live, writer in my public library. At the time I was holding a copy of his book The Chocolate War. If it had not been a library copy, I would have had it signed in an instant. I confess I had thoughts of “losing” that book, just so I could get his autograph.

Meeting other people that write, especially well known writers, can be very inspirational. It worked for me. My efforts to be a writer began anew. Thus, my first lesson for other would-be writers and those who like to encourage aspiring writers is that exposure to writing, poets, writers and literary-minded people has been very beneficial, if not critical, to my development as a writer. Being around these people has allowed me to look at my writing critically, and sometimes, when I have shared my poetry, I even got very valuable feedback that has helped shape my poetry and my identity as a poet

I wrote in high school my sophomore and junior years: the traditional run of the mill high school angst-ridden poetry, until tragedy struck. Early on in my junior year, I was in a car crash on my way to school; in that car crash one of my friends died. Poetry was cathartic and helped me get through the fear, hurt, loss, and anger of losing one of my friends to a car accident. I submitted some of that writing to my creative writing class, and the teacher reported her concern over the subject of my writing to my guidance counselor. The resulting embarrassment literally shut me up for a long while. My fascination with poetry still continued; I just wasn't writing.

I was self-conscious and afraid to put my thoughts to paper and have others see and judge my writing. Hence, embarrassment joins fear as two of a writer's worst enemies; they are two of the most dreaded emotions, capable of cutting off the flow of words traveling down from the mind of the writer through the fingers onto paper. Writer's block results from many things or from nothing, sometimes there is just nothing to write about; but for me these two feelings top the list of things that remain a barrier to writing.

In my very short experience as a writer, being and becoming self conscious can trump positive experiences. But once the problems of embarrassment, fear, or other

variations of writer's blocks have been overcome, the next problem facing the writer is the problem of actually writing without sounding overly contrived. There have been many books and essays written about overcoming this and other problems of writing. Many of these do not help because the writers tell you how they write, and the danger is that their experience will take over and change or even corrupt your own voice. In the opening paragraph of Richard Hugo's book The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing, the practicing poet and poetry teacher writes,

You'll never become a poet until you realize that everything I say in this quarter¹ is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me.

But I hope you learn to write like you. (3)

It is very hard to write in your own "voice." As an aspiring poet I've found myself writing like my favorite poet, Allen Ginsberg, and I've found myself trying to adapt my writing style to fit the wants of my teachers and professors, resulting in the feeling that the poem and the words were not mine.

These lessons lead to my second piece of advice: The key is to keep an open mind. Read for inspiration and allow for criticism, but keep the voice in the poem your own. That of course is much easier said than done.

While I must follow my own poetic voice, I must realize I am not free to slam a bunch of words down on the page and call it poetry. I discovered this truism when I had to explain my first poems to everyone I met. Not one person said, "I think I get what you

¹ Semester

are talking about.” To succeed as an established poet, I cannot bend literary conventions too far nor rely too much on past schools of poetry. For example, I cannot follow the school of thought and style that ruled the Beat Generation², however much I admire them, without looking too dated, and I cannot throw around abstract phrases and bend literary convention, call it poetry and expect the poetic community to accept my poems with open arms and praise. Alexander Pope, a noted poet and critic wrote:

Expression is the dress of thought...
A vile conceit in pompous words expressed
Is like a clown in regal purple dressed:
For different styles and subjects sort,
As several garbs, with country, town, and court...
In words as fashions the same rule will hold;
Alike fantastic, if too new, or too old:
Be not the first by whom the new is tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside. (276)

It is hard to express your "vile conceits" while meeting the literary conventions of the type and style of poetry in which you are writing. But like Pope says, “be not the first...nor yet the last,” meaning that, to become an accepted poet, you have to express your unique voice while staying close to the accepted rules of poetry. Pope basically says

² Beat Generation: Term applied to certain American artists and writers who were popular during the 1950s. Essentially anarchic, members of the beat generation rejected traditional social and artistic forms. The beats sought immediate expression in multiple, intense experiences and beatific illumination like that of some Eastern religions (e.g., Zen Buddhism). In literature they adopted rhythms of simple American speech and of bop and progressive jazz. Among those associated with the movement were the novelists Jack Kerouac and Chandler Brossard, numerous poets (e.g., Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso). (The Columbia Encyclopedia)

that the writer should not be avant-garde nor should s/he cling on to the past so long that he becomes passé. Instead the writer should work within literary conventions and stretch literary convention—in short, write within the system. As a writer seeking to be published I may have to change some of my writing style. The challenge that I face as a poet is to adapt my writing style so that it is marketable while staying true to myself, my artistic voice, and the reader. This excerpt from Pope refers to the reader, more specifically what the reader expects from an author of heroic couplets. Pope undertook the effort to “codify Neoclassical literary criticism” (Bressler 34). Pope understood that there were a great many variations in responses to literature, and, with his essay, *On Criticism*, he attempted to sort out these responses to literature, separating the purely emotional, aesthetic and literary responses from criticism while enforcing the necessity of a balance among these separate aspects of critical response. Ironically, even though Pope considered free verse and emotional poetry/writing “unrefined” (Bressler 34), his ideas mirror reader response theory responses to the “unrefined” literature *en vogue* today.

In outlining his expectations of good verse, Pope also says in his own poetry:

the sound must seem an echo to the sense.

Soft is the strain when zephyr gently blows,

And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;

But when loud billows lash the sounding shore,

The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar. (276)

Pope recognizes that the writer needs to master the use of emphasis in his lyrics to create an effective poem for the reader as well as the writer. Pope uses the comparison of

zephyrs, which is a gentle wind, to "the smooth stream" of lilting lyrical poetry which in "smoother numbers flow" and "hoarse, rough verse...like the torrent roar" to demonstrate the importance of emphasis to poetry. Emphasis and resonance in verse are important because they are critical to the effective conveyance of tone and the message of the poet and poem. I make a distinction between the poet and the poem here because the message of the poet and poem may not be the same due to the emotional and critical responses of the reader, meaning the intended versus perceived message.

The intended versus perceived message lies with the concept of the actual reader versus the implied reader as defined by Reader Response theorist Wolfgang Iser. The implied reader as defined by Iser is, "the reader who embodies all those predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Hence the implied reader has his or her roots planted firmly in the text" (Bressler 386). Conversely, the actual reader "is the person that physically picks up the text and reads it...the actual reader comes to the text shaped by cultural and personal norms and prejudices" (Bressler 330). Thus the intended message is what the author wants to say and goes to the implied reader, and the perceived message is what the actual reader gains from reading the text. The perception of the actual reader may generate a completely different response than what the poet intended the poem to elicit. Pope's verses indicate the importance of meaningful and accentuated verse to enhance and sharpen the author's intended message. Writing within the boundaries of poetic convention is necessary to connect to readers, to pass on the intended message and to entertain and express thought and feeling in ways the reader can appreciate.

There is irony in using Alexander Pope as a model to explain my contemporary verse while discussing Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti because Pope represents the classic strain of balance. New can be “clownish” or rough because it is untried and untested. Recall that Pope advises not to be among the first in new poetic forms or style while the Beats belong to the Romantic tradition that values the new and the fresh, and even celebrates the rough rather than the polished poetry of the classics. I included Alexander Pope because the subject matter of his poem still rings true in that one must approach poetry as a discourse between the self and the public. If poetry is entirely a monologue coming from the poet’s self then it most likely will not be understood; by not understanding, the reading public will reject it. By the same token, if a poem is entirely a public monologue then the personal meaning can be lost and the poem itself might seem cliché. The aspiring poet must navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of convention and innovation: To stick to past poetic forms that no longer connect to contemporary readers essentially damages the pleasure of a poem’s originality in capturing feeling or insight. On the other side, to be too avant-garde is to lack commonalities that allow the poem to be understood. The poet needs to navigate between public and personal images, the past and the too avant-garde present, to create a cogent and understandable poem which negotiates public understanding and unique expression.

All of this advice becomes meaningless when an aspiring writer hits the proverbial writer’s block. I also have confronted the personal problem of trying to express myself only to sit staring at an unfinished line, attempting to figure out what word fit in that line. I have pondered and sat with an idea for a poem with no idea of how

to put the poem together or how to put the line together, much less which word to put there. Sitting, thinking, looking for that word, staring at that blank page is important to the development of a writer because it develops discipline. Staying with and working through my frustration has allowed me to focus my energies and mentally train myself to write. It is for this reason that almost every writer has a set time, place or journal for writing to get into the mindset of a writer. I recommend that as a strategy for overcoming writing blocks.

