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MIDDLETON, ED. Poems (1970) Directed by Fred Chappell pp. 33.

These poems are not experiments in metrics. They are not experiments in form. They are not experiments in persona. There is no conscious celebration of any particular theme. Whatever organization the poems seem to fall into is purely coincidental. Whatever stance I have taken, if any, can best be explained by an unknown poet, known alternately as Huck and Slingbo. His words follow:

One Gram

When you write in blood you have something to say,
if it's yours and you're not a holy body hacker

Every word to the point, no bushes to beat around,
no sliding panels, no Mickey Finns.
No confections anyplace, just knife
and fork, plate, and spoon.

Water can make it run, but can't wash it away,
if you write in blood you have something to say.

POEMS

by

Ed Middleton

[Edwin Gheens Middleton, Jr.]

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

Paul Cheppell
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee
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Sprung Through The Hangman's Trap

All the bright plastic contraptions framed
in vinyl hanging off your walls, but now
the wine has sunk in, so let me pause
and consider. Yes,
all the portraits of your mother's family
you keep over the spice shelf over
the stove; and the one
of them all together at cocktail hour
in Palm Beach, all dressed in white
with polished teeth, hands folded, white
cigarettes, for the ladies white heels,
white spats for the men.
I turn to chalk and the wine fights
to return me to a human form.
In spite of your healthy interest in the Bible
and pornography, there is such a darkness here.
Every face above the stove is grinning his
linen smile, but I turn to chalk,
when I touch the reason you hung them there.

The Pipe Was Clogged

I went down
old wooden stairs, worn smooth as stone,
but noisy like the dusty
keyboard of a dead piano.
I went down fast
to find a misplaced plunger.
My plumber's friend was lost I had to find him.
Stubbed the light switch on,
then foot over foot
down two octaves to the floor of the basement.
Around I turned, first my whole body,
and then just my head.
The black furnace went about his business, unaware
of my purpose. The dust lay about
in monotonous dunes and had quietly
devoured everything in sight, except
a postage stamp machine
without any innards, a raw red
corncob and the misplaced plunger.
My feet puffed back in muffled surprise,
convinced, I started forward
and collared my prize.
But in the corner,
damp and crusty with dust,
deflated, apparently discarded,
slumbered an old canvas suitcase,
my initials still gleaming.
I seized it up, it wheezed mold spores
like a winding sheet.
Up, up, up the stairs both hands full.
Not too gently I spread the old bag in the sun.
I stood there and watched water bugs
abandon ship, then I fixed the sink.

Dove Hunt

Coming out shot from a barrel,
 a cold blue pipe, talking
 dragon talk.

Coming clean out, scattered,
 shot into the blue breach above the ground.
 Stinging with life, the fire behind,
 born on the target, bound in explosion.

Off dove off, you are no clay pigeon.
 tonight I will not choke on powder.
 Off wing, off if you can,
 I am born on target, chanting
 through the dusk.

I shall catch you in my fingers
 and love you to the ground.

As it is for the Earth: A Love Poem

How to begin to say that
this snow, this blaze of switches,
this starless night,
this grumbling furnace and silent ash,
is neither hot or cold,
or the dream packed tenement of tomorrow?

You stand on your nose, a seal on a ball,
instinctively poised on my axis.
Now, I ask you, why
must I still attempt to explain?
My hand is not a claw,
nor burning, nor empty.
Can you feel the pen denting my fingers?

You are more than a stomach
and certainly no seal, after all;
so I have cut you white roses. Beside
the glass vase on the inherited table
a silver tin of sardines floats on dark grain.
Bits of headless fish that missed the cracker, bask
in blonde oil, stare up at our flowers.

Beer can, jug of wine, ashtrays
in the morning to be watered
and dried. Toss me down
and I won't break and I have no reason.
You want my plants?
We are more than dirt, but no better.

For the Son of Man

This clear morning the man in my beard
is plucking tobacco crumbs out of my hair.
Me, I'm just splashing here minding my time,
helping the wind turn flips in the rain.

Simply soaking my bath, not drinking wine,
hopping drunk in my throat.

