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# “Sully”

A Collection of Poems  
Exploring the  
Eastern New England Accent  
  
and  
  
an Essay Examining Them in  
Context

By Phil Najemy

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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I also want to thank my secondary adviser, Kei Miller, as well as Elizabeth Reeder, and the various professors of the English Department who taught me, offered me critiques and feedback, and provided a stimulating and welcoming academic environment during my time at Glasgow University.

Though this comes from a bit far afield, I want to acknowledge the Glasgow University Tigers American Football team. Saturday afternoon games were crucial to my dissertation in providing moments of decompression and sheer competitive euphoria that took me—if only for three hours—miles away from the library and the computer screen. American Football at our university is a long and successful tradition that the administration would do well to support.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents (bio- and step-) for accepting and encouraging my academic goals, which have kept me in school long after it was time to grow up.

## Expository and Explanatory Note

I think it is useful and only fair to the reader to offer some explanation of these poems before throwing him in the deep end. What follows is not an analysis or synopsis, but a bit of clarification. Though many speakers are named in the titles of poems, many are not, nor are their relationships to one another always obvious. Though I intended for the discovery of much of this to be part of the interactivity of the poems, I suspect that too much opacity at the start will unnecessarily hobble the reader's pace, and dampen his enthusiasm.

These poems tell a part of the story of an American man of about thirty years named Thaddeus Sullivan. Family and those who know him best call him "Thad", and those who know him only casually or socially tend to call him "Sully". Casey is his father, and Mary is his mother. Thaddeus has two older brothers named James and Patrick, though Mary refers to them as Seamus and Padriac. They are blue-collar, possibly lower-middle-class family from Worcester, Massachusetts. The speaker of many of the early poems and some later ones is Thaddeus's friend from childhood and into adulthood. He is never named, nor does he seem to interact much with anyone but Thaddeus, whom he knows better than most, but still calls "Sully." I refer to this speaker in the essay as the "Unnamed Friend."

I leave any other identities and connections to be observed, inferred, or—I hope—invented by the reader.

## **Sully's Rotary**

Sully stahts innis head  
thenny opinsis eyes

Gits too big furriss room  
thenny steps inta the kitchen

Shakes hands withis front doah  
thenny steps awnta Graftin Street.

Sully tucksis chin dahn Graftin  
tilly gets ta Union Station.

Takes the T from Union Station  
ta the stahp in Back Bay.

Cant even get bad dreams in Back Bay  
soee thinks abaht swimmin ta Chinatahn

But eels inna chi knees butcha shop  
makim think abaht the Cape

Soee rides an eel from the hahbur  
dahn the South Shoah ta Sandy Neck.

Then theahs nowheah ta go but away:  
Bahnstable, Yahmith, Dennis, Wellfleet, Truro

An winnys standin on the tippa P-Tahn  
theahs that eel again, but with a sneer anna new hat

Whipsis tail arahn Sullys thighs  
nslurpsim inta the Bay

Dragsis ass on the waddah,  
bumpsis head on the hahbur

whacksit on every tie on the T from Newtn ta Wistah  
slithisim back up Graftin Street

squirtsim thruis keyhole,  
dumpsim innis tuna can room

an slapsis eyes shut.

## **Sully and the Black Rings**

Sul wis skehd a the deep lines innis dads face  
deep cuzzy couldn quit suckin dahn Mahbros  
so Sully stahdid doin dip.

Thought theahs no fiya wheah theahs no smoke,  
so wullis dad watched Hannity or Scabro  
Sully pact a pinch innis lip.

His dad sat theah with the clicka  
likee wis cut ahdda stone.  
NSuld punch in the mawth of a can

nspit wull they watched the tv flicka.  
Didn mind soahs onnis gums  
longis he didn look like that old man.

### **Casey on Thad**

Most kids fahget theah quess chins  
that don get ansid

    They grow up  
    an worry abaht the rent  
aw when the milk goes rancid.

Thad neva fahgut his,  
anny neva stopped bein confused  
    abaht hahtdogs  
    an traffic lights  
an when ta tie is shoes.

Spent the last thirty yeeahs  
livin by the stricsha  
    he learned in preschool  
    juss cuzzy neva fahgut it  
anny neva learned ta see the big picsha.



### **Sully Under Glass**

Juss once did Sully ever almost admit  
juss once  
winny wis backed up ncornid  
winny wis tryna fielddress a skeleton  
winny couldn playis games  
winny hadta burn the gahdam candle or freeze  
winny wis ahdda gas inna stolen cah  
win lashin aht lashed im back—  
then juss then  
he shrugged.

If juss once I sweah juss once  
that kid wid say that what really killsim  
is thinkin that win somebiddy findsat box an opens it  
theahs gunna be nothin innit.

## **Bay Attitudes**

Blessid ah the Eagah  
fa they botha with tiesnlunches.

Blessid ah the Readahs of the New Yorka  
fa thell get the jokes.

Blessid ah the Grownups  
fa they know their age.

Blessed ah the Drivahs of SUVs  
fa thell savive the crash.

Blessid ah the Peacemakahs  
fa they give us someone ta blame.

Blessid ah the Lovahs  
fa thell work it aht.

So

Ah Lady of Grey Tennisshoes n Lumpy Oatmeal,  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of the Telegram & Gazette  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of Bustid Nintendos nWiffleball Bats  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of Rusty Saabs nDuctape  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of Drunkndisawdallys  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of Slammin Doahs in Empty Apahtments  
pray fa Sully.

Ah Lady of Seven Yeeah Grudges  
pray fa Sully.

## **Reticulated Sully**

Sul usta be in love with a giraffe  
who lived inna kids room at the public libry  
She wis seven feet tall nhad fibry  
stitches anna felt hide. The ladies on the staff  
thought it wis sweet winnyd pulla tail. Half  
the time she wis the only piece a bribry  
his motha had ta makim read. At the libry  
Sul was neva skeahd ta talk aht or laugh.

But we stahdid ta find new things ta do,  
an they took Suls giraffe ta get her stitches  
fixed, an neva broughta back. Cant say Sul knew  
weah ta go, buddy went there anywho.  
We spent a lot moah time at his house, which is  
wurra a lepid had ta change a spot or two.

## **Most Saturdays**

Sully's goin aht tonight

He's gunna meet	Shaughnessy	Fat Head
	Grebs	Dunn
	Burke	Quirk
	Rafferty	Hafferty
	Lone Ranger	Sully (other Sully)
	Vicky from main South	Spanish Vicky
	Duane-O	Greek George
	O'Brien	O'Hanlon
	O'Mal	Oh My
	Hogan the Shogun	Conan the Ronan
	Baz	LaJoie
	Radio Flyer	nTick.

An hes jiss gunna have an awful time.

## **Sully and the Normal Kids**

At least once Sul thought abaht disappearin.  
Thats howwy sezzit.  
not movin  
not runin away.  
Disappearin

Sezzy wiz at that sped school  
way ahtside the ciddy  
place he gut sent when they put a CHINS onnim.  
One day in Mahch he steps ahtside  
anny looksit the snow inna trees  
thenny follis the tree trunks dahn ta the street  
thenny watches a cah passin the school  
thenny looksit is clothes anny thinks  
“I could take off in this.  
I gut sneakahs njeans.  
I gutta sweatshirt.  
I look like noahmal kids.”

Buddy neva did.  
Sezzy stayed theah fa twenny minutes  
watchin cahs go by  
thenny went inside nchangedis clothes.

## **Finger Bones**

I know what Suls thinkin abaht winnys crossin Chandlah Street.

I know worrys bin winny comes ova smellin like leaves.

I kin tellya how much he has left in the bottle by the time hes singin *Flower of Sweet Strabane*.

I know what name hes lookin for onnis phone right now.

I know why Sul gahds is den like a fox with a limp. Old lace cahds nshoeboxes.

I kin showya the holiest spot on Pahk Ave between Clahk nthe KFC.

I kin showya the relics innat shoebox.

But Sul dudn know I know abaht that.

## He Asks Me Why I Don't Make an Effort

He asks me why I don make an effit  
nwwhy Um wearin the same sneakahs I leftit  
my mothas six months ago. Why I don  
botha with a real jacket njuss go in  
the sweatshirts I had ten yeeahs ago.  
Wullemmeetellya nobiddy wantsta letcha know  
abaht the flakes comin offem  
but we sweatem nshakem ncoffem  
off ah scalps ntongues ngroins nfeet  
every day. Ya leavem on ya sheet  
nya showah an everybuddy ya talk to.  
Ya constantly disolvin. An everybuddy tries ta do  
what they ken not ta showit:  
Fancypants nslick shirts nperfumes nhaihcuts, butchaknowwhat  
I don see a reason ta covva myself in polyurethane  
an rot on the inside of a Ken doll. Main  
Street nShewsbury gut makeovas.  
Buncha city fathas nbusiness ownahs  
gut embarrassed at the pieces  
chippin off the street. No money innat. NHoleyJeezus  
they gave em a facelift. They scrubbed emty garages  
inta sushi joints, an wheah the cah wash is  
—or was—theah's a precious coffee shop  
sellin mochalattechinomachiattoventes. An on top  
a that, they permed the pahks. Walkways  
ntopiaries—like the jungle isn't alwees  
gunna take back what it owns. Like ya haihs  
not gunna go straight again. An all anybody caihs  
abaht is how long they kin makeit look  
like theah bodys a new bar a soap  
an not a handfulla scum.

## Ashley and Thad Break Bread

One night Thad made me dinnah.  
I don't know why Um sayin "One night";  
He always made me dinnah.

I guess what I mean  
is this was the last night  
he made me dinnah. I mean

at least til we make up again.  
I askedim about his father that night  
About why he wouldn seeim again.

I askedim what he did that was so bad  
an I touchtis face an his arm a lot that night  
an he poked at his salmon and said it came out bad.

I know I wasn helpin  
tryin ta getim ta talk, cause all night  
nothing seemed to be helpin.

Thad said "I don wanna talk abahdit."  
I said something three more times that night;  
an I shoulda lettin not talk about it

an I shoulda stopped at two, cause  
Thad snatched up a glass from earlier that night  
an turned his back and smashed it on the wall cause

he didn wanna talk about it.  
He sat for a second an said it wiz just a bad night  
thenny gut the vac and vacuumed all of it.

Thenny stopped an picked bits of glass out of my hair.  
The next night  
he broke up with me when he sawr I'd straightened my hair.



### **Casey on Permanence**

They don eva change.  
Hah they come aht is hah they stay.  
Like James come aht with a crook innis wicked little mawth  
an hes bin laffin at the world eva since.  
nPat came aht cryin  
an hes bin cryin eva since.

But Thad came aht so quiet  
doctahs thought he wiz stillboahn.  
We held ah breath tryna hearis haht,  
seeis liddle chest move.  
An whin I put my eah close he stahdid kickin nswinging.

An hes bin goin from zerotasixty eva since.

## Mary Watches Breakfast

Once they brought it in the kitchen I shoulda said somethin.  
Apaht from that  
—breakin my plates, kickin my walls—  
I'd tend ta lettem kill eachotha.

I learned ta smell a fight,  
and theah was one hanging that moahning  
like wet wool on the clothesline.  
An no way I'd get in between.

It wiz when Thad was in high school;  
he wiz eating breakfast  
an his fatha comes behindim  
nputsis hand on Thads shouldah.

An Thad shrugs it off an grunts.  
with a spoon innis mouth.  
Casey patsis head nThad pulls it away  
nsays "Don touch me."

Casey curls his lip nsays  
"Um ya fatha  
Ull touch you whenever I feel like it."  
nThad turns back to his oatmeal.

I shoulda said something ta Casey right then  
butcha can only tape your windows in a storm.  
He grabs Thads ear and rubs the lobe  
between his thumb and forefinger.

Thad knocks his chair back  
an slaps his bowl off the table  
nshoves his father nsays  
"Keep ya fuckin hands offa me!"

An I'm watching the milky oats spread  
around the broken bowl  
all ova the linoleum.  
An I know no ones gunna help me clean it up.

### **Sully's Bonehouse**

Wheahs the truth in a crooked spine  
an how can Sul knowis way upndahn?  
If the whole things stacked like jenga  
every vertebra has its own plan.

Annis shouldas ah lopsided  
annis scaps stick aht like mudflaps  
annis hips ah like a coahkscrew  
annis flat feet turn aht like a ducks.

Buddit all works like a houseacahds.  
An if juss one a them bones  
knew wheah the othas wah headed  
Um priddy shoah Sul wid fall apaht.

## **Sully's Kitchen**

Suls a goah-may mac-n-cheeseah  
withis pinky innis eah  
spillin cake mix aht the box.

Gut Goahdons Fishsticks innis freezah.  
*Maybe* salmon. Spillin beah  
winny wipes dahn the counta withis sox.

Buddis kitchens clean as a psycho woahd  
cuzzy has a "bottomline" rag  
that soaks up allis spots.

It swipes the baseboahd  
by the fridge, the juice unda the trashbag,  
an catches doublebarrel snots.

Thenny drapes it on the faucet  
an lets it drip  
same place he letsis chicken thaw

Sul wouldn't tossit  
iffy puked up his dip  
an used it ta clean up the floah.

### **Ashley Wakes Up before the Alarm**

A week before Eastah  
Thad came home at seven in the moahnin  
an woke me up withis face all red

nclose to mine. Took my face  
innis hands nkissed me lawnganhahd.  
Pistme off n turndme on.

I laughed cuz he kin do that.  
He was cryin a little. So wasn I.  
I tookis hands off my face

nsaid "What's wrong?"  
He smiled cryin nsaid  
"Zero is wrong."

He smelled like beer nCopenhagen.

### **Sully Spread on the Carpet**

Ya broke it again, Sul?  
Think back weah ya were win ya broke it befoah  
—that apahtment on Highland—  
Didja pickit up nfixit,  
even take it with ya,  
or leave it like grape juice on the hahdwood floah?

I know ya leffit like a smashed window  
win ya took off from Cotuit.  
Ya neva went back  
cuz ya wah beahfoot  
an ya neva swept up the glass  
an ya knew yid have ta walk right through it.

So ya broke it huh?  
Somethin else blows up in ya face like a chemistry set  
an now ya gutta choose  
if it's a puzzle or if it's trash,  
if ya fix it or leave it where it broke  
or if ya juss try ta fahget.

## **O'Mal on Sully**

Satadays Sully comes aht ta Irish Times  
buddy neva wantsta stay.  
I kin smellit like an albinos sunscreen  
onna sunnyass day.

Says hi like ya gutta gun attis back  
gives Vic a wink,  
thenny pushes up ta the bah  
ta buy the place a drink.

Figgiz hes paid is dues  
soee slides behind a booth,  
sucks onnis lippa,  
then gleeks betweenis tooth.

Sits theah makin liddle jokes  
npackinis tin innis hand  
wull all the chicks ah chattin  
an dudes sing Turkish Song of the Damned.

Suntimes the prick mumbles  
he usta make betta friends in jahs a tadpoles.  
Nex moahnin kid spills inta Dunkies  
lookin like a bagga smasht assholes.

### **Spanish Vicky on Thad**

Esully sometime dice que fourafive people  
ah the ones keptim comin back.  
Like en la e'cuela with me nRafferty.  
Gut kicked ahdda South, entonces he wenta Voke.  
Came back the next yeeah  
cuz wasn no Vicky at Voke,  
wasn no Baz nO'Mal nthem.

Catchim at the Times, quisas,  
winnits cool fa me ta go.  
Neva catchim at Funky Murphy's.  
See, conozco a Thad—  
he wouldn go too fah from home.  
But too many people an hes gone.  
Aun que hes there, I know hes gone.  
Entiendes?



### **Uncle Mike on Casey and Thad**

Thad sezzy don like Case.  
Case sezzy don like Thad.  
Neva wouldda guestit.

Case left Thad at Greenhill Pahk winny wiz eight.  
Thad kickt in Case's truck windas.  
Toldim ee would.

Thad snapt Case's Mahbros.  
Case locktim innis room  
nshut the light.

Case could be the bastid  
Thad needed ta be the prick  
they both juss gutta be.

## Renovated Sully

You just have to see what they've done  
with this town.

All the old buildings that made it look bleak—  
They took them and shook them and knocked  
them all down,

And put up some new ones in under a week.  
You just won't believe what they've done  
with this town.

*I juss cant believe what they done  
ta this tahn.*

*All the ol buildings that made it like home—  
They zonedem an bonedem an rippt  
em all dahn*

*An put up some jengablock stacks made a crome.  
I juss cant believe what they did  
ta this tahn.*

### **LaJoie on Thad and his Exes**

Lovedem?  
Coahsee lovedem.  
Lovedem all.  
Proibly still does.  
Tswwhy he neva seesem.  
Couldn stand it.  
Falls right back in love.  
I beddy keeps things  
they gaveim an looks attem  
an remembihs wheah  
they gavem to im.  
Gut nuthin bad ta say.  
Neva says Tanyer wis a slut.  
Neva says Daisy wis lazy  
or Rosie wis nosey.  
Neva mentions that Jill's can  
lookt like two hogs jostlin fa space  
in a hammock.  
Calls *imself* alotta names.

## Quabbin Reservoir

Now this place  
this place  
is comin apaht nice.  
Like old ladies that  
usta be pretty.  
Daner, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott  
moved on with a liddle class.  
Not gone.  
Clams sittin unda foah hundred billion  
Gallons a freshwadda.  
Sawr it comin  
Since the Civil Wah.  
Boston needed wadda.  
Wista needed wadda.  
Framinham Brockton Haverhill.  
So the pretty ladies quit  
the bobsnbeads.  
By thirdeight when they flooded the valley,  
they stared dahn  
the Swift Rivva  
right dahn the valley  
an ovih theah heads.  
Gave a pretty piece ta the rez  
a piece ta Pelham a piece  
ta Hahdwick a piece ta Ware.

Then the bombs durin Worlwahtwo.  
Juss duds. The ahmy practicin.  
Shells fullah sand  
an a liddle blackpowda.  
Made a popannapuff,  
left a mahkannaditch.  
Still some dahn in the wadda  
neva went off.

Theah's stone walls nbasements  
in the woods all arahn the rez.  
Stone fiyaplace jiss standin theah  
by itself.  
Oldtahn mahkas with the plaques  
ripped off.  
This place

this                      place  
is comin apaht juss fine.

### **Uncle Mike on the New Way of Things**

Cripes,  
it don take a chi knees jew  
ta figure aht it ain too  
smaht dealin in stereotypes.

Frankly speakin  
folks get upset  
an ya catch yaself in moah nets  
than a queeah PoahdaRican.

People's lives  
gut a lotta faces  
so let these black guys know ya not a racist  
with one a them long high-fives.

### **Neil Takes Thad to the Fights**

Good hahd fight.  
Big black Roy,  
old Mick Stone.  
Sat right theah.  
Case casht in.  
Me. Thad. Two beahs.  
Thad sixteen?  
So what?  
May. Spring Fights dahntahn.  
Roy lands three right off.  
Mick fuct up.  
Guy showed two glass jaws.  
Foahth rahnd Roy digs in,  
gives Mick jab jab  
Rahndhouse.  
K.O.  
Crowd loves hahd dukes,  
Loose mahthpiece.  
I ask Thad "Like that?"  
He says "That's sick shit."  
Christ, Thad. Stay home.  
Case. Shoah Thads yaws?  
Long hahd fight.

## **Thad on Stage**

Thad loved a crowd  
winnit watchtim.

*Lookit me Um dancin*

He did faces and voices  
drew pic-shiz a Reagan  
kept goin as long as they laughed.

*Lookit me Mahr Um dancin*

Little showman  
pretty feahless ferra kid.  
Grownups thought it was cute winny joked about the news.  
Timing was neva great.

*Lookit me Um dancin*

Alright but it's time.  
Hadda good time. Time ta go.  
You're keepin these people,  
Thad, just one moah.  
Last time.

*Ma lookit me Mahr Um dancin*

These people just being polite  
an it wiz time ta go.  
I grabbed his ahm  
an made my eyes wide attim  
an he pulled back ta the circle  
like he owed em moah than he owed me.

*Ma lemme go Um dancin*

I dug my nails innis foreahm  
An dragged em toward my palm  
justis he wis pulling his ahm away.  
I didn meanta kid wouldn quit

I left runs innis skin that turned pink  
nstahted ta bleed  
I didn meanta but he just wouldn—  
    *Ma lookit me Um—*  
I know. You're dancin.

### **Sully's Forest for the Trees**

Sully  
pictup  
a tooth  
an didn even see  
he wiz standin in a crocodile's mawth.

Guy  
breathed  
onna plum  
an couldn even tell  
hed snapt off a piecea wormwood.

Kid  
said  
a girls haih  
lookt  
Etruscan  
an didn even seem ta notice  
she had two kids zero jobs and half a GED.

Suls bumpt into a lotta screen doahs.



### **Skewbald Sully**

We sawr a deah hitta cah dahntahn.

*The hellsy doin dahntahn*

Bolts aht a graveyahd across Webstah Street  
right infromnova Subaru.

*Foreign cahsll killya*

Smashes in the hood nsnaps backis neck  
an goes limp in the middledasreet.

*Huh. Like a black guys plams undaneath*

Sully makes a wide loop nkeeps drivin.

*Christ keepya head onna gahdam swivel*

Then Sul dudn say nuthin til we get theah.

**Mr. Devereau**

Teaching Thad was like drinking all day  
with his *slowdahn waymit Idongut my papah*.  
By noon you're all in, or you fade away  
with his *hawaya lemmetellya knowatchaget winya mixem*.

Stop at twelve for a tick and you're done  
with his *jeekas cmahn hahsacurvy line a fawmuler*.  
Let him talk, and he's running the class by one  
with his *I neva likedem shakemup nleavem theah*.

But try too long and you'll pay at night  
with his *I quit whattsa point hahsis payin fa gas*.  
Your marbles are loose, but your head'll be tight  
from his *O docta yawanna curve heahsa curve whyequalswhatexplushuh*.

Thad made you drink for your dime  
with his *jeekas neva likedem whattsa point*.  
So I took him one day at a time  
and hoped for his *hawaya lemmetellya knowatchaget winya mixem*.

### **Ashley Tells the Weather on the Cape**

Let's go dahn the Cape  
he says  
dahh the Cape  
cause it's cold heah  
but it's gunna be  
cold theah too  
I tellim  
cold nwe gutta work.  
Work he says  
juss gets me  
thinkin abaht  
every place but work  
ya wanneta  
work good  
keep me ahdda work.  
Thad  
I tellim  
I love you most days  
like ya girl  
an some days  
like ya mother.  
An pleeeeeease  
he says  
cuz he knows  
which one today is.

## **We Grow Rocks**

We grow rocks  
that look like rocks.  
Fahmahs madem inta walls  
an now theah still walls.  
Rocks go dahn thirty feet.  
Digem up an they grow back.  
Only thing between ya feet  
nhell.  
We grow rocks fa stone walls  
like scahs inna field  
fa basements befoah the toahnado  
fa weighin dahn stacks  
a birth certificates.  
Rollem over  
nthe centipedes nsalimandahs  
wiggle aht nfind anotha rock.  
Rocks go dah a hundred feet.  
White Mountains ta the Birksheahs  
God stird up the ground like cement  
nsaid fahm this, pal.  
Rocks go dahn a mile.  
Now Shewsby Street  
they wanna pave an inch thick?  
Be my guest.

### **Sully's Lorax Homunculus**

The cold ground grew a stump  
in West Brookfield  
last night.

An that stump grew Sul  
eatin Wondah Bread  
this moahnin.

Now whats Sul gunna grow  
win the suns weak bright  
this aftanoon?

He looks right at it this time a yeeah  
cuzzits too low ta make im squint.

He can grow big on a stump in West Brookfield  
unda the sun thats so low  
ontoppa the crusta hahd snow  
with nekkid trees  
the low sun  
and a flat colonial bahn.

### **Sully's Railroad Chorus**

—Wheah do we put the spikes? Ask Angel.

—Dond e'ta Anhell? Guys inna bathrum.

—Them eye-yin pegs? Talk ta Angelo.

—Winny swings the boom ova, thread the strap unda the ties.

— Stick the washers con the plates, vale?

— Eh, Sul, twoattatime, capiche?

—Two rails a day's abaht fifteen ties.

— Vamos. While it's still hot.

— Gutta vamoose befoah the ground freezes.

### **Eggs, Cinnamon, Nutmeg, and Usually Whiskey**

Glorier in eggshellsis deo, Sul,  
wheadja fatha hide the Jack?  
Nah ya mothas ovaryactin  
cuz we rummaged through the hutch.

Take off that tie npickup Saint Brigid  
befoah she gets pisst. Putta back  
with ceramic Jesus, Mary the Zebra,  
that animal cracker nGI Joseph.

Long time ago in Bethlehem  
ya fatha hadda bottle a Beam.  
Nah weahdahelld that crawl off to?  
Cuz ya motha lockt up the resta the beah.

Yer uncle on ya dads side  
juss told me that Christ wiz no jew  
cuza carpentahs good withis hands.  
Ya mom plopt moah badaydas onnis plate.

Ah you gunna take off that tie awhat?  
Ya trees abaht ta tip ova.  
Let's push off befoah ya motha sees.  
Theahs that Jack behind the fridge. Nunc dimittis. Nah we kin scram.

### **When Casey Would Put Thad to Bed**

I'd say sleep like a rock ya liddle shit  
nkick me like a pony  
win I carrya backta bed.

All I did wiz keep the roof onna threedekkah  
All I did wiz teachya ta read  
All I did wiz sit by ya bed ntalkya ta sleep  
until ya wah five.

Knew winta stop cuz I heardja breathe deep  
like a liddle thickheaded  
smahtass  
cotton rhino.

Win I cameta wake you up  
yid kickntwitch  
win I poked you inna shouldah.

Then ya spent half ya days widda boxa crayins nmahkas  
colorin people that wernt even real  
witcha face upaclose ta the page.

Dahell withya colorin books  
drawr on my walls  
drawr on my face fa Chrissake.

Drawr all the crossbones  
nFUCKYOUs on me ya want.  
I think sometimes I shoulda kept you up all night.



## **Eddy the Vet**

Case I knew Case  
in high school  
guywisa guywisa  
jeezis hewiza guy hadda lip  
I doneven  
Hed gimmea gimmea  
cigarette a Mahbro a Camel  
nlight me up.  
Jeezis I bin we bin  
drinkin nMahbros  
since since shit  
Um gladee gut kids  
Nah my daughta  
wont even  
ah dahellwitha  
wont even  
well I guess onceatwice  
couplea times arahnd Chrissmiss.  
But me nya dad  
thought wed ahtrace ah draft numbahs  
we g'dahn nsez  
we sez send us ova  
cuz whatdahell else we gut heah  
an Case didn go cuzzy wiz  
he wiz an oldest son  
but a couple us gut basic  
an didda tour and a bunch didn come back.  
You know the know the ones  
ya cant eva trust  
cuzza fahkin suit don make em tellin the truth  
an they won leave ya with a pot ta  
a a but Case butcha fatha  
stayed heah workin on cahs  
an he sent us cases a Mahbros  
thats what he gave.  
But I guess its lucky ferris kids though huh.