But if sheer discipline and routine fail, consult another poet. One of the poems that make me laugh at myself and break through a block is one-time U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass' poem *The Problem of Describing Trees*. This poem describes the problem of expressing your inner writer's voice and writing in a meaningful and poetic way; it has helped me find my own voice by reminding me playfully that not all is lost if I cannot find the appropriate word at that moment. Hass himself also illustrates my advice to consult another poet when stuck in this poem. Finding inspiration in the work of another famous poet, William Butler Yeats, he writes:

The aspen glitters in the wind.
And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,
Because that motion in the heat of summer
Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf
Of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem
And the tree danced. No.
The tree capitalized.
No. There are limits to saying,
In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.

Aspens doing something in the wind. (97)

In the poem, Hass attempts to describe aspen trees. He writes, "The aspen glitters in the wind. / And that delights us" (Hass 97). The first two lines of the poem fall flat rather than inspire. The lines here do not follow Pope's advice: the lines do not "echo sense" nor "flow" in "smoother numbers." Instead, they seem more a note-to-self, a reminder of what the leaves are and do, not poetry—they seem as if they do not capture Hass' inspirational vision of the Aspens that caused him to write this poem. Paradoxically, Hass' words poetically express a failure to express in more conventionally poetic ways the emotional impact that Hass felt when he saw the aspens glittering in the wind. Indeed, it's a wonderful example of navigating the conventional and the innovative.

The next stanza also "fails" miserably and transitions from attempted visually descriptive poetry to the technically descriptive. Hass describes the leaves turning in the wind, then attempts to explain why they flutter: "Because that motion in the heat of summer / Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf / Of the cottonwood" (Hass 97). Haas uses the change from visual to scientific/technical description to highlight the lack of emotion and the lack of emphasis to show us what is necessary to create a good poem.

The next stanza follows Hass' train wreck of ways to describe the Aspens that he comes up with and discards. Hass writes in the first line of the third stanza "The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem" (Hass 97). The increasing focus from tree to leaf to stem

and gene pool reflects Hass' increasing desperation to capture visually and emotionally his vision of the aspens and his increasing failure in producing solid descriptions which allow the reader to connect emotionally with the poem. Here he only succeeds in increasingly abstract and non-visible description—who can see a gene except a scientist in a laboratory with special equipment? At the same time, he has expressed this failure poetically. In other words, his vision of aspens is the ostensible subject. Writing about his failure to capture his vision, the actual subject becomes what makes a poem poetic and the emotion he conveys successfully involves not aspens but the desperation of the poet struggling to express himself.

From the second line on in the third stanza, Hass directly confronts his problem of describing the aspens in poetry: "the tree danced. No. / The tree capitalized. / No. There are limits to saying, / In language, what the tree did" (Hass 97). Hass is saying that language is malleable and open to endless possibilities; however that openness does not guarantee that not all such possibilities are poetic. Sometimes language does not allow poets to recreate their poetic vision; there are limits to language and what it allows us to create. At the same time, the failure allows a deeper insight to emerge.

The last three lines serve as a reminder that all is not lost if you cannot write out immediately what you are trying to say about aspens or anything else for that matter. Hass states in the third to last line that "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us" (Hass 97). And the next line, which is italicized for emphasis, explains the nature of this disenchantment. Hass writes "*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will*" (Hass 97). He refers to William Butler Yeats' famous line from the poem "Among School Children": This line becomes a powerful metaphor of the poem's own metaphor of struggling with language

to express inspiration, a metaphor pictured in aspens “doing something” with the wind in their leaves. The dancer is the poet and the command “Dance with me, Dancer” is the poet’s frustration with language. The tongue in cheek reply “Oh, I will” is Haas’ acknowledgement that language will comply, but, the question is when; as evidenced by the word “will.” Since there is no imperative in the response, no timeline is set. The absence of a timeline adds to the frustration of the poet. Haas is not asking “Why can’t I write”; rather Haas is asking, “When can I say what I want to say?” This is the problem of every writer that faces writer’s block. Haas’ reference to Yeats’ poem “Among School Children” is contained in the line “Dance with me, dancer.” In this poem, Yeats writes, “O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,/Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? /O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (Yeats 2113. 8. 61-64). While Yeats asks, “how can we know the dancer from the dance?” Haas asks how can we know the poet from the poem? Yeats searches for a solution to unrequited passion; he looks to the dancer who creates his or her own choreography within the limits of music. Using this parallel, Haas attempts to create poetry within the limits of his own mind. In the poem, Haas’ own mind is frustrated; it cannot break through the writer’s block. Against the constraints of poetry, the poet creates poetry on his own terms and keeps trying. Like Yeats, Haas experiences unrequited passion, this time with the passion to express poetry, but, the last line, which is tongue in cheek, states “aspens doing something in the wind” (Haas 97). Haas brings the whole poem and the metaphor of unrequited passion and frustration together in a different dance or poem from the one intended or yearned after, but a successful one nonetheless. Ironically he breaks his writer’s block with a poem about writer’s block.

This poem serves as a great reminder to poets that not all is lost if a phrase or word or even a whole poem cannot be written. Like Hass says, "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us" (Hass 97). Sometimes a flawless line which has great emphasis and is a remarkable visual metaphor like "Dance with me, dancer" can be borne out of utter frustration and go on to make a great poem about the very limits and purposes of poetry. As I continued to write I began to realize something that I did not realize before, that the frustration, embarrassment, anger, and the limits of poetry are all part of writing—indeed, they can be the source of a poem—and a part of the development of the writer's self. While this may seem obvious, indeed I knew this as I started writing; I had yet to internalize that crucial piece of knowledge. Once that knowledge was internalized, I started to focus more on my writing, to concentrate on the development of my own writer's voice with new respect for the craft I was dancing with.

Moving from Experience and Insight to Poetics

My budding understanding of the source and craft of poetry led to my association with the theoretical framework of Reader Response. The concepts of implied and actual readers, in particular, not only explained an issue for Pope but also shed light on my experiences in a way that other theories had not.

Before I came to understand that Reader Response explained my education as a poet most fully, especially the problem of my implied and perceived meaning, I first explored Post-structuralism, particularly in its incarnation in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school is on the experimental or "adventurous" side. It is

composed of writers who prefer to try new things, scoffing at the old-fashioned work of the past. This school has been dominant in the United States for the past twenty to thirty years. The school was named after a journal whose title was L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. The writers associated with this school have spawned second and third generation followers, all of whom preach the need for a Post-structuralist awareness of the values hidden and ignored in much traditional writing; like many Post-structuralist theorists, these poets and writers tend to suppose that "mainstream" means avoiding or not attending to the damage which the socio-politico-economic status quo wreaks upon everyone. In the Post-structuralist way of thinking, there are, "many truths [that] exist, not *the* truth. Post-structuralists declare that modernity's concept of one objective reality must be disavowed and replaced by many different concepts, each a valid and reliable interpretation and construction of reality" (Bressler 99). In response, to the status quo—"the truth," they try to combat that damage by the shock of fresh and surprising uses of language, which avoids making the sense of normal sentiment, in order to address larger buried issues. Bressler likens this textual combat to replacing a picture of an object with a collage of different images and representations of that object. From the collage the reader gain many different meanings or truths which can be applied to the reader's created/perceived reality (99).

The reason that I first studied Post-structuralism generally and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school particularly for my theoretical understanding is because my early writing was influenced heavily by Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, both of whom are a part of those schools of thought. Their poems represent multiple truths, challenge any notion of a single truth, especially hegemony of those in power, and sought to break

down sociopolitical barriers to equality. Their work and the Post-structuralist theory appealed to me as well because it was geared towards breaking down barriers and creating new ways to use language and create truths that varied from “*the* truth” that is espoused by society. As a deaf writer of poems in English, I stand both within and without mainstream life. It seemed to me that this experience was not ordinary and so needed extraordinary language. To express this dual consciousness, I looked to others who pushed the boundaries of meaning. One example of this kind of writing/play with language can be found in an anthology titled The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy, edited by Charles Bernstein: “A V-effect to combat the obvious; to stand out = to rebel; counter embodiment with our ‘paper bullets of the brain’.” As Bernstein indicates, this kind of writing seeks to surprise the reader by using different, non-traditional ways of language. I emulated this style in my earlier attempts at poetry.