Been a long silent house until you showed up alive
with a freight train that whistles.

My ears sound fine in your welcome guitar.
Kick off your sandals.
I'll fix you a song.

Blue Ridge Mts.

The needles
 on the floor
 rusty
 in ripe old pleasure
 made a bed for
 my woman to love on
 and to dream on
 looking up at the needles
 spread green
 a full house
 in a sky
 flush blue

After the Mountain

A State Patrolman served me well,
called me a good customer,
believed my tale about the registration,
manifested enough interest in my occupation
to adjust the trial date
to the girth of my bank book.
He even wished me well
before driving away
in his black car.

Some days are just like that.
That was after the mountain,
the padded silence of space,
the bath of sunlight.

The blanket was soaked with Coca-Cola,
real country ham sandwiches
fed the people.
You and me,
the people in the green blades on the hillside,
the cow dung like footstools
and the straw tufts
scattered around like hairstyles.

The air was a pure youth,
a stream in motion.
The purr of the motor
in the brief clarity of sun down,
and then the speeding ticket.
Sometime it's like that after the mountain,
when even a smiling cop
can't bring you down.

This Time Round

Blind man can't see black
shine of coffee in the mug.
He feel it in his nostrils.

Won't talk. Can't read.
Hands busy with flat sticks.
Blind man sing.

Morning on the street
hunched on a stool, head
up in sun or rain,
he sing, fingers clap sticks together.

Children bring blind man sticks,
sticky and damp with ice cream.
Blind man sing his song.

Grocer bring blind man twine,
golden colored and tough.
Blind man hunched with soup can
hung round his neck sing.

Blind man lash sticks in form of tree.
Blind man eat.
Blind man drink.
Blind man sing his song.

Last Fare Beneath The Moon

The bones of the sea are locked in your spell.
At your zenith you draw ebony swells up to a point,
salty mountain of living things,
a pyramid raised to your firm embrace.

Women know you well,
and grace your fullness with glistening child.
Taxis chase you down wanton streets,
pale lamp, you silence the night spots.

Through the dusty windshield I read your palm,
my intuitions smoke up the cab like wounded soldiers.
Lay us down, sister, to rest.

The city is drunk on men with pistols,
firing their blood at your sky.

Medicine Song

Come baby lay your colors down.
I won't save them or obliterate them,
just lay your colors down.

What have you locked up in your head?
Your hands fumble across my skin.
Your eyes are closed, I'm growing cold,
come lay your colors down.

I was the general who prayed for war.
Once was a sailor who walked the plank.
I was a rainman dead in the snow,
just lay your colors down.

Just to touch you in my soul,
just to fill your cup with wine,
to talk with you throughout the night,
in the morning see you lay your colors down.

White Lightning aboard the Nautilus

Inking squares around white light,
 I am down in the engine room cooking up darkness
 with a ruler, paper and a ball point pen.
 My eye lolls on the smooth turning
 drive shaft, lightly oiled,
 a steady tuned vibration.
 The atom spined motor claws the air,
 wheels with teeth eat each other.
 Everything is tied down or spinning on course.
 Lines meet with mechanical grace,
 slashes and coils. My hand draws back,
 a snake about to strike, trying to
 grasp it, to remember the smoke
 of a pissed out fire, or coffee
 stewed with home made whiskey.
 I try to picture it in my mind,
 the bubbles, the copper worm, the slow fire.
 Then on paper white as blazes
 I design my recollections,
 manufacture an oily drink.

Voices and Water

Two stoned men in a dredged up oyster boat
leave lights behind,
stutter out into the bay at three A.M..
Voices clutter and jangle
into the old Sea Horse motor, then
catch and spin above the vibration.
Black water all around
except where the bow and wake
ignite phosphorescent algae.
"You touch the animal, the animal glows."
And the talk an arc over
the whine of the motor.

First stop a duck blind.
Box on the water, shoebox,
shoebox on water,
where an osprey has fed.
Bones in the cedar skeleton thatch
and inside beer cans left by hunters.

