

THE ROAD HOME

(Poems: 1994 – 1997)

by

Lyman Grant

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On the cover:

The art proudly displayed on the cover of this book is based on a work by Shawn Camp entitled "Terrene no. 4" (54" x 54", oil and mixed media on canvas, 2005).

The work of Shawn Camp is an expressively rendered, but geometrically derived abstraction loosely based on aerial photography. In it, he explores the interplay among man and nature, structure and chaos, order and disorder.

Shawn was born in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He completed work on a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting along with a bachelor's degree in psychology at The University of Idaho. He received his Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and now paints, teaches, and lives in Austin, Texas. For more information on Shawn and his art, visit *shawncamp.net*.

For Colleen.

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— Lyman Grant

— FOREWORD —

In *The Road Home*, Lyman Grant probes, with haunting clarity and insight, the complexities of human love, from the tragedy of its passing to the ecstasy of its powerful return. These are poems of risk, courage, and brutal honesty, never flinching in the face of the actual. Whether he's working in free verse or in the more relaxed form of the prose poem, Grant writes with assured poetic skill, complementing his vernacular diction, at times profane, with passages of exquisite grace. Are these "love" poems? Absolutely, but "love" poems artfully absent the excesses of sentimentality.

The collection is intelligently divided into three sections: "Clear Directions to Some Place Else," "These Are Things I've Been Wanting to Tell You," and "Waiting for Mercy." Its overall tone moves gradually from darkness to light, from the "darkness" of old love in demise to the "light" of new love sanctified by the birth of a child. Grant wastes no time introducing his subject matter, setting the stage in the first poem ("Searching the Parking Lot for a Poem") for what follows. He writes of a man and a woman, each of whom is married, in a large parking lot. Their cars are parked far apart, and the man walks her to the far end of the lot where her car is parked. They were together for a long time, perhaps in a tryst, but Grant makes clear that . . .

*the poem is not about parking
lots or all their walking about.
The poem occurs when they arrive
at her car and they stand looking*

*at each other. This is where
huge distances are, the inches
separating two bodies. Here,
I find unbearable heat. Here
is the silence so full of words
they float between parked cars waiting
to call her back with this poem.*

In spare language remarkably free of modifiers, Grant captures the complex essence of love, finding "unbearable heat" not in its passion but in the enigmatic "inches" separating the lovers.

A distinguishing characteristic of Grant's style is his use of common language and his uncanny knack of knowing when to employ it for optimal effectiveness. This stylistic technique renders particularly powerful his expression of raw, honest emotion, including anger and even revenge, allowing both the poet and his reader a refreshing sense of catharsis and transcendence.

It is said that Beethoven, in a handwritten note above the first measure of his last string quartet in F Major (opus 135), wrote in German, "Muss es sein? Es muss sein!," the English translation of which is "Must it be? It must be!" Grant, in subtle homage to the great composer, alludes to this poignant incident, echoing the maestro's resignation in "No Strings: Prose Quartet for What Must Be." In the fourth section ("The New Place") of this masterful piece, the poet, after angrily musing about his ex-wife's string of new boyfriends, blurts, "But they all hop into that van and go camping, go sailing, all that stuff I hated. Fine, I say, let them go. They put on their goofy shorts and hiking boots, buy some Evian. Fine. Sometimes my son goes with them, but lately he's been throwing fits, so he stays with me. I like that. That part's working out."

Grant softens the harshness of common language by juxtaposing it with passages of literary elegance. In "An Animal Speaks of Speaking on Christmas Day," he writes of "breath that sang a lump of clay to be;" ". . . the music of a child / rocking in the arms of his own lullaby;" and "Confess your desire / that winds inside your chest / should breeze witness to miracles."

In the final poem of the collection ("The Laying on of Hands"), a prose poem, Grant writes about the rather unexpected moment of his son's birth, sanctifying the beauty of love returned. The birthing begins around 3:00 a.m. "in a bed not made for blood and screams," when "the elders are sleeping" and the "prayer people across town dream of a man falling, tumbling . . . toward seas heaving at the waning moon." The baby arrives, not in accordance with the predictions of man, but in the mystical, arbitrary manner of Nature when "mercy visits," after "the last appointment has ended." The poem's powerful conclusion is suffused with the glow of something holy, when "there is no other way but to kneel since kneeling is demanded, to bow before the only heaven our body will ever know, to

pull life, wet and frightened, into your palms and place him on the altar of his mother's breasts." As Nature is "arbitrary" in determining the moment of birth, so are the lines of the prose poem arbitrarily determined by the margin in Grant's deft merging of form and content.

