

[an · (A)lgebra]

DON BOGEN

An Algebra

PHOENIX

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS (hicago & London. DON BOGEN is professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of a critical study of Theodore Roethke and three previous books of poetry: *After the Splendid Display, The Known World*, and *Luster*.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637 The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London © 2009 by The University of Chicago All rights reserved. Published 2009 Printed in the United States of America 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 12345 ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06313-3 (paper) ISBN-10: 0-226-06313-5 (paper) Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Bogen, Don. An algebra / Don Bogen. p. cm. — (Phoenix poets series) ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06313-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) ISBN-10: 0-226-06313-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) I. Title. II. Series: Phoenix poets. PS3552.04337A79 2009 811'.54—dc22 2008039233

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

For my parents

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following journals in which some of the poems in this book first appeared, sometimes in different versions:

Colorado Review: "Air," "Sky," and "Who" Electronic Poetry Review: "Barcarole," "Edge," "Have To," and "Slash" FIELD: "Vaporizer" The New Republic: "Flowers" and "Run" Partisan Review: "Could Not Speak" and "Give It Back" Ploughshares: "Bagatelles" and "Proteus" Poetry: "Variations on an Elegiac Theme" The Southeast Review: "An Algebra" Sou'Wester: "A World"

Sections of this book were set to music by Allen Otte and performed by him in "As an Algebra," recorded on the CD *Implements of Actuation.* "Variations on an Elegiac Theme," under the title "1886," received the 1997 *The Writer* / Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America.

I am grateful to the Camargo Foundation, the University of Cincinnati Charles Phelps Taft Research Center, the Corporation of Yaddo, the Ohio Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts for grants that allowed me to complete this book.

Ι

RUN

Wanted solitude, feared it Wanted to run, always somewhere new Blank streets of the poor blocks, front yards with chain-link fence Hospital buildings sealed, monumental Wanted no faces in the windows, no visitors coming with roses

At places to turn back kept going Wanted the loop larger, taking more in Small abandoned factories that made boxes, candy, soap Soot-fuzzed louvers, glass underfoot Wanted the lungs to tighten—three, then two steps to a breath

Wanted solitude, kept turning off the big streets Found loose dogs growling in driveways, car parts on porches Sidewalks swallowed in weeds Gravel—wanted the slide of gravel at sudden dead ends Having to turn back uphill

Wanted to slow but would not stop Wanted to come back some different way Yellow lamp glow of other lives Old parking lots, the closed-off stories of cars Dreamed up over and over Wanted nothing known, all to be imagined Glint of winter sunlight off windows Late streets empty, echoes muffled on brick Feared solitude but wanted the loop larger Wanted everything breath could hold

Proteus

To take,

like water, whatever shape you flow through, fill, or rest in.

And to choose that shape.

* * *

As: Brian, become a gangster, six feet from my face. Voice no longer a caress but a sharpened projection, belly a ram in a buttoned vest.

The whole body shows

the thing done: goat-song in the rites of a god, transforming, starting to speak now through him

as he walks on stage.

* * *

Remember when you turned into moonlight, the bark of an oak, an orange going to shreds in your own cold palm? Everything you saw you *were*, and you saw everything.

No choice. That face light gnarled around a tree was your face.

* * *

Flesh is approximate. We clothe it in dreams, wrestling with our eyes closed down through layers: thug, wraith, chieftain, devouring angel (held by my shoulders I am trying to make you stay put) daddy mama breath balm a man a woman in separate desires overlapped.

* * *

Curious,

cautious enough to disguise himself as a woman, the voyeur peeks at the rite.

Women, leaping, mothers and daughters their rapt beauty draws him out. The god has tricked him: they will tear him apart.

* * *

As: a virus.

Never alive, but a frantic mimicry of life to pierce the cell, make over its orders, move, repeat itself, mutate in sped-up mini-evolution now it swims the blood, unravels in light, never alive, now

it floats on air.

Lost in the host a thousand years, inert chemical mechanism asleep in a rain-forest cave.

* * *

To mime—

not a statue or a gray accountant picked from the crowd, but a robot.

Steel jumpsuit and boots, greasepaint turning the eyelids aluminum.

9

This hand a crank, this grin the edge of a disk,

I am Mister Silver Mister Silver—tape loop syncopating over the drum machine.

* * *

As: a child's toy, its intricate language of joints and swivels, creature within creature: the robot a wolf on silver feet, in his boxy jaw the tiny half-robotic head of a man

who will drive the car.

* * *

Who will drive the car

to the hospital

after the cancer has metastasized?

* * *

These knots rising in my palm look, in the photo album, he grips the mower like a sad hawk. Grandfather, father, son—flesh tightens, branching genes send up more

of the claw each year.