Post-structuralist analysis can inform a contemporary poet’s consciousness but not prescribe his craft or form. It is modern as avant-garde literature is modern, but this connection is historical rather than textual. The main concern of Post-structuralists is to discover how the parts of a poem fit together and function, not the discovery of individual practices or individual meanings (Bressler 109). My own development involves the emergence of a unique voice within a traditional format so that I came to realize the Post-structuralist and the growing awareness of individual meanings. For these reasons, I dropped Post-structuralism as a theoretical framework for my approach to poetry in favor of Reader Response theory with its emphasis on individual practice and individual meanings.

Reader Response theory explains my analyses of the poetry of my models and names my approach to understanding my own poems. In its focus on the reader's emotional and intellectual responses to the text and the process of reading the text, this theory explains how I can draw from both the Classical tradition to which Pope belongs and from the contrasting Romantic tradition, to which my greatest influences, Ginsburg and Ferlinghetti belong. Moreover, I posit that this reading and analyzing of poetry is fruitful not just for me but for all aspiring poets. Furthermore, it may be the most effective way to have a personal, life-changing relationship with poetry, the experience every poet wants his poetry to effect in his readers or audience.

Wolfgang Iser and Reader Response

One of the main theoreticians of Reader-Response is Wolfgang Iser, a German literary scholar who received his Ph.D. in English with a dissertation on Henry Fielding. It is perhaps not surprising that a person interested in and aware of inter-cultural experiences would be aware of how individuals bring different sets of experiences to texts which influence interpretation. It is also not surprising that this approach appeals to me, a deaf person who navigates deaf and hearing worlds even in the imagery and ideas of my poetry. Iser's first essay argued that it is the point of "convergence of the text and the reader that brings a literary work into existence; though this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, it must always remain virtual." Iser viewed the text as a "phenomenon from the convergence of a duality" (Cohen 1). As I mentioned before, the uniformists aim for the space between the actual reader and implied reader, the perceived

and the intended message. These are the dualities in the “convergence.” As with other Reader Response theorists, I believe that it is in this convergence of dualities, implied vs. actual readers and intended vs. perceived message that the most meaning as well as understanding is to be gained. To reiterate, because of this convergence of dualities it is perhaps not surprising that the Reader Response Theory best frames the approach of the self-education of an aspiring poet.

While admiring the craft and seeking to learn the craft of the poets I admired, my reaction to the emotions and ideas expressed in these poems first drew me to them as models in the first place. To be published, poetry must communicate to others, but the impetus to write poetry is perforce personal. Bringing to consciousness my reactions to poems of others and my own poems exemplifies Reader Response theory as a fruitful approach to my self-education.

The main assumption of reader response is “Reader + Text = Poem (meaning)” (Bressler 80). The reader is one of the two main components from which meaning is derived. Only when a reader is actively engaged in reading the text can meaning arise. Furthermore, theorists have characterized reader response as “context dependent” and “intricately associated with the reading process” (Bressler 80). In other words, with each reading, your response will be different than your last response. What you know now and what you know later will change your perception of the text. According to Bressler, the question that best summarizes reader response is “What is and what happens during the reading process” (81)? Although it seems to be a rather simple question, in all actuality it is not. It involves many variables such as the background of readers, their view of the world, their socio-economic, political, and sometimes sexual orientation, their education,

linguistic elements of the text, the ability of a reader to interact with the text and a plethora of other factors (Bressler 81).

Although I have found the Reader Response theoretical approach fruitful for aspiring poets and any student of poetry, some critics have castigated the theory for being too inclusive and accepting of various views and responses as a result of its subjective stance on the text. Critics of reader response consider this subjectivity a weakness of literary theory. If meaning is entirely subjective then it can be argued that the author is irrelevant. Indeed, the more subjective of Reader Response critics such as Stanley Fish embrace this conclusion. This extreme of subjectivity is countered at the opposite pole by New Criticism theorists who assert that all one needs to do to comprehend the meaning is to master the technical aspects of language, in other word, an entirely objective approach (Bressler 76). For reader responses to have any claim to a standard as exists in other theories, it is critical that the responses to works be grounded in the texts themselves. Other Reader Response critics move toward an approach that embraces this dynamic tension between subjectivity and objectivity: According to Cohen, Iser himself commented that the “very diversification of meaning makes dubious the assumption that meaning is the be-all and end-all of the literary text” (2). Conversely, Iser also mentions that, “if there is not one specific meaning of a literary text, this ‘apparent deficiency’ is, in fact, the productive matrix which enables the text to be meaningful in a variety of different contexts” (Schwab 75)—but not all contexts. In other words, not just any old response or eccentric and idiosyncratic association will do. Iser wrote, “interpretation indicates the dominance of the conscious over the imaginary, and creation swamps the conscious by the imaginary” (Cohen 2). These two activities are interrelated, and, if one

increases, the other decreases and vice versa. The conscious act of interpretation, then, requires grounding in the matrix of particular texts. As Bogdan, Cunningham & Davis, in their article “Reintegrating Sensibility,” explain, there is a need to “balance emotion and cognition in reader response, giving priority to the personal literary experience while still espousing a conception of literariness” (479). Since I am writing about the emotional and cognitive process of writing, my emotional and intellectual responses to the writing of others and my responses to my own writing are, by definition, Reader Response analyses.

My responses work within the parameters of this theory, namely that, in my responses, I seek to exemplify a “literary experience” as well as “literariness” which is characterized by a response grounded in text, application of cultural norms, history, aesthetics and an incorporation of “actual thought systems, as well as elements of, and even complete, literary traditions. These provide the ‘dialogue’ between text and reader and amplify what Iser meant by convergence” (Cohen 1). My reading, then, cannot be so idiosyncratic that it fails to communicate.

My particular uses of Reader Response theory place me in one of the two dominant schools of thought, the uniformists. The uniformists, led by Wolfgang Iser, characterize reader response as “...not an act of understanding something contained and given in advance by the text; instead, it generates a new perspective and mental object out of textual elements” (Riquelme 8). The main feature that Iser posits here is that the response must be grounded within the text, and the reader actively works with the text and his/her own experiences to create a response arising from the text.

The use of the Reader response theory also goes well with Pope’s advice to readers that I use early on in my paper. The reality is somewhere between textual

construction and individual meaning--that is, for Pope, it is between tradition and one's unique voice. Similarly, for Iser, the readerly meaning is in between the text and the reader. By using Pope and Iser, I attempt to bring the two together to a place where reality is shaped between the reader, the text, tradition and my unique voice.

The individualists form the other dominant Reader Response school of thought, of which the most prominent practitioner is the American literary critic Stanley Fish. Proponents of this school of thought take the position that the reader is “totally in charge of constructing texts through the act of interpretation” (Machor 1127). The difference between Iser and Fish is found in the responses of the reader. Iser believes that the text informs, limits, and creates responses in the reader based on the text, while Fish believes that the reader’s response creates the text which in itself is indeterminate in meaning. In this reading, Fish says that the reader is the text, and whatever we read does not exist without us. He is speaking from the viewpoint that the reader is the “be-all and end-all of the literary text” and that there is no convergence of the text and the reader, only the reader. For Fish, the meaning is all in the reader; in effect, the reader is the writer. Hence, the literary experience is not tied to literariness, that is, not grounded in or delimited by the text. This is not the best focus for my thesis because, if it were, my analysis would not be grounded in the work itself. It would be wholly composed of the messages I perceived very possibly for reasons other than the text and so would consist of unsubstantiated allegations and conjecture.

In affiliating myself with Iser’s model of Reader Response, I analyze my responses by pointing to textual evidence. Thus, the textuality of the poems that I examine ground my observations and analysis in the text. I agree with uniformists that

this view is appropriate because my experience of poems accords with theirs. Although poems are subjective and subject to individual interpretation, they show designs that create semi-uniform responses arising from and delimited by the text. This very element of Reader Response, however, even in the Uniformist formulation, makes discussion of the theory during analysis of poems because the theory has no central tenets to guide an analysis, only an approach. Hence, in Reader Response terms, this paper is accurately understood as a response to the texts that is grounded by textual evidence, including my own poems. This approach informs the personal narrative of my development as a poet. The most profound reason for choosing this path is because I agree with Iser that “the act of reading involves our realizing that we are not what we mistakenly think ourselves to be and that, as a consequence, we may become something we never imagined possible” (Riquelme 7). I interpret that to mean the act of reading a text allows us to bring our minds outside the box to add to and interact with what we already know, that reading as a consequence builds up our knowledge, our understanding, and our interaction with the text and the world at-large. This act of reading in effect allows us to grow and build ourselves into something we were not before. This vision suits the exploratory and introspective nature of my work and adds an element of discovery expected in a documentation of my growth as a poet. Other critics or critical readers have the task of determining whether my responses accord with their sense of what the text plausibly evokes in them as well. Judgment of my responses should be based on whether or not they fall into the “convergence of dualities” as dictated by Iser.