— Larry D. Thomas
Author of *Where Skulls Speak Wind* and other volumes

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CLEAR DIRECTIONS TO SOME PLACE ELSE



For ~

The bus ends here. Paths go on. — Marge Piercy

Searching the Parking Lot for a Poem

Though I've been silent many months,
I might now write about a man
and woman in a parking lot.
This parking lot is very large,
acres, and there are but few cars
huddled beneath the scattered trees,
like cattle in western Kansas.

I would want to be clear, to make
understood that the distances
are vast, and that the air contains
a heat, something like four o'clock
in the afternoon, the air like
that last still moment inside
a balloon just before the balloon

blows up. I could say something
about the man, his marriage, and
about the woman, her marriage,
but I might not. It would be better
to mention his car was a long
way from her car but that he walked
with her all the way to the far

end of the lot where her car stood
and then when she left he walked
all the way back. I would not make
the reader think this journey was
difficult, like desert fathers
searching thirstily for Christ.
I would just want to point out that

they were together a long time
and then the man was without her
a long time. Merely that. Because
the poem is not about parking
lots or all their walking about.
The poem occurs when they arrive
at her car and they stand looking

at each other. This is where
huge distances are, the inches
separating two bodies. Here,
I find unbearable heat. Here
is the silence so full of words
they float between parked cars waiting
to call her back with this poem.

The Rose's Thorns

We do not know yet when rose's
leaves sharpened into thorns.
We imagine eons of abuse,
a million days of unwanted
tongues, the incessant nibbling
of beaks and teeth and hairy
leather lips hungry for a bit
of red, yellow, pink, or white.
For how many centuries
did the cedared breath of goats
part the tightly folded petals
to eat her sweet, sweet hips?

We do not know yet when rose's
leaves sharpened into thorns;
they might have hardened overnight
as tender hands that held her
pulled away to hold the lily
or the iris near. Might it have
been the shame of sunlight shining
on her face untouched by dew
or the ache of being pulled
apart upon an empty bed,
the agony of scent unflared,
of flesh unwarmed in dark moon oil?

We do not know yet when rose's
leaves sharpened into thorns.
Perhaps she tired of weak perfumes,
the crystal vase, and poignant pose,
and urged herself toward wild. I
believe she wanted once to taste
a dancer's blood, hair affright,
guttural call, sweat between her legs.
Their feet desire a hard dirt floor
to pound into. On his lip one
tear of blood appears. She finds
the pain that beauty can command.

290 West

So I'm driving down 290
west thinking what a day hot bright
dazzling I'm lucky s o b
saying to myself you ought to be
sitting beside me windows down
to hell with the a c today
imagining your beautiful
eyes looking at me little beads
of sweat along the curving line
of your gorgeous lips geez you're hot
I'm hot and I'm saying to myself
everybody's driving around
probably heading off to the pool
or the movies maybe the mall
just so it's cool and it's proper
and all I want to do is step
on it ease it into high take
you with me down 290 west

doesn't even occur to me
it's Thursday you dope these people
are working making cold calls or
picking kids up from mom's day out
doing chores getting stuff for home
this . . . even though I'm working too
just stepping out of the office
to buy you a little something
like a card with a poem on it
by someone who knows how to say
the things I'm feeling . . . finally
I realize they don't make cards
saying what I'm feeling at least
not at the Hallmark down the street
which is where I was aiming when
I stop in the heat remember
I'm you're married and no one's
cutting out on 290 west

today

The Y

Doing laps at the Y
swimming, swimming toward you,
half-naked into cool
water I dive and strike

out for the other side
till I touch the wall, turn,
doing laps at the Y
swimming, swimming toward you.

Either this or your sighs
on that rare afternoon
round and round in my rooms
where we kiss. Here I cry

doing laps at the Y
swimming, swimming toward you.
Down under I reach to
stroke your open thighs;

with each breath I deny
I taste a virtue loosed,
doing laps at the Y
swimming, swimming toward you.

THESE ARE THINGS I'VE BEEN
WANTING TO TELL YOU



No Strings: Prose Quartet for What Must Be

1. Voyager

It all ended when we bought a van. Yeah, that's what I said. A van. We'd been married for ten years. We had a seven-year old son. She hadn't worked in three years. I'd gotten soft and fat. My father's inheritance was running out, and she wanted a van. A god damned Plymouth Voyager, to be specific. Seventeen thousand, three hundred seventy two dollars. And fifty-four cents. Cash.

I had already been beaten, you understand.

