

THE RADIUS OF HOME

BY

Dennis Etzel, Jr.

Submitted to the graduate degree program in English
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master's of Fine Arts.

Dr. Joseph Harrington—Chairperson

Committee members*

_____*
Dr. Ken Irby

_____*
Dr. Hadara Bar-Nadav

Date defended: April 16, 2010

The Thesis Committee for Dennis Etzel, Jr. certifies
that this is the approved Version of the following thesis:

THE RADIUS OF HOME

Committee:

Dr. Joseph Harrington * Chairperson

Dr. Ken Irby

Dr. Hadara Bar-Nadav

Date approved: _____

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Title page | i |
| Acceptance page | ii |
| Table of Contents | iii |
| Acknowledgements | v |
| Dedication page | vi |
| | |
| My sister and I climb the trunk to begin | 1 |
| In 1970, I was born in the middle of America | 2 |
| <i>To help describe my actions</i> | 3 |
| Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the déjà vu | 4 |
| There was no pool | 5 |
| It would take years for psychologists to define and describe | 6 |
| My father fought fires | 7 |
| you with that I | 8 |
| Children played war | 9 |
| My <i>Transformers</i> Optimus Prime can beat | 10 |
| RE: ATTN | 11 |
| in grade from page | 13 |
| With a cape, I was unseen to everyone | 14 |
| In 1982 on the day | 15 |
| I theory the bed | 16 |
| After a radioactive ninja bit me | 17 |
| The panels of my comic book contained the clutter | 18 |
| Each illustration had the potential for intensity | 19 |
| I was neither super nor hero | 20 |
| Curled over for the walk back home | 21 |
| I drew a circle | 22 |
| [panel one] | 23 |
| The April 1984 Ice Storm | 24 |
| when out comes to | 25 |
| RE: TWO MOTHERS | 26 |
| Imagine: lesbian sitcom meets soap opera | 29 |
| RE: TWO MOTHERS (continued) | 30 |
| fast job as to | 32 |
| The first thing I did was to slip it on | 33 |
| Potatoes, cows, chickens, fish | 34 |

Table of Contents, continued

| | |
|--|----|
| As toasted buns report like young soldiers | 35 |
| I scrape the carbon off the flat grill | 36 |
| Drive-thru always yells the need | 37 |
| As punishment after being seen | 38 |
| Slang is slung side to side | 39 |
| Waste: how we label food after holding | 40 |
| <i>Barbie or Hot Wheels?</i> I asked the mother | 41 |
| The closing hour turns to cleaning | 42 |
| RE: <i>Topeka</i> | 43 |
| WINTER: | 46 |
| NOTES ON <i>winter</i> : | 49 |
| ERRATA: | 50 |
| I was told to be careful | 53 |
| after takes we from | 54 |
| Not only can communication be by letter or speech | 55 |
| I get confused between the telephone game and the silent treatment | 56 |
| I plot and pencil a comic book story about a son and father | 57 |
| There is always a victim that needs clarification | 58 |
| AFTERWORD: | 59 |
| Notes | 60 |

Acknowledgements

With special thanks to these editors and their magazines, where the poems from the following pages appeared in some other form:

Julia Cohen and Bin Ramke, *Denver Quarterly*, pages 23, 30, and 31

Brian Daldorph, *Coal City Review*, pages 38 and 42

Matt Porubsky, *seveneightfive*, pages 3, 9, 10, and 36

Leah Sewell, *The Argo*, page 14

Thank you Joe Harrington, Hadara Bar-Nadav, Ken Irby,
Kevin Rabas, Margy Stewart, Matt Porubsky, and Brian Daldorph
for your help and support!

To my radius:

Carrie & Asmund

& my mothers, Susan & Sondra

My sister and I climb the trunk to begin
with a tree for this world. I spread out leaves
of paper. She says it is a maze,
a labyrinth for us
to follow, as each memory
begins with a word, a bird migrating
to join the flock's flight
we trace back.

At night, we watch the neighborhood plummet.
The poem underneath turns over
as a boundary, a blank.
I push my pen to plant lines
but lose my footing. Mnemosyne,
my sister, please help.