After the operation skin comes back thick as bark.

* * *

A boy, a lion, wild boar, snake no one will touch holds the changes.

Dream he is a sea god,

and he is.

Dream he is a stone, a bull, no, a tree

rippling over the waves' quick light, he is shape always becoming, he is a flame and the stream that drowns it.

A Cage

Tunnels through black earth, through bone:

goldfish fat as biscuits probe the bulged veins, chambers of cartilage, in one a scarred pike flipped in a knot.

Dreams in this grotto of foreign dark—I can't unpack them.

Betrayal? Guilt? This was about something I'd forgotten.

* * *

Intricate, web-sticky texture of regret: the past a net of roots finding no hold, the present endless

writhing in the net.

Wrestling, blind wrestling—the nest sinks into itself, sticks, brown leaves, dry stems enumerate old themes.

* * *

Why does the lake still rim my dreams?

Beach, small breakers, sandbars layers of horizon the moon keeps remaking, a border through years of sleep.

Always a comfort, that blue-gray lip under cloud fields. It blocks off the east,

seals what's passed. The edge is something you can't see across.

* * *

Dusk on a boulevard, wet snow thickening nostalgia. That bottle-green light from a showroom, blurred, enticing, in all the objects

lined up on the walls.

Car parts? Or plates? Or door chimes? Row on row—

drive on, there's nothing anyone could want.

* * *

I am in this tunnel in a car, driving back from some talk, pneumonia still wrestling my lungs.

Memory has garnered,

embellished the swoops and stacked interchanges, neon in the gleaming tubes extending and bending cool orange light—

but not the talk, grit in my cough, whatever mall we stopped at.

* * *

Each cold another step to deafness.

Fog gathers around the fast delicate consonants of talk in a crowd, a whispered joke, the single cricket

I watched making sound.

Invisible distance year on year deepening, slow retreat—

a ghost pretends to be alive.

* * *

A frame makes a window you can't see out.

Bars, locks, steel-colored button shapes to press, and the comforting illusions: time a quaint archaic hourglass, motion a scroll at your control.

Enter:

your life infinite layers where everything is flat. Point, shrink, and close till the screen goes blank.

* * *

Old people falling, people forgetting, forgetting they fell.

This skeletal box aluminum tubes like the bed rails, black rubber caps on its rocking legs a walker that helps you walk toward the door, your helpless son and daughter,

toward

a memory of them.

* * *

Found himself kindly, a companionable ghost at the party's edge nursing rage? despair?—

absurdly in a plastic cup.

Time went on blanching him: a voice, thinning, that might sparkle amid the chorus a moment, another voice fixed in the empty cage of ink.

Get this down now so it will last, drink this and disappear.

WANTS

There's nothing anyone could want A yard sale where the private past is suddenly on display Brought up from storage, dazed and blinking Drugstore lamps, dessert glasses, AM clock radio The two-speed bicycle you stripped down over the years Worth more if it still had its tank, fins, and handlebar streamers What moves and what doesn't—you can't sell it all On card tables old desires transpose into *objets d'art* and junk The basement empties like the hold of a freighter So you can get away Air as lost time Voice of a cloud, of a ghost crowned with nimbus Smack-thin, it lingers forty years I thought it came from the jeweled world we'd seen Everything stuffed, urgent, glittering alive But it was just pleasure, blank and sure Now what is there to sing From speakers, the tune folds and fades in waves Earphones drive it through your head

AIR

WHO

Broken—who goes there A Christmas innocence watery with nostalgia Burnt herb smell blurring the years War has its long fingers, love its old haunts That ice-cream shop, her paisley skirt The purple commas swirling as if animated by sight Full-body armor of a tingling cloud Encased, I pictured tracer rounds as a light show Sweet smoke, what are you singing The boy almost a man who'd be a child

EDGE

The edge is something you can't see across Burnt-out refineries on the rim of a winter city Trainyards, coal piles, empty pre-fab warehouses No people but a clutter of abandonment Against a straight blank sky Fixed now, pointed toward abstraction, the scene waits You stare at what you've made and keep seeing more White space mirrors a mind of ice Snow only suggests the distances and threats

HAVE TO

What do you have to give away One note—you break it open again and again A braid of tones inside the one tone unraveling As it drowns in air like all tones Same mind, same wrist, same hand, same white key like a chisel Repeated, a moment thickens Focus clears out what's messy and unimportant The deeper you listen the more you hear the limits There is no world this infinite and pure

SWIM

They are swimming in the book Two stick pens on the yellow pad where I left them The random now suddenly purpose, configuration An almost-V catching a moment's light Glint as of crystal off the faceted surfaces Inside, veins with drying traces Streaks in a wineglass, residue of streams Under the long-visored caps a black reservoir, a blue Go with me little pools

Vaporizer

A charm,

a dream of protection. Gurgles hold the night light's glow.