## Here Come the McCuvvys

Aw, heah come the McCuvvys  
with theih tins a Grizzly  
an monstatruck t-shirts  
cahpenta jeans an Timbalins,  
dangling ahtta two rusty Chevys  
like a pail fulla chicken pahts.  
City goats spent theih Sataday  
on their uncles fahm in Oakham  
stringin bales an smellin like sheep  
wull theah waitin onnat new job  
or that disability pay.  
Now dahn Main Street they creep  
ncrawl half inna bag  
cuz tonight these bahnyahd kings  
aint nobiddys slob.  
First they wiz a threat  
then they wiz a cloud of dust  
now theah pullin up so close  
I kin read theih highschool rings  
an tip my fuckin impressed cigarette.

Lovey pahks an they all jump  
aht the back like some rats  
or an Isetta fulla clowns.  
I lost count a hahminny hopt aht  
wull they spit theih dip unda the lights  
an tilted theih meshback hats.  
Coupluvus smoking aht front  
a the Times look up  
look up like weah lookin fa the Big Dippa  
wull clan McCuvvy pushes through the doah  
nshuffles in frim the night.  
Theah gunna offa drinks  
nget no taykahs. Theah gunna slap backs  
too hahd, eyebang girls ndrool a lippa.  
Theah gunna whine the JacknCokes is ovapriced.  
An win the last bell jingled  
nthe last one steptin  
trippin onnis tooth  
I thought "SonofaChrist.  
Sul's sittin with Vic  
in Lovey's favorite booth."  
An if theahs two things

the McCuvvy's can't stand  
it's Sul anna fingasnappin Spic.

Heah come the McCuvvys.

### **Rob on Sully's Blarney**

I handim joe an ask hawaya.  
I should knew ya play with fiya  
cuz Sully learned real young in choir  
ta flappis lips.  
The quiet boys gut Fatha Dwyer  
on campin trips.

Sez Seamus finely moved ta Gahdnah  
nfahnd anotha business pahtnah,  
but Sully's shoah he'll play the mahtah,  
broke nproud,  
and too ashamed ta be a pahтта  
that welfaih crowd.

So Sul keeps jawrin on with news  
abaht his moms orthotic shoes  
an how if Jesus made im choose  
between a gossip  
an a girl with buttafly tattoos  
id be a tossup.

## **Sully's Sunday Lament**

Sull peekt ahdda Shaughnessy's a liddle sunsmakt  
a liddle facepuncht

          SquinT          SquinT  
Two front doahs with two broke knobs  
Two front walks an foah flat feet  
Two tin lawnhaihs with scoliosis  
Two cah keys in foah clammy hands  
Two Monte Cahlos that gut the same plates

          But what it wazzat really threwin  
          was it wazzat chainlink fence

Couldabin fifty of em from the doah ta the cah  
cuz one second it wis right heah  
next it wis way ova theah.

Sul putis hand aht  
didn touch it  
juss putis hand aht ta steady it  
cuz it wis cleahly jumpy.

          Two sunS          Two sunS  
flickin vinnagah right innis eyes.

## **The Sullivan Wound**

Sul gut laid up  
with a purple bootprint on his thigh  
said his leg was deadnumb  
except a pulse in his artery.

Wouldn't say who did it  
his father wasn't much better  
grumbling in bed upstairs  
with an icepack and an inguinal hernia.

The whole castle holding their groins  
Sul badly limping down to Indian Lake  
Wistahs coming up cafes for a while  
until their icepacks melted in the sink.

Sul said he couldn't get away from him  
his dad just flipped a page  
a Newsweek he said all you can do  
is tip your own ashes and clip your own hedge.

## **The Things We Were**

O'Mals dad one time said We wah the niggahs  
back then  
cuz they wouldn serve us on a train

nWe wah the mexkins  
ahundridyeeahsago  
cuz We come crammed inna box takin cheap jobs

nWe wah the chinks  
on the east  
cuz on the railroads they said ah stews smelled like chink food.

So We know whaddits like he says  
nWe know  
winnits ah turn.  
Theminnajews ahnt alone.

Next week in school O'Mal says ta me "Hey,  
waddaya calla niggah girl with braces?"

### **Ashley's Raisins Why**

I neva toldim  
an Um pretty shoah Vic neva toldim  
cuzzy neva needs ta know.  
And iffy did know  
he'd wanna get back togetha  
and the only time weah togetha  
is when he really wantsta hurt me.

He'd say Umma mongoose.  
And Vicky drove me. He'd say she's a mongoose.  
He'd call on Motha Mary  
to be able to live with it nMary  
would lettin live for a while  
and afta that while  
he'd staht pissin tears ncryin  
blood like his favorite statue, cryin  
and sighin blessings I didn ask for.

I useta believe that,  
maybe takin a chance that  
coming clean could staht  
us ova, like we wah sixteen nstaht  
with the same old hats  
with my knit skully and his Pats hat  
with the minuteman.

But he'd weah me down ta nothing  
with his sighing and crying and forgiving.

## Summer Toad

Whozis feller inna grass  
withis blinky liddle eyes,  
whozis fella hoppin  
lookin like hes lost?

Toady inna grass wontcha be mine?  
Catchoo in my cupped hands,  
gunna close my fingas  
an yull neva get away.

Hoppin in my hands  
Like it's a big black cave  
I kin feel ya bones  
In ya liddle bagga warts.

Um gunna putchoo inna shoebox  
gunna fill it up with grass  
gunna find out whatchoo eat  
an grow you up ta be a bullfrog.

But my motha said lets go  
timetago but howta carry you?  
I dont gutta tupperware  
an shell neva let me keep you.

So I settim in the grass  
buddy wouldn hop away  
so I stept onnim  
tillis froggy legs squished out

anny squeaked the way girls yell  
but like his voice was far away  
an I wanted ta keepim  
so I twisted twice as hahd.



## **The Fish Man**

I sell Sully salmon fa seven a pound.  
I catchem by Tuesdy dahn Long Island Sound.

Thursdy I truckem ta Hahtfid nLowell.  
Fridy Um all ahdda haddock nsole.

Saddady comes an Um fishin like fuck  
so Wensdy theahs salmon on ice inna truck.

But halfway between, I stop in Wistah fa Sul  
anny swoops on my truck like a Sandy Neck gull.

I tellim fiveninedynine fa the crawfish nprawn.  
He sez gimme the shrimp with theah faces still on.

Buddy shrinks like a bitch whenny sees a whole bass.  
So I oblige im nchopoff the headntheass.

Some he kin look inny eye an some not.  
Some he cuts up with okra an sticks inna pot.

In May Sully wants fresh winta floundah,  
so I chahgeim twelvetfifty fer a floppy two-poundah.

Seven fa bluefish nsix fa the hake  
comes ta twennysixfifty rahnd two bucks a steak.

I stop an hour in Wistah each Thursdy fa Sul.  
Kid shops like a buzzid ncounts like a gul.

## Dorothy

Dor a thee keep ya face on keep ya face on  
the one the Good Loahd gaveya  
an whadeva you think ah blemishes  
stickem aht likeya Sundy Best.

Membah win you built that beauty mahk  
an some yuppies moved in with no kids  
you rubbed it off with ya thumb  
an opened a threedecka mole on ya nape?

Dor a thee you kin get mad  
win ya squeeze the fat on ya thighs  
an pull it aht three inches  
but Ull lookitcha like *I* gut something ta prove.

Membah win you filled the cracks with foundation  
an it caked up an crumbled right off?  
Thats win I knew hadda set my watch again  
cuz I readja purple lines like fingaprints.

Dor a thee lemme take you aht tonight  
some place the lights ahnt low  
an Chrissake keep ya face on  
so I know ya through the crowd.

## **Thad Heard Mary through the Wall**

Quit shiftin Ma  
lookinit everyone else  
win I useta sing  
Christmas songs in January.

Quit with my buttons  
then come nfind me  
or come unfind me.

Silva Bells Bells a Saint Mary's  
an you did my zipper nsaid  
we don't do that  
Christmas is over it's not time fa that.

Who dont do that Ma  
dont do what nwhynot?

Come nfind me  
afta you unfind me dahn a grocery aisle.

Why cant I sing win singin happens Ma  
I heah you sing sometimes  
—songs that dont make much sense.

Um glad I heardja sing  
cuz I know ya sound awful  
butcha sang anyway win theah wiz no one around.

Now come nfind me Ma  
singin Jingle Bells  
Bells a Saint Mary's in June.

## Sully's Provenance

“BETTA LEAVE YA WALLET OPEN NEXTA YA BODY!”

Who ah you, Sul, nwheah daya come from?

Ah you that threedeka-dwella hidin  
unda Stah Wahs sheets with a juice box  
a flashlight anna Fantastic Foah—hopin readin  
inna dahk will make yer eyes go bad so ya get ta  
weah glasses nlook smaht?

“WHO AH YOU, MIC MCGEE?”

Surrious? Ya jiss said is name.

Ah you that greatgranson on both sides  
of a railroad digga with a walrus mustache  
who baihnuckle boxt onna weekends—  
one paht fa fun an two pahts cuz no Irish need  
apply?

“WHO AH YOU, MAL O’CONNA?”

Am I missin something heah?

Maybe yaw that smahtass kid in math class  
telling Devereau ta suck it cuz fractions  
wiz only paht a the equation. Maybe ya bindas  
fulla doodles an aer-o-planes ncurly queues  
nldies butts an not one straight line.

“NAH, WHO AH YOU, BRIAN FLAHERTY?”

I bet he has a birth sahtificate.

Sul, settle something for us. Ya come from  
a squaih kitchen with no windas an framed  
picshas a JFK nJesus—or ya crawl ahtta  
Ashley’s window ova the garage at two a.m.?  
Eitha way, hadja wind up heah with steamy glasses  
crossin the shit ahtta yaself?

“WHO YOU THINK YOU AH, BRADY GRADY?”

Faih question, Brady...

Mass drivas license. No passpoaht. Ellis

Island regista. Social security numba. Family  
tree back ta Munster nKerry with a  
shamrock onnis mothas coffee mug. Didja  
come ahtta Vickys with the Amoah del Señoah,  
or get coughed up on a papal bull  
ahtcha fathas Mahbro lung?

### **Sully's Rube-Goldberg**

Sully lost the gold bracelet  
that pist offis brotha  
who fell inna basket  
that tipt the scale  
that flipt the mahble  
that triptis dad  
who smasht the bottle  
that held the string  
that pulled the hook  
that hung up onnis motha  
who cried onna tablecloth  
that Sully wipedis mouth on  
twenny yeahs befoah  
he eva lost the bracelet.

## Sully's Inversion of Paul

1. Ah pal Paul, late of Chandlah Street, called ahtta Wistah
2. Concerning his drive ta Providence cuzzy gut sicka waiting fa the resurrection of the dead:
3. He wiz debtor ta the Greeks an the Poahda Ricans; the patient an the hasty.
4. So he took off at night inna station wagon fa the City of God on the new by-pass
5. That skips Kelly Squaih, unda 290 onta 146.
6. He left jist a slit ta see aht the back windah cuzzyd stuffed the back seat
7. With a futon an pillows ncases a Polar an cahdboahd boxes labeled with shahpie.
8. Then somewheah rahnd Millville he sez the cah stahted shakin:
9. He didn trust his suspension so he pulled ova ta check aht is lugs.
10. An lo, wull he wiz squattin ova the tie-ya Paul wis blinded by a white light.
11. He stood up withis left hand overris eyes an braced imself onna trunk withis right hand still holdin the lugwrench.
12. "Gah whatheChrist" he sez, an a statey steps ahtta the lights.
13. "Wheah ya headed?" he sez nPaul sez "Providence."
14. The statey shines a flashlight innis backseat an sez "Fa good?" nPaulie sez "Fa good".
15. "Gunna remembah ta change ya plates nlicense?" sez the master of the flooding headlights.
16. The statey took off nPaul peeled arahnd on 146 nzipt right backta Wistah.
17. Anny gathid us arahnd an he wiz still squinting and rubbin is eyes fa three days.
18. An ah pal Paul said theahs stasis in the City of the Resurrected Dead
19. An the walkin bodies ah quick nthe debts ah paid nwhats ta do is done;
20. But heah the sinnahs nthreedeckah debtors ah blessed ta wait fa the change.

### **Son de la Ma Dorothea**

- Dónd' e'tá la Ma Dorothea?
- Breakinup sidewalk cement.
- Con su hammer an rotating drum?
- Mezclando nuevo cement.
- Where she at don undo where she's from.
- Layin downnuevo cement.
- An ESully can't see where she went.

## Major Taylor and Turtle Boy

Mayja Tayla biked up Geohge Street  
—most folks walk a mile arahnd—  
like climbin the face of a steeple  
wully pedaled the rarified grahnd.

Soonizzy gut ta the summit  
he hopt off ntrotted back dahn  
withis bike onnis shouldas ncycle shoes clickin  
ta ride back up the rarified grahnd.

Turtle Boy sawrim from Main Street  
an said “Major, I know you can ride.  
But I’ll race you the Loop with this turtle  
conveying my nakedly hide...”

The Mayja gavim a wink;  
the liddle buck geeupt is turtle,  
then bothofem ticktackt southwest  
towahd the foah-way at Main Street and Myrtle.

The turtle swooshed likeed swoosh unda watah;  
the Mayja leaned over nshot uppis hips.  
They zippt past the Times, the Palladium,  
the coahna wheah Fish-Rida sawr an eclipse.

But Turtle Boy cheated nturned noath up Portland  
wull the Mayja stuck to the path;  
he’d accounted fa coahnas nsquaihnd the hypotenuse  
wull Turtle Boy sneezed at the math.

He skidded is breaks inta Franklin nFront  
—widow’s peak a the ol city green—  
with some kid onna terrapin snappinis jaws  
at the twennyfive yahds inbetween.

Now Mayja Tayla’s infronna the libry  
takinis brassy repose  
wull Turtle Boy’s stuck on the Common  
still gettin beat by a nose.

nBothofem lookin southeast  
nbothofem toastin the tahn  
can see Vernon Hill from theah plinths



between capstones a rarified grahnd.

### **The Grafting Trees**

Aht in Brookfield on the oldtimey fahms  
they donlet the apple fields go fallow.  
When a reddelicious turns up its palms

they chop it dahn an graft a sallow  
granny smith. They leave enuffofa stump  
ta grabba hold then cut two shallow

slits between the bahk npulp. They wedge a clump  
a shoots that grow ta be anotha tree  
then bagntape it like a camel's hump.

The field don hafta go ta waste. Just be  
patient a couple yeeahs ncrossher ahms.  
Frankenstein trunks at each antipode

climb aht like the Lorax nmake these fahms  
brannew. Don needa backhoe pullin roots  
ta reworkem. Leave a fielda schoolmarms  
at the knees, nyull keep the autumn fruits.

### **Uncle Mike's All-Truism**

Jeez  
some lives a done befoah theah stahdid  
like some kids ah boahn retahdid  
or even viet na meez.

Some gutta cleft lip  
like ya buddy Forkface  
or missin an ahm like that sad case  
Lefty with the bad penmanship.

So gahead ntip  
a sadsack a quahta.  
Sides. Yakin be sorta  
sure arahn heah he probly aint a Gyp.

## **Sangréal**

Onna Satady they wernt duelin  
Sul's fatha tookim ta Higgins  
nshowdim the swoahds nthe ahma,  
the bannahts hangin frim the cealins.

Sul gut hung up on the hoahses rampant  
npicshid is fatha unda the hoofs  
wull Mista Sullivan rattled the saybahs  
innis head an magined is hands arahn the hafts.

Sul said the only thing he couldn find  
wiz the Grail. So is fatha callsim ova  
ta the winda npoints ta the Odd Fellas Home.  
Saidy could break in with some rope anna hamma.

"That's wheah they keepit." NSul staih at the red bricks  
ntellsis dad "I kin seeit frim heah.  
Bet we could sneak in." An Mista Sully smirks  
nsez "I alwees though you belonged theah."

## **Sully on the Peacock**

Paht pewta peacock  
in the livinrum coahna  
has Ma's eyes nDad's beak.

Toahso's tin an antimony  
but the feathas ah real  
stubbin an crumbly.

If the glass eyes don  
catcha theahs a hundred  
spread aht like a fan.

Ma wiz dustin the feathas  
with feathas like cuttin  
diamond with diamond.

Dad wiz shakin the papah  
smokin a butt  
nburnin the aih

snaps the funnies  
goes ova ta Mar  
nsnatches the dusta.

Thenny whacks whacks whacks  
at the feathas  
till the whole peacock shakes

jams the dusta  
back in Ma's hand  
ngoes back to is papah.

Turned aht unda the dust  
the glass eyes nfeathas  
wah morales the same blue

an the pewta body  
was holdinem in place  
by bein so heavy.

### **Embalmed Sully**

Sully's a canopic jah with a baboon head.  
Flashlight glows thruis alabasta—  
holds a wellkep lung.  
Strawbry blonds faded  
attis widow's peak wurry hasta  
rub coppatone ta keep the UVs frim cookinis mug.

Yakin poppis head off nswapit with a grinny jackal  
Yakin weighis heaht ntossit to a crock.  
Stillis translucent skin  
wont raise a hackle  
winya stickim inna tomb. Jiss make shoah ya knock  
inna thousan yeeahs winya robbin the grave. Hill letcha in.

### **Rob on Sully's Day Trips**

Win Sul an Ash drive dahnna Cape  
in Ashley's Foahd made adda tape  
like Steve McQueen inna Great Escape  
    they bitchnfight  
baht who fahgut ta shut the drape  
    an the kitchenlight.

They slam the trunk at ten past six  
packt fulla Coke npeanit Twix.  
Theah holdin hands winnay hit the bricks  
    but that don last.  
It stahts with liddle sighs and clicks  
    then gets ugly fast.

But once they see the old Borne Bridge  
an cables link the chanel's ridge  
they both feel smalla than a midge.  
    Sul sweahs they meanit.  
He reaches in back fa the travel fridge.  
    'Hm. Tastes like peanit."

### **Casey on the Peacock**

Fat fuckin turkey  
she took fereva  
dustin. Felt like NBC

frontoffice in the den.  
Hayagunna keep  
real feathas inna tin

pigeon inna house  
fulla boys? Dustin  
flickin. Red cloth

fa the pewta  
we must neva use  
ta wipe spilled beah.

Featha dusta  
fa the feathas!  
Wull habadda

linoleum sponge  
fa the kitchen floah?  
Ull vacuum the rug

Unda ya bird  
but Um not gunna  
watch aht fa feathas.

## Uncle Mike's Mung Beans

So  
I mighta grew pot  
in Case's veggie gahden  
an  
I mighta toldim  
it wiz mung beans  
then  
theahs a chance  
I hahvistem up by the roots  
an  
I maya left dirt holes  
innis gahden like a mouse grave yahd  
an  
I mighta sprinkled dirt  
onnis prize tamaydas  
an  
Case mighta gut pisst  
iffy didn think I loved mung beans so much  
an  
I guess ya could call them holes  
pot holes. Huh. Pot holes.



### **Casey's A.M. Routine**

Theahs frost onna cah win I get up  
so I scrape it off withee icescraypah.  
Scrape scrape scrape liddle dahnwid strokes  
till I gut an icefishin hole ta see ahdda  
cuz its still dahk.

Now Um breathin hadh nsweattin  
inna cold an my neck is sweaty ncold  
anna sweat freezes an makes my eyebrows  
crunchy. Back doah groans open  
an I toss the icescraper in.

I cant get the keys inny ignition  
with my gloves on. So I yank  
the right one off with my teeth  
an my fingiz faihly stick ta the fuckin key.  
I slam the doah with my left

an see the clock says 5:34.  
I turn the key an theahs Thads  
crayins on the passenja floah  
an Um doin this fa him  
an the fuckin thing coughs win I turn it ova.

### **O'Mal on Sully, Exactly**

That fuckin kid hangs  
on ya words not cuzzy  
thinks ya friends  
but cuzzys fussy

baht whats exactly right  
nw who had hahminny RBIs  
in sixtyfive nDiet Sprite  
don come in the size

it did six yeahs ago  
an no it wiz Novemba  
we saw the Dropkicks show  
an otha shit I don rememba.

Kid dips like a pan a penzoil  
but won eat meat thats too pink.  
Folds leftova salmon in tin foil  
then fahgets it by the sink.

So I toldim once  
that precise shit drives  
me uppa wall. Two months  
latah hes leavin Irish Times

by hisself an I askim  
whodja piss off in the champagne room?  
Kid spits aht the lip hes packin  
an sez "Ya mean 'whom.'"

## Ashley's Theology

Thad wiz doin the beads  
sure-  
handed. Thumb flickin the beads.

I sawrim go around three times.  
Sure  
enough he gut quiet likee does at the Times.

He looktit the mantle with the peacock nthe Christ.  
“Sure-  
ly ya knowee loves you,” I sez. “Christ”

Thad sez. “Hahkin I know that  
sure  
as you think ya know that?”

We’ve done this befoah. “Cuzzy loves us all.”  
“Sure”  
sez Thad. “Then why even do good at all?”

Ya hafta earn grace, earn His love—  
sure  
ashellaint a free scratchticket. An I sez “‘Earn love’?”

That’s just like you.”

### **Dorothy Gloveless**

If I took ya kidglove hand befoahr  
I took ya baih hand Dor a thee  
Id have no idear a ya skin  
wheah ya blemished an soah.

Id feel the unifoahm  
texture an hafta take ya word  
that frim ya wristaya fingatip  
aint mucha cold or wahm.

So Ull nestle in ya deep trails—  
those trenches in ya palm  
the meat a ya thumb  
that bed a dirt beneath ya nails.

## Wedding Photo

I askt James nPat if they seenis befoah  
what I fahnd inny attic an they couldn believe  
he eva lookt like that with white teeth  
nthin nposed ferra picture ndahk haih.

Ma didn look too different cept  
a liddle thinna too befoah she had  
us anna haih wiz straight nlong with a band  
holdin it back wherrah veil wiz draped.

Almost goodlookin withis face shaved  
annis unbrow pluckt annis grey ascot  
an grey gloves ntails. No butt  
betweenis fingas. Jiss Mas hand.

They wah standing on grass clipt so small  
it musta binna golf coahse. Probly the only  
time Dad set foot onna green or a country  
club. Had a white cahnation innis lapel.

Jimmy nPat said they couldn think  
winnayd eva seen Mar or Dad holdin  
eachothas hand or lookin so thin  
an why don I gahead stickit back inny attic.

So I stuck it back with the moths nmildewy  
boxes nstoahm windas stackt over insulation  
an rags gone the way of a white cahnation.  
If he don caih then why should we?

## [Corrections]

The Worcester Telegramaphone & Landfill wishes to announce the following corrections:

- A Mr. L. McCuvvy, 31, of Worcester was arrested Tuesday for assault and public urination, and not for “a salt and public coronation” as reported in Wednesday’s police blotter. Mr. McCuvvy is accused of shoving an unidentified man to the sidewalk outside a crowded establishment on Main Street, stamping on his thigh, and attempting to relieve himself upon the man. Public coronation in Worcester County is neither a crime nor politically possible.
- The city council meeting, open to the public, to discuss putting pants on the Turtle Boy statue on Worcester Common is scheduled for Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup>, and not Wednesday the 10<sup>th</sup> as reported.
- Wednesday’s article on the overflow at local shelters, such as the P.I.P. on South Main Street and the Massachusetts Veterans’ Shelter on Grove Street, reported the date of President Reagan’s repeal of the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980 as August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1984. The date was in fact August 13<sup>th</sup> 1981.
- Our Recap of the Worcester Tornadoes season in Can Am League competition stated that the team had its bats and balls repossessed prior to a home game in August. This game was against the Quebec Capitales, and not the Toledo Mudhens, as reported. The Tornadoes ended the season 29-71.

We regret any confusion this may have caused.

## Sully on Mr. Devereau

Mista D hadda asstight sense a things  
withis *MorningThaddeus*you'vecomethreehundredsixtydegrees.  
Neva saw how ansis wah like pullin cats ahtta bags  
winny *XequalsnegativeBplusorminus...*

Ya stick ya hand in blind an get clawed ta ya sinew  
wully sez ...*thesquarerootofBsquaredminusfourAC...*  
Pull one aht by the scruff an hopethechrist it's a winna  
thenmy goes *over2Aandyoucanusethattosolve...*

All I askt wiz ken I use the handicap john  
anny sez *Idon'tknowcanyou?*  
I tellim homeworkishomework even if the papahs toahn  
buddy goes *ThaddeusIwon'tacceptthistatter.*

Some folks don't see past the tippa theih *pince nez*.  
(an ya know he goes) *Itisimpolitetoblowbubblesinonesmilk—*  
What wiz so wasn alwees whaddy sez  
withis *Nexttimetryturningonehundredandeighty.*

### **Mary on the Peacock**

One nice thing. I wanted  
one nice thing inna house  
with a Seamus a Thad

a Padriac a Casey  
four crost streams a piss  
and one Mary.



## Suliad

But win bloodshot dawn blinkt ova Grafton Street  
an the rage of Casey's son wiz broke up nspread  
like grains a glass or puzzle pieces withaht no coahna  
pieces, an it spahkled wheah the slash a pink light  
from the winda lit like it wiz worth breakin  
the skin onnis palm—then Sully woke onnis corduroy  
couch with lineprints onis face.

He sawris spitta:

A half full Snapple bottle a dip juice.  
Anny saw the shahds npuzzle pieces ngrass  
clippins of all the swaths hed cut thru the House  
a Sullivan annits noble friends fa the slights theyd dunnim  
an the slights theyd done ta the orda he kept innis pocket.  
Slouchy Sully rolled off the couch an onta  
his knees. He snatchtis phone off the dipspit table  
nscrolled fa messages. Winnyd put aside is hope  
that they mighta called inna Guinnessdahk ow-wiz a night  
he checkt the bedrum furra note. But longtalkin Ashley  
had scooped up the scrunchies an eye yins ntearing  
words of the last six yeeahs nclosed the doah  
behinder at onefoahtyve.

Soee threw on a purple  
windbreaka an busted aht the screen doah withis keys  
in one freckled hand annis phone attis ruddy eah  
callin is fatha, loahd of men, Casey.  
But Sullys winning words fell on Caseys  
voicemail wully clawred withis keys at the cah doah.  
An winnyd gut it open he sawr all seven hills a the city  
littid with the clippins nthe fallout a the rage a the son  
a Casey—atta girl whod straightened her haih, att motha  
who gut embarrassed, att fatha who mahshaled the stoahmclouds,  
atta tangle a suitors who thought close wiz good enough  
fa Dor a thee, an at Dor a thee heself whod smoothed er creases.  
An in the ruts between the hills the bodies wah stacked  
like leggos waitin ta be burned ta cleah the grahnd.

Strawbry Sully called ta his motha, but Mary  
had shut hah phone ta the protests of hah third son.  
He tosst is phone wurra passenja mighta sat  
an pulled aht dahn Graftin lookin for all the world  
like a headless hoahsman feelin ferris punkin. He bent  
right onta Wata Street jiss lefta the cold storage  
that burnt dahn an gut made into a fie ya station, jiss right

a the Faihway Beef locka. Sully spilled  
unda the tracks a the Providence Wista line  
inta Washington Squaih in fronta Union Station  
with its two towas scrubbed white. A quahta  
turn arahnd the rotary tookim ta Summa Street  
jiss right a the new St. Vincents wurris granmotha died,  
jiss left a the post office: one suckin things in; one spittin em aht.