In 1970, I am born in the middle of America in the middle of an American war. This is the time before I have a face for language, when the television does the talking. It takes time to understand the face of *The Vietnam War* outside the television. Inside our house.

To help describe my actions, please let me explain, the President says. And so, with the vague idea of conjunction and adverb, I start with nothing. There is a so-and-so on television, and the word *and* repeated over and over. Gertrude Stein says there is no repetition in writing, only insistence. Watch the whole thing previously recorded, not as a repeat, but for insistence, like when the man insists there are hidden WMDs. In America, you can start with nothing.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the déjà vu between forgetting and trying to forget. Mark and Rob refuse to talk about Iraq. My father refuses to talk about Vietnam. The lawn needs mowing again. Going back and forth across the field. You can't tell who the enemy is until they fire upon you. It's all coming back now. To stay.

There is no pool, no diving board
for jumping away. Only feet-scuffles across

grass, the sun stuck. I can not step out
of bounds, the boundary

of certain busy streets. A boy named Jack
who lived a couple of blocks away

is murdered. The news says it.
The neighborhood parents say

avoid cars, stay closer to home,
my worst fear. Closer to ending

up like Jack.
My father continues

to burn through
streets. Block by block,

the radius of home
burns.

It takes years for psychologists to define and describe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, so they give it initials—a way to hide the wounds. I feel the after-effect of PTSD, call it post-PTSD. Blame the wars. Blame the need to speak.

My father fights fires with a force that knocks doors down. He is gone for days at a time. I panic at the sound of fire truck sirens. I check the house for flames, dump matches into the toilet. From under my sheets I listen for the sound of the front door crackling.

| | | | |
|-------|-------|------|------|
| you | with | that | I |
| try | words | I | play |
| walls | work | turn | dumb |

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| you | do | but | with |
| say | not | say | your |
| words | shake | don't | words |

| | | | |
|-----|-------|------|-------|
| you | mouth | say | words |
| do | what | you | for |
| not | you | will | me |

| | | | |
|---------|------|------|------|
| said | but | you | what |
| through | you | verb | you |
| hands | grab | noun | hold |

Children play war in gardens of lilacs and daisies. There is often a picnic after a morning of plastic machine guns with rapid-fire spit. I place my hands over the ketchup spout to stop the bleeding.

My *Transformers* Optimus Prime can beat your *Halo* Master Chief. And my fantasy football Indianapolis Colts Payton Manning quarterback can beat your fantasy football Miami Dolphins Jason Taylor defensive lineman. And my *American Idol* first-season winner Kelly Clarkson can beat your *American Idol* fourth-season winner Carrie Underwood. And my Led Zeppelin "Stairway to Heaven" can beat your Beatles "Hey Jude." And my *Resident Evil* Jill Valentine can beat your *Tomb Raider* Lara Croft. And my *Risk Board Game of Global Domination* green Army in North America can beat your *Risk Board Game of Global Domination* yellow Army anywhere in the world. And my noun can beat your verb. And my scissors can beat your paper. And my rock can beat you beat you.

RE: ATTN

1. The first-grade teacher says the child should be on Ritalin.
2. The mother and father refuse.
3. Slide the red paper aside.
4. When in trouble, open.
5. Your notebook and dictionary. *Copy.*
6. Include the phonics, written, not heard.
7. Trap a frog in a jar as an experiment.
8. Imagine a robin perched on a tree limb.
9. In the rain, orange heart beating.
10. The tree limb as a guarding hand.
11. Make the sun orange.
12. Make trees.
13. Make robin hearts beat the size of raindrops.
14. The mother says:
15. *Let's look to see what is on this page to color shades of orange.*
16. *We should explore the possibilities.*
17. *Behind what we think things are, what colors they should be.*
18. The nightlight a constellation.