Second stop the island.
Push on to the island.
"The farther out you go, the stronger the wind."
Hand in the water like a torch
and back in the boat still glowing.
"Out here the sky is darker, the stars closer."
For a filmy instant, yellow fingers,
and then black water walking
over the skin to meet the night, further and further.

On the horizon a solid cloud breaks
into peaks, ragged edges, breaks
in the middle, becomes two chunks, becomes
an island split by a channel.
Pine trees, ridges and insects.
Big water on the other side.

Nose into the channel and scrape bottom.
Kill the motor, study the bottom.
"Hand me the oar, the tide is out."
Push off, head for home. The home lights lean
out on the water back around the bend.

Eastern Shore

Time was when I hunted
 holes in the sky.
 Now I listen to sea nettles
 break a path through the sea.

The moon rides the tide
 and the osprey sleeps.

A light on water
 silent as stone.

The Other Side of Joy

When I break through the clouds
I will be thinking of you.
Shot off the face of the planet
by a chrome plated cannon, aimed at the moon,
hauled blindly forward like ice through a straw,
until I break through
to your dawn blue mind.

Stranded on a cot with my mystery book.
The door opens.

Pusher who stabs me with her silver gun,
whose lips drop slightly apart to kiss my eyes
awake and who sets fire
to my chest and feet,
it is you,
I will be thinking of when I break through.

So then a bad man can have no peace?
Do your worst.

Thirsty clown, O pusher, you bloody outlaw,
standing in the keyhole,
gun drawn,
drop your mask, come
sit down and play strip poker
until our tendons knot, snap and pop on my cot.

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Visit to Hometown Suburbia

God what magnificent animals we are.
Tonight in this frigid air stretched out
beside you sleeping, I hear
you purring like a stereo lion.
If I were a spider
I would tie you up in a web,
and if it could hold the blue waves
of muscle pacing through your breast,
then I would hold the universe, its viruses,
its air conditioning, its shooting stars.

On one elbow propped up against you, safe
from the crush of summer heat, I
am lost on prismatic mountain peaks,
as I watch your eyeballs wander
and seek beneath your lids.
As I knot dream into fabric,
I am lured into the scents
of flesh and all the perfumes
you have put on to kill them.
A cold tide sucks through my brain.

Tomorrow we go to motorcycle races.
God what magnificent animals we are
tonight in this frigid air stretched out.

With a Bird High in the Hexagrams

The snow on the brain of the mountain at dawn
perfume of your voice
makes the asphalt thread climbing seem
like the purple rim of a crown
forever traveling in time and space.

Yes and who would care to know of us here
melting into vapors under the sun
or dancing together who could hear our feet
fall like yarrow sticks through the air?

So listen old lady owl, my flower,
your cold breath burns my lungs
spread white wings, circle quickly, your
wisdom of talons clean as ice
will steer my moon car up the rungs.

Thank You Mary
for Fleur

Television's got its back to the room,
screen faces up against the wall.
What do I look at?

I look in on you in your bath
in New Brunswick. What lovely
blue soap, I wish I could
smell it. And your hands,
eyes, taut legs, smooth skin.

I see you still in bed, smiling
at a dream that crosses your
mind like sunlight
that floats across the pillow
and ignites your hair.

And now your eye, much too
human to be cat, appears
to sparkle between your lids,
but you don't see me, I think.
And just when I think you

don't see me, you throw off
the sheet and I see us
together.

Almost Touching

I have no token of your visit but lady
I feel you here, I do.
Maybe a photograph is what I need,
maybe a book, a note,
a poem, a strangled gourd
shaking its life out in my ear.
A letter from you would be so good.
Tell me something I want
to hear, tell me I want, you know,
really want to see you!
Don't let doubt cast
shades between us, come
across freight train style.
Shake my tracks, shake the moon,
make the rain sting and the fire
be warm, the bed be soft,
the love complete.

Must We Die This Silent Death?

Your bed ruffled, full of you
and me sprawled beside.
Our trip to the country ended
here. We lacked the
strength to leave the car
and walk around. Now not even
the energy to zip down our clothes,
we just lie here and close
our eyes and don't sleep.

The past, I could say that
in the past it was not this way.
I could lie about the future.
We tell stories about strangers,
we instruct each other. We don't
drink or smoke we just lie
here and don't sleep and
wish we could.