Stout Sully took a left up MLK  
that useta be East Central tillit teed  
inta Main. He peeled ta the curb in fronna the Times  
raddlin is busted muffla likee wiz “Just Divorced”.  
He hustled bowlegged ta the glass doah ta see McPlasta  
sweepin npointin ta “Sorry. We’re Closed” inna winda.  
“Bit early idnit Sul? he sez unda wata.  
“WuddI say last night?” askt Sully thru the wineblue  
glass. “Chrissully what didnya say?” said McPlasta  
who opened the door a crack nstuck is head  
annis broom inta the daylight. “I mean ta Ash  
or O’Mal or Vicky or Baz or LaJoie or my dad  
onna phone or ta Quirk or Burke or Hogan or Logan  
or you.” McPlasta said “Well ya told me ta keepem  
comin then ya told me ta cutcha off. Win Ashley  
left ya told me ta keepem comin again.”  
“What time she leave?” askt the son a thundering Casey  
“an wudshee take with ah?” “Baht eleven thirty ta yaw place,  
an her setta keys an ya rosary with the troll doll  
hangin frommit.”

Sully puttis hand onna glass  
as it closed, an lookt south dahn Main ta the red bricks  
of Clahk an the vinylsided threedekkas, then noahth  
ta the Aud an the brannew bio chem labs at Tech.  
He gut innis car an rolled noahth. Sully spat  
inna Poland Springs bottle he kept attis crotch cuz  
his cah neva had cup holdas. Old bottles bopped  
arahn the back seat wully bumpatabumped up Main.  
Nah the sun wiz up like a chrome hubcap ntraffic  
wiz stahtna pick up. Sully Rolled past AT&T  
an lookt left fa the trusty Sundry moahnin oracle:  
Rosie the Batshit Newspapa Lady found asylum  
between the Unitarian Church anna coahth house  
an theah she wiz flingin selfpublished rags made  
ahtta recycled pizza boxes at everyone an theih dog.  
Sully pahkt onna right an froggid ova ta Rosie  
who tosstim an ‘Inner City Advocate’ nsaid “Three selectmen

ah blockin this vote on the sewas. Ya gunna help me  
 canvass?" The son of Casey bit is tongue befoah sayin  
 hah canvass awriddy lookt like a Jackson Pollock.  
 He folded the paypa back up nsaid "My fatha  
 been by?" "Been by arahn eight" said Rosie. "Told me  
 ta shove my commie paypas up my ass thenny  
 gamey five bucks ferra paper an went off. Think  
 ya fathas sweet on me." "Sweet on me that way too" said Sul.  
 "He say wurry wiz goin?" Behind glasses too big ferrah face  
 an unwashed bangs too shoah ta cull inna ponytail  
 Rosie said "Alleetoldme wiz Sundys his day off an that  
 includes you. Wundja say ta the guy, Thad" "Christ if I know"  
 said the headspun son of Casey Sullivan who stamps  
 nthundas nkeeps ya close nmakes ya fridge runneth ova.  
 Sully lookt right, noahth up Main again  
 cuz south wiz old grahnd an jiss didn seem like it held  
 any secrets ferrim today. He turned backta Rosie  
 but she'd awriddy lockt eyes with a Puerto Rican guy annis girl  
 an wiz talking city ordinances that discriminate by neighborhood nflappin  
 paypas attem like an ahm fulla cats. So Searchin Sully  
 clapt back innis car an nudged noahth ta the intasection still draggin  
 his muffla by the heals.

He stopt at the stopsign cuzzats  
 whattcha do atta stopsign. Straight wiz Salisbury Street  
 nthe aht museum he went to onna foahthgrade field trip,  
 Grove Street, the fie-ya-mins trainin towa, the cemetery.  
 Left wiz a hump up Highland, the Boynton, Elm Pahk,  
 the supamahket wurriz motha wid gettim a chocolate  
 donut nsit withim sippin hah coffee wully tolder  
 abaht Transfoahmas nGI Joes nkickt is legs hangin  
 off the stool. An behind wiz wheah hed been comin from a long  
 time now. So Sully turned right at the stopsign  
 cuzzats whatty dont nawmally do at this stopsign.

The sun had a few too many last night an now  
 it wiz takin its twelve slow steps into the coppatone  
 sky. It slickt its path with WD-40  
 an stuck itself in place with a roll of ducktape.  
 The streets wah getting busy an honkin with cahs  
 an people with someplace ta be or nowheah ta go.  
 Sorry Sully didn think abaht the livin bodies  
 but counted the dead onnis fingas ntoes an couldn  
 rememba whaddy said ta whom, buddy wiz shoah the rage  
 of the son of Casey who rakes the thunder nshovels  
 the stoahmclouds musta spaltnid his life with the sinews nguts

of whateva kinships nfriendships keptim afloat.  
 He crosst Mayja Tayla Boulevahd on Belmont  
 past the central po-leece station ta the bridge  
 ova 290. Pacin imself Sully pulled into  
 Dunkin Donuts that useta be Store 24  
 across frim UMass Memorial. Comin aht with an extra  
 medium coffee ESully espied Angel  
 late of the railroad with new tattoos elbow-deep  
 innis engine. He saw the ahch of the rosary that he knew  
 wound dahn Angels ahm an ended inna cross  
 onna back of is hand. He saw the name of is daughta  
 SELENA in cursive onnis shoulda. "Que ta!" said Sully  
 ta Angel elbow-deep innis engine. And Angel drew aht  
 his ahm one rosary bead atta time. "Man"  
 he said. "Esully, aint nobody lookin fa you today."  
 "Ya don say" said the son of Casey. "Someyhow"  
 said Angel "insteada noahmal when yoah people be callin  
 me askin fa you I gutcha pops an ya girl beggin  
 me don let Thad know where I'm at. Like they done curst you,  
 Sul. It's something gimme a bad feelin  
 an I cant have that hangin ova me.  
 Least not today. Fa love a me *hay que keep movin*.  
 Slinky Sully who knew the curse would ahtrun him  
 On foot clapt back innis car an lookt east wheah the word  
 had no jurisdiction ta ahtrunnim. Ova the hump  
 of Belmont the world opened and spread before him.  
 He whoosht past Bell Pond wheah the Poahda Rican  
 families have cookahts, an like a Monny Cahlo  
 balanced onna pahkin cone he tipt nrolled  
 inexorably dahn an east.

Halfway dahn  
 the hill Sully lookt right nsaw two ahtta seven  
 McCuvvys comin ahtta the bloodwork clinic with paypas  
 rolled up in theih blotchy hands. They wah both rubbin  
 bandaid spots on theih shouldas. Sully saw  
 clear enough cuz they wah both wearin Stone Cold Steve Austin  
 t-shirts with the sleeves cut off. "Good luck cleanin  
 ya koolaid blood long enough ta hold dahn a job"  
 though Casey's babyborn. "Bowlegged fuckin huckleberries."  
 Sully grinned cuzzay didn seem. Nobody  
 wid seem. Not is folks or Ashley. He knewy did sumpn  
 ta pissem off. One by one or all tagetha  
 they left is place empty an is phone stoney  
 as a slab a Cracka Barrel by the sink. He grabbed at the seat  
 next to im ferris phone wull the traffic backt up at the light.

Thenny dropt it as the cahs stahted crawlin again. He toucht  
is face wurry woke up with the lines from is corduroy couch.  
“The Christ I do? The Christ I’m gunna do now.”

He floated through the innasection of Lake Ave  
nBelmont, abaht ta cross the bridge ova Lake  
Quinsig—Wista behind im nShewsbury in front.  
Belmont wid turn inta Route 9.

The sun wiz directly  
ovahead. “McCuvvys gunna be the last famillya faces  
I see ferra hot minute?” said Sully ta his steerin wheel.  
Goin foahwid like is cah wiz tiptoein, Sully  
sawr a bum standin on the median holdin a cahdboahd  
sign creased an wrote in shahpie: “WHO ARE YOU  
AND WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?” Sully lookt straight ahead  
at Shewsbury, at Petco an Trayda Joe’s. Thenny blinkt  
an lookt back beforry gut too fah. Now  
the sign said “Illiterate. Please spare some change. God Bless.”

## **“Rehab”: an Epilogue**

Laddahs inna windas  
nbills posted in print as  
if its wiz oldtimey wanted  
signs sayin “this joint useta be haunted”  
shoulda been enough fa Sully  
ta figya the old places wah truly  
overanbulldozed an the Times  
wiz no exception. Wallpapah skeins  
standin on end an he musta knew  
the green felt above the blue  
tiles in the bathroom wiz gone  
fa good. Whir else couldy piss on  
a urinal cake an admaya some felt,  
one hand onna wall an one attis belt?  
Knew like a gopher it wiz closin but  
he kep goin til they shut  
fa renovations. The last bah  
that wasn a club or a douchenest. No hurrah.  
Jist a whimpah an Sul’s fingas  
innis eahs, waitin fa the libation-bringas.  
Know what they call it now?  
“Rehab.” No moah Irish Times jiss Lowenbrow,  
no Sammys stackt like pyramids or  
green felt paisleys arahn the bathroom doah.  
But actual glasses with pastel  
drinks ncollege kids weighed dahn by haih gel.  
Pretty much not even ironic any moah  
That the sheriff’s office is jiss nexdoah.  
The Irish Times. Irish times zero. “Rehab.”  
He knew it wiz comin and didn grab  
onta Vic or George or me or tell-ya-the-truth  
even Asley til they tore aht his coahna booth.



# **An Examination of the *Sully***

## **Poems in Context**



## Introduction

These poems, grown out of a sensitivity to the sounds of words, started out as a language experiment. *Sully* is a sequence of poems in an array of voices that attempts to depict and round out the character of a young man, his family, philosophy, and city by inscribing them in the array of styles of speech found in his immediate world. I give the Eastern New England accent primacy, as it often assumes without examination in the daily parlance of the region. Also present and interacting with this rendering of the ENE accent are standard spellings and pronunciations, as well as dashes of a sort of *Spanglish* hybrid of American English and Puerto Rican Spanish.

In 2007 when I attempted the first of what would become the *Sully* poems, my only motive was to imitate what I relished as the aural inventiveness and precision of Tom Leonard's *Glasgow Poems*. The phonetic code he challenged us to break and the novelty of performing the poems—even before their political or aesthetic implications—compelled me to draw a parallel to the Eastern New England accent I grew up hearing. So I gave it a try using almost his exact template of non-punctuation and clustered words. I even included the cheeky subtitle, “Inspiyid by Tom Lenid.” Obviously I considered this single poem of mine also a novelty; it began as a lark, and was never meant to sprawl and entwine with my other areas of literary interest.

But as I read more works from around the Anglophone world that explored accent and dialect, and that even challenged and blurred my understanding of the word “Anglophone”, I came to see linguistic variety and manipulation in poetry as necessarily underscored by questions of place, politics, and versification. Leonard, in his *Glasgow Poems*, was no longer being just a voice actor, but a painter of cityscapes and an educational reformer. He was minimalistically depicting the gritty and sometimes violent underbelly of Glasgow, while also destabilizing the prominence of Received Pronunciation. Likewise, the demotic spellings and rhythms of the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett—though in celebration, unlike Leonard's poems—operated confidently outside the confines of the convention of Standard English. The mockery that laughs her R.P.-speaking “Dry Foot Bwoy” from the communal circle is an unspoken inversion of traditional linguistic hierarchy. These perspectives—bristling or joyful—based on a sense of linguistic alterity, I felt could be gestated only in post-colonial traditions. Only those literary heritages of language overlaid on language, of dominance and subjugation, could produce this dynamic tension of identities and expression. And so I debated how to justify my attempts

to contribute to this body of work, how to wedge my post-industrial corner of the world into the same context as Dublin, Castries, Glasgow, and Johannesburg. Obviously, this was a fatally reductive understanding of their work and mine.

When I began earnest research to expand *Sully* into a project, my premise was the existence of a trans-cultural “genre” of poetry found in former colonies and written entirely in or featuring phonetically rendered local accents and dialects. Whatever I produced I intended to measure against this composite tradition. The problem was that my voices did not come from a place of oppression or deracinated or transplanted tongues. Say Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “...[B]ehind the problematic of writing itself in the settler colonies, lie the central and unavoidable questions of the relationship between the imported European and the local, between ancestry and destiny, and between language and place. These questions remain at the heart of the creative conflicts and possibilities inherent in all post-colonial writing and theory.”<sup>1</sup>

This took some of the wind out of my enthusiasm. What gave me the right to play with accents and registers as my heroes had done if none of these relationships applied to me or to my speakers? I came to see that the historical conflicts that underlay these questions of language were not milieus for my fifth-generation Irish-American X-Box player. Similar gimmicks of sound and spelling may have been occurring between my poems and those of the post-colonial world, but driven by different influences and compulsions, and in aid of different aesthetic ends. Any people or languages native to New England and displaced by English have long been eradicated or consigned to a distant margin. The legacy of the region as we inherit it today is not a clash of languages, or even dialects, as much as a hodgepodge of accents. These tend not to cut cleanly along lines of race, age, or class, and in many ways are always changing. The unavoidable realization this forced was that *Sully* and his city do not exist in the traditionally-defined post-colonial contexts of Walcott, of Brathwaite, or even of Burns (a sort of proto-*Sully* as I conceived him). Again, Ashcroft, et al.:

The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities...Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice...The language of these ‘peripheries’ was shaped by an

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<sup>1</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 2003. 144. First published 1989.

oppressive discourse of power. Yet they have been the sight of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period and this has, at least in part, been the result of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional uses.<sup>2</sup>

Sully has known no power-struggle over politics or language. Though the ENE accent is often *depicted* as belonging to the working-class, it is in fact spoken from the top to the bottom of that society. Sully would have heard teachers, priests, police, lawyers, and judges speaking mostly as he does. Even before Sully's time President Kennedy went on television talking about missiles from "Cuber". Boston's mayor of twenty years, Thomas Menino, is a famous and vocal spouter of the accent. If anything, to Sully the accent *is* normative. The "energies" Ashcroft et al mention must come in my case not from a rejection of an imposed structure, but from the static of many "variants" jostling in the same space.

But all this did not make my poems disappear. How was it that some of them even seemed to work without an embattled history of language and place? In order to perform a competent critical reading of my own work, I have to think beyond the context that inspired it. More than that, I have to allow the individual authors and works that did so the same mobility to wend in and out of the categories in which I had once fixed them. Berryman's *Dream Songs*, for instance, I had looked to only as a model for the supporting of a primary voice by the presence of a secondary in a longer sequence. Poems by a white American Shakespeare scholar essentially donning Blackface, I thought, could offer me little more. But had I given the poems a Formalist reading considering the counterpointing of Bones's/Henry's Standard English with the African-American dialect (such as it is) of his "cornerman", I would have tapped a richer and more relevant vein. The voices, I would have seen sooner, are not always distinct, and often borrow from one another, channel one another to the point of provoking a dialectic of expression that subtly permeates Henry's vocabulary and rhythms. Surely this ends up having as much or more applicability to *Sully* as the binary and battling language templates handled by Leonard or Bennett. Inversely, I originally took the conversationally inspired free-verse models of Williams and Olson to be the proper vessels for American demotic. Before long, these got bumped as a default by the lilt and repetition inherent in quatrains more closely associated with Border Ballads. As

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<sup>2</sup> Ashcroft, et al. 7-8.

I allowed Sully and his companions episodically to slap more clay on their frames, the sound that emerged tended toward this and other folk forms such as Irish drinking songs. I realized that the plan is ever-changing, and the influences may yield different parts of themselves at different points in the development.

*Sully*, at last, needs to be considered not in a context, but in a contextual *field*. I identify the four aspects of my work that, in the aftermath of its completion, assert themselves as salient. Very broadly they are: language; voice (including tone); place; and mythology. Each I will discuss in turn, and when relevant, in relation to one another. Initially this approach would seem to insist on the compartmentalization I claim to have been slowly overcoming; and indeed some works will prove to offer one-dimensional—though important—influence. But most will prove tougher to define, and drift between these four themes, allowing us to take apart and use every piece of what they offer. I hope by the end to come to rest among poems that prove as much a nexus of these themes as can exist. A reader might by then see why I try to embed *Sully* in this context of more syncretic poetry. We will examine lastly, and with a sense of culmination, these works that exemplify the dynamic play and integration of language, culture, time, and voice that may not have begun as my goal, but in the process of creating *Sully* became my moving target.

This fever to contextualize is the fallout of my realization that my work has no single obvious forebear, that it does not follow any influence in more than one or two of the four categories. The presence of so many influences works *for* me as well as against me, since it makes my poems less likely to be mired in their derivativeness, but also more slippery to analyze. Though this difficulty has made assembling a context a preoccupation, I urge the reader to remember it is not the goal of this essay, but simply step one in processing the *Sully* poems. As we will see, referring to works of influence or those influential in my rejection of them (what I will sometimes call *inverted influence*) is by way of establishing the domain and range of my own poems vis-à-vis the four aesthetic and geo-cultural aspects of language, voice, place, and mythology. Once inside this framework, my analyses, like the variety of registers and languages in the poems, will not simply rotate in isolation, but should have limits to chafe and spark against. Each category of enquiry is so broad as to demand its own consideration independent of the others, which it will get; nevertheless I will try by the end to integrate them in an analysis that honors the absorptive and syncretic design which I hope to have made clear in the poems.

## Chapter 1: Language

Language ought to begin and conclude our examination of *Sully*, since it is the formal feature in whose consideration it was conceived; and despite any narrative texture it takes on, it will be the most obviously and strongly *received*. Labov et al. define Eastern New England as “the region of *r*-vocalization where a short-*a* is split into /æ/ and /ah/...”<sup>3</sup> For our less technical purposes, this means we sometimes add an *r*—where none exists—as a buffer between vowels or pauses, sometimes drop them where they do, and we may stretch out a short-*a* to become an *ah*, as in *father* or *aunt* (*fahtha* and *ahnt*). It is sometimes identified as one of the few American non-rhotic accents; but this is inadequately descriptive. The handling and mishandling of the letter *r* does not happen in isolation, but exerts a force on phonemes immediately before and after it, like space bending around an astral body. Thus, in the ENE accent the word *partner*, for example, becomes *pahtnah*, and *soda* becomes *soder*. One can see in my poems a general shift in the orthography toward such spellings, but not a leap with both feet. There are exceptions, of course, consistent with some Labov notes regarding age and ethnic groups. Also, some topics, voices, and instances seemed to demand more standard expression; and at these points I have followed my gut and ear rather than dogma.

The linguistic predecessors of most immediate relation to these poems are, tellingly, oral and not written. Wretched approximations notwithstanding, contemporary films have attempted to dramatize the Eastern New England accent and bring it to a mainstream audience. At times it has been with subtlety, as with Tom Berringer’s American character in *The Field* (1991) attempting to claim ancestral land in Ireland. In this instance, his provenance is never made overt, but his well-executed accent transplants a personal and family back-story of separation and reconnection, of being at once an insider and outsider. Other films have made the accent a cudgel to clobber theatregoers with an onslaught of aggression and defensive posturing, as in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), or *The Departed* (2006), in which Robin Williams and Jack Nicholson struggle with and mangle the accent (“Wah you nawt in the f--kin’ cah!”).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Labov, William, Sharon Ash, Charles Boberg. *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Sound Change*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Although I must admit that a few actors in each film performed the accent convincingly. Matt Damon, Ben Affleck,

These films were the earliest depictions I encountered of an accent to which I had become inured as a background music. It was initially defamiliarizing to hear it treated as an affectation when usually it was Standard English pronunciation that I was accustomed to hearing people affect when social propriety demanded. In my early teens, as my schooling began to expand beyond my hometown in central Massachusetts, I came into daily contact with young people from other regions of the English-speaking world. Their amusement at the ENE accent and hammy attempts to imitate it jarred me into hearing it again for the first time, really *hearing* it. With renewed sensitivity to its aural features—the disappearing-reappearing elided and hypercorrective *rs*, the missing *gs* at the end of gerunds—I began to recast every utterance of it I heard in phonetic spellings. When I discovered the works of others writers that seemed to legitimize this quirk of mine, I wondered if this were trodden ground. A fair amount of digging revealed no extended literary attempts to reproduce the accent. The vocabulary and rhythms of Old New Englanders had been channeled through the likes of Frost and Sarah Orne Jewett, but I could not find a poet or novelist who had offered a phonetic encoding for this accent as, say, Faulkner had for the deep-Southern African-American dialect through the character of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*.

So I began to draw parallels to other accents and dialects in literature. These led me to identify three formal criteria by which to assess the language of non-standard poems, and by which measure I may compare mine to the others I examine: proximity to Standard English; the presence of a spectrum of modes and languages; and what I will call “clustering”, or orthographic rearrangement and bunching to represent units of sound.

### *Degree of Deviation from Standard English*

As we will see, not all of the *Sully* poems employ the same invented phonetic spellings. Some deviate less than others from Standard English, and some are in fact entirely in Standard English. This section will consider the majority, however, which display at least some of the accent. The ENE accent, when heard, is actually rather intelligible. Some phonemes sound mutated to the Standard ear; but it is general spoken slowly enough to understand, not languidly but in no great rush, and is sufficiently within

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and Jeremy Renner (*The Town*, 2010) come to mind.

the limits of comprehensible deviation from typical American English. Apart from local place names and a sprinkling of regional paprika, the vocabulary is quite universal. This is why I refer to it in my case as an accent and not a dialect.<sup>5</sup> MacDiarmid's Scots and Bennett's Jamaican patois are properly recognized as dialects, almost languages unto themselves with their own codified grammars, syntaxes, and lexicons. The Eastern New England Accent is, by and large, governed by the rules of American English. Or, if there are deviations particular to the region (such as the inexplicable "So *don't* I"), they are either not exercised with consistency, or not recognized as deserving codification, since the accent in general tends to be *regarded* more as an aberration than as a cultural artifact fit for preservation.

In this way, it does not follow the Scottish or Caribbean traditions of dialect independent of the standard. Perhaps it is too young or too protean a mode of speech yet to have come into its own self-sustenance. And, sadly, it may never, due to what I perceive as the gradual grinding and homogenizing of the American accent. What traditions or individuals, then, could I take as models for this combination of linguistic familiarity and oddness? Where I find analogs is in accents with a less established literary or even oral tradition: in particular the Leeds accent Tony Harrison explores in his *School of Eloquence*, and the whimsical guide to "Strine", or Australian, in the works of Afferbeck Lauder. Tom Leonard's Glaswegian, though coming from an urban setting similar to Sully's, gains opacity from a kind of garbling that the ENE accent cannot claim. Leonard writes in "Good Style",

ahmaz goodiz thi lotta yiz so ah um

ah no whit ahm dayn

tellnyi

jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me

stick thi bootnyi good style

so ah wull<sup>6</sup>

The swirl of uncapitalized, unpunctuated and sporadically complete thoughts contributes to this impenetrability. And this is what Leonard wants. The preoccupation and the principal challenge to the reader are the language. Leonard, I felt, by writing like this was also positioning himself not with but actually against his own Scots tradition, which is itself on the outside of Standard English. Again, this

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<sup>5</sup> Although Labov et al. identify it as a dialect in linguistic terms.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard, Tom. *Intimate Voices* 1965-1983. Newcastle upon Tyne: Galloping Dog Press, 1984.

linguistic backlash against tradition and establishment would not suit Sully and his people, who are speaking ignorant of tradition, and with no sense of being double-outsiders as are Leonard's speakers.

As *Sully* developed, I found the voices moving away from such a combative stance against the English-speaking world, and toward more (realistically?) myopic dealings with one-another. This made me rethink my efforts to "encode" every trifling phoneme into the ENE accent. Gradually the palpability of the voices as created by their messages and images became more important than their adherence to my system of expression for the accent. I chose not to spend the length of the poems battling the reader or his preconceptions of English, but rather to try to use them to my poems' advantage. Leonard's own awareness of this self-restriction may have been why he offered only six short *Glasgow Poems* in 1969, and proceeded to keep phonetic spelling and local dialect as just occasional arrows in his quiver. Leonard, in this case, despite being Sully's first prompt, became a figure of inverted influence, which I believe is no less important a figure to growing writers than our beloved icons of inspiration. Often, I find, they may be the same person. We delve so minutely into the works we admire and keep them so close that, once the honeymoon is over, we are all too aware of the points of divergence between our voices and theirs. We may even seek these differences if only to reassure ourselves that our work is not entirely derivative.

This is all to say that from a starting point of extreme alienation, I inched toward and settled on a mode closer to Standard English than I had expected I would. In fact, I let such spelling predominate, and focused my accented spellings on the sounds I found most characteristic of Eastern New England speech: *rs* and the vowels surrounding them. I hoped that these quirks would actually stand out in greater relief against a normative field. So, as I mentioned, I have walked along a path that I and others can follow, but without walking in the well-worn ruts of that path. In this vein I found very little precedent poetry. The work of Kamau Bathwaite, I would say, comes closest to the balance of languages I have ended up with; but this similarity extends only so far as a rough ratio, and is mostly coincidental after the fact. The greater influence of his work on me has had to do with the politics of place, and will come up in the third chapter. Because the question of linguistic normativity in my work was largely fatherless, I will continue here to refer to Leonard's Glasgow poetry as the strongest influence *against* which I set myself.

One of my earliest and most fundamental decisions was to defer to conventional or at least



simplified spelling in the event of a dreaded schwa (ə). Many vowel sounds surrender their clarity and definition in the ENE accent. “Spot” can become “spawt” or “spaht”, as Labov notes. I thought I could create a language merger of my own and consolidate these possible pronunciations by culling all these sounds under the rubric of one “letter”. I began by actually inscribing these sounds—and they were many—as schwas. Readers found this disorienting, technical, and unclear, since the schwa by definition stands for a sound grown too nebulous to pin to a certain spelling. Thus, the original presentation of a stanza in the first poem in the collection ran something like

But eels inə chi knees butchə shop  
makim think abaht thə Cape

It now reads

But eels inna chi knees butcha shop  
makim think abaht the Cape

I was compelled by my own desire to force this alienation, as well as by the example of Mr. Leonard’s skill with vowels. “[T]hi lota yiz”, and “ah no whit ahm dayn” settle so confidently on their vowel sounds that I thought surely I should be able to do the same. But linguistic verity defied my efforts, as the vowels of the ENE accent are not as cleanly mutated from SE as are those of Glaswegian Scots. “The” to Leonard neatly turns into “thi”. A careful ear to the streets of Glasgow will reveal that no other spelling could replicate this sound as accurately as an *i*. I did not have this luxury, precisely because of New England’s ambivalence with vowels as described by Labov. The resulting sound can be heard at the end of a word like “butcher”. Some might pronounce it “butcha”; others might add something of a short-*i* to the end with the corners of the mouth spreading: “butchih”. Once I learned from readers that I couldn’t induce both of these readings at the same time with a schwa, I settled on the latter construction, which sounds more accurate and regionally specific to my ear. A high Southern or a New York City accent might lose the *r*, but none but our own in New England would add the *i*. This is especially true of plurals, and I retain this spelling in rare instances for this reason (e.g. “fingiz”, in “Casey’s A.M. Routine”, line 14). Unfortunately, people read this as a long-*e*, and I was forced to sacrifice some nuance for the sake of clarity. Also, it felt like a cheat: if I borrowed from the phonetic alphabet for a sound I wasn’t perceptive enough to spell, where do I draw the line? Why not just write the whole thing in phonetic symbols? I settled mostly on standard spellings where they would not seem dishonest (e.g. the word “the”, which undergoes relatively little contortion in the ENE accent), and a

humble *a* where a schwa had been.