19. Pay attention.
20. Purples in the darkness.
21. Wait for Orion's sword to fall.
22. To cut the thread.
23. Do not talk in class.
24. No movement of the mouth.
25. No recess.
26. Where no one sees.
27. The stars in detention shine.
28. An award for coloring the correct colors of animals.
29. Color a page of grey over green.
30. Use the sunlight coming through the classroom window.
31. Reflect its light in your wristwatch glass.
32. Make the ball of light dance on the wall like a star.
33. Make shining rescues.

| | | | |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| in | grade | from | page |
| the | words | board | as |
| fifth | leave | to | strict |
| my | me | out | scream |
| mouth | in | though | get |
| sticks | time | you | out |
| say | tongue | just | your |
| speak | your | want | own |
| with | teeth | room | voice |
| no | me | white | to |
| sound | makes | sticks | plaque |
| from | teeth | stuck | us |

With a cape, I am unseen to everyone
but three superheroes in fifth grade—

girls inside their secret headquarters
behind the playground's maple.

They confide to me
how they each have x-ray vision,

could see supervillains
in fathers, brothers, men down the block.

I hug them
with my mutant arms

powerless
to share my single cloak—

In 1982 on the day of the finalization of the divorce, my mother, sister, and I go home to sleep. On my thirteenth birthday, I turn to comic books and graphic novels. Two days later, my words turn inward. Fifty years before, glassmakers make the plates that fill my mother's china cabinet. My finger presses the raised textures, the sudden drops.

| | | | |
|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| I | theory | the | bed |
| example | silence | night | covers |
| trauma | through | shakes | loose |

After a radioactive ninja bites me, I develop superpowers of agility. My head buzzes with fear. I climb walls all night.

The panels of my comic book contain the clutter that hides me as I create the comic book in this way—out of hiding. By drawing a panel for my story, a box surrounds me. I use the box to recreate my bedroom. Scribbles represent my clutter.

Each illustration holds potential for intensity, for intensities that require several word balloons. They float away like thoughts. As a scholar of origin stories, I research each superhero I know. My origin is different, a story about someone I do not know.

I am neither super nor hero. *I hope you fall in life*, the teacher says in gym when I fall from the bars after five minutes without a chin-up. In comic books, the weak boy swallows a super-strength serum. For cover, he holds up his indestructible shield. I hold up my comic book.

Curled over for the walk back home through the blizzard,
my pages touch the landscape until, hooked by the wind,
they detach from my staples. My story is visible, if
someone would reassemble us.

I draw a circle. I draw two dots with a flat line underneath.
I see a face.

[panel one] With his comic book artwork, Bill Sienkiewicz saves the world every Friday.

[panel two] My thoughts need rescue, stuck in a gutter between panels.

[panel three] Smudged inside.

[panel four] Somewhere, a penciler pencils an exploding wall.

[panel five] An inker inks over the debris, adding details.

[panel six] The colorist colors the center with red and yellow.

[panel seven] I stare at the artwork until a flash of red and yellow hit.

[last panel] The explosion knocks me. Free.

The April 1984 Ice Storm
of my mother's divorce
snaps power lines
the weight of drizzle
strands our house
except for the transistor
describing Glenn Miller
his plane disappeared
without news of rescue
his family gathered
with my mother and sister
huddled under blankets
thick clouds Stardust
cuts and scatters

| | | | |
|--------|---------|-------|--------|
| when | out | comes | to |
| mother | another | with | make |
| comes | mother | arms | family |

RE: TWO MOTHERS

1.

My mother comes out in 1984

Sondra moves in in 1985

her bookshelves hold gardens of philosophers

hold healers, mystics, prophets, poets

with a turntable and speakers

her albums hold orchestras

tragic clowns and a ring of gods

female warriors on flying horses

sweep down to claim my dead soldiers

as I am among them

2.

Two women—
out—hang

each double-cup
in the breeze

on two wide lines—
their smiles

at the neighbors
who spy no sign

of any man—no
boxers, no briefs

3.