Ramble, we could travel, I bet
we will do that someday soon.
I taste us together sometimes
and promise myself too much.

When Black is White

Love what we are they don't know.
The mind stalks for definition, but enough,
now put your head back in
the crook of my arm
and hear the deep lung
of the soul of the train, feel
the wheels plant the track.
Insects spray out a treble line,
a back porch slams its door, the moon full
and the black shadows of the apple tree
branch overhead draw out circles that spin.
Feel the wheels plant the track?
Right on cue a green apple leaps to the ground.
Listen we are what they don't know
and all night they try to tell us.

Moonflower

I watch you open up leaf
by straining leaf.
Mist hangs all around, rain
falls at your feet.
A tight bud intent on tightness,
you have been a hard green stem.

Your voice is like the flower
that burns into the night,
like leaves your wings spread out
like leaves as you open
leaf by straining leaf.

From a Radio Photograph: a journey of twelve months

Stars look frozen to a man on the ground
like ice displayed in a velvet case, but
they burn through the black
like a firecracker fuse
not concerned with what they replace.

Horsehead Nebula rears his head
from the grind of an avalanche energy flow,
snorts fire through his nostrils,
bulges his eyes,
then goes where he has to go.

Fucking Colorado is a Stone Groove

White Glacier

Fast stream bucking around swerves
the course and down the mountain

Catching at the banks, dragging
its nails against the bends,
sucking the glacier into the valley

I Wonder Can You Shake It

I stand on the sidewalk and watch
the road turn into a ribbon of snow.
Out of the grey midnight clouds a galaxie
is falling down at my feet.
I stand on the sidewalk and smoke.
Bushes and the cars that struggle
past sag beneath it, but I
can shake it off if I want to.

But you in another latitude, you who
hate snow falls and icy streets
are warm and drugged asleep.
I stand here and become a snowman
smoking in the snow, watching
the drivers bash along and the stars
fall. You might laugh
if you saw me here and I wonder
would you try to melt me.

I wonder, because I don't know
and because you don't know.
You are there and I am here,
both locked in private asylums.

Immigrant From The West

Strange intentness in your wild western eyes
shoots me clean through the head,
a stag on your twenty below zero
Wyoming mountain, where snow
lies fresh for miles and hot piss
drills the only holes in the snow.

Shoot for the head, don't waste meat
with shrapnel, blood clots, and now
south of your philosophy you don't
bother with my tender southern meat,
but aim with hard eyes at my skull.

Twenty years in the mountain texture
will make certain you go back.
Summer will come, you will leave
your herb garden, your new black
friends, your easy heat bill.
You will go back, purchase
dry ice and game in bulk, dream
of snow for miles, then drive back
south to your freezer and cold beer.

Corn Dance

My tribe has scattered across the land.
The man who shot arrows is
down on his luck, the man who
scented new game is dreaming
in other quarters.

Our Prince is with us yet, but speaks
less and less. Our Queen is thriving
but so busy with deals, all day, all night.

Our sisters are married. Some are just gone.
Some of us work sometime, some don't.

We have to get together soon, we will,
there is always so much to sing about.

The drums ring now. Drone now.
Circles form, a summoning of lights
paints the night sky.

Crickets warm up as we will soon
dancing around our fire.

Forest Spirit

You are molten you light
the swirling track
of muscles in my arms.
The axe in my hands is two bladed,
is sharp and bites
into the bark of dead oak.

A black dog with white teeth
and red gums sniffs
at chips that jump
out of the trunk like sparks.

The wedge deepens, cuts
into the marrow, hard as rock.

The dog sees the sun flare
in the sweat on my face.
I throw the axe in again
and again, then I chop
from the other side.

The axe rings in my spine.
Blind and numb I drive
through the heartwood.
Dog and I stiffen at the sudden crack.
When light shoots in,
my fingers are frozen
from holding on.

In for Repair

Landlocked I was and had been before,
but never had I lain on the bottom
of a harbor and gazed out on the pearls
tossed up by the sea.