Other non-standard spellings occur but do not reflect the accent. These include simplifications, such as “thru” for “through,” or universally American pronunciations, such as “liddle” for “little”. These have more to do with establishing tones of simplicity, nonchalance, even oblivion, than with accent or language. We will take a closer look at them when we examine voice in chapter two.

Let us look at a poem that represents the typical dispersion and difficulty of accent in the series.

### **The Grafting Trees**

Aht in Brookfield on the oldtimey fahms  
they donlet the apple fields go fallow.  
When a reddelicious turns up its palms

they chop it dahn an graft a sallow  
granny smith. They leave enuffofa stump  
ta grabba hold then cut two shallow

slits between the bahk npulp. They wedge a clump  
a shoots that grow ta be anotha tree  
then bagntape it like a camel’s hump.

The field don hafta go ta waste. Just be  
patient a couple yeeahs ncrossher ahms.  
Frankenstein trunks at each antipode

climb aht like the Lorax nmake these fahms  
brannew. Don needa backhoe pullin roots  
ta reworkem. Leave a fielda schoolmarms  
at the knees, nyull keep the autumn fruits

Here in the first two stanzas we find 42 “words”, such as they are, five of which are spelled to reflect the accent: “aht” for “out”; “fahms” for “farms”; “don” as part of “donlet” for “don’t”; “dahn” for “down”; “enuffofa” for “enough of a”. (The other unconventional spellings—“ta grabba”—are the secondary,

almost incidental ones I mentioned before that are in aid of a casual blue-collar tone rather than a particular accent.) This ratio of about 11 percent is mostly consistent throughout the poems that do not feature Standard English exclusively, or mingle it with ENE. This is a step back from the edge of Bennett or Leonard whose works, I think to their benefit, demand a Rosetta Stone for mainstream readers. I scaled back my insistence on the accent for two reasons.

The first is that I feel this is as true to my accent as the writing of the other poets is to theirs. As much as I wish it were “weirder”, the ENE accent is quirkier than it is “foreign” to a SE ear. Second, my point was never to baffle or create a puzzle, nor was it to envelop the reader. I have no desire to coax a recognition of these spellings as a universally legitimate system of expression, and as far as language goes, I have no axe to grind. Too thick a cacographic jungle would obscure my characters and images, and foreground a conflict of language that does not exist.

### *Spectrum of Languages*

After the degree of oddness or conventionality of the spelling, another defining feature of the language in the *Sully* poems is the presence of multiple modes. The four I intended (though I hope readers will identify others I did not) are 1) a more-or-less standardized Eastern New England accent, 2) a toned-down hybrid between that and Standard English, 3) Standard English, and 4) “Spanglish”, or a demotic mixture of local English and Spanish. Sully himself, and most of the male speakers deal in the ENE accent at its grittiest. Says Sully himself in the poem “Wedding Photo”

I askt James nPat if they seenis befoah  
what I fahnd inny attic an they couldn believe  
he eva lookt like that with white teeth  
nthin nposed ferra picture ndahk haih.

And Casey Sullivan, Sully’s father tells us in “Casey’s A.M. Routine” (one of my favorites)

Theahs frost onna cah win I get up  
so I scrape it off withee icescraypah.  
Scrape scrape scrape liddle dahnwid strokes  
till I gut an icefishin hole ta see ahdda  
cuz its still dahk.

The women of Sully's Worcester tend to speak with a less severe accent. This is number two in the spectrum. I have rendered this simply by reducing the instances of manipulated words and preserving just the ones necessary to keep a whiff of the accent. Sully's mother, Mary, and on-again-off-again ladylove, Ashley, speak like this except when quoting men. In "Thad on Stage" Mary Says

Thad loved a crowd  
winnit watchtim.

*Lookit me Um dancin*

He did faces and voices  
drew pic-shiz a Reagan  
kept goin as long as they laughed.

*Lookit me Mahr Um dancin*

Little showman  
pretty feahless ferra kid.  
Grownups thought it was cute winny joked about the news.  
Timing was neva great.

Casey or one of Sully's friends would likely drop the *t* at the end of "kept", turn "was" into "wiz", and elide the *g* from "timing". Mary, however, holds closer to standard pronunciations and spellings. This is made clearer by the interpolations of Sully's childhood voice turning "I'm" into "Um" and "Ma" (when preceded by a vowel sound) into "Mahr". Ashley's muted accent produces the same effect when she quotes Sully:

Thad said "I don wanna talk abahdit."  
I said something three more times that night;  
an I shoul da lett im not talk about it  
(“Ashley and Thad Break Bread”)

It would be difficult to identify one system for the women and one for the men, since the language of both groups drifts toward and away from each other; these differences are noticeable but not categorical. Spanish Vicky, a Puerto Rican woman who is sometimes Sully's peer and friend,

sometimes his apologist, employs a Spanglish that reflects little of the local English, but the hybrid many Latinos in the area speak, sometimes unconsciously. Angel, a former co-worker and friend of Sully speaks similarly. We will return to these characters and their language.

Third of these modes is Standard English, which has the smallest role in this sequence. It occurs most obviously in four poems: “Renovated Sully”, the two Devereau poems, and “Corrections.” In three of these it occurs as a parallel to speech in an accent, and only in “Corrections,” a slightly surreal burlesque of newspaper correction announcements, does it stand alone. I intended in marginalizing Standard English to retain it as a tool for surprise and dislocation amid the thicket of the accents, which would almost become familiar. Instead of being the anchoring voice of narrative that surrounds pockets of the accent, I wanted it to stand out as stilted and literary, almost a “nerdy” voice compared to those of Sully and his ilk. In “Renovated Sully” it does by juxtaposition.

You just have to see what they’ve done  
with this town.  
All the old buildings that made it look bleak—  
They took them and shook them and knocked  
them all down,  
And put up some new ones in under a week.  
You just won’t believe what they’ve done  
with this town.

*I juss cant believe what they done  
ta this tahn.  
All the ol buildings that made it like home—  
They zonedem an bonedem an rippt  
em all dahn  
An put up some jengablock stacks made a crome.  
I juss cant believe what they did  
ta this tahn.*

However, the Devereau poems advance this comparison from juxtaposition to active mingling and reimagining, recasting. In them Sully and his old high school math teacher take turns remembering in their tortuous relationship and caricaturing each other’s language. Says Mr. Devereau of Sully,

Teaching Thad was like drinking all day  
 with his *slowdahn waymit Idongut my papah*.  
 By noon you're all in, or you fade away  
 with his *hawaya lemmetellya knowatchaget winya mixem*.  
 And says Sully of his teacher,  
 Mista D hadda asstight sense a things  
 withis *MorningThaddeusyou'vecomethreehundredsixtydegrees*.  
 Neva saw how ansis wah like pullin cats ahtta bags  
 winny *XequalsnegativeBplusorminus...*

The italicized speech each offers of the other is garbled and overblown, but true to each man's memory of his counterpart. These secondhand versions of ENE and Standard English occur nowhere else in the poems, but are the products of the ears and minds of those to whom they are unfamiliar and jarring. The primary speaker of each poem has heard the actual content and prosody of the other's speech, but finds discomfort and alienation in the difference between it and his own. Thus each offers it back up as less-than-comprehensible slurry of the other's characteristic words or expressions. This is what I understand Bakhtin to mean by an "intentional hybrid," or "the illumination of one language by means of another."<sup>7</sup>

But in these poems my intention is for the illumination to go both ways, for each voice to reveal something about the other.

And fourth is the Spanglish of Vicky and Angel. They tend to superimpose a smattering of Spanish idioms and vocabulary over an English syntax when addressing English speakers. Says Vicky of Sully

Esully sometime dice que fourafive people  
 ah the ones keptim comin back.  
 Like en la e'cuela with me nRafferty.  
 Gut kicked ahdda South, entonces he wenta Voke.

I do not consider these lines macaronic, which often results in comedy. Nor are the two languages here meant to run in separate circles, like the occasional interpolated French found in the poetry of Derek

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 360-61.

Walcott, or the binarily opposed ENE and SE of some of the poems here. Rather, the dash of Spanish is meant to imitate the realistic speech wherein it is woven so naturally and unobtrusively as to pass almost unnoticed even by a non Spanish-speaker. The result in real life is that the Spanish words sound as if they've always belonged in English conversation. This is quite the opposite of the accent-speakers' and non accent-speakers' hyperawareness of one another. Whereas their modes at the extremes of the spectrum—though sharing vocabulary and some pronunciations—are at odds and mutually unintelligible or annoying, the Spanglish-speakers may drift in and out of languages and cultures as comfortably as they may change clothes. In “Son de la Ma Dorothea”, for example, Vicky adapt a traditional Afro-Cuban song to have local social and linguistic relevance. The original, “Son de la Ma Theodora” is as follows:

¿Dónde está la Ma Theodora?

Rajando la leña está.

¿Con su palo y su bandola?

Rajando la leña está.

¿Dónde está que no la veo?

Rajando la leña está.

Rajando la leña está.

Rajando la leña está.

Rajando la leña está.

(Where is the Ma Theodora?

She is splitting the firewood.

With her cudgel and her knotted cord?

She is splitting the firewood.

Where is she, for I don't see her?

She is splitting the firewood.

She is splitting the firewood.

She is splitting the firewood.

She is splitting the firewood.)

Vicky's version reads

—Dónd' e'tá la Ma Dorothea?

—Breakinup sidewalk cement.  
—Con su hammer an rotating drum?  
—Mezclando nuevo cement.  
—Where she at don undo where she's from.  
—Layin downuevo cement.  
—An ESully can't see where she went.

First, Vicky is already stepping slightly but not perilously outside of her own culture by appropriating a fixture of Cuban music. The *son* is a syncretic form of call-and-response music that combines the instruments and rhythms of Spanish with African Bantu traditions. Thus, the field in which Vicky is manipulating and creating is already one of combination; her premise is the mutability of language, and her result is further mutation. Here she is sharing in Sully's personification of the city of Worcester ("Dorothy"), and substituting her for the Afro-Cuban character of Ma Theodora. But she meets Sully only half-way by turning Dorothy to the Spanish "Dorothea." Instead of splitting wood, Dorothea is giving herself a face-lift by tearing up the streets as part of the steady process of renovation and revitalization that so frustrates Sully. The cudgel and cord for splitting and collecting wood have become the jackhammer and cement drum of city road crews. Consistent with this transplanting of place and images is Vicky's incorporation of English, not as a parallel or point of opposition, but as a texturing of her projections of her own world. "Mezclando", she says emphatically at nearly the swirling center of the poem: that is, mixing.

With respect to the dispersal of languages and modes in most of the works I looked to for influence, I found their compartmentalization and tendency to extremes not suited for my poems. By this I mean the stark use of one dialect or the other in a poem or collection, and allowing the twain to meet only rarely and to make a point about language. Burns, for example, my entrée to dialect poetry, wrote a large number of his 600-or-so poems in Standard English. I have finally been able to admit to myself that these poems generally lack the vitality and humor of his Scots poems, and seem almost unaware of their counterparts. Reading Burns, as well as Leonard and to an extent Brathwaite (the strengths of their works notwithstanding) gives me too tidy a sense of *these-poems-over-here-and-those-poems-over-there*. They tread the extremes in their use of modes. I say the same about a poet who writes exclusively in her native dialect. Louise Bennett's celebration of



Jamaican patois pervades all her work, and represents half of what I wished for *Sully*. She makes her language the governing structure, the linguistic bottom-line that—with no relief in sight—the reader is going to have to come to terms with. David Dabydeen does the same with his dazzling and simple *Slave Songs*. This is what I at first attempted to do with the Eastern New England accent. But as the work grew, I saw other modes interacting with the one non-standard accent, and I felt it would have been dishonest to the region I was trying to depict not to include them. Once I overcame my initial rapture at the accents popping off the pages of Burns and Bennett, I did identify moments in them of cross-over, of one mode's awareness of another. This is the subject of Bennett's "Dry-Foot Bwoy", in which a speaker of patois, brimming with confidence in her language, derides a young man for affecting Received Pronunciation among his own people.

...

Me start fi feel so sorry fi  
De po bad-lucky soul,  
Me tink him come a foreign lan  
Come ketch bad foreign cole!  
Me tink him got a bad sore-troat,  
But as him chat-chat gwan  
Me fine out seh is foreign twang  
De bwoy wasa put awn!  
For me notice dat him answer  
To nearly all me seh  
Was 'Actually', 'What', 'Oh deah!'  
An all dem sinting deh.  
Me gi a joker de gal dem laugh;  
But hear de bwoy, 'Haw-haw!  
I'm sure you got that bally-dash  
Out of the cinema!'  
Same time me laas me temper, an  
Me holler, 'Bwoy, kirout!  
No chat to me wid no hot pittata  
Eena yuh mout!'

Him tan up like him stunted, den  
 Hear him no, 'How siiley!  
 I don't think that I really  
 Understand you, actually.'

...

Him get bex and walk tru de door,  
 Him head eena de air;  
 De gal-dem bawl out affa him,  
 'Not going? What! Oh deah!'<sup>8</sup>

Here Standard English has swapped places with a dialect that schools and parents have often taken it upon themselves to “unteach.” The friction between the speeches creates conflict, humor, and political implications. Ramazani offers a formalist reading that illustrates the earthier differences between these modes and the field of images and tones they occupy in the poem:

“Bennett deflates the seeing superiority of English English by inscribing it in a creole poem as “foreign twang”...Juxtaposed with banal and hollow clichés like “Actually,” “Oh deah,” “How silly,” the metaphorization of pseudo-British as hot potato-impeded speech instances the creative vitality of creole...[A] common Afro-Caribbean name, “Cudjoe” is from the Twi...Since “Cudjoe” can also mean “a heavy stick or cudgel, the word also hints at the force of the speaker’s anger, as do the /k/ sounds and the emphatic masculine rhyme of *Scoop/soup*, especially in contrast to the boy’s triple feminine rhyme: “How silly! / I don’t think that I really / Understand you, actually.”<sup>9</sup>

Again, as Bakhtin says, one language is illuminating another. My problem with this for the purposes of my own poetry is the same one I have with the work of Tom Leonard: in dramatizing the conflicting languages, it becomes preoccupied with language. Burns weaves similar implications into his “To a Mouse”, but with less explicitness, and with the focus not on the language, but on a relationship of spirits. Of the eight stanzas of roaring Scots, the famous second one glares in near-Standard English:

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,  
 O, what a panic's in thy breastie!

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<sup>8</sup> Bennett, Louise. *Selected Poems*. Mervyn Morris, ed. Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Ramazani, Jahan. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 114.

Thou need na start awa sae hasty

Wi bickering brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,

Wi' murdering pattle.

I'm truly sorry man's dominion

Has broken Nature's social union,

An' justifies that ill opinion

Which makes thee startle

At me, thy poor, earth born companion

An' fellow mortal!

This is the inversion of the tale of the “Dry-Foot Bwoy” for whom the conflict of language defines the relationship with the speaker. The poem and the *bwoy* would have no reason exist without the conflict. In Burns, the subtle shift to a polished pronunciation and diction consisting of one architecturally ornate sentence and only one exclamation point, merely nuances the relationship. It imports the language of moral philosophy into a farmer’s chat at a rodent, but without giving the reader the sense that anything is out of place. Burns achieves this by insinuating the new language in two ways: he makes it a believable progression of thought from the gritty action and immediate sentiment of the first stanza; and in the third and sixth lines he retains just a whisper of the demotic by eliding the *d* of *and*. Here the speaker briefly keeps a foot in both worlds, invoking both, before continuing in his original demotic mode. The relationship between man and mouse, the substance of the poem, could still exist without the modulation of the language, but that very modulation tells us as much about the relationship as the words themselves. This is much the relationship I tried to depict in the *Sully* poems that combine ENE with Standard English. To Mr. Devereau, the point of his monologue is Sully’s intractability; the clashing languages bring the point home for the reader.

These examples, along with the Leeds accent woven into many of Tony Harrison’s poems, are the nearest genetic ancestors to this feature in my own. Taken singly, some of the *Sully* poems seem to reflect the awareness of only a single language; and I admit the apparent hypocrisy of these in the light of my criticism of Bennett’s limited style, and Leonard’s, Burns’s, Brathwaite’s, and Walcott’s compartmentalizations of language. The works of the last two *do* achieve the balance Burns does in “To a Mouse” by letting the dissonance of modes speak for itself without allowing the content of their

poetry to become entangled in questions of language. However, in the case of Braithwaite, Standard English asserts itself as the baseline, the default language of his work, only *admitting* interpolations of dialect—admitting them as equal and legitimate expressions, but as interpolations nonetheless.<sup>10</sup>

Walcott, on the other hand, offers some entire and longer pieces in dialect, but his version of it is often subtle, and produced by elisions of words and letters, rather than by systematic cacography.<sup>11</sup>

As I mentioned, Tony Harrison's poetry, much of it from his "School of Eloquence", offered me maybe the closest relation to my poems. In fact, I came to much of Harrison's work *after* I had finished these poems, and was astonished how familiar they felt in form and tone. The way he goes about depicting and incorporating the Leeds accent hits closer to home for me than any of these others. It is a regional accent associated with the working class and that does not enjoy the sovereignty of an actual language. Many have argued that Scots as well as creolized Caribbean dialects are in fact languages in their own right; but this northern English accent through history has labored under a lowlier status. Famously, the earliest known representation of dialectal alterity we find in English is Chaucer's "Reeve's Tale", an example J.R.R. Tolkien referred to (though not dismissively) as "a linguistic joke."<sup>12</sup> This is more or less Sully's circumstance, who speaks a language the same as nearly 300 million of his countrymen, just in a quirky way. Most American's would not fail to understand Sully, but might chuckle at his accent.

Harrison, like Bennett, defends his accent as a legitimate medium for art and communication. The speaker of his famous "Them & [uz]" from *The School of Eloquence* takes this very metapoetic stance, but in the framework of Standard English:

...

'We say [ʌs] not [uz] T.W.' That shut my trap.

I doffed my flat a's (as in 'flat cap')

my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. "Rights of Passage", II:iv, *Wings of a Dove*. The final stanza of section 1 takes off from SE into a West Indian dialect and is sustained for sections 2 and 3.

<sup>11</sup> CF. "The Schooner *Flight*."

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. "Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*". Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2008. Originally presented 1931. Reprinted by permission of the Tolkien Estate and the Philological Society.

lumps to hawk up and spit out...*E-nun-ci-ate!*<sup>13</sup>

The speaker is so confined by the expectations of readers and listeners that even a defense of his pronunciations presupposes their marginalization. He has no recourse but the International Phonetic Alphabet. He reports the speakers of RP telling him, “please believe [ʌs]/your speech is in the hands of the Receivers.” Even in the less umphaloskeptic “Long Distance I”, the modulation between SE and the Leeds is not democratizing or leveling. The accented words still come as quotations in the voice of the father:

Your bed's got two wrong sides. You life's all grouse.  
I let your phone-call take its dismal course:

Ah can't stand it no more, this empty house!

Carrots choke us wi'out your mam's white sauce!

Them sweets you brought me, you can have 'em back.  
Ah'm diabetic now. Got all the facts.  
(The diabetes comes hard on the track  
of two coronaries and cataracts.)

Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push  
food down mi throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out.  
And t'only reason now for beer 's to flush  
(so t'dietician said) mi kidneys out.

When I come round, they'll be laid out, the sweets,  
Lifesavers, my father's New World treats,  
still in the big brown bag, and only bought  
rushing through JFK as a last thought.<sup>14</sup>

Liang Xiaodong identifies this as skaz, “one kind of ‘double-voiced utterance’ in which two distinct

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<sup>13</sup> Harrison, Tony. *From The School of Eloquence and Other Poems*. London: Rex Collings, 1978. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, Tony. *Collected Poems*. New York: Viking, 2007. 144.

voices –the author's speech and another's speech –are oriented toward one another within the same level of conceptual authority.”<sup>15</sup> Conceptual, yes, but not hierarchic, as the father's accented speech is still embedded in and secondary to the son's standard. In “Them & [uz]”, Harrison's speaker rejects the idea that such speech is innately risible: “I played the drunken porter in *Macbeth*./Poetry's the speech of kings. You're one of those/Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose...” Despite this, in “Long Distance I” the son's Standard English offsets the father's accent, making it seem quaint. Harrison, like Burns, does find a way to overcome this catch-22 and integrate his warring languages with each other in part II of his poem “Wordlists”. His speaker rattles off a litany of texts in and about languages, “other tongues I've slaved to speak or read.”

L & S dead Latin, L & S dead Greek,  
one the now dead lexicographer gave me,  
Ivan Poldauf, his English-Czeck *slovník*;  
Harrap's French 2 vols, a Swahili,  
Cabrerías's Afro-Cuban *Anagó*,  
Hausa, Yoruba, both R.C. Abraham's—

The dizzying list, in Standard English but (appropriately) full of foreign words, ends abruptly on a dash, and then is undercut by a coda: “but not the tongue that once I used to know/but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's.” The English, already destabilized by the swirling list, is now free to work its way into the tongue most native to the speaker. And without declaring war or having to defend itself, this couplet of iambic pentameter is punctuated with the perfectly clear Leeds-accented words of “mi mam's.”

It is in this space I hope readers will find not just the Devereau poems or “Sully's Railroad Chorus”, but most of the language of Sully and his people.

### *Clustering*

I have referred occasionally to “clustering” as a feature of the language of the poems. By this I mean the breaking apart of lexical words and reassembling of them at places pronunciation seems to

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<sup>15</sup> Xiaodong, Liang. “The Conflicting Voices in Tony Harrison's Poetry.” *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, Vol 4. No.4 December 2009. 103-113.

dictate. This creates new “words”, or packets of language that either have their own compact meaning, or seem to capture the actual spoken cadence of the old words. For example, often in the *Sully* poems, “when he” turns into “winny”, or “and” preceding a word will become an *n* at the beginning of that word (“NSuld punch in the mawth of a can”: “*And Sul would* punch in the *mouth* of a can”)

Literature in which clustering occurs seems to fall into two categories: the consciously textual; and the unconsciously textual. Words break apart and recombine either to highly crafted visual and orthographic effect, or simply as one’s hearing would indicate. The second category tends to be merely a recording of oral or musical pieces. The exemplars I turned to for the former extreme, the textually self-aware clustering of sounds, was (again) Tom Leonard. The well-know cover of his *Intimate Voices*, taken from one of his *Three Poems*, displays this process of cacographic mutation based on real-life pronunciation:

. in the beginning was the word .

in thi beginning was thi wurd

in thi beginnin was thi wurd

in thi biginnin was thi wurd

in thi biginnin wuz thi wurd

n thi biginnin wuz thiwurd

nthi biginnin wuzthiwurd

nthibiginnin wuzthiwurd

nthibiginninwuzthiwurd

. in the beginning was the sound .

Orthography, Ambrose Bierce tells us, is the science of spelling by the eye instead of the ear. I was excited by Leonard’s ability to do both. So in the earliest *Sully* poems, I tried to cram as many words together as I could justify. I liked the almost-concrete poetry I saw resulting from Leonard’s work. I felt that in addition to transferring Sully’s voice accurately to text, the manipulation of space on the page could create images in itself. The close quarters the words now shared suggested to me a cramped three-decker or housing project, or even a cluttered suburban house. The same tightness appeared to lend it a breathlessness that suggested the anxiety I heard in the Eastern New England accent. But readers told me this initial battle with clarity was almost not worth the images and narrative that lay underneath. Leonard’s line, “helluva hard tay read theeze init” kept coming back to me. The accent I

was working with was thick and very local, but not *helluva hard* to understand, so it should not be helluva hard to read. I was not striking back at Standard English, but just attempting to show it what it *really* sounds like as opposed to how it *thinks* it sounds. So Leonard's tightly-packed words like "gonabootlika" ("going about like a..."), while fun and tempting to produce, were untrue to my language and corrosive to my clarity. So I began to space out my words when bunching them was not absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, my clustering had to fall somewhere along the spectrum depicted above. As a default, it comes in as a cross between the fourth and seventh lines down: "in thi biginnin was thi wurd"; and "nthi biginnin wuzthiwurd." My agonies over *the* notwithstanding, these captures Sully's partial elision of initial one-syllable words and final gs, as well as his sometimes careless compression of words. Sully himself might say "Nthe beginning wiz the word." I did not abandon the larger compound words altogether, though. Earlier poems like "He Asks Me Why I Don't Make an Effort" display words like "butchaknowhat" ("but you know what?"), and Sully's burlesque of fancy coffee names, "mochalattechinomachiattoventes." The former is meant to be sonically accurate, and the latter mostly comical. Sully's coffee coinage is meant in the same vein as Mr. Devereau's ventriloquism of Sully: "slowdahn waymit Idongut my papah," ("slow down, wait a minute, I don't got my paper"). Each comes from a world the other does not wish to understand. Just the same is Sully's mocking of Mr. Devereau explaining the quadratic formula: "*XequalsnegativeBplusorminus...*" They are mutually unintelligible, and this kind of intense clustering dramatizes the speaker's projection of that inscrutability. So, I chose to avoid foregrounding the self-conscious textuality of the clustering; but I did not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The other side of clustering is the splitting of lexical words where a natural pause might make the syllables sound like separate words. A recurring example is "chi knees" for "Chinese". This reflects the drawn-out pronunciation the word receives from ENE speakers. It also gives the reader two new words to work with (or juggle). Instead of imparting just the sense of "Chinese", the reader now has the words "chi" (as in tea), and "knees" looking him in the face. Sure, he will quickly combine them to break the "code", but the textual words are still there, in play at the same moment as the aural word. The connections are not overt, but denizens of Sully's world would see the heap of vaguely-related Chinese images: chi, of course, as well as an echo of the old ribald schoolyard rhyme "*Chinese, / Japanese, / dirty knees, / look at these!*" Such is the depth to which Sully or his friends might know about or appreciate Chinese culture: as a novelty, a penumbral presence of alterity, and the food they



eat from take-out. Thus it becomes appropriate sonically and imagistically that “Chinese” becomes the flat and almost goofy “chi knees.” Just as in Leonard’s “ma right insane yirra pape” (“Am I right in saying you’re a papist?”), both meanings (*insane/in saying*) may exist simultaneously. Still, it seems, my aim is to spell by the eye *as well* as the ear.