When neighbors
across the street
yell at me
you live with "dikes"

they do not mean
how my mothers
hold back flood
after flood

Imagine: lesbian sitcom meets soap opera. In the pilot, a boy sits on a living room sofa. Two women walk in the front door. The boy asks, *Mother, isn't that the closet?* Cue laugh track. Set in a New York City neighborhood bar, a voluptuous woman publicly comes out on her show—the response by straight, adoring men: *out of character* and *the meanest sitcom in years*. The sitcom showed two women sharing a brownstone and raising two daughters in Greenwich Village before the show was cancelled. The newsman says, *Avoid moving children immediately to a new neighborhood or school, as students of lesbian or gay parents are victims of harassment and bullying in every neighborhood not on television.*

RE: TWO MOTHERS (continued)

4.
years later the new neighbor asks how my aunt is feeling

I stop

how would she know my aunt

we never see

it is my other mother who is sick

she questions, as if my mothers are sisters

who live together

raise children

share a bed

my mother not mother but mother

5.
one mother is a nurse, the other is a counselor

for therapy, down the middle

one for the mind, the other for the body

I help them sharpen, that double-edged axe

for gardens, each work

of resistance, against grindstones

| | | | |
|------------|-------|-----------|--------|
| fast | job | as | to |
| food | as | I'm | saying |
| restaurant | start | uncertain | no |

The first thing I do is slip it on—
blue polyester with white highlights
and tag. My name penciled in beside
the arches. There is a photo of me
on the front porch, on my first day
of work. My visor pulled
down, hiding my eyes. I wished
not to be seen, out of fear of what men
might shout. I wondered why
I was going, why I even signed up.
Alongside the veterans—
the employees who do their time alone
as I am—we each do the job well, knowing
we don't make a difference.

Potatoes, cows, chickens, fish—the list
of the condemned will soon include you, how
you are cut down and frozen at work
in the kitchen, a deer caught in the flash
of timers—the sign of failure—
even when you follow the manual
to the word, a devout employee.
The manager brings down fryer baskets

shaped like iron jails and ends illusions
of meals named happy, and you feel like these
things you load into wired cages—
pushed, spliced, mangled, reshaped,
lowered into the fryer
that endlessly burns.

As toasted buns report like young soldiers
onto the table, a timer
of the mind begins—break the clinging
parts apart and place each condiment on
the tops before the burgers drop. I am taught
uniform dressing procedures—one squeeze
from the mustard and ketchup guns, a pickle
with enough onions to fit the size of a quarter—

but now I wish to do more, to throw grenades
of extra pickles and cheese, give real happiness
to the boy who wants a Happy Meal.
But the order is in—keep my head
down, do what I am told, and swallow,
without question, everything.

I scrape the carbon off the flat grill,
as the new team member from the kitchen
is told by the manager
to mop the back room
before leaving. The grill scraper is sharp—
shaves off the brown ashes. The manager
jokes with me about something, as a way
to let the new boy know

he is not wanted. I push down hard
to get the residue
off the metal, wishing to see silver
again. The manager turns his back on
the young man he laughs at. I do my best—
nod, smile, continue to scrape away—

Drive-thru always yells the need
for a chef, side, garden or chicken.
On the farm where the packaged lettuce grows,
just by the barn's north side, chickens roam
free in the garden. A chef surveys
the soil's fertile texture. On afternoons
at two, a man in red polyester
sweeps everything into his arms—
lettuce, garden, chickens. Loads a truck
bound for a factory
where each thing naturally falls asleep,
passes away to a painless dicer
or chopper. From conveyer belt into
cardboard boxes, loaded onto a truck,
and sent to this restaurant, this salad-
making table of stainless steel under
flickers of fluorescent, without a drop
of red on either plastic-gloved hand.

As punishment after being seen
as lazy, you are placed on the station
for bagging French fries, knowing anyone
can pick up the handle, place containers
on the end, flip the wrist, and send
scooped fries falling down off the pile.
Think of how the sun shines outside
as heat lamps shine their substitute rays.
How the beach feels as salt gets stuck
under your nails with the frying oil.
The manager comes by to check you out, looking
hot in your uniform. You glow
from the fluorescent rays, with the power
to make many servings at request.

Slang is slung side to side
in the five-o'clock-in-the-morning manner
after the outside door to the walk-in freezer
opens. The cold rolls out as fog
onto the truck's back where we unload
and open boxes, pulling out goodies

like thieves. Greg was homeless
when hired. He now takes empty boxes
to his apartment. *They are like the ones I wept in,*
he says. He follows with a comment
about how stealing stereos is better
than working fast food. I follow
with how I feel my hours here stolen.