The tide was so low we could have walked
ashore, but the shore so damn naked,
so parched and empty of women
that we blasted it with cannon
just to pass the day.

Our rum was no good, though we swallowed
fifty gallons, still our veins spurted
sweat and there was no wind
there to blow it away.

Who could sleep with those cannon
shaking the deck, busting
palm trees to splinters and
the shouts of the men
goddamning the sun?

Glass in one hand, I stewed in the cabin,
stared out of my porthole
onto the black dance of the waves.

Highwire Lady

I dream about her everywhere, want to
talk for hours with her lying down
on her trapeeze bar, swinging back
and forth, to and fro, all day and
all night, sunday morning, right now.

Sometimes she talks about what she knows;
everybody stand up, sit down, but listen
sometimes she knows exactly what
she talks about; everything dear to me

comes out of her mouth. Makes music
old empty beer cans could dance to,
makes me scream joy out of my mind.
Don't imagine run on lines make her sick,
cause this chick can jam.

And if you know her name don't tell, for
God's sake, keep the secret, but talk
about what you have seen only. If and
only if you can make her live, give
your medicine a dose of whatever
you've got, and pull the net away.

Sitting Up So Free

Talk about dope, five children and lover,
 husband and talk about smack,
 grass, black mollys, downs, acid.

Ain't no way up but where you've been
 down, beat up and kicked around;
 so lady you say your husband's free,
 but while your lover fawns, you're
 glancing at me, and ups and downs
 is on our mind, same experience, common ground.

Smoke Ciggies, dig sounds, lover sax-
 ophone player has done his rounds,
 paid dues in New York, loves a
 city sound, but we're so country
 our thoughts in brown loam
 hang down and entwine while we

talk dope, acid and pass the time.

Finished Record

Hey I swear I can't hear the tunes
those cats are laying down on me.
So colorful, so cold and I chase
them like a meteor.

My dark dungeon in the castle had straw,
water, your dusky presence, the moon
knifed five times by the bars.

Music play on one time for my baby
who has gone long time gone away.
Eyelids squint around black expanding
pupils, rims gold with specks of amber.

Blue, cool electric light of machine
salutes me and your memory
as I recline to that watery jazz.

Water drips down my walls, dank
is the smell of my bed, straw turns
black, my pulse jumps in and
out of time with the water.

In whose arms do you dream of me?
Who up there fills the ball room
with sound, who pours your wine?

And my jailor is a jolly fat man
who smiles at breakfast and lunch.
In his backpocket a book of photographs
dance and smile of you.

Still I listen for the turnkey to wink
and turn the key, as I burn inside
this thirst and drink your memory.

So would you sail deep south with me,
deep beneath the root of coconut
palm? Would you carve a boat
of straw and would you climb the mast?

(Cont.)

These oceans are uncharted, the sea
is grey as stone. The clouds are
black as jail cells, the music
howls and bites a bone.

Never dug a drum so simple up
and down under the guitar, but
where it goes I am astonished.

Maybe you were that girl they brought in late
yesterday afternoon, the one
who wore a black slip, who
pulled at me like gravity.

Fish House Punch

Lazing on the sun porch a stoned out Tom,
head on one paw and tongue poked out,
dreamed of you, of food dish, of love
and fights.

Moppy clouds sloshed over the sky,
but Tom was clear blue in his mind.
There is something he asked me to tell you,
if you're ever in a pinch,
he said he doesn't know the answer,
he just knows when he don't itch.

There is milk in the fridge, mice
in the streets and the only thing
he has to watch for is mad
dogs and police.

He often loves the ladies, his claws are neat.
You can rub him if you want to,
but don't keep him off the street.

We Have Been Tatooned By The Same Artist

Our shape that is so locked in place
was carved by dancers who
turned to stones on our backs.

Our banner that we telegraph and
wave proudly between us was
sewn by fingerlight in the heart
of night. We lay there making
stitches, grown close in our ears.

When we stand together we are
five eyes with tongues.
Our voice is a silent thing
that gets its point across.

Jailed in the darkness of a dense thicket,
just one flash of lightning lets us
share a face and fix up
a spot to awaken in at dawn.