On the other end of self-awareness is the clustering that occurs solely to record the actual sound of language. Some dialect poetries perform this more dutifully than others. For example, MacDiarmid, Bennett, and Burns were generally not “playing games” with their words as I tend to do.<sup>16</sup> Their languages, though non-Standard, were largely codified, systematic. Some strong force of sound—unconcerned with the effects of textual manipulation—would have to compel a writer to split and recombine words. This would have to come from a mostly oral or musical, even pre-textual tradition. The example of this from which I took the confidence to redistribute sounds as I saw fit was the collection of Yugoslav epic songs as observed by Milman Perry and Albert Lord.<sup>17</sup> They found, essentially, that folk singers sang and played their cultural epics without a sense of fixed form, either oral or musical. As the instrumental performance (traditionally played on a gusle) might change from one player to the next and even between a single player’s renditions, so would the changing music compel the oral composition to break off at metrically corresponding points. “The absence of a musical stanza-formation, like the absence of the text stanza,” says Herzog of their work, probably characterizes epic poetry at large...[T]hrough the musical performance itself...the song attains—and at the same time reveals—a structure which the poem as text does not have. The instrumental interludes do of course divide our long poems into large chunks, but apparently the singer employs considerable liberty as to where he will introduce these breaks...[T]he sections of the text marked off by a change of musical motifs...form units of varying length whose content tends to have some degree of textual coherence and unity...These findings illustrate the generally flexible character of living folk music...It is quite

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<sup>16</sup> Although Burns sometimes revels in double-entendre, this has more to do with meaning than coinciding sound. Cf. “The fiddler rak’d her fore and aft,” from “The Jolly Beggars, and “Wad ding a Lallan tongue, or Erse, / In prose or rhyme” from “Address to the Deil.”

<sup>17</sup> Lord, who was Perry’s student, gives a full analysis of their recordings on aluminum disks in his own book, *The Singer of Tales*, published in 1960 after Perry’s death. (Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.)

possible that in the Yugoslav heroic epics we can observe the growth of textual structure in a state in which it is still tenuous, and exceedingly fluid...<sup>18</sup>

Attempts to transcribe the orally composed epics, says Lord, tended to confound the singers, who were performing for an amanuensis without gusles.

...[C]areful analysis reveals some differences between sung and dictated lines within the limits of a single singer's works. The singer when dictating occasionally builds his lines somewhat differently from the way he would if he were singing...[A] dictated text, even when done under the best of circumstances and by the best of scribes, is never entirely, from the point of view of the line structure, the same as a sung text. One should emphasize, however, that these changes or differences are not caused by the singer's conscious or deliberate choice of an order of words or of words themselves for any other reason than the influence of the surrounding rhythmic structure. This structure is broken by the dictating and such breaks may be indicated by differences in the line.<sup>19</sup>

Now, this refers to the breaking off and uniting of phrases, often stock phrases, as in Homeric composition, rather than to the redistribution of syllables into compound or shortened words. But the principle is the same: a complete focus on the aural obviates—even defies—a fixed text. They are working in phrases, linguistic and musical, that may shuffle and recombine. The singers, Lord explains, learn their songs as a child learns language: not by consciously memorizing words, but by repeatedly using phrases.<sup>20</sup> Learning to make distinctive configurations of these is what produces the unique voice of an oral composer. These phrases in *Sully* are the word clusterings that convey a compacted thought and are true to the sound of the spoken language. But this applies to *Sully* insofar as it is read aloud or accepted as an experiment in sound. It is also very much a text that attempts to play with alignment and visual suggestion. These alignments do aid the reader in pronunciation and pacing, but maintain a purpose strictly on the page. However, Lord insists that an oral and a textual version of the same work

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<sup>18</sup> Herzog, George. "The Music of Yugoslav Heroic Epic Folk Poetry". *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 3. International Council for Traditional Music. 1951. 62-64.

<sup>19</sup>

Lord. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 36.

are “contradictory and mutually exclusive”<sup>21</sup>. So embracing it as merely incidentally textual would not be appropriate either. *Sully* is a textual composition that is not a transcription of speech, but an interpretation of it.

I took from each of these extremes the elements I found most useful for *Sully*: awareness of what goes unsaid but appears nonetheless on the page; and the freedom to regroup syllables where I heard them occurring, even if it meant representing the same phrase differently in different instances.<sup>22</sup> Funnily enough, the source that hit closest to home with its balance of appeal to the ear and the eye is the exploration of *Strine*, or Australian English, by Afferbeck Lauder. Lauder (the pen name of Alastair Ardoch Morrison) wrote songs, dialogs, poems, and prose that look largely like collections of Standard English words, but when read produce an eerily accurate Australian accent. In so doing, he disjoints many of the words being pronounced into other, mostly existing, words. Here is an exchange from his 1965 book, *Let Stalk Strine*:

[*Man*.:] But hula calf trim Y. limer Y? Summon scotter look calf trim. Summer nester Phillip E. Swotter and gimmies tier nawl.

[“But who’ll look after him while I’m away? Someone’s got to look after him. Someone has to fill up his water and give him his tuna.”]

[*Woman*.:] *Nair dent-show worry. Iler calf trim. Sleece tiger do. Watsy effris tea? Dar snaff March dussy? Undersea effny think frizz breckfuss?*

[“Now don’t you worry. I’ll look after him. It’s the least I could do. What’s he have for his tea? Doesn’t have much, does he? And does he have anything for his breakfast?”]<sup>23</sup>

Lauder (whose pen name is a play on “alphabetical order”) offers a glossary of Strine terms. Some

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. “Ashley Wakes Up before the Alarm”, and “Neil Takes Thad to the Fights.” Sully’s girlfriend describes his kiss as “lawnganhahd”; and Neil, his father’s hardboiled friend, describes his attempts to make a man of Sully as a “long hahd fight.”

<sup>23</sup> Lauder, Afferbeck. *Strine: The Complete Works of Professor Afferbeck Lauder*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2010. 43. Originally published in *Let Stalk Strine*, 1965. My attributions and “translations”.

compact examples are *Scummin Glerser* for “it’s coming closer”, and *Dour Pitterby* for “do appear to be.” Lauder captures the Australian accent while emphasizing the whimsy and lightheartedness of the process by scattering random “real” words around the page. Strine would not be so absurd or funny were its constituent words mostly gibberish. It is the clustering of the sounds of words into other recognizable words that establishes the whimsical tone and makes “translation” so rewarding for the reader. This is Sully’s kind of clustering. In fact, it was similar clusters in the Eastern New England accent that made me think this project worth doing in the first place: “words” like *hawaya* for “how are you?”, and *waymit* for “wait a minute”, each of which makes an appearance in the poems.

Lauder’s clustering is most akin to Sully’s because it revels in the sounds it produces while also strewing the page with pronounceable words and secondary images. Now, Sully does not achieve this as often as Lauder; more of the *Sully* poems than Lauder’s works are in “original gibberish”, so to speak (taken at face value). However, even before exploring Strine in depth, I found myself inviting many “real” words into my transliteration of the ENE accent. Often the lexical words imported suggestions I had not intended but ended up liking. *Worry* shows up often, sometimes as *wurry*, to mean “where he.” Once the reader has figured out the speaker is saying “where he”, *worry* has already established itself as a bell that cannot be unrung, speaking maybe to the economic anxiety of the region, maybe the emotional or social anxiety of a character. Whatever it is to the reader, the possibility for *implication* is planted. In “Sully on the Peacock”, the casual expression “more or less” appears as “moraless”. This is one letter away from “moral-less” (which is recognizable, if not really a word). Whether this relates to the pewter peacock or anyone’s opinion of it is up to the reader; but there it is. Even Sully’s name, while not a clustering, is an example of this kind of multiple meaning.

Though this comes closest, perhaps, in tone and form to *Sully*’s clustering, I have tried to refrain from what I see as Lauder’s tendency to descend into pun. Humor has a prominent place in *Sully*, both intrinsic and extrinsic. But punning for its own sake would have felt showy and pointless. In fact, Sully’s uncle Mike looks harmless and risible, even pathetic, chuckling at his own pun in “Uncle Mike’s Mung Beans”. He recalls growing marijuana in Casey’s garden, and telling Casey it was a crop of mung beans, then recalls the mess he made harvesting it:

Case mighta gut pisst  
iffy didn think I loved mung beans so much  
an

I guess ya could call them holes  
pot holes. Huh. Pot holes.

Readers should feel confident taking this as my authorial comment on puns. Here Sully diverges from Afferbeck Lauder. I have tried to employ judicious multiple meaning short of punning. I have also tried to direct equal focus to the aural and the visual orchestration of the poems. In this, *Sully*'s brand of clustering borrows from all three sources while categorically embracing or rejecting none.

## Chapter 2: Voice

Language, as we have looked at it, is both the component of a single voice and the aggregation of voices. Each speaker in these poems employs a language template (or two) to convey his or her voice. The gumbo of these single voices amounts to a collective language. Language in *Sully*, in its template form and its collective form, is communal and impersonal, a tool. This is why we have discussed it in formal terms, and as representative of groups: men; women; blue-collar; white-collar; Irish-American; Puerto Rican; the entire region of New England. *Voice*, however, is individual and vital to the multiplicity of sounds and registers as well as the layering of narrative. It is the unique stamp of a speaker contributing to that multiplicity. This voice may be characterized by its perspective and subject matter, by its tone, by its vocabulary; but usually it is by a combination of these components.

My examination of voice in these poems focuses in one part on their formal configuration, and in another on their tone. The first part will begin with an exploration of the effects on the narrative of multiple voices and the parallax created by differing takes on the same events, things and people. Some of his acquaintances are fond of Sully; others hate him. The local paper reports an event one way, and an unnamed speaker remembers it another. What, then, is the effect of this dispersion and refracting of the narrative?

The first section will continue at a more granular level by looking closely at the interpenetration of voices. Though many are distinct and at odds, their proximity and variety cause them at times to influence and infiltrate each other. What elements does one adopt from another, and to what effect? And does this further heterogenize or homogenize voices?

The second section will examine tone, which is more slippery to define in general and describe in practice. I will narrow the field by saying I will look specifically at the question of joy or anger in the context of other accent and dialect poems. In the densest of accented poetry I notice a tendency toward extremes of tone, toward either elation or frustration. In these cases, the speakers seem either to thrill in their accents or to grumble in them. At the first end I find poets like Louise Bennett, Benjamin Zephaniah, Robert Burns, David Dabydeen, and at the second end, the likes of Leonard and (at times) Brathwaite. There are, moreover, fine poets who handle dialect with a lighter touch, and tend to keep in their speakers an even balance of emotion and tone. Anger and exultation exist in the works of Derek

Walcott and Tony Harrison, but not usually in isolation, untempered by the other. Where in this spectrum do Sully and his crew find themselves? I began this project with the belief that belligerence and violence underlay the Eastern New England accent; but this turned out to be my own prejudice about my own region. As different speakers asserted themselves, I found the accent was capable of sustaining a surprising variety of feelings and moods. Certainly violence, ignorance, and resentment still threatened and sometimes surfaced, but so did playfulness, love, humor, and philosophy.

### *Division of Voice*

This aspect of voice has implications mostly for the narrative of the sequence. The *Sully* collection comprises sixty-nine poems spoken in twenty distinct voices. Most poems have one speaker; three have actual multiple speakers; and eighteen show the direct speech of another character reported through the voice of the speaker. The most common voice is that of a nameless character who is a peer and close confidant of Sully. As a long-time friend, he has insight into Sully that even some of his family does not have. He is the right distance from and closeness to our point of focus that his access appears believable: neither barred nor unfettered. This character seems to observe Sully from the ground as well as from above. I discuss below just why he toes this line of closeness and distance, and why I rejected his possible omniscience. In this way, he is the default voice, but his attitude toward Sully is shown to be multi-sided, and liable to change with his observations of his friend. I have been referring to this speaker since 2008 as the Unnamed Friend. He provides the voice for a plurality of the poems, dominating twenty-five. My original plan was to make him the exclusive speaker for the entire sequence; but despite his versatility, I found myself running out of things to say about Sully and ways to say them. We will look later at the measures I took to change this.

The second most common voice is that of Sully himself, which in some form commands thirteen of the poems. The other thirty-one poems represent a diverse scattering of Sully's family, friends, enemies, co-workers, teachers, and the occasional disembodied ambient voice.

I intended initially to shuffle episodes into a loose narrative told from the perspective of that Unnamed Friend. Each poem would explore through reflection or dialog another aspect of Sully's

personality or events in his life. Though they were meant to be strong enough to stand alone, the episodes were to coalesce into a discernable impression of a man and his city, conveyed by an episodic, commentated account of his doings. Much depended, then, on the mood and perceptiveness of this speaker.

As I said, difficulty arose as I exhausted ways to reveal Sully through this single voice. I was stretching him too thin for realistic narrative. I was contorting his placement and relation to Sully to allow the access that would make his commentary authoritative. He was at turns working with Sully in a butcher shop, going to summer camp with him when they were children, observing his family's private moments, overhearing him fight with his girlfriend. In my attempt at insight and completeness I had cast a spell of omniscience. Once I realized this, I tortured him further in contrivances designed to ground the narrative in plausibility. The speaker began relating what he had heard from Sully and others. This just made the words of third persons pile up like hearsay, and their actual absence grew increasingly suspicious.

I began to see I had hamstrung myself by deciding too soon on a circumscribed structure. I was trying to fill in a template rather than let the substance of the poems suggest its own shape. Why not an omniscient narrator? Because omniscience would shake off and transcend the local accent and demotic register I intended to give the narrator. It would also render Sully and his city one-dimensional. Why not use this single voice, but accept his limited vision? In the absence of counterpoints from other perspectives, his blind spots would be nothing but potholes in the narrative. This would redirect the reader's focus from the development of character and place and the reliability of the speaker, to the inadequacy of the speaker. Also, his commentary would grow boring; it had already begun to repeat itself.<sup>24</sup> His single voice, though exemplifying the local, would annihilate the bouquet of vocabulary and range of accents I wanted to see emerge.

The final problem with this single narrator was the absence of the female. The male voice stood unrealistically alone commenting on the activities of men in a male thought-world. Sully had a mother, an ex (or three), and lived in a world meant to reflect a real one. Female characters would have found

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<sup>24</sup> The Unnamed Friend notes in some unused poems that Sully "...Played dumb abaht stuff. Tolkidz eewiz froMahz. Juss pistem all off/ Brought it onimself rilly" says his friend about Sully's behavior as a child; and later "Chrissake Sul jiss cant help imself" about Sully's inability as an adult to refrain from playing dumb in a conversation with a windbag of a raconteur. I grew uncomfortable with all this exposition. It felt as if I were two steps removed from the story. There was the story, then the telling of the story, and now the telling-of-the-telling of the story.



themselves at best vaguely treated at the hands of the single male speaker, their influence on the story shown as oblique. Sully could not afford to find himself half-made.

For these reasons I began to explore multiple voices. My models for this, which I will discuss below, were primarily Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, and John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. The relating of a single story or event through multiple perspectives—such as the development of Sully and his city through these poems— I found created a parallax of narrative. When the position shifts from which we as readers are allowed to view an element of the story, that element takes on more and new dimensions, meanings, and positions. It is the difference between looking at a photograph, and looking at that photograph through a stereoscope; and with each different narrative perspective, the reader observes another angle of depth and articulation.

(It is important here to recognize the technical difference between *story* and *plot* as I have been referring to them, and as recognized by the Formalists. Says Abrams,

An author is said to transform the raw material of a story into a literary plot by the use of a variety of devices that violate sequence and deform and defamiliarize the story elements; the effect is to foreground the narrative medium and devices themselves, and in this way to disrupt what had been our standard responses to the subject matter.<sup>25</sup>

The actual events of Sully's life and world are the story, but their deployment is the plot.) On a formal level this use of multiple voices allowed me to round out the plot and characters without sacrificing the quirks or unreliability of either; by withholding, it also enhances the dramatic effect of delayed revelations, time-bombs planted in the text. But its structural effect is the irresolvable tension between the completeness of what is revealed and of what is withheld. The given (or gathered) plot is rivaled, but also sustained by what is revealed in the blind spots of the characters. To Žižek this represents the "insurmountable *parallax gap*, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible."<sup>26</sup> They may treat the same events, but run along parallel lines. "[F]ar from posing an irreducible obstacle to dialectics," says Žižek, "the notion of the parallax gap provides the key which enables us to discern its subversive core."<sup>27</sup> And while language might dominate

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<sup>25</sup> Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 103-04.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 4.

the discussion of *Sully*, its narrative dispersion reflects the same kinds of dissonances and misunderstandings and its linguistic dispersion.

In Masters's collection of voices, denizens of a small Michigan mill town reveal piece-by-piece just what catastrophe has left them in the predicament they describe and reflect. This work displays a narrative divided to the extreme. Two-hundred and twelve speakers offer two-hundred and forty-four dramatic monologues that each give a glimpse into the ruin of the town. Masters uses the techniques of cataphora and anaphora—that is, the mentioning of what is yet to be explained, and the explanation of things that will later be mentioned—to raise and answer, answer and raise questions about the story and characters. Masters's approach serves all the more directly as a model to me because of its poetic episodic structure. With great economy (no poem is longer than a page and a half) he allows a character to tell its own story which also contributes to the collective fate of the town. Some poems are paired, direct answers to one another. Because of this, the parallax can be blunt, stark. However, this bluntness suits not only the linguistic register of small-town Michigan, but the quick turn-around of the episodes that fill the work with convolutions and texture.

This was the effect I tried to adapt by democratizing my narrative, and distributing it among many speakers. This way collectively they could say more, but each could know and feel less. No speaker would have to overreach the believability of his or her familiarity or insight into Sully. This eliminated the unwieldiness of reporting everyone's words and feelings through one channel. As an unexpected boon, it also allowed the array of voices and accents, male and female, to blossom in such a way that it brought to life the ENE accent as I had never expected.

I began by opening the voices of those immediately surrounding Sully: his Unnamed Friend (now limited of vision), his ex, his parents, his brothers. Right away unforeseen competitions, alliances, and conflicts began to emerge. The organic completeness of a back story was almost overwhelming once I allowed the many speakers to present it from different directions.

For example, Sully's conflict with his father had been a peripheral recurrence in the narrative of the Unnamed Friend. In his eyes it had come across as Freudian competition between a despotic father and a petty son. "Only paht eeliked/ wiz drawpin is Dadz watch awf that tawah" says the friend in "Château Sully", an early poem I have since trashed. This to him is Sully's response to his father's miserliness: "Place wiz dahk cuzzay kep thə lights awf. Heat too./ Hiz Dad sed it wiz gassiniletric aw

breaddinmelk.” Likewise, in “Sully and the Black Rings”, there is an understated tension between father and son—sublimated as it might be in front of this non family member—that depicts the father’s dominance and Sully’s resistance as passive-aggressive forces in a stalemate. However, treated by Sully’s mother, and in the intimacy of family, the same conflict comes to a violent head.

Once they brought it in the kitchen I shoulda said somethin.

Apaht from that

—breakin my plates, kickin my walls—

I’d tend ta lettem kill eachotha.

I learned ta smell a fight,

and theah was one hanging that moahning

like wet wool on the clothesline.

An no way I’d get in between.

It wis when Thad was in high school;

he wis eating breakfast

an his fatha comes behindim

nputsis hand on Thads shouldah.

An Thad shrugs it off an grunts.

with a spoon innis mouth.

Casey Patsis head nThad pulls it away

nsays “Don touch me.”

Casey curllis lip nsays

“Um ya fatha

Ull touch you whenever I feelikeit.”

nThad turns back to is oatmeal.

I shoulda said something ta Case right then

Butcha can only tape your windows in a storm.

He grabs Thads ear and rubs the lobe

betweenis thumb and forefinger.

Thad knocks his chair back  
an slaps his bowl off the table  
nshoves his father nsays  
“Keep ya fuckin hands offa me!”

An I’m watching the milky oats spread  
around the broken bowl  
all ova the linoleum.  
An I know no ones gunna help me clean it up.

Sully’s ex-girlfriend encounters the same response when she presses him about his father:

...

Thad said “I don wanna talk abahdit.”  
I said something three more times that night;  
an I shoulda lettin not talk about it

an I shoulda stopped at two, cause  
Thad snatched up a glass from earlier that night  
an turned his back and smashed it on the wall cause

he didn wanna talk about it...

After a while I could not resist trying a few poems about Sully from his father’s perspective. To my surprise, he came out mostly-formed. I just “knew” he could not be the ogre Sully seems to think he is, because I already knew Sully was not that trustworthy or disinterested. Casey Sullivan had feelings too. He loved and resented his son in a complicated way that the two of them appear unable to reconcile. In “Casey’s A.M. Routine” he grumbles at his early-morning fatherly duties, and bemoans his early work-day.

...

I cant get the keys in my ignition  
with my gloves on. So I yank  
the right one off with my teeth

an my fingiz faihly stick ta the fuckin key.  
I slam the doah with my left

an see the clock says 5:34.  
I turn the key an theahs Thads  
crayins on the passenja floah  
an Um doin this fa him  
an the fuckin thing coughs win I turn it ova.

A sudden glance at young Sully's crayons in his car reminds Casey of why he works so hard so early.  
Here his love and resentment mingle in a way that to Sully only ever looks like antagonism. I conceived  
this poem as the father's side of the story in Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays":

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueback cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?<sup>28</sup>

Casey has no idea that Thad senses or fears any angers in their house. He feels merely like the  
unthanked father performing these lonely offices for the love of his son, from whom he cannot get a  
friendly word. The grown speaker of Hayden's poem has perspective that the thirty-year-old Sully

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<sup>28</sup> Glaysher, Fredrick, ed. *Collected Poems: Robert Hayden*. NY: Liveright, 1985.

does not yet have.

The new voices multiply the effects and networks surrounding this single relationship. The commentary on it has implications beyond the relationship itself. Again, the facts do not change, but we now have a narrative tension between the perceptions of family and outsider. For instance, Sully's friend observes sublimated tension, and sees Sully crush in the mouth of a soda can to use as a spittoon. This violence is inward, and displaced. In the narratives of Sully's mother and ex, this inward violence moves outward and becomes the expression of Sully's anger. Sully changes from "Sully" to "Thad". His mother considers how the conflict affects her and the family, and does not simply report it as does the friend. What Sully's friend does not see or know enhances and sustains the shock and secret intimacy of the violence Sully's family knows all too well. Likewise, our deeper understanding of Casey's relationship with his son makes us wonder why Sully does not see the conflicted feelings in his father that make us sympathize with him at times.

Similarly, we find diametrically opposite responses to the same behaviors among Sully's acquaintances. Spanish Vicky is fond of Sully for the same social aloofness that repulses O'Mal. Vicky says of Sully's mercurial presence

...

Catchim at the Times, quisas,  
winnits cool fa me ta go.  
Neva catchim at Funky Murphy's.  
See, conozco a Thad—  
he wouldn go too fah frommis base.  
But too many people an hes gone.  
Aun que hes there, I know hes gone.  
Entiendes?

She feels she understands him, and may even be attracted to his brooding. At the least, she finds herself in his inner circle. O'Mal, on the other hand, sees this behavior and finds Sully sometimes standoffish:

Satadays Sully comes aht ta Irish Times  
buddy neva wantsta stay.  
I kin smellit like an albinos sunscreen  
onna sunnyass day.

Says hi like ya gutta gun attis back  
gives Vic a wink,  
thenny pushes up ta the bah  
ta buy the place a drink...  
sometimes pretentious:

...

So I toldim once  
that precise shit drives  
me uppa wall. Two months  
latah hes leavin Irish Times

by hisself an I askim  
whodja piss off in the champagne room?  
Kid spita aht the lip hes packin  
an sez “Ya mean ‘whom’”.

O’Mal is outside of Sully’s confidence, and understands the wink at Vicky very differently from how she receives it. To Vicky he is “Thad”, but to O’Mal he is “Kid”. The ornamental peacock in the Sullivan living-room is another obvious example of this turning around a single spot, which would be impossible with a solitary speaker. Likewise, Major Taylor Boulevard gets anaphoric reference. It comes up first in a fable embodied by Major Taylor himself, the famous cyclist and namesake of the street. Many poems later, it gets passing mention in “Suliad”, which serves as something of a finale to reprise many people, items, and motifs we have already encountered.

I did not plan these shifts; they began to grow as the extension of the natural language of each new voice. Now just as crucial to the story are the questions of public and private presentation, family secrecy, the role of the friend, of the ex-girlfriend. This is the “parallax gap” I observed in Masters and sought to create in my work: the blank space between narratives that shows us the dynamic act of collective creation. All this comes from the addition of a few voices.

But a character’s commentary on and consciousness of an object is only half of his or her contribution to the plot. What we must also pay attention to is what he or she does not observe or say. The absence of an element of *story* (in the Formalist sense) may start as a conspicuous oversight; but it

becomes a thing put in play—itself part of the *plot*—once we see it revealed in the parallel narrative of another speaker. This is the dark side of the moon of the monologue; unseen, but present, and countervailing the lit side. We are forced to consider the first character’s unstated motivations or shortcomings that might cause this elision. Says David G. Wright, “...ironies can work reciprocally: as we respond to them, we revalue the immediate context in which the corrective, or ‘true’ meaning resides as well as the immediate context of the ironic marker or ‘false’ meaning which sent us in quest of truth in the first place.”<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, we begin to sense a second layer of enunciation of the plot, an interaction and tension between the unstated parts that rivals that between the stated. This tension gives these works their power, and is the device that distinguishes them; in the embattled blank space, the reader is empowered actually to partake in the creation of plot and character.

Žižek, in describing the benefit of “getting lost” to locate the ethics of Henry James, happens to explain the potential of these blank spaces:

*...[I]t is the very movement of “getting lost” (of losing ethical substance) that opens up the space for the ethical word of mediation which alone can generate the solution.* The loss is thus not recuperated but fully asserted as liberating, as a positive opening.<sup>30</sup>

When we no longer feel compelled to accept the narrative, but free to interrogate it for bias or inconsistency, our reading of it may become richer. The competition of the blind spots behind that curtain sustains so much of the plot not only because of the extra story hidden in its shadows, but also because it is dynamic. In this space the plot and characters are not *being*, but *becoming*, just as the language is not formed with the first poem, but forming.

The other notable formal effect of multiple voices is dramatic delay. Though the gradual parceling of information allows for greater completeness, it also necessitates the uncertainty of withholding. This delay enhances the impact of the newer information by first nearly extinguishing our receptiveness to it (primed by earlier information), then hitting us broadside with it. Though most revelations in *Sully* have to do with feelings, there are some secrets in the traditional sense. One of the “bombs” I tried to plant is

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<sup>29</sup> Wright, David G. *Ironies of Ulysses*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan. 1991. 62. Wright says this of Joyce, but I am considering as it applies to narrative in general.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek. 127.



Ashley's admission that she had an abortion. Her first three poems reflect a deceptive simplicity. She tends to repeat herself and miss Sully's points. But the realization in "Ashley's Raisins Why" sheds new light on her obtuseness with Sully, her deflecting his directness at times. It adds greater poignancy to the drunken rapturous kiss Sully offers Ashley.

A week before Eastah  
Thad came home at seven in the moahnin  
an woke me up withis face all red

nclose to mine. Took my face  
innis hands nkissed me lawnganhahd.  
Pistme off n turndme on.