So we go out in the northwest part of town. The motor mile they call it. Out where the Shoney's is, the sushi bar—and the multiplexes. Out past the Smith and Hawken, the Pottery Barn, Banana Republic, REI, Barnes and Noble, Ann Taylor, Egg Head Software. Not quite to the new mall. And I wrote the check.

My wife thought she had finally arrived. A mother among mothers. Tooling around in her van. Hauling cupcakes. Not Pillsbury. Carrot cake cupcakes. With cream cheese icing. Maybe some Lemon Squares. Pints of Ben and Jerry's—Cherry Garcia, right? Pop a little Joan Osborne in the CD. You get the picture. Maybe stop off for a cappuccino before the son's school lets out. Then the big event of the day. Stuff a half dozen kids in the new van. Pause awhile, let the other moms check it out.

Hey . . . new van. Yeah, Plymouth Voyager. It's so comfortable. And the kids, you know. I just love the juice holders. Show her, son. Then it all falls apart. Off to the water parks. The pioneer farms. The canoe trips. All the parents in those shorts with a dozen snap pockets and Nature Conservancy t-shirts. And kids and their hundred dollar Nikes and t-shirts Saving the Wolves. If I talk to one more person in a hipper than thou t-shirt, I'll shoot myself. I'd rather hang out in a sports bar—with hockey fans.

Fuck it. It was over. I didn't mean for it to end that way. But god damn. Who could listen to one more empty-headed, trend following, middle-class mom and dad discuss the philosophical import of *Forest Gump*? I couldn't god damn stand it any more.

2. Double Fantasy

I remember the Valentine's Day before we married. I bought her tulips, a book of poetry, and the recording of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Double Fantasy*. I arranged the gifts on the kitchen table and made a photograph before she came home. The setting sun was beaming through the window and the flowers and poetry and music cast long shadows across the oak.

We argued that night. I don't remember how it started, but I remember pleading desperately, childishly: please, please, let me bring beauty into our home. Perhaps it ended that night. Before it had really even begun. Perhaps she saw—but did not know that she had seen—that I could not bring beauty into the home. That the beauty was already made, before the purchases, before the hothouse flowers, before someone else's words, before someone else's music, right there on the kitchen table, clean of breakfast dishes, the sun shining through white curtains for both of us to see.

3. Making Sense

I want the daily events of my life—each one, one by one—to mean something. I don't want to look back on my life and see this long trail of nonsense, the detritus of dumb experience, scraps of a doggerel existence strewn like junk food wrappers on a Sunday backyard barbecue spirituality. I don't want one more hurried Slimfast morning. I don't want to hear one more blowdryer blender electric toothbrush water pic vibrator alarm clock boombox copy machine fax cellular telephone car alarm garage door voice mail food processor egg timer espresso smoke alarm elevator buzz hiss bing whirr hum honk. I don't want to hear one more sad lonely half-informed voice on talk radio. I don't want to buy one shirt hat pant belt sock shoe underwear bathing suit sweat pant leotard because it's new improved special stylish. I don't want to read one more book because it was short listed.

I don't want to see one more movie because of its special effect button pushing envelope pushing exciting sound track two thumbs up faithful adaptation cameo appearance. I don't want to vote for one more man or woman in a suit. I don't want to write one more word because there's a dollar at the end of the paragraph. I don't want a big gulp or one more thing super-supersized. I don't want another credit card. I don't want to be rich skinny empowered healed successful unblemished or have a good memory. I don't want to have a lifestyle.

I don't want a day off. I don't want a vacation. I don't want to deserve a break today. I don't want the happiest days of my life to be those when I was a tourist a visitor a day tripper. I don't want ever ever ever to say again Thank God It's Friday. I don't want a holiday. I want every day to be a Holy Day.

I want a seamless unfolding of days where every minute makes sense—makes me *sense* that inside of the act, inside of the observation, are the trumpets announcing the presence of god.

4. The New Place

This is the thing that gets me. It didn't matter that I left. I mean, I move out. And she's a little pissed off at first. But pretty soon she's dating. Seeing other guys. I mean I move out into the apartment; she's got the house. I've this little piece of shit of an old car; and she's got the van. And I'm thinking what did I do? What did I just do?

The first guy she dates is a friend of mine. Well, was a friend of mine. A poet. So I'm thinking what does this mean? That she really loved me and was trying to find a quick substitute. You know, same guy, different clothes, different metaphors. Or worse. Maybe she did love poets, and she figured out that I wasn't one. That I wasn't a poet. Was that it? Was she sick of my metaphors? She thought my rhythms were tedious, my use of assonance immature?