The use of the uniformist Reader Response theory complements Pope’s advice to poets to write within, while simultaneously stretching against, the boundaries of a system

of literary conventions. For Reader Response uniformists, the literary experience occurs in the convergence of the literariness of textual construction and individual meaning. For Pope, the poet creates a literary experience in grounding individual poetic expression within a tradition of literary form and conventions. Pope's ideal reader cannot connect to or appreciate the unique voice without some shared understanding of a tradition in which the poet is working to and to which the poem points. Another way to understand Pope's advice in uniformist Reader Response terms is to say that a reader understands the text of a poem in relating the text to the larger shared "text," if you will, of literary tradition. *Mutatis mutandis*, for Iser, the readerly meaning is in between the text and the reader. By using Pope and Iser, I attempt to bring the two together in my understanding that literary experience is shaped by an interaction among reader, text, and tradition. As a poet, I add to this interaction my unique voice.

My Conversation with Allen Ginsburg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Although not a theory or a school of thought, major influences provide a hermeneutic context in which to analyze my writing. I join those poets who are inspired early in their life by reading one particular poet, and their entire life and career become responses to their early encounter with, say, John Donne or T. S. Eliot or Emily Dickinson or Robert Lowell or William Carlos Williams. Such writers may not have a theory, but a desire to co-exist in a plane of conversation, competition, and fellowship with one or more important writers who preceded them. Earlier I wrote about the involvement of many variables of consideration in reader response such as the background of the reader,

linguistic elements of the text, the ability of the reader to interact with the text and other factors (Bressler 81). My early consideration of these two poets incorporated these variables in “the convergence of dualities” of my writing and their writing, my messages and their messages. I also took on this conversation with Allen Ginsberg as I emulated his ideas and his ambitions to change the world through conscious social protest. Reading Ginsberg’s poetry evoked a strong response in me. Reading poetry then became an active dialogue rather than a passive act, a process, according to uniformist Reader Response, which occurs in all readers though with various levels of conscious awareness. In this dialogue with Ginsberg I experienced the approach contained in uniformist Reader Response theory. This approach enabled me to think in different ways, to think of my writing not only as a product of my mind, but as a product of my history, education, experiences and my worldview. I learned to think of my writing as a transaction between myself, the text and the reader. It was in this transaction that I gained a much better understanding of the meaning(s) that are inherent in my conversations with Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and later on, in my developing voice.

Discovering Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Poets

When I started to write poetry again during my sophomore year of high school, I looked for a creative writing class. However, my high school had no creative writing classes; instead, my guidance counselor who knew I liked poetry suggested that I take an online class. These online classes were available through a program called Virtual High

School (VHS). This program collected teachers of various disciplines and levels across the nation and had them teach classes online. I took a poetry class. We covered contemporary poems, and one day the teacher assigned us to read “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg. Not only was I struck by the language and the use of images, but also I was overwhelmed by my first deep connection to a poem. Ginsberg’s poem was the first poem I understood. It also was the first poem that spoke as clearly to a deaf reader as it does to a hearing reader. It was amazing. I read it once, twice, and then the period allotted for VHS was over. I hurriedly printed out the poem and re-read it on the way to my class.

Once school was done for the day, I decided to do my final project for that class on Allen Ginsberg. VHS was a great opportunity because the teacher had us contact poets via e-mail and ask them questions about their poem and about poetry in general. Meeting Robert Cormier and being in contact with poets made me decide I had to contact Allen Ginsberg as well. I skipped over to his website online and found that he had died just three years earlier.

As I read more of Ginsberg and became more aware of his life and his literary circle of friends, I learned more about my tastes and budding styles within my poetry. I read other poems by those who associated with him. I consider “Howl” to be my gateway poem into the world of poetry. As I delved seriously into the world of poetry in my high school years, I began to notice different styles of poetry, how a poem was written, how the content was presented, and what the subject matter of the poetry was. I explored Allen Ginsberg’s poetry, and then I explored other poets in the same vein, such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I noticed that I liked many of the Beats because they wrote in much the same way, but Ginsberg was always first among them.

In Ginsberg's poetry, he uses the stream of consciousness method of writing, which is a madcap, rambling writing technique almost similar to free association. I liked it so much I copied the style of writing in my earlier poems. I feel that this method is both liberating and a true form, a form that constitutes itself from the coherence of associations within the writer's inner self. In my opinion poetry that follows meter or strict structure is an artificial construction, at least for today's world. While meter or formulaic structures do convey meaning and force the poet to consider different ways of writing the poem, different word and sound choices structure are, as a rule, more limiting to me than inspiring. One may admire the artistry or marrying a formulaic structure to meaning, but such artistry spoke more profoundly to Pope's readers than to today's readers. Today, stream of consciousness resonates deeply, in part because its flexibility suits a world with multiple traditions and no one shared world view. Patterning, word choices and structure are constrained by the needs of expression rather than the other way around. Stream of consciousness allows me to write freely while ensuring that my writing remains thematically connected. In my experience, whatever words and ideas that I pour out onto paper will have meaning that relates to a central idea; this inter-relatedness of the words and ideas establish the unity of the poem rather than the unity of meter and rhyme in traditional forms of poetry. In other words, while a metered poem is more structured in terms of meter, rhythm, punctuation and style, stream of consciousness is more structured in terms of theme because it comes from your own inner mental structure of associations. It reflects the organic unity ("Organic Unity") of what you honestly see and feel.

Although very different from conventions of form in the Classical tradition of Pope, this notion of organic unity still asserts the need for form through selections of words that cohere around a theme, or words whose meanings create a pattern of meaning that becomes a theme. This notion of organic unity is not new to the Beats. It begins with the poets, in fact, who countered the balanced and highly structured style of Pope's rhymed couplets, namely the Romantic Poets. Wordsworth in particular, stresses that the poet embodies Nature which "rolls through all things" (Composed 102) to achieve the sublime. This idea of grounding the organic unity of a poem in the organic unity of Nature seems to recall the Uniformist Reader Response concept of grounding responses in the text. The reader's response coheres around a text that coheres around natural experience, whether, as with Wordsworth, around Nature or, as with the Beats, the inner life of the poet.

A modern cousin of organic unity might be stream of consciousness since coherence derives from the association of images and ideas around a central theme or insight. As a contemporary deaf poet, stream of consciousness fits my style in part because it suits a contemporary consciousness. But it is also very important because it is not primarily dependent on elements of sound. Sound, meter, and stresses in poetry are very difficult for me to identify and use. Meter also is organized by different patterns such as audio line break patterns, internal rhyme, and so on. These aural patterns are difficult for a deaf person to distinguish, which can explain the lack of a deaf presence in written poetry. I believe that an example of the lack of a poetic community in deaf world can be found in the rather unfortunate demise of *The Tactile Mind Press* and the lack of interest in *Manus*, the annual literary magazine of the Gallaudet University student

newspaper, *The Buff and Blue*. As a deaf person, I feel that patterning based on sound, which is very important in metered poetry, detrimentally constrains my writing. I disagree with the use of meter even though I am writing in English because it restricts my writer's voice, causing me to feel boxed in and unable to freely express myself. Fortunately, great poetry such as that of the Beat poets, along with concrete or visual poetry, has established a precedent for free-style poetry. This poetry may have visual rhythm or natural speech rhythms, but not formal meter structures.