I laughed cuz he kin do that.  
He was cryin a little. So was I.  
I tookis hands off my face

nsaid "What's wrong?"  
He smiled cryin nsaid  
"Zero is wrong."

He smelled like beer nCopenhagen.

Maybe for this sweet moment nothing is wrong; but in the light of day much is wrong that neither Sully nor Ashley wants to face. The crying in this early poem may appear just an overflow of emotion, but Ashley's later poem—evasive title and all—recasts the tears as mutual but unspoken recognition of the abortion, and Sully's kiss as the forgiveness Ashley hoped would never come.

The nothing relationship between Casey Sullivan and his wife Mary is conspicuous. They seem barely to acknowledge each other, and when they do, it is with resentment and sometimes disconnection, as in "Casey on the Peacock", and "Mary Watches Breakfast". Casey excludes her (and anyone else but Thad) in "Casey's A.M. Routine" from his list of people for whom he makes sacrifices. While these lacunae may say something, we can also gather aspects of their discord

indirectly from what they *do* mention. In particular, Casey refers to his other two sons as “James” and “Patrick”. Mary calls them by the traditional Irish versions of these names, “Seamus” and “Padriac”. We might even miss that they are referring to the same people. The suggestion, of course, is that there has been disagreement somewhere along the way about something as fundamental as what to call their sons. Religion and language underlie the conflict, which seems vaguely to fall along the same sectarian lines as some of Tom Leonard’s Glaswegians. This has gone unresolved for more than thirty years, and lingers in the tense and silent space between them.

The prose poem (for lack of a more certain categorization) “Corrections”, occurring late in the sequence, takes up some of these smaller time-bombs:

The Worcester Telegramaphone & Landfill wishes to announce the following corrections:

- A Mr. L. McCuvvy, 31, of Worcester was arrested Tuesday for assault and public urination, and not for “a salt and public coronation” as reported in Wednesday’s police blotter. Mr. McCuvvy is accused of shoving an unidentified man to the sidewalk outside a crowded establishment on Main Street, stamping on his thigh, and attempting to relieve himself upon the man. Public coronation in Worcester County is neither a crime nor politically possible.
- The city council meeting, open to the public, to discuss putting pants on the Turtle Boy statue on Worcester Common is scheduled for Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup>, and not Wednesday the 10<sup>th</sup> as reported.
- Wednesday’s article on the overflow at local shelters, such as the P.I.P. on South Main Street and the Massachusetts Veterans’ Shelter on Grove Street, reported the date of President Reagan’s repeal of the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980 as August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1984. The date was in fact August 13<sup>th</sup> 1981.

The item about the reviled Lovey McCuvvy reveals to the reader just what followed that ominous moment at the end of “Here Come the McCuvvys” when the whole clan has filed behind their leader into the Irish Times and is about to encounter Sully. It also explains the leg injury that has incapacitated Sully in “The Sullivan Wound”, and about which he remains mum. The second item is a cataphoric reference to the Turtle Boy statue on the city green that has become emblematic of the city of Worcester. Though the mention of him here is playful and absurd as his earlier poem, he has become static. His great energy from “Major Taylor and Turtle Boy” is thwarted forever, and he has become the actual statue that he is, and a subject of silly debate. The third item refers obliquely to Eddy the Vet. Any investment we have nurtured in the fates of these characters is rewarded by the delay created by sharing out their stories over multiple speakers. The ability of one speaker to tell us about these people and vents is limited. Only another voice or two can rotate us around the subject.

The third cumulative effect of the dispersion of the narrative into a medley of voices is the creation of a sense of a surrounding, scrutinizing and chattering community. This I lifted as much from Faulkner as from Masters. Cleanth Brooks refers to this in Faulkner as “the circumambient atmosphere, the essential ether of...fiction.”<sup>32</sup> The number of speakers in *Sully*, the diversity of their opinions on people, things, and their city, accumulate in a kind of circuit. It seems every perspective is expressed, and any direction one turns will lead to a dead end of judgment, good or bad, that has already been said.

O’Mal resents Vicky who likes Sully who is angry at Casey who seems to have no relationship with his wife Mary who is sometimes embarrassed by Sully who hates O’Mal. Someone is always saying something about someone else; and the unnerving part is that one character may never know who has said what. As the Compsons are the subject of whispers in Yoknapatawpha County, so I intended to make everyone in Sully’s Worcester unsettled by the chattering of the community. But in *The Sound and the Fury* the community is only *allowed* to be implied through the presence of four speakers, through “interrupted monologue, [and] the very presence of an audience...”<sup>33</sup> I planned for the twenty

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<sup>31</sup> This is not a mistake in editing. I have retained the Bookman Old Style font I used for this poem, which was meant to resemble newspaper type.

<sup>32</sup> Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

voices of my poems to provide an even more disorienting, swirling cacophony. If four speakers could suggest gossip, my twenty could establish a city of natterers.

The last formal effect of multiple voices I found characteristic of *Sully* is the exchange between voices, interpenetrating ventriloquism, in a sense. Speakers often channel or reflect one another. This may suggest unspoken or unacknowledged closeness, more of a connection than some characters would care to admit. Whether it comes as a subtle inclusion of someone else's phrase or as an unflattering impersonation, the presence of another voice tells the reader about connections and attenuations that may not be explicit.

In my poems there are two strains of this exchange of voice: absorptive and mocking. Some speakers through convection seem to absorb the words and phrases of others, and repeat or echo them as integrated parts of their own speech. The words may be mutated in the mouths of new speakers to reflect a new context, or overlaid with their own modes of expression. These may be conscious or unconscious on the part of the primary speaker. The other exchanges are overt mockeries, often in italics. These are the speakers' attempts to imitate what they see as the characteristic speech of another, usually by way of burlesquing him or her. Such utterances are meant to sound ham-fisted and overblown; but nonetheless they betray the speakers' sensitivity to the voices of the ones they mock. My models for these, which we will return to, were John Berryman's "Dream Songs", and (though a jaunt outside of my genre), the inner monologues of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The absorptive ventriloquism of voice can be subtle. Casey Sullivan uses the mimetic repetition of "scrape scrape scrape" in "Casey's A.M. Routine" to describe clearing his frosted car window. It was probably from his father that Sully himself picked up this rhetorical quirk, which he, too, employs to describe a cleaning motion in "Sully on the Peacock":

...

snaps the funnies  
goes ova ta Mar  
nsnatches the dusta.

Thenny whacks whacks whacks  
at the feathas  
till the whole peacock shakes

...

As Sully's and his father's personal similarities are often the sources of their conflicts, so too are the expressions they share a point of divergence and connection. Also in the peacock poems we see Casey and Thad echo each other's analogies about the absurdity of dusting feathers with feathers. The same act causes similar thoughts between the two. Says the son:

...

Ma wiz dustin the feathas  
with feathas like cuttin  
diamond with diamond.

...

And Casey:

...

Featha dusta  
fa the feathas!  
Wull habadda

linoleum sponge  
fa the kitchen floah?

...

Same idea. But Casey's suggestion is earthier, dirtier, closer to the floor, and inherently derisive. Sully's is gentler, but a little in the clouds. Whom the comparison started with is anyone's guess, but both use it and have marked an iteration of it as their own.

A similar but more immediate transference occurs in "Sully's Railroad Chorus". This was one of those poems a writer tears off with minimal craft, only later to discover folds of significance he did not intend. As such I have come to consider it one of the corner-pieces of the *Sully* sequence. In this nine-line poem, three speakers take turns answering Sully's unreported questions and giving him instructions. The first line of each stanza is spoken by an unnamed speaker of the ENE accent, the second a Latino speaker of "Spanglish", and the third also an ENE speaker, but bearing a hint of Italian-American vernacular:

—Wheah do we put the spikes? Ask Angel.  
—Dond e'ta Anhell? Guys inna bathrum.

—Them eye-yin pegs? Talk ta Angelo.

—Winny swings the boom ova, thread the strap unda the ties.

— Stick the washers con the plates, vale?

— Eh, Sul, twoattatime, capiche?

—Two rails a day's abaht fifteen ties.

— Vamos. While it's still hot.

— Gutta vamoose befoah the ground freezes.

Here the same words and ideas are bouncing between three voices. To the Spanish-speaker talking with English-speakers, “Angel” becomes “Anhell”. The Italian-American hears something exotic in the name and its variety of pronunciations. Not knowing which to repeat, he turns it into the form of the name he is familiar with: “Angelo”. The same occurs with “Vamos”, an actual imperative verb to the Spanglish-speaker. The third speaker turns the expression he has just heard into the corrupted and casual “vamoose”.

This inter-linguistic exchange goes the other way when we see the Spanish-speakers incorporating English vocabulary and syntax into their hybridized speech. The middle speaker above is one example. Spanish Vicky does this as well, as does Angel when we meet him the “Sulliad”. Says Vicky:

Esully sometime dice que fourafive people

ah the ones keptim comin back.

Like en la e'cuela with me nRafferty.

Gut kicked ahdda South, entonces he wenta Voke.

I cannot point to a single voice Vicky is channeling here. It rather the generic American English she hears around here, with a touch of the regional demotic we have been exploring. My intention was to make it unclear where her Spanish ends and her English begins. As we see Spanish-speaking voices influencing those around them, so I wanted to show Spanglish in mid-form, undergoing infiltration from English during the act of becoming.

The conscious and mimetic interpenetrations, the caricatures of voices, take less effort to extract from the poems. The Unnamed Friend indulges in them when parodying church language, as in “Bay Attitudes” and “Eggs, Cinnamon, Nutmeg, and usually Whiskey”. In the first he adopts the voice of a

priest in the template of the beatitudes, irreverently blessing this group and that:

...

Blessid ah the Grownups

fa they know their age.

Blessed ah Drivahs of SUVs

fa thell sa-vive the crash

Blessid ah the Peacemakahs

fa they give us someone ta blame.

...

He playfully skewers the same ecclesiastical voice in the second poem with his holiday-appropriate “Glorier in eggshellsis deo” (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*), turning the Latin for “Praise God in the highest” into a celebration of eggnog.

And once, perhaps sick of Sully’s antics, the Unnamed Friend enjoys mimicking Sully’s drunken, speech. “Sully’s Sunday Lament” begins  
Sull peekt ahdda Shaughnessy’s a liddle sunsmakt  
a liddle facepuncht

SquinT              SquinT

Two front doahs with two broke knobs

Two front walks an foah flat feet

Two tin lawnmachihls with scoliosis

Two cah keys in foah clammy hands

Two Monte Cahlos that gut the same plates

But what it wazzat really threwim

was it wazzat chainlink fence

The speaker captures Sully’s tendency to repeat himself, especially when disoriented. The lack of punctuation steers the flow of the sentences about as smoothly as Sully is going to steer himself home.

The poems between Sully and his mother, Mary, and Sully and Mr. Devereau are the clearest examples of conscious exchange. Devereau and Sully, as we have seen, do their best to send up one

another's speech. Devereau reduces Sully's voice to a *mélange* of bankrupt expressions: "*O docta yawanna curve heahsa curve whye equals what ex plushuh.*" His Sully spouts unintelligible expressions, and struggles with the math. Of course, Sully might not have ever said any of this. What matters is that shadows of the real Sully remain in the language Devereau uses to recreate him. Likewise, Sully turns his Mr. Devereau impression into a couple of math-based quips—too clever by half—and a recitation of the quadratic equation: "*Morning Thaddeus you've come three hundred sixty degrees*", and "*X equals negative B plus or minus...*" How much of the real Devereau is in this we have no way of knowing. But the point is to take from this poem an impression of Sully's relationship with the man based on the voice he synthesizes from the oddments of his memory.

When I determined to use multiple voices, I knew they had to interact somehow. The first model I turned to was the *Dream Songs*. They showed me how dynamic two voices could be over nearly four-hundred poems. Ostensibly, Henry dreams and broods and the cornerman is his sounding-board. But he becomes more than that as Henry begins to show signs of adopting his rhythm and vocabulary. Henry favors Standard English and often a poetic diction. The cornerman, who calls Henry "Bones", speaks with a stylized African-American dialect. His interpolations are usually indicated by a dash. The sixty-fourth "Dream Song" begins

Supreme my holdings, greater yet my need,  
 thoughtless I go out. Dawn. Have I my cig's,  
 my flaskie O,  
 O crystal cock,—my kneel has gone to seed,—  
 and anybody's blessing? (Blast the MIGs  
 for making fumble so

my tardy readying.) Yes, utter' that.  
 Anybody's blessing? —Mr Bones,  
 you makes too much  
 démand. I might be 'fording you a hat:  
 it gonna rain.

...<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969. 71.



Here the cornerman's minstrel show language interjects itself starkly in the second line of the second stanza. The name he calls Henry and the simplicity of his language mock Henry's anxiety and pretentiousness. But just four poems later, Henry himself says

I heard, could be, a Hey there from the wing,  
and I went on: Miss Bessie soundin good  
that one, that night of all,  
I feelin fair myself, taxes & things  
seem to be back in line, like everybody should  
and nobody in the snow on call

so, as I say, the house is given hell  
to Yellow Dog, I blowin like it too  
and Bessie always do  
when she make a very big sound—after, well,  
no sound—I see she totterin—I cross which stage  
even at Henry's age

in 2-3 seconds...<sup>35</sup>

We know this is Henry because he refers to himself as such, instead of “Bones”, and his role is the interlocutor, the narrator in the minstrel show of these dreams. But without this understanding, we might easily take this for the cornerman's voice. As the poems progress, Henry's voice becomes more flexible and faceted, largely because of its exposure to the cornerman's. I knew the voices of *Sully* would feel stilted in the stasis of too much consistency; so I tried to take from the voices of the *Dream Songs* this principal of dynamic interaction.

I saw the same process more overtly in Stephan Dedalus's chapters of *Ulysses*. Without getting us lost in the labyrinth of that novel, I will say that I was captivated by the route by which Stephen's observations and things people say to him in the *Telemachiad* become his arguing points in “Scylla and Charybdis”. Where I hope *Sully* diverges from these influences is in the complexity of the interpenetration. Rather than one voice texturing just one other, or a swirl of voices funneling into one, I

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<sup>35</sup> Berryman. 75

intended to insinuate a network of voices connecting, borrowing, and changing.

### *Tone*

This section argues points of my thesis that are the most subjective and difficult to demonstrate. Does the Eastern New England accent as I have depicted it have an inherent tone? Is it too fractured and varied here to be said to have a single one? This would not altogether constitute a failure. In the dialect poetry I have read, I find tones accreting into pervading temperaments. Some speakers seem to take great joy in either flaunting Standard English or reveling in their own modes. Others are burdened with the alienation of their language or frustrated with its dismissal. *Sully*, I suggest, leans toward the side of celebration, but is tempered with a resignation. This resignation could be about economic status, interpersonal failures, ones own shortcomings. The resulting cumulative tone (though I am loath to use this word) is of bittersweetness.

I hear anger in Leonard's Glasgow voices. He embraces this as part of the character of the city, and makes no effort to sanitize the corresponding action in his poems. In "No Light", the speaker takes on violence with chilling casualness:

"i've not *got* a light,"

hi sayz, dead posh

so a looksit wullie

an wullie looksit jimmy

an jimmy looksit me

n we aw starts laffn.

...

geez im wan wit hi knee

then thi nut. a didny no

wullie hid a blade but

nix thing its oot n

right in ther. anyway.

thaht wuz las sahtrday.

thi morra wir gawn up thi hull.<sup>36</sup>

And in “Simple Simon”:

thirteen bluddy years wi thim ih

no even a day aff

jiss gee im thi fuckin heave

weeks noatiss nur nuthin

gee im thi heave

that’s aw<sup>37</sup>

For some speakers in *Sully* this might have been appropriate. But very few except O’Mal or the McCuvvys seem to have antipathies this strong. There is a gruffness to the ENE accent, but not quite like this.

I hear not anger but disaffection in Brathwaite’s dialect poetry. Not much of his *Arrivants* trilogy is actually in dialect. Those sections that are, assume a feel of burlesque or mockery. This voice attends the Rasta Man and preacher caricatures of “Wings of a Dove” in *Rights of Passage*, and “The Stone Sermon in *Islands*. These characters are overblown and risible representations of provinciality to Brathwaite’s speakers of more cosmopolitan perspective. What I find is an ironic division in this between *us* and *them* created by the sarcasm of the accent.

At the other end, I find tones of overflowing triumph in the likes of Bennett, Afferbeck Lauder, and David Dabydeen. Bennett we have seen already rejoicing and having fun at the expense of pretentiousness. Lauder is a given. It is almost too easy to count his work in this category, because it has always been meant as a joke, and represents an accent that is dominant and unchallenged in its country. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the fun humans can find in wordplay of any origin.

Unexpected joy bursts from the saddest situation in David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song*. His Guyanese Creole rings with life from the throats of slaves and workers even amid the brutality of their condition. Says the speaker of the title poem,

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<sup>36</sup> Leonard, Tom. *Intimate Voices 1965-1983*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Galloping Dog Press, 1984. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 10.

Tie me haan up.  
Juk out me eye.  
Haal me teet out  
So me na go bite.  
Put chain rung me neck.  
Lash me foot tight.  
Set yu daag fo gyaad  
Maan till nite—

Bu yu cann stap me cack floodin in de goldmine  
Caan stap me cack splashin in de sunshine!<sup>38</sup>

He taunts the slave-owner to punish him as cruelly as he likes. Even in describing these ghoulish mutilations, the language brims with quickness, brashness, and simple rhymes. Sexual vitality busts through these threats after the first stanza as the irreducible and irrepressible bottom line of the speaker's identity.

Sully lacks the bitterness of one who has been told his language is unfit for use. He also has not been mistreated and stripped of things to the point that laughter is his only recourse. I intended the Eastern New England accent of the poems to come across as rough and assertive, but not furious; also playful but not joyful. What I read in my speakers was discontentment, for sure, but discontentment with resignation and a chuckle. Sully is torn about the fate of his city, certainly wishes it would progress in another way, but admits what he sees. Eddy the Vet, the slurring Viet Nam veteran reflects this at the end of his monologue. He recalls with some resentment how Casey was able to avoid the draft. Such a touchy memory coming from a drunk runs the risk of becoming acidic. But Eddy eases his grip at the end:

...but Case butcha fatha  
stayed heah workin on cahs  
an he sent us cases a Mahbros  
thats what he gave.  
But I guess its lucky ferris kids though huh.

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<sup>38</sup> Dabydeen, David. *Slave Song*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, Ltd, 2005. 26. Originally published by Dangaroo press in 1984.

We can feel sad for Eddy, even snicker at a few of his stumbles, but we do not feel the bite of pure anger or the enervation of joy. Even apparently funny poems like “Sully’s Kitchen” accept as a premise some sort of iniquity, shortcoming, or unpleasantness:

Buddis kitchens clean as a psycho woahd  
cuzzy has a “bottomline” rag  
that soaks up allis spots.

It swipes the baseboahd  
by the fridge, the juice unda the trashbag,  
an catches doublebarrel snots.

The trope of a sloppy bachelor is amusing enough, but the Unnamed Friend is actually criticizing Sully’s serious inattention to hygiene. He knows he will never change, and this is why the Friend can identify Sully’s tendencies so pithily.

This collective tone comes from a place of disaffection, but also contentment, which I believe is characteristic of the first world. Sully and his people are not wealthy, but are comfortable compared to most humans. Their lives are humble enough that they feel justified complaining, but not so difficult that they have been pushed over the edge of resorting to finding joy in the mundane. This tone, I feel, is rather American. We will return to this in the conclusion.

Where this places me contextually is near the realm of Tony Harrison’s dialect voices. I am tempted to point to Walcott, but his speakers of dialect are so varied and individual they defy my effort to categorize them as a whole. Harrison’s speakers of the Leeds accent, as we saw, have their resentments of language and class discrimination. But they also recognize the relative stability of their situations. The resulting tone is humor mingled with serious grievances. We remember the father’s Leeds accent in “Long Distance I”:

Ah can't stand it no more, this empty house!

Carrots choke us wi'out your mam's white sauce!

Them sweets you brought me, you can have 'em back.

Ah'm diabetic now. Got all the facts.

(The diabetes comes hard on the track

of two coronaries and cataracts.)

Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push  
food down mi throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out.  
And t'only reason now for beer 's to flush  
(so t'dietician said) mi kidneys out.<sup>39</sup>

There is here the sadness of the ill health that afflicts the old and the working class. The mother is dead and father is on his way out. But we also see something sweet and celebratory in the memory of the mother, and the old father's inability to enjoy food in her absence. Sully is sitting across the ocean in a similar city, speaking in a similar way, and in a similar socioeconomic position to many of Harrison's speakers. The similarities of his tone are to be expected.

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<sup>39</sup> Harrison. *Collected Poems*. 144.

### Chapter 3: Place

Soon after I began these poems with the intention of delineating the accent, I started to notice a savor of the region emerging from the language and images. I decided to run with this, and turn my language experiment concurrently into an inscription of the ground-level of the geography the accent encompasses. Sully lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, the second-largest city in the six-state region of New England. Worcester is nearly dead-center in the state, forty miles west of the capital, Boston. The city has maintained a population of around 180,000 for most of Sully's life. It has traditionally been a center of manufacturing, much like its counterparts Lawrence and Lowell in the northeast of Massachusetts. The city as it was in Sully's childhood was spotted with early-twentieth-century red-brick buildings: factories, warehouses, schools, churches. These were the vestiges of its heydays of manufacturing. Between these were vinyl-sided three-decker houses from mid-century, dwellings mostly particular to New England, and famously characteristic of Worcester. Since the late 1990s, the city and interested businesses have been making great efforts to revitalize areas that have grown moribund. Pot-holed streets have been repaved; trendy bars and clubs have opened where small businesses offering more pedestrian services once strove; and any of the old red-brick buildings and architectural fixtures of the old city have come down to make way for a new, modern façade. Those old buildings, some of the new, the streets that connected them, the people who worked and lived in them, and some outlying places prominent in the local imagination (Cape Cod, Boston, Providence) were to be among the subjects of my kinetic portraits.

I had several urban or near-urban models—American and European—to turn to as examples of language constructing place: Hart Crane's "The Bridge" and the borough of Brooklyn; Charles Olson's "Maximus Poems" and the fishing city of Gloucester; Joyce's Dublin. But the single work I kept returning to was William Carlos Williams's "Paterson", and the speaker's assertion in Book One that there are "no ideas but in things." After reading the figurative and conceptual city-based poetry of Jay Wright, I cannot say I agree entirely with Williams's blunt, categorical declaration. It is a syllogism that overshoots the mark. All *things* can convey ideas, but not all ideas need be found in *things*. We may find palpable ideas and constructed cities in abstract language as much as we can in the concrete. But for Sully's city and tribe, *things* were more appropriate to begin with. The ideas they expressed, I

trusted, would give rise to the ideas found in thought, abstractions, and metaphor. I started by following Williams's lead first as his speaker declares his intentions:

To make a start,  
out of particulars  
and make them general, rolling  
up the sum, by defective means—  
Sniffing the trees,  
just another dog  
among a lot of dogs.<sup>40</sup>

He then guides us over the Passaic Falls and onto an aerial view over Paterson, New Jersey:

From above, higher than the spires, higher  
even than the office towers, from oozy fields  
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,  
black sumac, withered weed stalks,  
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—  
the river comes pouring in above the city  
and crashes from the edge of the gorge  
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—<sup>41</sup>

The many speakers of the *Sully* poems would have to dig their hands in the same kind of imagery from downtown to the nearby countryside to conjure such palpability. "The crucial problem facing Williams in creating *Paterson*, Book One (1946)," says Douglas F. Fiero, "is the conversion of the bare 'local material' into a poetic 'matter' of imaginative validity for the long poem."<sup>42</sup> Williams's answer was to weave the local matter, the "things", into a book-long conceit of language-as-the-land, then that land as the parts of a giant body, then that body as part of a myth. Though I incorporate a hodge-podge of mythologies and a personification of the city into the imagery of the poems, they are not meant to be the culmination of my efforts; they are buttresses in support of a more prosaic and concrete depiction of the

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, William Carlos. "Paterson". New York: New Directions, 1963. 3. Originally published in 1946.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> Fiero, F. Douglass. "Williams Creates the First Book of 'Paterson'". *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 4. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Apr., 1974. 965-86.



region. Anything more conceptual or “poetic” as an overarching esthetic of the sequence would be unfaithful to the character of Worcester and central Massachusetts, mere romanticizing. With this caveat in mind, we will examine first in this chapter the means by which I have tried to inscribe the area and establish the city as the center of human activity and growth, whether Sully likes it or not. This mostly has to do with the naming of specific streets and places, directional orientation, and the depiction or description of movement through—and in and out of—the city.

Second, we will explore Sully’s relationship with his surroundings. As I developed the character, I found him becoming protective of the city as he once knew it, and resentful of the cosmetic changes sweeping it during the last decade. This tension actually emerges as Sully’s defining characteristic not only as he regards his home, but as he deals with other people and himself. The second section of this chapter will look closely at Sully’s resistance to the change around him, and how the reaction forms into a philosophy and a neurosis. In this, Sully finally has something in common with post-colonial traditions. All this change and progress makes him feel unwelcome, uprooted. Ashcroft notes the “concern with place and displacement” in such literatures. “It is here,” he says, “that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.”<sup>43</sup> Sully feels this keenly, but we see that it is a decision he makes. Essentially, his discomfort is all in his mind. Connecting the first and second sections is Sully’s personification of Worcester as a woman: “Dorothy”. In his construction of her we find Sully’s anxiety as well as his coping mechanism. Ultimately he *invents* what frustrates him and what gives him peace.

### *Inscribing the City and Living in It*

Once I decided that depicting the city of Worcester and its surroundings was as integral to the totality of the poems as the whole gamut of languages, the next challenge was to invent a way to make place a foreground and a background. It was where the events would happen and the people would live, but it was also to be an organism sustained and defined by these activities and people. Williams’s poetry suggested to me the raw material for such an undertaking—the things, the place names, the

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<sup>43</sup> Ashcroft, et al. 8.

people—as well as the awareness of history that has made a city what it is. But for me a more resonant model for this process was the early work of Jay Wright. “The city [in Write’s Poetry] has its own peculiar discourse,” Says Vera Kutzinski, “a kind of body language, which is at once historical and mythical. Wright regards the city as a charged field, constituted by a series of symbolic acts that make up the ritual of founding.”<sup>44</sup> Though the historical founding of Sully’s city is not a point of focus for my poems, aspects of its history—primarily nineteenth and twentieth century immigration—resonate into the present.

On the literal level, I chose two methods by which to inscribe the city: constructing maps with language; and identifying landmarks from the ground. The former are not guided tours, but usually the paths of characters as they pursue some purpose. This makes the path essential to the movement of the poem, even determinative of it, without making it the entire focus. Likewise, the buildings, attractions, the fields are the location of activity and character development, and rarely the subject of a still-life. This way the city at its most detailed becomes the center of vitality and population, while the zoomed-out and more vaguely-handled outskirts, country-side, and other metropolises become places of alterity and uncertainty. This uncertainty is not necessarily baleful, though, nor is the certainty of home always comforting. We will see growth at the peripheries and stagnation in the city just as we will see disconnection at the peripheries and continuity in the city. Very loosely, the wider view is influenced by Wright, the narrower by Williams.