Waste: how we label food after holding past a certain time. Our food expires, we are told when hired, and we learn compound words like *wastecount* while we watch each sandwich thrown into wastebuckets, still warm, unwrapped.

One time, Steve snagged seven cheeseburgers meant for waste and ate them in the break room to show he would survive.

After close, everything becomes waste—even pies and salads. We sometimes include ranch dressing, knowing it will be gone from the dumpster by morning.

Barbie or Hot Wheels? I ask the mother
when she orders a Happy Meal for her son.
Many employees called the Barbies girl toys
as Hot Wheels were for boys. I argued
a boy might want a doll
and a girl might dream of racing someday.
The store manager allowed me to change
the buttons, reprogram the registers
that said BOY TOY and GIRL TOY. However,
the customer yells at me, *How dare you
imply my son would want a Barbie toy.*
I stand looking just as confused, upset,
holding the toys in each hand
as if they could be balanced.

The closing hour turns to cleaning, turns
to leaving at two in the morning, as night
employees stretch out on the grass, beside
their parked cars, as the automatic lights
shut off. Each body turns to the stars,
each wishing to find a way out.

The hands that touched burgers,
that wrapped wrappers and fixed cold drinks now smell
of grease and French fries, now dig into dirt
to bury these gross scents, fingers pushing
deeper into the earth.

RE: *Topeka*

1.

Sunflowers grow wild
along the highway,
but you can't pick any

other place to live. Nor
can you pick any flowers
from the rose garden

at Gage Park. The mini-train
leaves every half hour,
tickets cost a dollar.

The tour goes through
a tunnel. You circle
around, then back untouched.

2.

“Topeka’s grand opening never happens.”

Highway cuts through hills
to allow people a trade route
for their covered wagons, for their cars.

This reveals the thousands of years
of sedentary rock, fossils.
“Bison wandered the unpalletted limestone”

until the carved slices of flint
embedded inside them. Came for a revival,
then left for Texas. Settlers did not settle

here. This is post-revival,
the repetition of a lost city, mimicking
a ghost town without ghosts.

Here, old signs
of promise. On the left are the parking lots
moved all the way from White Lakes Mall.

Gas is cheaper than rooms here
so we drive these streets
all night.

3.

MapQuest doesn't work, though I dream
of travel, even to Kansas City. I need
mapped out like a route without dead ends.

Always clicking to the wrong streets,
I want my dramatic monologue to be dramatic.
I want my city to change, but it's me

who can't use MapQuest right.
In the sublime, you cozy close
to death. Someday, Topeka could be

sublime, but I know
every death
here.

WINTER:

1.

Topeka takes a turn
for me for the better

part of the new millennium
when disaster grows

on the national level
to reach my fill-to level

I need Topeka
with its decision of desegregation

its capitol building dome
in green oxidation

another breath
a change in the copper

and lead during
SEPTEMBER THIRTEENTH

TWO THOUSAND ONE
yes that one

day two days after the towers
when Sondra falls under

like how the swimming instructor
held my head

under and prepared me
for my future my breath held

until a count to ten
my mother told

the first of five different times
Sondra will not survive the night

2.
it is not what is not written

but omitted

in the records

where words should be

we receive

white space

an insider tells us

anesthesia travelled

the wrong way

attacked the heart

stopped the brain

white-out conditions

like a blizzard—

3.

Please read me a poem

she says, as she moves

into the machine, her body scanned
like a page. She knew the pain

in her back was more than the pain
doctors dismissed. Inside,

she wants Sappho, broken
lines, lost words.

I said I prefer just to talk
as space fills

pages. The word

winter

brilliant in white
lighting each of us.

NOTES ON *winter*:

- a: Let the snow be a metaphor for death.
- b: It happens during three winters, while snow falls.
- c: In the waiting room, we worry about Sondra's dying.
- d: Not the death people refer to when they say, *I literally died*.
- e: Not the cliché death found in poetry.
- f: Not the death Ernest Hemingway says every story ends with.
- g: *Frozen still*, someone says.
- h: As the snow covers everything, surrounds us.
- i: Sondra pushes through the snow.