This lack of sound-based patterning drew me to read *Howl* in high school. Reading of it was a literary liberation for me. For the first time I was able to really read a poem without tapping my fingers on the table trying to figure out the rhyme scheme and meter. I was free to focus on the meaning, the theme, and the intertextual connections. I was interpreting Allen Ginsberg's poetry in relation to my own social constructs and other features of the text. I focused on the storyline within the poem, the history contained within it, and the aesthetics of Ginsberg's placement of words, line breaks and punctuation upon the page. In essence that poem was the first time I acknowledged the convergence of the reader and the text, and I was ecstatically exploring the brand-new consciousness of the duality of the poetic reading experience. John Paul Riquelme in his "Introduction: Wolfgang Iser's Aesthetic Politics: Reading as Fieldwork" mentions that Iser describes "the interpretive act as a form of translation in what is basic and unavailable to us [which then] becomes a productive mapping of ever new territories." In effect, my understanding of *Howl* became my map showing me a route to new lands of poetry within myself. Riquelme also explained that, to Iser, "illustrative mapping is related to literature because it is a form of 'figuration' that equally assembles and

dismantles territories” (8). Because those sound territories were dismantled I was able to assemble another area that allowed me to enjoy poetry even more. Gone was the worry about whether I was missing any meaning hidden within the sound contained in the poem’s meter. For the first time, poetry was almost completely visual and accessible to me. I started to emulate Allen Ginsberg’s style and method of writing poetry.

Another valuable lesson I learned through personal experience that accords with Reader Response Theory, is that poems have significance to readers based on various levels of accessibility, with most readers preferring a reasonable level of difficulty. Certainly T.S. Eliot thinks differently, as I discussed earlier in that he thinks the harder the poem the better (which certainly suits some readers well, but not most) , but my experience leads to a slightly more accessible view about poetry. In addition to the form, the content in Allen Ginsberg’s poetry is also accessible. His poetry contains common events of which most readers have a general knowledge, thus making his poetry easier to understand. Once you explore the common events and the meanings of some of the words, you can easily understand the symbolism in his poetry. This in my opinion leads to a pleasant and interesting reading experience. For example, the title of one of Ginsberg’s poems is *Sunflower Sutra*; the word “sutra” in the title is a reference to Buddhist scripture and the Eastern religion of Zen Buddhism which is also the adopted religion of the “Beat Generation,” a school of poetry which Ginsberg played helped develop and perpetuate. I found the definition of the word “sutra” in less than a minute, the easy access to the meaning of the symbolism contained within the poem allows the reader to connect emotionally with the poem and the writer:

Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray
shadow against the sky, big as a man, sitting
dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust--
--I rushed up enchanted--it was my first sunflower,
memories of Blake--my visions—Harlem” (*Sunflower Sutra*)

With five easy minutes of internet research and this biographical knowledge, the symbolism of the Sunflower as well as the parallel storyline of Buddha and Ginsberg become clear to the reader and lead to a greater understanding of the poem. A little more checking, and you realize he riffs on a Romantic forebear, William Blake, with the phrase, “memories of Blake--my visions ...” If you know Blake and his visions, you have this part of the Romantic tradition to deepen your sense of Ginsberg’s experience with the sunflower. This accessibility of Ginsberg’s poetry allows for an emotional connection to his poetry as well as a greater intellectual understanding of the symbolism contained in the poem; together they result in a greater appreciation for his poetry.

When I read Ginsberg’s poetry for the first time, I felt an immediate bond with him because, while I feel more comfortable writing and speaking my words, the language of my peers and the language of my college years, in which most of my critical thinking skills formed, is American Sign Language (ASL). At its most artistic, ASL is a language that conveys meaning through concepts and images, much like the compressed language of poetry in English. While this paper does not explore the linguistic relation between poetry and ASL in depth, it is appropriate to mention because Allen Ginsberg’s poetry communicates in concepts and images which make access much easier for deaf individuals who communicate through ASL. In this way as well, Reader Response affirms my experience: Iser proposed that literature “does not mirror cultural

determinations but negotiates cultural boundaries, freeing one from prescriptions of identity rather than freezing one within them” (Schwab 75)

As if authenticating my connection to Ginsburg and my bilingual consciousness, Ginsburg himself recognized the negotiation of cultural boundaries exactly as it related to seeing his poetry translated into ASL. Peter Cook, a well known actor in the deaf community, told a story to journalist Scott Walters about the day that Allen Ginsberg visited the National Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a college of Rochester Institute of Technology. The day that Ginsberg visited NTID he gave a reading of his poem *Howl*. After he read it, he asked for an ASL translation of his line, “...listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox.” Walters wrote,

Well known deaf actor Patrick Graybill stepped forward ...thought for a moment then mimed putting a coin into a slot with his right hand. His left arm became a mechanism that lowered the ‘record’ onto the turntable and his right index finger descended onto the record which was now spinning. Suddenly, he made the sound of a violent explosion and the record and tone arm spiraled up into the air and disappeared.

(Walters 1)

After Graybill’s performance, Ginsberg declared,

That’s it! That is exactly what I was looking for. Of course I didn’t write anything about putting money into the slot or the record coming

down...but the concept is there. Let the concept get involved. When you translate one language into another language, you can't keep the rhythm or the wit or the rhyme of the original. But, you can get the clear, hard image. (Walters 1)

Ultimately, I like poetry that is easily accessible. The poetry I aim to write allows the poet to build an emotional impact on the reader by communicating on a personal level yet in accessible language that connects to public meanings. Poems also should allow for the negotiation of cultural boundaries and “enfold a...reader as the addressee of their own alterity” (Schwab 76). While texts do not simply recreate or copy the present world, literary texts are marked by a sense of otherness. The text can guide or shape a person's response to readings by inviting specific responses; individual readings will not coincide with the parameters of "the implied reader." Instead, readings are shaped the events that shape the historical situation in which the reading takes place (Schwab 76). With that said, the act of reading according to the principles of the uniformists allows readers to steer their own journey into the “otherness” that is created from the literary text.

Ginsberg's poetry is accessible to me because he uses clear concepts that translate easily into ASL, a visual language, rather than relying on aural patterns such as rhyme and alliteration to captivate his audience. It is hard to relate to a poem when you're flipping through the encyclopedia, leafing through a dictionary, and going to a translation website to find hidden meanings crammed into every line that is heavily sound-dependent or has layers of abstruse allusion. Without the writer's allowing his personal emotions to be accessible by the reader without departing too often from the page in search of sense,

how can the reader allow him/herself to connect to the poem? A personal interaction made by the reader and the writer's words is created at the halfway mark, with the writer and the reader stepping toward each other to complete the connection between the two. T.S. Eliot felt the more allusion-filled and difficult the better: "And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living" (Eliot, 9.3. par 18). However, I side with the more populist poets of the Beat Generation as well as the tenets of Romantic poets in using common experiences and everyday language in poetry.

Analysis of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and My Poems

Iser, in his book *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* stated that "literature is a decisive means of shaping cultural reality" (Schwab 77) In this he means that what we read has an impact on our understanding of other cultures as well as our own. However,

...individual readings will never coincide with the parameters of the 'implied reader' instead actual readings are shaped by the contingencies and idiosyncrasies that determine the historical situation in which they take place. The act of reading, then, unfolds in the space between the implied reader and the concrete reader, a space marked by the dynamics of cultural interaction and negotiation.

(Schwab 77)

Iser is saying here that literature shapes our cultural realities, not only our understanding of those cultural realities, which means the text does shape us and our realities and expressions. This prospecting of historical situation(s) and cultural negotiation(s) is the path I take here in this paper. I ground my analysis in the text as well as my own experiences to create a convergence suitable to the implied reader and the concrete reader. I aim for that space using *Outrage*,³ a term that I have adopted and created in response to the cultural interactions with the deaf community as well as the historical situation(s) in which Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti's poetry takes place.

The response to historical situations that Ginsberg expresses in his poetry is one of the main reasons I was attracted to his work. Both as a reader and writer, I also felt attracted to the use of his poetry to promote social change. As a writer, I want my words to mean something and affect people rather than just make a pretty picture. Ginsberg's poetry didn't just create a pretty picture; it made ugly pictures as well as aesthetically pleasing pictures, to illustrate serious social concerns. Ginsberg was not just a radical, but one of America's premier poet-patriots; he had a vested interest in making America a better place through his first rate poetry. His poetry exposes wrongdoing in America's history. Allen Ginsberg was concerned with social policy and the oppressive nature of the American government during the fifties, sixties and seventies. He sought to change the status quo for the oppressed liberal intellectuals during these times.

Later in life, Ginsberg reflected that some of his protestations were misguided: "I'm an idiot, a complete idiot who wasn't as prophetic as I thought I was... I thought the

³ Outrage: I define outrage as the emotional reaction from which outrage is derived.