Thank god, before I had to come to terms with that, he dumped her. She's moved on, though. There was an accountant. That helped. I could write them both off. I'll never feel inferior to an accountant. Then she found a software developer; now there's a lawyer. I'm getting better at this. But they all hop into that van and go camping, go sailing, all that stuff I hated. Fine, I say, let them go. They put on their goofy shorts and hiking boots, buy some Evian. Fine. Sometimes my son goes with them, but lately he's been throwing fits, so he stays with me. I like that. That part's working out.

Signs

Remember the conversation

I had twelve years ago
with the friend at the checkout
counter at the grocery?

He was carrying eggs
and turnips
and a sweet German wine.

He was, by then, an old friend
but a lost friend.

I used to drive him home after work.
He once made a pass at me
in the porno shop.

We stood there,
catching up,
rooting out old memories of
getting drunk together,
fingering the lace of possibility.

When I told him I was getting married,
it turned out
he knew you.
You were old friends, too.

He no longer lived in the trailer
by the river
where I would drop him off.

Well,
he stopped by today.
He had seen the signs
announcing the yard sale.

He was late,
and all the good stuff was already gone.

WAITING FOR MERCY



Late Night

So a man drives around late at night
avoiding all the streets that lead home.

He knows lights are still on
that those who love him
are gathered round the table
talking, wondering what could have gone wrong.

They don't understand why it takes him
so long to return from simple chores.

He doesn't understand why
in spite of all the street signs,
in spite of all the maps scattered on the seat,
he would rather be lost.

Sometimes he even rolls down the windows
and lets maps fly;
he tosses out flashlights and matches
and says to himself,

Let's just see how fucked up things can get.

They know this is not the way things should be.
He knows this is not the way things should be.

But he hopes,
searching black streets alone
in the minutes closing on midnight
with gas running out,
he might find a second home
with those who know where he has been.

Custody

You've seen them,
the untethered men.
They wait in lines
while children drift lonely
toward automatic doors.
With well-trimmed fingers,
they empty their baskets—
cartons of pudding,
bags of string cheese,
canned soup, bananas,
and Cocoa Puffs, maybe
juice packs and beer.

In their faces, you scan
the barcode of fear,
the standard smiles,
the startled eyes,
distracted yet searching,
as if they forgot
the list of things they need,
forgot they ever made a list.
Item after item
is weighed and tallied,
subtotaled and taxed.
A voice informs them
what they owe.
They call kids back,
and write a check.

The Angel of Santa Maria

An angel wakes

on Santa Maria Street
before sunrise,

stretches her light

in shapes like ancient signs,
like God's first words.

Her fingers rake

the world's wet soul
and tender rows sprout midair.

The turn of her

slender neck shocks song from the sleeping.

On one of god's

other avenues, he stirs,
facing the far wall,

listens for intonements

of dim dark dawn—

this could be the hour of panic

—but he feels a green mantra budding,

hears the light praying,
remembers dreams of an angel waking.

Thoughts on Not Being Married #1

I admit that, when miracles strike,
my hands rummage hidden pockets
for coins and doves, handcuffs and rings,
my tools to dazzle and enslave.

Telling Others

Peoplesay: How're ya feelin' bout this?

Peoplesay: Wow!

Peoplesay: 'Sthis somethin' ya planned?

Peoplesay: Sombitch!

Peoplesay: Guess ya knew what you were doing.

Peoplesay: Dumbshit!

Peoplesay:

Peoplesay: When she due?

Peoplesay: When ya gettin' married?

Peoplesay:

Peoplesay: She's how old?

Peoplesay: You're how old?

Peoplesay: Tomcat!

Peoplesay: Ya gonna keep it?

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Lyman Grant has worked at Austin Community College for nearly thirty years. He has taught developmental writing, creative writing, composition, and literature; served as chair of the developmental writing department and of the creative writing department; and as chair of the developmental education division. Currently, he is Dean of Arts and Humanities. He has authored and/or edited six books. His previous volume of poetry is titled *Text & Commentary*.

Lyman's essays, reviews, and poetry have appeared in a variety of periodicals and anthologies, including *The Texas Observer*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Texas Humanist*, *Langdon Review*, *Creative Pulse*, *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Pikeville Review*, *Timber Creek Review*, *Windhover*, *Best Texas Writing I*, *The Best Man*, *Is this Forever or What?*, *Literary Austin*, *Houston Poetry Festival* anthologies, numerous *Di-Verse-City* anthologies, and *Feeding the Crow*.