ERRATA:

I'm a lesbian living inside a man's body
 I say out loud on the bar's terrace
 luckily my friends laugh, knowing

I'm drunk
 describing how I was raised by two women
I am the son of lesbians

I tell Nooney when we first meet
 after I asked her why she said
homosexual

when she described her graphic arts project
 from her lesbian viewpoint
 and thought about how my thoughts were shaped

by two completely different mothers
 as the Mai Tais I've had wrap my thoughts
a girly drink someone said to me

I count
 seven empty glasses
 two mothers

and the times I can't relate to most men
 like when one says *that is so gay*
 a second responds *your mom is gay* I turn

to see if they're talking about me
 while I'm confiding in my friends
I would castrate myself to end the patriarchy

but it is nonsense, nonsense
 that gender means sexuality
 when Jack Tripper from *Three's Company*

can be both straight and gay
like Kinsey said, we do the sexuality
slide

I order another Mai Tai
trying to ignore them
like the man who called me a fag

because I would not support our troops by signing his petition
or when the nurse outside of Sondra's hospital room
asks what relation

we are, my mother says *I am her partner*
as we walk past the nurse
who can not stop us

or the march to Topeka's city council in support
of the vote for *non-discrimination based on orientation*
the opposition is from churches

I've visited, friends I work with,
their spouses
their children

even as I hold hands with the woman I love
in public but my mothers can't
or when two women kiss

outside of Best Buy
I say *yes* aloud
thinking Topeka has changed

but they drive away with Oregon plates
I am a reliable witness to
an unreliable society

tonight I am drunk
walk back with several friends, women
to Nooney's

where she and her girlfriend
let me sleep
on their sofa, in peace

I was told to be careful of the fine print.

My attention fixes upon details—

the motion of birds, the design of doors.

I was told not to trust what I hear,

to get the words in writing.

Now I listen.

to build

each word on paper.

The more I write in small

letters, the more spaces

in between make nest

after nest, room

after room.

| | | | |
|---------|-------|----------|-------|
| after | takes | we | from |
| the | years | hesitate | past |
| message | what | stars | share |

Not only can communication be by letter or speech, but by internet, satellite, and comic book. In spite of parental guidance and reality television, children hold the power of comics, using dialogue balloons with pointed ends like arrows—to point to the speaker like a camera microphone. Sometimes circles replace arrows—to show what one is thinking, their private feelings and thoughts. When I was young my dialogue balloons floated away.

I get confused between the telephone game and the silent treatment. When something is whispered and passed down from person to person within a group, the end sentence is a different punishment than the start. An example of this happens near my father's house, how his dog on an extended leash runs into the busy street anyway and is hit by a car—silenced. I will leave the other details out of this sentence, for comfort. My sister calls to say any communication with him, even a letter, would not be good. I repeat this as a whisper into a can on a cut string.

I plot and pencil a comic book story about a son and father, but it lacks a coherent story that connects within the panels. A character uses a dialogue balloon to say they are guilty of victim talk. Psychologists can prove this because guilt is another sign of a victim mentality. I capture my victim mentality inside a dialogue balloon to watch it drift away.

There is always a victim that needs clarification in a story. Rock stars' wives are shown on television, as survived. Dogs named after rock stars' wives can be elegized and buried. I open the front door in the same manner survivors recover their comic book collections. I wave my arms to invite you in—release a thought balloon as a signal that all is clear.

AFTERWORD:

You might read *radius*
in different ways

or all at once
everything radiates

radius *is*—
us—home—

Notes

22: A riff from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*

30: A riff from Gertrude Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry": "a sister not sister but sister"

44: The quotes are from Ed Skoog's poem "The Kansas River, Also Called Kaw"

About THE RADIUS OF HOME:

In the tradition of *My Life* by Lyn Hejinian, *I, Afterlife*, by Kristin Prevallet, and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, *The Radius of Home* is a poetic adulthood-meets-childhood memoir of perception, language, and survival. From the PTSD-related trauma of a father who served in Vietnam, to a mother whose coming out is attacked by homophobic neighbors, this poetry collection, ranging from prose and matrix poems to lyrical free verse, explores how language can be an attack, shield, or epiphany. Comic books, fast food jobs, and dogs named after rock stars' wives are all a part of this collection that seeks to redefine what makes a family a home.