North Vietnamese would be a lot better than they turned out to be. I shouldn't have been marching against the Shah of Iran because the mullahs have turned out to be a lot worse” (Hampton). Allen Ginsberg’s concern as a social activist was for the social equality of everyone. In some cases, his attempts to fix things were misguided; however, as a poet in the protest tradition Ginsberg attempted to change the status quo for the better.

Outrage at social injustice a theme that can be found in Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s prose and poetry and in my poem, *Appetite for Destruction*⁴. The focus on the experiences of oppression in our poetry serves as the impetus for this outrage. This outrage is so deep that the words of the poem can barely contain it. The rage pushes against the words, creating explosive tension.

Different expressions of outrage occur in Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl*. In Ginsberg’s *Howl*, the first line is very angry, He cries out against the violence of the system that crushes people. It is a statement to the world against America’s repression and destruction of very intelligent people who just do not fit the mold of America in the 1950s. Ginsberg says with explosive force, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical/ naked,” (2043). This is a statement directed to the oppressive “America” that has locked Ginsberg’s friends and intellectual colleagues in insane asylums because they do not match the 1950s idea of a normal person.

Explosive outrage protects an underlying sadness many times in reference to insane asylums in *Howl*. On page 2045, Ginsberg describes a person in an insane asylum. This person is most likely one of his friends “who broke down crying in white gymnasium naked and trembling before the/ machinery of other skeletons,/...and shrieked with delight in policecars for/ committing no crime but their wild cooking

⁴ See Appendix A for the whole poem.

pederasty and/ intoxication.” In the first two lines “who broke down crying in a white gymnasium naked and trembling before the/ machinery of other skeletons,” outrage exposes naked sadness. In the lines before, the first two talk about various subjects, and as the reader approaches the line quoted above, the emotional substance of the lines changes from humor to protest, then sadness and finally outrage at the injustices and repression of the medical and authoritarian institutions: the “white gymnasiums” and “policecars.” The outrage at the authoritarian institution draws from the “criminality” of homosexuality, “No crime but their own wild cooking pederasty”. Ginsberg viewed the American legal system as “unnecessarily oppressive, directed by American fundamentalist morality rather than by a concern for law and order” (McQuade 2042).

Outrage appears in *Howl* in the description of police arrests for sodomy as the physical act of rape: “Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed/ with joy.” The “saintly motorcyclists” mentioned in this line refers to policemen. The usage of the term “saintly motorcyclists” is sarcastic, reflecting outrage toward the elevated civic status of policemen. Ginsberg is angry because he views policemen as instruments of oppression rather than upholders of law and order. The image of “saintly motorcyclists” is particularly apt because Ginsberg was raised on protest as a means of facilitating social change. At protests, particularly crowded protests, there are numerous policemen on motorcycles and they are the most visible of all policemen.

The oppression of homophobia as rape by policemen serves as a double entendre. The raw brutality of rape serves to show the oppression of the system, and the fact that those protesters advocating for social change let the policemen oppress them. At the same

time, “screamed/ with joy” demonstrates that those protesters are using that show of force as another opportunity to protest, a way of subverting the oppression and showing the police that the victims thereby gain control morally. In this sense, it has the same force of non-violent social protest of Gandhi.

While Ginsburg uses sexual violence to express his sense of oppression and the resulting outrage against homophobia, Ferlinghetti, in his poem [*In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem To See*], expresses outrage in a different way. Ferlinghetti, “strove to redefine the relationship of the artist to the outside world and to depict ‘the people of the world/ exactly at the moment when/ they first attained the title of/ suffering humanity” (Ferlinghetti 1994). Ferlinghetti’s outrage is directed toward governmental oppression. Indeed, Ferlinghetti has described himself as an “enemy of the state,” he also “argues for the artist’s active social and political issues” and is concerned with, “...larger social, economic, and political issues...and sorrow for the suffering and alienation engendered in a violent, post-industrial age” (Ferlinghetti 1994)

Within his poem [*In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem To See*] Ferlinghetti uses violent imagery as a cautionary measure, as a warning to the people and as an example of what can and will happen when people are oppressed, “Heaped up/ groaning with babies and bayonets.”. In the poem, we see the outrage of Ferlinghetti’s descriptive phrases supplemented by Francisco Goya’s etchings of various scenes of violence, suffering and destruction. The addition of visual representations of violence alongside the poem enhances the impact of the outrage caused by the poem. These images of violence serve to disgust readers: words such as “Suffering humanity” and “writhe upon the page”

(Ferlinghetti 1994) conjure up strong images of violence and pain that are reflected by the images in Goya's collection of etchings, The Disasters of War.

Goya uses images of legionnaires many times in the collection of etchings; legionnaires are foreign soldiers who have joined a branch of the French Army. This part of the France's military is called the French Foreign Legion, which allows foreign soldiers to serve because the French Army does not allow foreign soldiers to join the regular French army. These during the 19th century these foreign soldiers mainly served for France's imperialistic quests. As Goya's images show, legionnaires are mostly represented as doing or about to do acts of violence.



Picture retrieved from <http://www.napoleonguide.com/goya38.htm>

Ferlinghetti's poem alludes to the "plague by legionnaires [sic]". Ferlinghetti later says that the people oppressed by the legionnaires are "The same people/ only further from home," an allusion to colonial imperialism, which is a form of state-sponsored oppression. Ferlinghetti makes the parallel between the physical violence of the past, which was used as a method of oppression, to the mental oppression of today's America, which he shows as, "false windmills and demented roosters."

Ferlinghetti's concern for social justice runs parallel to Ginsberg's, both focus on the state and the "suffering humanity" of Americans. While Ginsberg focuses more on the people that are already fighting for social justice, those that "let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed/ with joy," Ferlinghetti focuses on those that are already "suffering," he focuses on those that are "on freeways fifty lanes wide," "maimed citizens/ in painted cars" (Ferlinghetti 1995) He focuses on them in an effort to rouse them from their "imbecile illusions of happiness" (Ferlinghetti 1995) in an attempt to get them to see their "suffering humanity" and to rise up and fight against the government's oppression of the people.

Ferlinghetti wrote a recent poem in which he urges people to speak out against the government and its machinery of war. The poem, titled *Speak Out!* urges people to avoid complacency and it contains subject matter similar to *[In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See]* only this time instead of urging people to just rouse themselves from a complacent life, he urges them to become vehement and speak out against complacency and against the war in Iraq, because if they do not, the government will come and gather up the young men again and send them to war. This in effect, will force them to become like the "legionnaires [sic]" of Goya's etchings. Ferlinghetti says, "While all the young men/Will be killing all the young men/In the killing fields again/So now is the time for you to speak/ All you lovers of liberty/All you lovers of the pursuit of happiness" (*Speak Out!*). While this poem is not angry, it does contain a passionate call to arms of sorts for poets, writers, and painters. Ferlinghetti's urgency is apparent in the repetition of the phrase, "and no one speaks" he also rather angrily says that the "National Endowment of the Arts of/ complacency/ will not speak." This poem speaks out against the

governmental oppression of young Americans that will be, and are being, sent off to fight a war that Ferlinghetti sees as unjust and oppressive.

I wrote *Appetite For Destruction* in 2002 which was my senior year in high school. It was reflective of my life experiences from early childhood up to 2002. This poem is heavily influenced by Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. I wrote this poem in the stream of consciousness method, the periods in this poem have been added after I wrote it. Before it was revised it contained no periods except one at the end. *Howl*, depending on the publisher, is a five page long poem that is one sentence, it continues from one end to the other without a period. This is to show that the whole thing is one complete, disjointed thought. I loved the idea of that and I copied it. However, I added punctuation marks later because I felt that they were necessary to make my thoughts clearer to other people when they read it.

Appetite for Destruction

Changing the scheme of reality looking at life through
the fogged up lenses of society's dreams.
Bringing myself to tolerate more and
more of what it seems to be mine. The ability
of the disability exceeds expectations of
what it is like to be disadvantaged.
to be truly disadvantaged the hypocrites label themselves disabled but not really
disabled and rape the system with SSI and VR
while proclaiming themselves independent shunning the label of disabled

Choose one choose the other!
Bring yourself to par, we are not living in the streets!
we are not
brokedown dolls
rather we are masquerades of brokedown dolls
the rape of the system for the disabled by the disabled
Appetite for destruction,
the destruction of the normal standards. Who am I

(1999-2000)

In my poem *Appetite for Destruction*, outrage is also used to lash out against oppression although the particulars of the oppression differ. Ginsberg deals with the social oppression of intellectuals who did not conform to American ideals in the '50s and '60s while Ferlinghetti's poems that I use deal with those already suffering and attempts to galvanize them to speak out against governmental oppression.