A map, albeit a surreal one, starts the sequence. Here a process of telescoping takes us through all the levels of “map-making” the poems display:

### **Sully’s Rotary**

Sully stahts innis head

thenny opinsis eyes

Gits too big furris room

thenny steps into the kitchen

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<sup>44</sup> Kutzinski, Vera M. *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. 107.

Shakes hans withis front doah  
thenny steps awnta Graftin Street.

Sully tucksis chin dahn Graftin  
tilly gets ta Union Station.

Takes the T from Union Station  
ta the stahp in Back Bay.

Cant even get bad dreams in Back Bay  
soee thinks abaht swimmin ta Chinatahn

But eels inna chi knees butcha shahp  
makim think abaht the Cape

Soee rides an eel from the hahbur  
dahn the South Shoah ta Sandy Neck.

Then theahs nowheah ta go but away:  
Bahnstable, Yahmith, Dennis, Wellfleet, Truro

An winnys standin on the tippa P-Tahn  
theahs that eel again, but with a sneer anna new hat

Whipsis tail arahn Sullys thighs  
nslurpsim inta the Bay

Dragsis ass on the waddah,  
bumpsis head on the hahbur

whacksit on every tie on the T from Newtn ta Wistah  
slithisim back up Graftin Street

squirtsim thruis keyhole,  
dumpsim innis tuna can room

an slapsis eyes shut.

We follow Sully from his own head, to his apartment, to the street level, to the state level as he rides the forty miles from Worcester to Boston then somehow levitates to the end of Cape Cod. Then the process collapses on itself as that unfriendly eel drags him all the way from his point of greatest freedom—the farthest geographic distance from Worcester he achieves in the poems—back to the inscape whence he ventured out. This poem is something of an overture for the land-roving of the sequence. Maps, directions really, will emerge as either street-by-street accounts, or as “satellite” overviews of the region that may even overlap state borders. This poem, meant as it is to set the tone and christen the textual ground of *Sully*, gives us a taste of each.

The more intricate of these exercises in cartography, so to speak, are the handful of poems that bring us from one part of town to another, sometimes street-by-street and turn-by-turn. There is not only a street plan, but a movement to these poems, a direction propelled by the speaker’s or character’s familiarity with an area, as if the city exerts a gravity that only a conscious decision to defy can overcome. For instance, *The Unnamed Speaker* suggests an almost religious veneration by Sully in his regard for spots downtown:

I know what Suls thinkin abaht winnys crossin Chandlah Street.

...

I kin showya the holiest spot on Pahk Ave between Clahk nthe KFC.

For Sully, crossing Chandler Street and passing the span between Clark University and the KFC on Park Avenue is clearly a repeated experience, a ritual. We are told (though vaguely) the geographic relationship between these places, and a glance at an actual map would make them obvious; but as important is the direction and habitualness of the crossing. *The Friend* is cryptic about the nature of its significance to Sully. But nevertheless we now have a new piece of the puzzle of the city, as well as the puzzle of Sully.

“Major Taylor and Turtle Boy” gives us one of the most detailed accounts of movement through the city streets. Turtle Boy—that personification of the actual statue discussed in Chapter two—challenges Major Taylor to a race around the city commons. Major Taylor—the nickname of

Marshall Taylor—was a late-nineteenth century bicyclist from Worcester, and the first African American to win a word championship in any sport. Taylor takes up Turtle Boy's challenge, and the two are off on a closely narrated loop around the center of the city.

...

The Mayja gavim a wink;  
the liddle buck geeupt is turtle,  
then bothofem ticktackt southwest  
towahd the foah-way at Main Street and Myrtle.

The turtle swooshed likeed swoosh unda watah;  
the Mayja leaned over nshot uppis hips.  
They zippt past the Times, the Palladium,  
the coahna wheah Fish-Rida sawr an eclipse.

But Turtle Boy cheated nturned noath up Portland  
wull the Mayja stuck to the path;  
he'd accounted fa coahnas nsquaihd the hypotenuse  
wull Turtle Boy sneezed at the math.

He skidded is breaks inta Franklin nFront  
—widow's peak a the ol city green—  
with some kid onna terrapin snappinis jaws  
at the twennyfive yahds inbetween.

Now Mayja Tayla's infronna the libry  
takinis brassy repose  
wull Turtle Boy's stuck on the Common  
still gettin beat by a nose.

nBothofem lookin southeast  
nbothofem toastin the tahn  
can see Vernon Hill from theah plinths

between capstones a rarified grahnd.

This near-circuit of barely a mile represents the nucleus of activity in the poems. Sully's favorite bar is on Main Street, just north of George Street; City Hall and the central courthouse are here as well; the public library is tangential to the loop; nearly everything happens here and around here. All these places treated singly in other poems are conglomerated here into a continuous and eternal circle. Their traversing locks Major Taylor and Turtle Boy in the poses of their statues forever, as the gravitational pull and centrality of the loop lock Sully in his setting. The route is one Sully has followed countless times, and knows as a matter of muscle-memory. And it is now one we could walk using these directions.

As the first poem, "Sully's Rotary" whips us through the range of map-making, and "Major Taylor" takes us entirely to the street level, so the penultimate poem, the "Suliad" starts at the street and ends with movement toward the wider region. This is because Sully encounters a moment of crisis in this poem, a point at which he must decide if he will continue to submit to the gravity and familiarity of the city's center. Ostensibly, his alienation from others has compelled him to flee, at least for a little while. The actual decision comes midway in the poem when he is stopped at a four-way intersection on the northern terminus of Main Street, not far north of the start of the race:

...

He stopt at the stopsign cuzzats  
whattcha do atta stopsign. Straight wiz Salisbury Street  
nthe aht museum he went to onna foahthgrade field trip,  
Grove Street, the fie-ya-mins trainin towa, the cemetery.  
Left wiz a hump up Highland, the Boynton, Elm Pahk,  
the supamahket wurriz motha wid gettim a chocolate  
donut nsit withim sippin hah coffee wully tolder  
abaht Transfoahmas nGI Joes nkickt is legs hangin  
off the stool. An behind wiz wheah hed been comin from a long  
time now. So Sully turned right at the stopsign  
cuzzats whatty dont nawmally do at this stopsign.

...

The familiarity that binds him to a place is the same that he recognizes as cloying in a moment of anxiety (and clarity?), and that sends him running east. This easterly direction is new for us and for Sully. At

least the ground he covers to arrive there is known to him, and floods him with memories and associations that have given these places the personality the speaker is now sharing with us. He is driving past familiar sights, but headed toward the affluent neighboring town of Shrewsbury. The oblong Lake Quinsigamond forms a natural border between city and town. The bridge spanning the lake becomes the threshold of familiarity for Sully. He has broken from the gravitational pull, but only under extraordinary circumstances. He is now headed toward the less-defined, less-charted unknown. For Sully, Here Be Monsters, but monsters he would now rather face than those back home and those within. We saw in the first poem what happens when Sully dares to travel beyond his customary confines. The difference of this poem and its note of finality are contained in its open ending. These minutely focused city “maps” provide not only the *local matter* to make scenes and narrative palpable, but circumscribe the range of the characters’ wanderings and doings.

The wider maps take us and the characters further afield. They mention not street names but city names and major highways. These destinations—none more than an hour away—represent for Sully a kind of alterity at the same time repulsive and attractive, places that lack the familiarity of home, but offer the luster of novelty and escape. Since the scope is broader, the language is less defined, and whatever these places offer can be less clearly known. All we know for sure is they are not Worcester, not the few square miles of urban space Sully could draw on a napkin. As he or anyone else attempts to see or think about these places, something usually draws them back to the old, inescapable nucleus of activity. Sully’s efforts to reach the warmth and quiet of “the Cape” are thwarted in his imagination by forces dragging him home violently, and in reality by his troubled relationship with Ashley:

Let’s go dahn the Cape

he says

dahn the Cape

cause it’s cold heah

but it’s gunna be

cold theah too

I tellim

...

Thad

I tellim

I love you most days

like ya girl

an some days

like ya mother.

An pleeeeeease

he says

cuz he knows

which one today is.

Elsewhere Rob, another friend with his own take on Sully, describes Sully's drives to Cape Cod with Ashley:

Win Sul an Ash drive dahhna Cape

in Ashley's Foahd made adda tape

like Steve McQueen inna Great Escape

they bitchnfight

baht who fahgut ta shut the drape

an the kitchenlight.

They slam the trunk at ten past six

packt fulla Coke npeanit Twix.

Theah holdin hands winnay hit the bricks

but that don last.

It stahts with liddle sighs and clicks

then gets ugly fast.

...

Proximity to their home town, it seems, keeps them connected; distance drives them apart as they are presented with the terrifying wideness of the world.

The city of Providence in Rhode Island, third biggest in New England, sits about as far from Sully as the bridge onto Cape Cod. In "Sully's Inversion of Paul" it stands in place of a holy beacon attracting this friend of Sully. Paul, fleeing his debts, thinks of it as a place to begin anew, "the City of the Resurrected Dead / 19. An the walkin bodies ah quick nthe debts ah paid nwhats ta do is done..." In Paul's imagination, it is the "Divine City", as its nickname says. But once confronted with the burden of changing his state-issued IDs and registration, he rushes back to Worcester and rationalizes his



decision. Always back to Worcester. The route here is as cyclical as that in “Sully’s Rotary”, but involves no landmarks. Just Route 146, Worcester, Providence, and Millville—a small town near the border—are mentioned. Direction and movement, so crucial in the street-level maps, are subsumed in the narrative for the sake of teleology. Here, and in most of the wider map poems, the destination is more important than the journey. Likewise, the places the Fish Man hits are only named and not described, place names that become almost fabled in their vagueness: Hartford, Lowell, Long Island Sound. The small towns Sully mentions in “Quabbin Reservoir” are not only vague, but no longer exist. They were sacrificed to the creation of the reservoir, and their remains sit at the bottom of a man-made lake. No place seems to exist in palpable detail except the immediate world of Sully and his people. The close-up maps form this concentrated center, and the far-away ones loosely assemble the periphery.

Other than landforms, cities, streets, and highways, we find specific buildings and landmarks texturing Sully’s world and making his location feel real. These tend to be the old buildings he grew up with, the ones that are giving way to the revitalized face of Worcester. Sully calls them “*All the old buildings that made it like home...*” Places like the Worcester Public Library with its stuffed giraffe (named Cecily, and still on display), the Palladium on Main Street, the Irish Times, the Higgins Armory Museum across from the disused Odd Fellows’ Home—these places orient the reader as do the maps; but they are even more dynamic and specific in their contribution to local significance. More focused than street names, these are the places *on* the streets. Cities, highways, and streets are destinations and conduits; these buildings represent the loci of interaction between the characters and the city as it functions. They represent what characters do when they get where they are going.

### *Sully’s Relationship with His City*

The underlying force internal to the story that propels the narrative, activates the characters, and energizes the language is Sully’s resistance to change and the artifice of what he considers superficial or cosmetic renovation. He liked the city the way it was, following its own trajectory of decay. The same is true of his belief about human physical presentation. Both will crumble at a preordained rate, and to try to deny or reverse this entropy, for Sully, is unnatural and frustrating.

Sully likes the buildings he grew up with not only because they are familiar, but also because they represent a utilitarian simplicity that he admires. The opposite of this is the wave of sleek new buildings from hospitals to bars that are taking the place of “*All the ol buildings that made it like home.*” Sully says in his first monologue,

...

Ya constantly disolvin. An everybuddy tries ta do  
what they ken not ta showit:  
Fancypants nslick shirts nperfumes nhaihcuts, butchaknowhat  
I don see a reason ta covva myself in polyurethane  
an rot on the inside of a Ken doll. Main  
Street nShewsbury gut makeovas.  
Buncha city fathas nbusiness ownahs  
gut embarrassed at the pieces  
chippin off the street. No money innat. NHoleyJeezus  
they gave em a facelift. They scrubbed emty garages  
inta sushi joints, an wheah the cah wash is  
—or was—theah’s a precious coffee shop  
sellin mochalattechinomachiattoventes...

Here he combines the image of bodily disintegration with that of urban disintegration, and compares efforts to resist each as equally futile and laughable. The simple couplets of loose rhyme crammed together reflect this model of body and city: an organism that stays intact, but only just, and only as long as it needs to. As the poem ends, the rhyme, which had been faint but consistent, disappears

...Like ya haihs

not gunna go straight again. An all anybody caihs  
abaht is how long they kin makeit look  
like theah bodys a new bar a soap  
an not a handfulla scum.

“Look” holds tenuously to “soap”, then the rhyme gives up the ghost with the dangling word “scum”. The formal structure of the poem has broken into it elemental ooze, as humans and their cities are also bound to do. This is Sully’s declaration of a philosophy that governs and complicates his relationship

with his home. It leads to alienation, but one he has designed.

“We Grow Rocks” proclaims the same permanence and virtue of entropy, and scoffs at artificial efforts to divide and subdue the land.

We grow rocks  
that look like rocks.  
Fahmahs madem inta walls  
an now theah still walls.  
Rocks go dahn thirty feet.  
Digem up an they grow back.  
Only thing between ya feet  
nhell.  
We grow rocks fa stone walls  
like scahs inna field  
fa basements befoah the toahnado  
fa weighin dahn stacks  
a birth certificates.  
Rollem over  
nthe centipedes nsalimandahs  
wriggle aht nfind anotha rock.  
Rocks go dah a hundred feet.  
White Mountains ta the Birksheahs  
God stird up the ground like cement  
nsaid fahm this, pal.  
Rocks go dahn a mile.  
Now Shewsby Street  
they wanna pave an inch thick?  
Be my guest.

The very things that presented the first impediments to colonial farmers are the things that characterize the land, and will outlast everything else. These rocks that defied plowing and building Sully reveres as the region’s greatest crop. Man can appropriate them and incorporate them into his own matrix of land-management, but he absolutely must deal with them. At the poem’s end, Sully betrays the immediate concern that has prompted this rather far-sighted philosophy. The collective renovations on

Shrewsbury Street are unsettling him in a figurative and literal way. But he reassures himself with the thought—of almost geological scope—that whatever they build will not last. Behind this is an echo of Hamlet’s address to Yorik’s skull to tell Ophelia that, “let her paint an inch thick, to [Yorik’s] favor she must come.”<sup>45</sup> All the new pavement in the world won’t stop dust from returning to dust. Through this, Sully again connects the dissolution of cities and architecture to the dissolution of bodies.

Sully values the authentic, doomed though it is, and scorns the feebleness of vanity and preservation. Others, however, find this tendency baffling and off-putting. The Unnamed Friend, in describing Sully’s body, reports an uncoordinated olio of bones and limbs that somehow keeps him upright and mobile. The Friend sees no glory or honesty in this entropy, just some ill-fitting skin on some sticks.

### **Sully’s Bonehouse**

Wheahs the truth in a crooked spine  
An how can Sul knowis way upndahn?  
If the whole things stacked like jenga  
Every vertebra has its own plan.

Annis shouldas ah lopsided  
annis scaps stick aht like mudflaps  
annis hips ah like a coahkscrew  
annis flat feet turn aht like a ducks.

Buddit all works like a houseacahds.

An if juss one a them bones  
knew wheah the othas wah headed  
Um priddy shoah Sul wid fall apaht.

In fact, to him Sully’s condition is the opposite of truth. If his physical being is not in harmony, how can

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<sup>45</sup> I am realizing as I write this that there is something of Hamlet in Sully’s alienation, resentment, and paralysis. I did not intend this, but I should address it. The great difference, I think, is that no one is trying to disabuse him of his philosophy. Sully is no prince, and nobody much cares what he thinks. This is why his conflicts with people don’t find much resolution or come to much of a head (except what is implied in the “Sulliad”), but just keep repeating.

Sully begin to understand the world around him? The Friend's simile of Jenga blocks is the same Sully uses to describe the new, slick buildings in "Renovated Sully". The misalignment of the lines in the stanzas reflects his impression of the misalignment of Sully's body. Likewise in "Embalmed Sully", the Unnamed Friend continues to mock Sully's belief that decay is to be embraced. He describes Sully as a canopic jar, and compares his light skin to thin alabaster. He consigns him to a dusty tomb, and jokes that Sully will be happy to let in visitors in a thousand years. He seems so unamenable to doing so now.

Ashley is an unfortunate victim of Sully's beliefs. We learn in "Ashley and Thad Break Bread" that "The next night / he broke up with me when he saw I'd straightened my hair." Already tense from their dispute over dinner, and showing himself to be volatile (even violent), Sully cannot abide Ashley's artificial change to her hair. Of course Sully does not bother to explain, and as far as Ashley sees, would rather pout. To the Friend, Sully's fatalistic relationships with his city, his physicality, and life are stupidity; to Ashley they can be emotional violence.

Sully shows the anxiety of Prufrock, not in a fear of death, but in conscious aloofness, in his awareness that his own appreciation of permanence and impermanence alienates him from others. Prufrock cannot bring himself to enter that room because he fears what people will make of his dissolving self, not because the dissolution means death. Sully's desire to stay apart from most people reflects an effort to preserve things as he knew them despite the wishes of society to update and renovate. Here is where Sully and Prufrock differ. Sully is not motivated by social pressure; or if he is, it is in the opposite direction of Prufrock. Prufrock is dogged by feelings of inadequacy compared with those who will judge him; he wishes he could converse about Michelangelo. Sully, as we see, does not appear to be ashamed of his ignorance, slovenliness, or imperfect presentation. In fact, he holds tight to these traits in passive defiance of social conventions. He too has seen the Eternal Footman, but does not see a point in worrying about the thinness of his hair. In fact, Sully honors the process of breaking down so much that he fails to see why others do not.

Sully's mind aims to resolve this tension by turning his association of the city with the body into an agreeable metaphor, a personification he can protect and revere. He calls her Dorothy. To him it sounds old-fashioned, early-twentieth century. He addresses what he sees as her anxiety over her own decay in terms of a female body. He speaks to her like a long-time lover still in awe of his companion, undeterred by her physical "imperfections". The contours and features of her body become the streets

and buildings of a city still beautiful to behold—even more so in its decline because it wears no disguise.

Dor a thee keep ya face on keep ya face on  
the one the Good Loahd gaveya  
an whadeva you think ah blemishes  
stickem aht likeya Sundy Best.

...

Membah win you filled the cracks with foundation  
an it caked up an crumbled right off?  
Thats win I knew hadda set my watch again  
cuz I readja purple lines like fingaprints.

...

Attempts Dorothy has made to hide or repair her marks of age have been in vain in that they do not appeal to her greatest admirer, and they do not take. Sully remembers his relief that the makeup she used to conceal her lines, the tar used to patch the cracks in city cement, proved shoddy and ephemeral. It gave way to the truth, in which Sully finds comfort. He regains his orientation and sense of belonging when the cracks in the cement, here compared to stretch marks, are visible. To his understanding of the city, they are as identifying as fingerprints. He makes the same comparison between the city's etched features and the body of Dorothy in "Dorothy Gloveless". Sully explains that he could not know Dorothy truly if he took her hand adorned, gloved. Uniformity is the death of discernable character. So he resolves:

So Ull nestle in ya deep trails—  
those trenches in ya palm  
the meat a ya thumb  
that bed a dirt beneath ya nails.

Spanish Vicky is the only other character to take up this metaphor of Sully's. She seems the least bothered by his quirks, perhaps because his moods and disaffection tend to favor her. Also, her cultural syncretism seems to equip her with sensitivity to a variety of perspectives and expressions. She appropriates his images of Dorothy, as we saw in "Son de la Ma Dorothea". Again:

—Dónd' e'tá la Ma Dorothea?  
—Breakinup sidewalk cement.  
—Con su hammer an rotatin drum?

—Mezclando nuevo cement.

—Where she at don undo where she's from.

—Layin down nuevo cement.

—An ESully can't see where she went.

Here Dorothy has become a motherly figure. Vicky has adapted her to her own system of archetypes, but kept the essence of Sully's anxiety as the defining action of Dorothy: aggressive reconstruction, the making new of the old. But here instead of cherishing the decrepit and begging it not to change, Vicky puts herself outside of the transformation. Dorothy is visually not in the picture. She is out of Vicky's sight, changing, but not to Vicky's dismay. Vicky accepts the change as simply cosmetic, and not fundamental: "—Where she at don undo where she's from." Vicky validates Sully's images and feelings, but does not experience the dislocation of the changing city. Any discomfort with the transformation is his problem alone. The only one who is blinded and disoriented is Sully, who "can't see where she went."

We get what might be a glimpse into Dorothy's future in "Quabbin Reservoir", in which Sully continues his analogy of place as the human body. He compares the four towns that were flooded in 1938 to create the reservoir to four dignified old women.

...

Like old ladies that  
usta be pretty.

Daner, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott  
moved on with a liddle class.

Not gone.

Clams sittin unda           foah hundred billion  
Gallons a freshwadda.

...

The body of this place—now just trees, fields, and a placid lake—has returned to the essence. The vain human attempts to tame it are now part of its frivolous past. But as Dorothy is not diminished, for Sully, in her natural state, neither are these towns gone for good. The land still exists and is of use, and even some buildings remain on the lakebed with the fish and freshwater clams. An irony here, somewhat undercutting Sully's philosophy, is that the lake and the abandonment of the towns, nature's reclamation of human settlement, are the works of man.

These acts of fretting and coping, however, are internal. Sully's relationship with his place and his questions of belonging and identity are not the results of any power-struggle or imposition of force. His feeling of displacement is a result of his sense of strict construction: when the place that fostered him looks like a new place, it *must be* a new place, and he is thus deracinated. In actuality, nothing practical has changed: his home is where it was, as are his parents and acquaintances. Likewise, the personification he constructs and protects is a mental practice. The irony here is all that Sully treasures as "real" is a fiction. The memories of Worcester as it was, and the encapsulation of it as Dorothy are acts of imagination. The only empirical reality of his place is the change right in front of him.



## Chapter 4: Mythology

This chapter represents the formal confluence and culmination of the first three. Mythology, like language, narrative voices, and the role of place, is not an end, but in aid of the ultimate goal of creating a man and a city. But language, narrative, and place first unite in a vortex of story-making that, in transcending each component, becomes mythmaking. Without realizing it, I have been following a Lévi-Straussian model of mythology. My Formalist focus on the constituent parts of the sequence led me to a Structuralist aggregation. “Myth is language,” Lévi-Strauss tells us, “functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling.”<sup>46</sup> Lévi-Strauss’s “mythemes”, the “bundles of relations”<sup>47</sup> that combine to form myths, are to mythmaking what my word-clustering, spelling, and register are to my discussion of language, for example. These are the subatomic particles that form the atoms—language, narrative, place—that form the molecules of myths that combine to form a compound of mythology. Until now we have been looking closely at these components; this chapter will consider the synergy of their totality.

Henry A. Murray, writing in the light of Lévi-Strauss, describes the anatomy of mythology: A more or less coherent assemblage of myths and serial myths constitutes a *mythology*. *Archetypal* characters, figures, symbols, situations, themas, outcomes are those with a long temporal span and a large special scope in the imaginations of men. One might say that such archetypes are *mythic genes*...susceptible under certain conditions to mutual attraction, composition, decomposition, and recomposition. A myth or a mythology in process of formation is marked by representations of unintegrated mythic genes...in conjunction with novel elements or features.<sup>48</sup> *Sully* attempts to do this with two strains of myths. One is the borrowed legendaria and cosmologies of established traditions, the “mythic genes”. These include Christian, Grail, and Homeric legend. The

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<sup>46</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Claire Jacobson. New York: Basic Books, 1963. 210.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 211.

<sup>48</sup> Murray, Henry, A. “Myth and Mythmaking”. *Daedalus*, Vol. 88 Spring 1959: 211-222. Boston: The MIT Press. 215.

second is the collection of images and stories of Sully's world that assume a hint of enchantment and become a kind of local mythology. My intention was to enmesh these strains so that the local gained a heightened ethereality from the established mythology, and the established was brought a notch closer to earth by the local. This would establish, I thought, a syncretic mythopoeia of Worcester and its inhabitants, and satisfy Murray's description of mythology in mid-creation. After an exploration of this vision, we will look at contemporary poets dealing in mythmaking who have influenced *Sully*, and examine where the collection might fall among them.

I am avoiding an analysis based on Frazer, Campbell, or Jung. Though in the borrowed and local myths there may be fecund symbols, archetypes, and themes, I want to consider these as pieces of the myth and not its hidden treasures. A Jungian analysis would unpack these for their universal applicability. But as a writer reconstructing his own process, I am more interested in how things combined right under my nose. Therefore, this quasi-Structuralist approach seeks to pack the symbols and archetypes (such as they are) *together* in an investigation of the mythmaking that their combination attempts.

### *Established Mythologies*

I have tried to scatter throughout the poems references to, and structures from, well-known mythological traditions that either seemed fit to frame Sully's particular situation, or that a speaker may have consciously imported because of an association. My design here was not to weave a network of erudition, but to waft the scent of familiar stories over the events of *Sully* to connote, and not denote, an overarching sense. There is no Joycean correspondence, but a grab-bag of (I hope) judicious references that range from subtle to obvious.

The most pervasive brand of myth in the poems is Christian. This comes from the Unnamed Friend, who has shared Sully's Irish-Catholic upbringing. Four poems feature the mythology of this tradition as a concept, and a handful of others contain passing references to it.<sup>49</sup> The first is "Bay

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<sup>49</sup> It is not my intention to be provocative or dismissive in calling Christianity a mythology. But insofar as it is a building-block of my text, I have to consider its place as one collection of natural and supernatural tales among several.

Attitudes”, a not-so-sly play on “beatitudes”. Here the Friend establishes a new litany of the blessed and the holy. This adaptation is straightforward. The adapted aspects we will touch on later; for now the point is to recognize the implications of these extrinsic mythological frameworks on the intrinsic ones. What we have here is the echo of the moral education of Sully and his friend, and probably that of Sully’s parents, brothers, and generations of ancestors. The Saints, the blessed, and the connection between them and the believers are the mythemes that constitute this myth. Catholic mythology, in these poems, imposes a sense of order, ceremony, obligation, and solemnity inspired by divine oversight and received originally through childhood fear and trust. Where the trappings of the church show up in *Sully* something has reminded the speaker of one of these senses. This mythology enters perforce through the voice of the Unnamed Friend, with combined reverence and sarcasm. His and Sully’s commitment to the belief in it may have flagged since childhood and turned in part to mockery, but the spookiness of its earliest lessons has never left them. Morality, whether adhered to or not, still flows from the font of the church. This ambivalence is ultimately what a Christian mythos imposes on the thematic ground of some of these poems.

In “Finger Bones” The Friend invokes the holiness and secrecy of relics:

I know what Suls thinkin abaht winnys crossin Chandlah Street.

I know worrys bin winny comes ova smellin like leaves.

I kin tellya how much he has left in the bottle by the time hes singin *Flower of Sweet Strabane*.

I know what name hes lookin for onnis phone right now.

I know why Sul gahds is den like a fox with a limp. Old lace cahds nshoeboxes.