My poem *Appetite for Destruction* deals with societal oppression, particularly in the form of paternalism, of a culture formed by a linguistic minority, by the linguistic majority and the parallel internalized oppression. Deaf people are a linguistic minority that internalizes the oppressive paternalism of the linguistic majority. The view that justifies this paternalism involves the negative stereotypical terms of disability. The internalized oppression stems from the receipt of disability benefits such as Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) which is a monthly check given to young deaf people and encourages a dependency on and/or subsequent abuse of the system from an early age.

Appetite for Destruction opens with anger at society for having set pre-determined expectations for the deaf. Echoing the sarcasm of "saintly motorcyclists," I write about "society's dreams" sarcastically because the system of oppression is so ingrained that many deaf people are programmed to meet the lowest expectations or "dreams" of society. Society expects deaf people to exist as a marginalized culture, relegated to jobs such as janitors, laborers, and to exist on the fringes of society. Because of their assumptions about people that they consider disabled, hearing people's pre-

determined expectations “fog up their lenses” and cause them to overlook the potential of people that have a lot to offer. Without that clear lens, all that potential is going to waste.

Lines one and two, “Changing the scheme of reality/ looking at life through the fogged up lenses of society’s dreams” derive from the story that my parents told me when they found out that I became deaf at two years old. They went to the doctor looking for an explanation. In the hospital room the doctor they brought me to, the doctor had already deemed me a failure. He said in the gravest tone that I would not be able to read past a 3rd grade level and, other than learning a menial trade, I would not be able to have a good job. This story is a small part of the oppression of low expectations. As a deaf adult, this story makes me angry. I am well-educated, I intend to have a good job, and I am a contributing member of society. To deem me a failure so early before I have even started living is abandonment and failure.

Outrage in the poem mounts more and more with each passing line. Lines three and four, “Bringing myself to tolerate more and/more of what it seems to be mine” describe how I feel about the lowered expectations that society has for deaf people. My education, my writing ability, my ability to understand philosophy, everything that I possess in terms of intellectual ability is mine. However, my achievements are not mine at the same time; by having such lowered expectation of deaf adults, my successes are stripped away from me. What I mean by this is that when I succeed, every, “oh, you, a deaf person, can do that?” takes away my right to own my success it is then viewed as an anomaly, an exception to the case. Every time a deaf person exceeds these ridiculously low expectations the well meaning but insulting accolades pile up. “I didn’t know deaf people could do that!” “Wow...and you’re deaf too?” and my personal favorite “deaf

people can major in English?” With every deaf person’s accomplishment we may be forced to take praise that doesn’t wholly belong to us. It belongs to our “place,” our socially constructed place within the mainstream. In the lines, “Bringing myself to tolerate more and / more of what it seems to be mine,” I emphasize that the successes of deaf persons should not be looked upon with such amazement and wonder. The praise and the sense of accomplishment will not be completely ours until society says “good” as a measure of achievement for any one deaf person and nothing more. Society’s oppression is based upon the conception that we have risen past our expectations when it is society’s expectations for the deaf that need to be raised.

As a consequence of society’s expectations of the deaf people, we have internalized the oppression of the majority and have begun oppressing ourselves. We do this by accepting money earmarked for the disabled. We do this by assuming the label “disabled” while denying that very label. Even worse, we perpetuate negative associations with disability. I write, “to be truly disadvantaged the hypocrites label themselves disabled but not really disabled/ and rape the system with SSI and VR.” Deaf people should not accept money on the basis of disability, because as a culture we proclaim ourselves a linguistic minority, we say we can do anything but hear, but yet we take money that is given out of pity. To take that money internalizes that pity and creates self-oppression. In my poem the sense is that this hypocritical attitude destroys the deaf community by encouraging disability to be a reason for coasting through life. As a student at Gallaudet University, I have heard of the first day of every month called “deaf day” because SSI checks arrive on the first day of every month. If the money given by the government is used as a scholarship for higher education, that is different. Otherwise it

becomes a crutch within that eats away at our dignity. The government's encouragement of financial dependence is an example of oppression because by giving us the money in the first place the government already looks at us as lesser than whole, as already broken. That stigma stays with us for the rest of our lives.

There is an increasing vehemence in my expressions of frustration with deaf individuals that internalize the governmental and societal oppression and react by coasting through life on governmental, disability-specific welfare is apparent in the second stanza, "Choose one choose the other! / Bring yourself to par, we are not living in the streets!" To be fully recognized as a linguistic minority by society and not as disabled, we must shed the label of disabled. We must stop the "masquerade of broke-down dolls," collecting disability benefits for something that deaf people feel that we are not because we are not living in the streets, leaning haphazardly against bus station benches. To assume the mantle of stereotypical disability is to declare that something is wrong, that we are in effect "broken." If we are not disabled, then we need to stop oppressing ourselves and break free of the system that keeps deaf persons from their rightful accomplishments. Deaf people need to be a cohesive culture linked by the use of a common language.

The third and final stanza ties up the previous two stanzas with the statement "Appetite for destruction, / the destruction of the normal standards. Who am I." Those two lines clearly restate my need to break down society's low standards for deaf people and erect higher ones in their place. It also emphasizes that I feel that we need to choose one identity, as not disabled and then change society's expectations of deaf people. Much

like Ginsberg's poetry, in my earlier poetic attempts I used outrage as my muse, hoping to create the same feelings in others as Ginsberg created in me.

While Allen Ginsberg's poetry has heavily influenced my early writing and my thought process as a writer; I have emulated his stream of consciousness writing style, I have adapted my personal experiences with the societal oppression of deaf people to a form of social protest like he has. However, as I have matured as a writer I have begun to find my current writing style becoming more like Lawrence Ferlinghetti whose style is clearer and presents his images and concepts in such a way that the common reader can easily understand.

While there are many different ways to create emotional attachment to a poem, Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti use different representation and types of violence in their works to create that attachment. Ferlinghetti's usage of violence in his poem [*In Goya's Greatest scenes We Seem To See*] is almost an historical account of violence and oppression that occurred. It also serves as a warning, that we must not forget or it will happen again. Like Ginsberg's *Howl* and Ferlinghetti's [*In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem To See*], the violence in *Appetite for Destruction* is based on anger stemming from oppression. The oppression in *Appetite for Destruction* is from within, the internalized oppression of a culture that is unable to rid itself of the patriarchal designation of disabled. It does not try to re-define the term 'disabled'; instead, it denies it in its derogatory sense and yet act in ways that reinforce the stereotypical view of disability as meaning people who are limited in more ways than the physical disability itself.

The different usages of violence in these poems serve to show readers the different forms of social protest, anger and sadness that Ginsberg encountered in his life.

The violence in the description of and the violence contained within Goya's images is also used to show the oppressive form of government that we have in America. The presence of oppression and violence calls forth the human spirit; the resulting anger and violence show what people can resort to when oppressed.

The anger and violence contained in these poems that I have just discussed have taught me as a poet that experience of injustice and the urgent call for social change can be and are major themes in poetry. Social change is a major theme in these three poems, and the use of violent images serve as a "in your face" approach that can change people's perceptions of society. For example, Ginsberg's compatriots let themselves be "fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists," Ferlinghetti describes the heaped up and "groaning babies and bayonets," and my image of deaf people as "broke-down dolls" all create a sense of ugliness that creates an emotional connection on a visceral level with the reader and hopefully provides an impetus for social change.

My Emerging Voice

My early writing which I define as the period between my junior year of high school and sophomore year of college was between 2001 and 2004. I must admit I did not write consistently; indeed, my pattern has been to write a great deal for a few months and then nothing at all for many months. Most of my writing periods have been when I went through a hard time, such as the death of my friend, or when I have taken a poetry class, which I have done my last two semesters at college. I feel that I have taken great strides in my poetry in my last semester at college. I took a poetry class through the consortium

program, which is a program where students can take classes at colleges at other universities. I took my poetry class at George Washington University. Before that, I took a poetry class at Gallaudet University. It was there where I began to see the change in my fundamental writing style.

Before my style changed, my writing was disjointed and rapid-fire, it was stream of consciousness and while it made perfect sense to me, the readers of my poems were not totally clear as to what it meant. I also believed that the subject of a poem had to be angry at some kind of social ill; I was still mimicking Ginsberg's earlier writing, particularly *Howl*. In one of my earliest pieces of poetry that I have, titled *The Otherside of Reality*, I discuss the controversy of Cochlear Implants within the deaf community. I wrote, "bringing myself closer to the rivalries of the robots, / to further technical generation of the insidious self decomposing racism." While this stream of consciousness poem makes sense to me, I need to explain it to the reader as my decision to get a Cochlear Implant which I compare to, "bringing myself closer to the rivalries of the robots," which is a multi-layered description of the controversy over Cochlear Implants, and by extension, all assistive listening devices in the culturally deaf community. I view my Cochlear Implant as nothing more than an advanced hearing aid, similar to digital hearing aids, and even similar to analog hearing aids. Then, in the next line I state my feelings on the divide in the culturally deaf community over Cochlear Implants as, "insidious self-decomposing racism." While the divide is not racism, I do feel that it is as destructive as racism and degrades the quality of the deaf community.

As my style changed I started focusing more and more on the images presented, what the context of the images were and what story those images told. I began thinking as

a writer and as a reader. I articulated my messages much more clearly. Rather than throwing down a loosely structured stream of thought, I began looking at what I wanted to say and putting it down in a much more cohesive and balanced way. This made my poems less complex and allows the reader to participate emotionally in the poem to a greater degree.

One of my poems in which my style improved and allowed the reader to become more involved with my poem was written for my GWU poetry class, titled *Arlington, with my Brother*.

Arlington, with my Brother

My feet shuffled, not quite sure what to do with themselves.
Beneath them, with a crunch, clumps of red dirt crumbled to dust
where the grass had not yet begun to grow back.
Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, we all fall down.

Your feet shuffled the same way mine did.
Your slightly frayed blue ball-cap hugged your face, both hands jammed
into your pockets at the sight of his dull-white headstone
What can I say? What can I do?

You knew him.
I felt that I did, I had seen macho, smiling pictures of you two.
You sighed and shook your head slightly.
I thank God you came back.

(2006)

This poem, like most of my poems is based on my thought process during a specific time or based on a specific theme such as *Appetite for Destruction*. Instead of using stream of consciousness as a method for getting my thoughts across I adjusted my writing style to a narrative form which outlined the who, what, where and why much more clearly than my previous stream of consciousness poems did.

The title of my poem, *Arlington, with my Brother* is a clear example of my transition from my earlier writing. It shows the setting, the characters, the scene and offers a general idea of what happened before the poem commences. The poem as a whole introduces three characters, while the characters are unnamed, I use “I,” “You,” and “His/Him” throughout the poem to clearly identify the three characters.

The first stanza and the title outline the scene, the Arlington Cemetery, and a fresh gravesite, “red dirt crumbled to dust/ where the grass had not yet begun to grow back.” The mention of Arlington, a military cemetery and the fact that our country is at war makes this an obvious allusion to the recent burial of a soldier that has died while fighting. In this stanza, the emotional impact comes from the dirt which frames the gravesite. The narrator of the poem thinks to himself, which is reflected by the use of italics rather than quotation marks, “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, we all fall down,” which references a line often said at a funeral and also refers to a Mother Goose line. This is used to reinforce an already somber setting to give the reader an intense emotional connection.

In the second stanza, the second and third characters are introduced. The second character is introduced, and is behaving the same way the narrator is which indicates the narrator and the second character are there together. The way the two characters are shuffling their feet, and the lack of verbal communication, indicates that the two characters are male because non-verbal communication and nervous movements at emotional times is a commonly held stereotypical view of men. The third character is introduced by “the sight of his dull-white headstone.” Then in italics, the narrator thinks,

“What can I say? What can I do?” Which reflects the emotional intensity of the moment; the narrator is unsure how to react to the emotionally-charged moment.

In a continuation of the emotionally charged moment of the two men at the graveside of a soldier recently killed while fighting. The narrator reflects on the two characters of the poem, the first character he knew intimately, the second character the narrator only knew through pictures. The third line of the last stanza introduces meaningful, nonverbal communication, “You sighed and shook your head slightly.” The nonverbal communication is a direct result of the emotional intensity of the moment, as if any word that is said would break the sanctity of the moment. The narrator then leaves a final thought, *“I thank God you came back.”* This statement resonates emotionally with the reader and creates an intense feeling of emotional attachment with the reader.

Conclusion

I started this project as a way to record my development, to show how I grew as a poet and as a thinker. I also hoped in some way to show others what may lie in the path of an aspiring poet. Throughout my writing career I’ve faced many obstacles. The most daunting because they seemed insurmountable were my many writer’s blocks at the start of my self-education. I’ve faced positive and negative criticism, both of which have allowed me to develop as a poet and as a person of integrity. I do admit though that some of the harshest criticisms have come from within. I’ve moved on from that and developed an introspective and academic analysis of my works.

With the use of Reader Response criticism as a tool for understanding my conversations with Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, I have developed a better understanding of my work, but, more important, I have developed a better understanding of my readers. Understanding the reader is critical to discovering your effective poetic voice. Originally, I did not understand the importance of understanding my reader and my poems and thus my poems did not have the desired effect. I have found the Reader Response theory beneficial to me as a poet and as a tool to better understand poetry. It has helped move me from my earlier slap-dash poetry to my more crafted poetry today and has provided me a tool to continue developing. I hope that others learn as much as I did with the tools I discovered were most helpful. Above all, continue to write.

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Appendix of Poems

Appetite for Destruction

Changing the scheme of reality looking at life through
the fogged up lenses of society's dreams.
Bringing myself to tolerate more and
more of what it seems to be mine. The ability
of the disability exceeds expectations of
what it is like to be disadvantaged.
to be truly disadvantaged the hypocrites label themselves disabled but not really disabled
and rape the system with SSI and VR
while proclaiming themselves independent shunning the label of disabled

Choose one choose the other!
Bring yourself to par, we are not living in the streets!
we are not
brokedown dolls
rather we are masquerades of brokedown dolls
the rape of the system for the disabled by the disabled
Appetite for destruction,
the destruction of the normal standards. Who am I

(1999-2000)

The Otherside of Reality

Scarlet starlet and she's in my bed⁵
A candidate for my soul mate bled
Feed my head⁶
Feed my head

The ecstasy is to me what it means to be
The world that is where signing is meant to be
Silence is we
Silence is we

The world opens wide and what we see
is what is meant to be
the rhythmic spinning of the fan
changes the currents of the air
changing the scheme of education
bringing myself closer to the rivalries of the robots,
to further technical generation of the insidious self decomposing racism

Coming closer and closer to the realities of life
ringing myself ever closer to discrimination rather than praise, loving every minute of it
cry to myself a candidate for my soul mate
bled a candidate for my soul mate bled feed
my head feed my head withering in agony,
I'm stronger I'm better than before

Half the world realizes it and the other half doesn't
but within that half there are some who support me
and my minority, while drunk off the successes of my dear old high school
the idealistic come to be fed the ideas of the new generation and bring about
my selfsame destruction.

(2000)

⁵ From The Red Hot Chili Peppers "Otherside"

⁶ From Jefferson Airplane "Go Ask Alice"

Untitled

The phone rang, its warbling shriek pierced my
newfound eardrums.

My neck tensed in pain as it continued on;
pecking at my eyeball.

Mom...phone!!

I let my mother, the constant gardener, know that
her son's new ears, did, in fact, work.

That's cool...

I had just done something
that I had only seen my brothers do.

She came in with a smile
"I'm sorry hon, that was a mockingbird"

(2006)

Arlington, with my Brother

My feet shuffled, not quite sure what to do with themselves.
Beneath them, with a crunch, clumps of red dirt crumbled to dust
where the grass had not yet begun to grow back.

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, we all fall down.

Your feet shuffled the same way mine did.
Your slightly frayed blue ball-cap hugged your face, both hands jammed
into your pockets at the sight of his dull-white headstone
What can I say? What can I do?

You knew him.
I felt that I did, I had seen macho, smiling pictures of you two.
You sighed and shook your head slightly.
I thank God you came back.

(2006)

Gallaudet Fall of '06

The little shiny fish

swim to and fro

in the *redbrick* **and** ivy aquarium.

Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Blockading their castle

from the bubbly aqua-man.

While the crawfish wait on the bottom, falsely extending peace signs towards

the little fish.