I kin showya the holiest spot on Pahk Ave between Clahk nthe KFC.

I kin showya the relics innat shoebox.

But Sul dudn know I know abaht that.

The isolated lines are discrete, mantling over their contents and hiding them from one another as sacred items are socked away in places of pilgrimage and church reliquaries. But there is a hint of disbelief and derision in his use of “holy” and in his description in general. The speaker recognizes the significance of these items and memories to Sully, but also chides him for cherishing them.

The same happens in the Christmastime poem “Eggs, Cinnamon, Nutmeg, and Usually Whiskey”, and in the biblically stylized account “Sully’s Inversion of Paul”. In the former, the trappings of the holiday, the essence of Christian myth, concern the Unnamed Friend as he juggles the chaos of a Christmas dinner in the Sullivan home.

...

Take off that tie npickup Saint Brigid  
befoah she gets pisst. Putta back  
with ceramic Jesus, Mary the Zebra,  
that animal cracker nGI Joseph.

...

He worries about preserving the nativity scene Mrs. Sullivan has cobbled together from items around the house while still highlighting the silliness of such a bricolage. He worries also about keeping the tree upright. All the serious displays of observance are toppling, to the amusement of Sully and the Friend; nevertheless, they maintain some respect for the importance of these things to Mary, and by extension, to themselves.

“Sully’s Inversion of Paul” is the most satirical of the poems framed by a Christian myth. This retelling of the conversion of an Apostle appears to sneer at the skittishness of their Paul, while still honoring the biblical form of storytelling. It takes advantage of the staccato sequence of the narrative to deliver surprising lines, as well as deploying biblical language to impart profundity to a rather trifling incident. Likewise in “Quabbin Reservoir”, the account of the rather functional act of flooding four towns to create a much-needed water supply takes on suggestions of not just a Christian, but a widespread flood myth.

Grail legend attends the few moments of harmony between Sully and Casey, those times their similarities put them in sync instead of at odds. “The Sullivan Wound” borrows the structure of the myth

of the Fisher King and the Amfortas Wound.

Sul gut laid up  
with a purple footprint on his thigh  
said his leg was dead numb  
except a pulse in his artery.

Wouldn't say who did it  
his father wasn't much better  
grumbling in bed upstairs  
with an icepack and an inguinal hernia.

The whole castle holding their groins  
Sully beechily limping down to Indian Lake  
Wistahs coming up cafes for nifty stations  
until their icepacks melted in the sink.

Sully said he couldn't get away from him  
but his dad just flipped a page  
a Newsweek he said alls yakin do  
is tip your own ashes and clip your own hedge.

Both men are afflicted in their lower extremities and housebound, as are the Fisher King and—in some versions—his father. In the myth, they are keepers of the Grail. What this imports into the poem is the suggestion of a temporary state of compatibility between Sully and Casey, a Holy Grail, so to speak. Their mutual immobility and inactivity have them for once on the same page. Without this story hanging over the tableau, the peace they are enjoying would not be significant. An early iteration of this peace is overtly connected to the Grail in “Sangréal”.

On Saturday they went to duel in  
Sully's father took him to Higgins  
and showed him the swoahds and the ahma,  
the banners hanging from the ceilings.

Sully gut hung up on the hoahses rampant

npicshid is father unda the hoofs  
wull Mista Sullivan rattled the saybahs  
innis head an magined is hands arahn the hafts.

Sul said the only thing he couldn find  
wiz the Grail. So is fatha callsim ova  
ta the winda npoints ta the Odd Fellas Home.  
Saidy could break in with some rope anna hamma.

“That’s wheah they keepit.” NSul staih at the red bricks  
ntellsis dad “I kin seeit frim heah.  
Bet we could sneak in.” An Mista Sully smirks  
nsez “I alwees though you belonged theah.”

Right off, the most noteworthy feature of the scene in the mind of the Unnamed Friend is that Sully and Casey are not fighting. And the language of what the Friend regards as Grail or Arthurian legend come in handy to describe the constant battle between the two: “dueling”; “rampant”; “[sabers]”; “hafts”. This motif is what influenced me to set this poem in the Higgins Armory Museum, a world-class collection in Worcester of weapons and armor from around the world, and housed in an old steel factory redone to resemble a medieval castle inside and out.<sup>50</sup> This mythos allows Sully’s childhood imagination to engage, and bring his father on the journey. They can find equanimity in each other’s presence, it seems, only by the aura of the artifact introduced by this strain of mythology.

The influence of Homeric mythology appears directly only in the penultimate poem, the “Suliad”. Other poems reflect an oblique influence. But the tropes of the protagonist as his own undoing, and the myths of monsters and voyages to uncharted lands figure in this pastiche. They influence the form and language, as we will see, but also allow a culmination of the stories of Sully as well as of the mythologies that have surrounded their telling.

### *Local “Mythology”*

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<sup>50</sup> Actually, this setting is doubly appropriate, as it is another of the real-life landmarks that are on the way out. The museum is schedule to close permanently at the end of 2013.

The other species of myth in *Sully*, which comes from within the world of the poems, is the original assortment of collective symbols, stories, and experiences that Sully and his people share. They resonate in this internal world as universally understood presences that seem to have no beginning or ending. They can be concrete, prosaic things, like people and items; but what imbues them with mythology is their ubiquity and the mystery of their beginning and ending. What is an image or metaphor to one person becomes a symbol to multiple people. These symbols in action and with a touch of magical-realism become myths. For example, the McCuvvy family, floating in and out of the action and bringing trouble, figures in the monologues of several speakers. They become a byword in the collective imagination of the poems for urban hillbillies and troublemaking. The accounts of their doings become the local myths. Most of these coinages fail to sprinkle pixie dust or fly into the ether; but they do lift realistic things just off the ground by withholding information. And once they find a place in the general consciousness of the speakers, they have become myths within the poems.

A handful of these grow within the poems and do not rely on external knowledge to flourish. We have already seen the five most prominent ones in some context: the mystery and restorative power of other places; Sully's ongoing tale of Dorothy; the sort of Maltese Falcon or Monkey's Paw they make of the peacock; the mischief that seems to attend the materializing McCuvvys; and the one myth in the sense of the word that connotes fable, the race between Major Taylor and Turtle Boy.

We touched in chapter three on the dichotomy of *here* and *there*, the place of wonder that other destinations hold in the provincial minds of many speakers. Our focus then was on the expression of perceived differences between the immediate familiar and the delayed unknown. The point to take from it here is that the accumulation of expressions of this difference—of figurations of other places, of change and the unknown—establishes a legendarium of *there*. In "Quabbin Reservoir", for example, the sacrifice the towns have made transcends the meekness and tranquility of nature, and energizes it with an eternalness.

...

Like old ladies that  
usta be pretty.

Daner, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott  
moved on with a liddle class.

Not gone.

Clams sittin unda           foah hundred billion

Gallons a freshwadda.

...

Then the bombs durin Worlwahtwo.

...

Still some dahn in the wadda

neva           went off.

The towns go on, as do the old ladies they become, aging but never dying. The list of the names of the towns emphasizes this personification, not least because the first town, Dana, bears the name (often) of a woman. Likewise, the unexploded bombs dropped for target-practice by the Navy during WWII are suspended before the moment of their detonation by the grace of the reservoir. As the inherent salvation this place becomes swathed in the language and imagery of the supernatural, Quabbin Reservoir slips into myth. This seems to happen to the wintery farm in West Brookfield—a half-hour outside the city—in which the Unnamed Friend places Sully in “Sully’s Lorax Homunculus”:

The cold ground grew a stump

in West Brookfield

last night.

An that stump grew Sul

eatin Wondah Bread

this moahnin.

Now whats Sul gunna grow

win the suns weak bright

this aftanoon?

...

He compresses time and disorients us by rushing through the growth of a tree stump (an impossible thing) in a night and a morning. The tone is meant to be surreal, with the miraculous growth, then Sully growing like Dr. Seuss’s Lorax out of that stump. He extols such a place as one of the true places Sully can be at ease and grow, as opposed to the bustle of Worcester. While the city is busy and encrusted with cement, trash, and real things that don’t invite imagination, the less familiar countryside can foster Sully. Now, we know this misses the point of Sully’s own beliefs: the dichotomy for him is not city



versus country, but acceptance versus denial of disintegration. Nevertheless, the Friend's romanticizing of the rural scene contributes to the enchanted quality of the half-described *other* places discussed in chapter three.

Dorothy we have examined at length. Her status as metaphor makes her a figure of story. The changing of the metaphor based on the condition of the city makes her a kinetic image. And her recognition between Sully and Vicky makes her symbolism shared. For these reasons I count her among the myths of the whole mythopoeia.

The pewter peacock that seems to dominate the Sullivan living room began as a tool by which to hear different voices discussing the same subject. I soon realized I had also made it a way of exploring the relationships of the family members to one another. But in the process, this odd decoration took on a life of its own. It is never clear where it comes from, its actual worth, its fate. It becomes something different to every observer. It is an annoyance to Casey, at turns a monstrosity and a comfort to Sully, and a connection to her own identity to Mary. The implication is strong that it is an heirloom of some significance from her side of the family. This would make it echo even further back in time. It would also make her desire to maintain it in a home unamenable to it understandable as an effort to preserve her past. Whatever its provenance, it stands watch in the house at once like a sentry and an idol, this source of accord and discord. Its composition and colors are too exotic to have a prosaic explanation. This is the type of "artifact" or actual item I tried to reinvent as a mytheme.

The final original mythic presence worth noting is the clan McCuvvy. I chose a recognizable name likely to be found in the region, the Scots-Irish McCovey, but chose to alienate it with a quirky spelling. This dislodged the characters from any sense of factual ancestry. Such disconnectedness and ambiguity of origin, as we have seen, are central to establishing the fiction and mystique that could allow for mythology. The McCuvvys don't seem to come from anywhere in Worcester, as their country manner and clownish approach seem to indicate in "Here Come the McCuvvys". The Unnamed Friend mentions in the same poem that they spend much of their weekend on an uncle's far in Oakham, a rural town outside of Worcester. They are from no certain abode, and they always run in a unit, like a pack or hive. My idea was to make a sort of menacing giant out of the whole clan, with Lovey at the head. He is the only McCuvvy who seems to have a first name, and with this distinction directs the drones in

thought and action. Their numbers seem inexhaustible when they pull up to Irish Times, but we learn in the “Suliad” that they are seven; though brothers, cousins, or a combination we do not know. Many speakers have a problem with Sully, but only the McCuvvys have taken him to task physically. Lovey, as we learn, is responsible for the boot-print on Sully’s thigh. They do harm, but they also come across as impossibly goofy, caricatures of a bully:

Aw, heah come the McCuvvys  
with theih tins a Grizzly  
an monstatruck t-shirts  
cahpenta jeans an timbalins,  
dangling ahtta two rusty Chevys  
like a pail fulla chicken pahts.  
City goats spent theih Sataday  
on their uncles fahm in Oakham  
stringin bales an smellin like sheep  
wull theah waitin onnat new job  
or that disability pay.  
Now dahn Main Street they creep  
ncrawl half inna bag  
cuz tonight these bahnyahd kings  
aint nobiddys slob.  
First they wiz a threat  
then they wiz a cloud of dust  
now theah pullin up so close  
I kin read theih highschool rings  
an tip my fuckin impressed cigarette.

...

I intended to mix the threat of stupidity, unchecked violence, and antagonism with the bumbling of giants and ill-proportioned monsters that is often a trope of such beings. And a dimwitted monster this family is meant to be, lumbering over Sully’s social existence with no empathy, and no redeeming value.

### *Syncretism and Exchange*

As I attempted to make language converse with language, voice with voice, and place with place, not as mere binary opposites but as partners in an exchange, so I have tried to mix these new and old mythologies to their mutual benefit. This does not occur at many points in the sequence, nor is it the feature I most intended when writing; but I feel a loosely Structuralist discussion of mythmaking ought to culminate with the junctures of greatest admixture, where the most complex structures exist. These moments show the established myths interpenetrating with the new, and blurring the boundaries of influence. The point, for example, was not just to steal from Homer, but to let Homeric forms and tropes be enriched by my own meager inventions. (Of course I am not suggesting I have anything to teach Homer; but the insularity of my own work made me feel safe in experimenting.) My models for this have been the syncretic poetries of Jay Wright and Derek Walcott that have explored trans-cultural mythologies as themes or frameworks.

We have looked at the overtones the old mythologies bring to the poems. But the new ones at times push back into the old. This occurs most directly under the canopy of Homeric and Greek myth, but loosely in one or two instances under Christian and Grail stories as well.

Homer figures subtly in two poems and heavily in one. The suggestion of Polyphemus, Laestrygonians, and other of Homer's monsters hovers over the McCuvvys. But their own grounded mythology within the poems overpowers the Homeric association at least as far as "Here Come the McCuvvys", and "Corrections". This evens out in the "Sulliad", by which point they inject back into Homer some of their absurdity. The "Sulliad" is meant to be a clear pastiche of Homer, with its name, its rough hexameter, epithets, and roving action. (It is also a slight nod toward Edgar Lee Masters's "Spooniad" with which he concludes his *Spoon River Anthology*.) And once again Sully's nemeses make an appearance:

...

Halfway dahn

the hill Sully lookt right nsaw two ahtta seven  
 McCuvvys comin ahtta the bloodwork clinic with paypas  
 rolled up in theih blotchy hands. They wah both rubbin  
 bandaid spots on theih shouldas. Sully saw  
 clear enough cuz they wah both wearin Stone Cold Steve Austin

t-shirts with the sleeves cut off. “Good luck cleanin  
ya koolaid blood long enough ta hold dahn a job”  
though Casey’s babyborn. “Bowlegged fuckin huckleberries.”  
Sully grinned cuzzay didn seeim...

Here they are to the side of Sully as he travels, like clashing rocks or Scylla and Charybdis, but this time they are declawed and silly. Sully just laughs them off. Where Odysseus had to devise plans and subterfuges, Sully now can just drive on. The myth of the bungling McCuvvys casts this harmlessness back over Homer’s monsters, at least for the duration of *this* text.

Something similar happens with Sully’s mythology of *here-and-there* in the “Sulliad”. It is now working under the Homeric theme of wandering and homecoming. In one direction, the Odyssey imbues Sully’s trip with danger and a feeling of being indefinitely adrift. In the other, Sully’s voyage turns the Odyssey inside-out and sends a guileless protagonist hurtling *away* from home.

The Sully poems that simply insinuate one vein of mythology into another, rather than pounding them together, find them mingling less overtly. By this I mean the situations that combine mythologies without creating conflict between them produce a subtler syncretism. The peacock, warden and *agent provocateur* to the Sully home, echoes something of the sphinx of Oedipus, as well as the hundred-eyed giant Argus. These are pre-Homeric myths, but meant here with the same aesthetic and thematic intent. These connections are more difficult to defend than those in the “Sulliad”. Still, if we may presume them, an exchange is implied. This pewter decoration becomes an eternal mystery and keeper of secrets; and the monsters of Greek myth in retrospect absorb some of its inertness. As the peacock embodies the legacy of their roll in mythology, it ossifies their modern manifestations into an inanimate statue given power only by people’s feelings about it.

My only “pure” myth, “Major Taylor and Turtle Boy”, represents the opposite compositional process from the “Sulliad”. It is an original mythology overlaying a more prosaic event from Homer. I based the action on the race run in honor of Patroclus and won by Odysseus in Book 23 of the Iliad. In my poem, however, Athena’s interloping, which trips Ajax and wins Odysseus the cup, becomes the fruitless cheating of Turtle Boy who tries to cut a corner. The Major Taylor/Turtle Boy story enjoys a degree of elevation, while the fickleness of Homer’s ideas of fate and divine favor get challenged by an honest winner. An irony is that this scene in Homer provides some small comic relief from the somberness of Patroclus’s funeral:

...

Ajax slipped at a dead run—Athena tripped him up—  
right where the dung lay slick from the bellowing cattle

...

Dung stuffed his mouth, his nostrils dripped much  
as shining long-enduring Odysseus flashed past him

...

They all roared with laughter at his expense.

...<sup>51</sup>

And while my poem has its playfulness, it actually reflects the gravity of fair-play and its lack of slapstick back on Odysseus's race.

Homeric myth dominates these exchanges, but overlaps at times with Christian and Grail myth. The same local mythology of *other places* we see playing out under Homer in the "Sulliad" underlies the story of Saul on the road to Damascus in "Sully's Conversion of Paul". As mentioned, the presence of biblical imagery or thought to these speakers conjures memories of religious observance and solemnity, maybe still observed, maybe not. The modern Paul becomes the old Saul in his flight and sudden conversion. But also by connecting them the speaker forces us to rethink the seriousness and legitimacy of a story like Saul's. He is not trying to upset the apple-cart of religion; but clearly he is struck by the silliness of his Paul, and made at least to entertain the idea that to someone in the first century, Saul-cum-Paul might have appeared as silly. The Sully-world myths of Dorothy and the McCuvvys play tangentially into "The Sullivan Wound" under a framework of Arthurian mythology in much the same way.

My models for this have been works that display a dazzling interplay of cultures, mythologies, languages, and forms. The two I kept returning to were Jay Wright's *The Double Invention of Komo*, and Walcott's *Omeros*.

I do not claim to have a thorough understanding of Wright's conceptual and densely literary book; but I at least see the parts it is made of, and what he is beginning to do with them. The structure of the sequence is based on the intricate initiation ceremony of the Dogon peoples of Mali. This is

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<sup>51</sup> Fagles, Robert, trans. *The Iliad*. New York: Penguin, 1990. 583. 23:859-871.

carried out by a speaker who exists on several planes and brings with him a knowledge of several worlds. The voice connects an African-American identity to its West African ancestry, but makes more than just this binary association. Though the Dogon cosmology governs the action and ethos of the poems, the American side retains awareness of parallel Christian beliefs and the European and American histories behind its existence. Quotations from Saint Augustine appear during the ceremony as though they were part of it. Words like “baptize” to describe cleaning and ablution unite the rituals, sacraments, and ultimately the mythologies of these cultures that meet in the history of a people. Wright blends the European, American, and Dogon images and perspectives to such a point that they become a new mythology of origin and rebirth. He begins with the invocation of an initiate, part in English, part in a Dogon language:

This is the language of desire

*bana yiri kqrq*  
*bana ba yiri kqrq*  
*dyigini yiri kqrq*  
*yeleni yiri kqrq*

Through this you will be fulfilled.

I place myself under the sign of the divine spirit  
under the sign of the great divine spirit  
under the tree of sacred signs  
under the tree of ascension of souls<sup>52</sup>

He concludes with the culmination of the initiation and the process of twinning. The initiate is at once who he was, and someone new, subtracted from but finally whole. This figures in the poems as Dogon mythology of cosmic twins who created the world, and in the dual identity of an African-American speaker:

I forget my name;  
I forget my mother's and father's names.

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<sup>52</sup> Wright, Jay. *The Double Invention of Komo*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1980. 3.

I am about to be born.  
I forget where I come from  
and where I am going.  
I cannot distinguish  
right from left, front from rear.  
Show me the way of my race  
and of my fathers.

I uncover the grilled intestines of the sacred fowl.  
I eat; I think; I contemplate what has been revealed.  
You take me to kneel; forehead to earth, before Komo.  
You present me to sacred things.  
I am reborn into a new life.  
My eyes are open to Komo.<sup>53</sup>

In between, the speaker has taken us from Mali to Texas to Rome to America, and through time. This process and style are astounding but barely accessible to me, and would be even less so to Sully. What I was able to draw from this sequence was the compression of mythologies into one another by the adoption of language that can straddle them, and by the voice of a speaker who may partake in each through this language.

Walcott's *Omeros* is no less a composite of mythologies, but more accessible to most readers. As with a handful of my poems, it is built on a Homeric framework. But within this, Walcott freely mingles stories from the Caribbean and Africa, and even aspects of European colonial "mythology", creating a transatlantic mythology even within his adaptation of Homer. There are not direct correspondences to the *Iliad*, not even to his characters named Achille, Helen, Hector, or Philoctete. They drift in and out of so many roles in relation to one another that it becomes impossible to pin one Walcott character to one Homeric one. In Walcott, says John Thieme, "[I]dentity will always be process and never product."<sup>54</sup> The correspondences do not stand still, nor do his mythologies. In this,

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<sup>53</sup> Wright. 108.

<sup>54</sup> Thieme, John. *Derek Walcott*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999. 157. This is also true of Wright's *Komo*, since initiation by definition is a *becoming* and not a *being*. What preceded and what follows are not shown, and are less important to his poems than the transition.

he resist what Thieme calls the “Manichean binarism”<sup>55</sup> of some Caribbean writers:

At noon a ground dove hidden somewhere in the trees  
whooped like a conch or a boy blowing a bottle  
stuck on one note with maddening, tireless cries;

it was lower than the nightingale’s full throttle  
of grief, but to Helen, stripping dried sheets along  
the wire in Hector’s yard, the monodic moan

came from the hole in her heart. It was not the song  
that twittered from the veined mesh of Agamemnon,  
but the low-fingered O of an Aruac flute.<sup>56</sup>

Here the figures of Homer are so assimilated into a new context with its own new conflicts that they are reborn as these people. The sounds of Greek myth become the sounds of the Caribbean. The myth of Philomel and the dirge of the nightingale still resonate in this new land. We experience the same kinds of transferences in time, place, and tradition that we do in Wright. But for me Walcott is the more useful of these exemplars of syncretic mythology, in part because his language is more concrete, his plot and images closer to the ground. He delves into dream and ghostly movement, but so, at times does Sully. Both of these works spurred me to be defter and less compartmentalized in my use of myths.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Walcott, Derek. *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1990. 152. Book Three, Chapter XXIX, i:1-9.



## Conclusion

I began this project concerned with the sound of language, and discovered it was not a single unorthodox one that fascinated me, but the interplay of several, the creation of new things by the mingling of the old. A syncretism emerged from the combination of languages where I had expected to find warring binaries. What became clearer as the unifying element of all the formal and thematic facets of *Sully* was a mixing I think it appropriate to call *creolization*. This term carries political connotations that have only a tangential connection to Sully's world; but I am considering it at face value in the terms laid out by Edouard Glissant: Creolization, he says, is "hybridity without limits, hybridity whose elements are multiplied, and whose end-results are impossible to foresee."<sup>57</sup> It is "unpredictable, it cannot solidify, become static, be fixed in essences or absolutes of identity."

*Sully* is not a "hybrid" because of all the pieces in motion. Hybridity by itself presupposes a duality. This duality, Fanon suggests, is a Manichean illusion, an enforced belief in opposite and unequal binaries; it is, he says, and a tool for division, establishing an *in* group and an *out* group. To think there are only two ways to be, to speak, to think, and that those ways happen to be opposites strikes me as limiting in any context. Hybridity at least challenges the boundaries of this duality, but operates under it. This is why I soon came to see the uselessness of one speaker, one topic, and one accent. As I broke down the four crucial components of *Sully* that became these chapters, I saw that all the while I had been building from the germ of one accent—one letter even (the glorious *r*)—toward a mixture of many parts.

When I decided not to set myself against the world, creative possibilities presented themselves. I had to abandon the idea that I was proving something to someone. The Eastern New England accent is not beaten out of children in schools or scoffed at in job interviews. There was a Standard English it was violating, but no guardians in my or Sully's world who would have objected to it. The accent was, however, interesting and entertaining in the light of other American accents, and it was this more inviting

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<sup>57</sup> Glissant, Edouard. *Poétique de la Relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990. 46. Glissant's surname, meaning "slippery" in French, I always found delightfully appropriate to the exploration of the elasticity of categorization and identity.

path I ended up following. The language quickly grew convolutions. I explored, as we saw, a continuum of accents, a standard, another language entirely. This creolization became my template for the three other areas of voice, place, and mythology. Voices multiplied and changed the story and its telling; places different from Worcester swam into our ken and connected in networks that became maps; myths and mythological features old and new stole bits from each other's stories. I began by imitating language, and ended up exploring the inventive nature of syncretism. When I chose not to occupy Sully, but to behold him from many angles, he and his friends took on more dimensions. My initial vision had a beginning and ending. The final one began a process that can never really end.

I made the mistake early in this essay of asking where *Sully* fit among its betters and forebears in its contextual field. My experience in writing the poems should have shown me that to identify and qualify something by placing it against other in a vacuum is a woefully incomplete assessment. Different influences informed the language, the voices, the treatment of place, and the mythmaking. And I did attempt to address the influences in each of these categories. But it would be reductive to single out poetries that treat all of these in a similar way. The best I can do is to allow the overarching theme of creolized form and the tone of resigned happiness to guide my evaluation. Doing this has led me to three poets we have already examined: Tony Harrison; Jay Wright; and Derek Walcott.

In Harrison I see a kindred Western urban voice modulating between a Standard English and a characteristic regional blue-collar accent. The places and histories of the world all seem known to his speakers, though a connection to the language seems to point them all back to home. Wright's synthesis of African-American identity and Dogon rites and cosmology is a highly figurative and literate form of this syncretism—maybe too literate for *Sully* and me. But his themes of separation and twinning in *The Double Invention of Komo* he achieves through linguistic interplay that *Sully* can only grasp at. The same is true of his mingled mythologies, which are so intricately woven as to seem one, and not layer on layer. And of course as I've come to know it better, the sting of Walcott's poetry I feel more sharply than ever. Everything I have attempted in *Sully* has to some degree been influenced by his achingly beautiful verses. The way children of combined ethnicity often reflect the finest features of each parent in a mixture than hints at the future of the human race, so Walcott's language, themes, and form reflect the best of the literary traditions that made the Caribbean, at the heart of the Colombian

Exchange, the first nexus of the modern world.<sup>58</sup>

But what I see in *Sully* that I do not see in any of its influences is an American voice that is changing despite itself. Sully's Uncle Mike and O'Mal's father, small parts though they have, quietly embody this perspective coming from the past, and *trying* to look to the future. Around them is a cornucopia of American voices and identities: young and old; blue-collar and white-collar; English- and Spanish-speaking. These two small characters reflect those voices of the old guard, the white males who come from an era when that was the only thing to be, but who accept the changes they see near the ends of their lives. Uncle Mike is comic relief, but his racist language belying his egalitarian advice is a serious comment on American cognitive dissonance.

Cripes,  
it don take a chi knees jew  
ta figure aht it ain too  
smaht dealin in stereotypes.

Frankly speakin  
folks get upset  
an ya catch yaself in moah nets  
than a queeah PoahdaRican...

says Mike. Just like the Italian-American speaker in "Sully's Railroad Chorus" who can only understand "Angel" as "Angelo", Uncle Mike, when trying to be sensitive bout race, can discuss it only through the language he knows: "chi knees"; "jew"; "gay PoahdaRican". O'Mal's father, whose speech Sully reports, is even more emphatic in trying to identify with the oppressed. But despite himself his language is even more objectionable: "nigghs"; "chinks". In these voices are the language and attitude of humor, earnestness, awareness and oblivion. And if this sequence has a distinctly American character and a bit of original invention, it may actually be strongest in this self-perpetuating mixture. Sully is my *guy*, so to speak, and these voices are my Worcester.

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<sup>58</sup> Crosby, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972.

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