A stream of clouds

misting the branching tubes.

Water, in fog, a tub, plug to wire in the wall saying

Okay, it's okay all night.

* * *

School, a door closing he opens:

haze of playground French, the five names for different kinds of marbles, games, bullies he wandered among while I was staring at the sea.

Shut off, not my past,

nothing I could do—

I keep making up all the world he lived. His new name, intricate drawings of aliens, long tunnel of lunch (*Mais il ne mange rien monsieur*) school hours shadows

that smother my days.

* * *

Burnt-out hills: char and velvety ash along the dropped limbs, magpies, new gullies.

A dry time clears the ground.

He was standing where the road split, arms spread, a small *x* straddling the crack. That bird call a slash, then, on the edge of things.

He was standing,

behind him the green blue of ocean, the white blue of sky.

* * *

The house of childhood sold, or razed—

not lost but

softened, distended: diaphanous linked chambers springing from a lightshaft or a varnish smell, the way a floorboard aches, a scrap of wallpaper

tunnels the heart.

* * *

A film of

"events"-

tiny collisions, tracks of light in the bubble chamber—you'd scan for hours (smell of formica, rock headsets, eyes going furry near four AM).

This celluloid memory now your memory, coursing chemical fissures in the brain.

Matter split like time,

thinner and thinner parings— Anything that happens is too fast to see

* * *

There the sky kept reeling as she ran wisps, then puffy clumps, then rain the park spread low

beneath the blanketing.

Who could have worn that purple coat cartwheeling in the grass? It grows as I look at it, puts on pillowy layers.

Now the coat wears memory, warms a ghost.

* * *

Wind off the world's top, whipped clouds over hedgerows: Girton, that one year twenty years away.

He learned to walk, she started school, read, slowly,

the first book Red.

Moss edging the garden wall, little flags on the clothesline.

A Language

Thirty years swept open milkweed transfigures the field.

How she changed him, he her, a bird cry defining the territory.

Possession, of the past, of place—those hills, that coast—

of the nest:

she marks him, he her, seizing distances.

* * *

This music of scenes we shuttle between us, ever more interwoven as measures blur over time: a walk, yes, I, then a meal, rush and slow of ocean through drawn shades somewhere when notes held, grouped, changed, repeated, overflowing the score.

* * *

Loops and swirls I know from messages on the phone table page after page of them now your hand is ink.

The story grows: facts, dates, events— I don't need the news but a sigh breathing hieroglyphs, my fingertips reading the scroll of your back.

Voice

in the mind, I want your wet mouth, not this paper that rattles in the wind.

* * *

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Eyes too undress that pale look they take on with your glasses off.

A thin blue fragile, almost violet in the moon shell, pink lip at the rim, softened pupil that can't read my too-close face.

Study me now, focus the dark. Eyes,

when my tongue speaks you are slits.

* * *

A call of flesh, a lesson learned to re-learn—

What

are you saying each moment I need to hear again—

our hands

listen, mouths pushed open as the point drives home.

* * *

Your hair shades of wheat at first, of oak,

now more soft ash each night we burn. My forest, my playground, my nest.

Delirious waterfall—years swirl in my hands, moonlight flooding

a darkened room.

* * *

Metaphors: she is damp earth and I the plow, drawn to the source of this old noun *husband*.

No, to sighs, mere sounds—

no,

not sounds merely but a language of shifting touch where she is limb bud fruit trunk blossom

FLOWERS

And brought home flowers then The glad blue iris, bright carnation Bouncing on top of the laundry basket In a white car on thin roads Passing hedges and plowed fields in the rain

And brought them flowers The wife pleased, arranging The schoolgirl's glee when she came home The baby reaching up toward them As he would toward the rising of the sun

East wind over the moss wall and garden Sky and shadow streaming by the window In the gray row house, two up two down The little square of family then A frame around the table at dusk

And brought home this gesture with the clean wash A curve of color marking Wednesdays Each week the fish man, vegetable man A new word in the schoolgirl's books The baby's eyes and hands And drove home each week through stone villages Girton, Histon, the names blurring Smoke from allotment gardens on the wind then Berries in wet hedgerows Red as any blood

Π

VARIATIONS ON AN ELEGIAC THEME

A stillness in the air you heard a fly buzz in as

between them and silence the blanket that would hold you blank as air

that circles the dear globe turning erasing in heaves of storm

Your stillness resting in the calm between measures a current

under the layers strands of bound air that gather to wrest

voice from an empty rush to resist in dashed song A stillness interset with breath clouds on the world's shell

of gas parentheses between us and the dark effacing waves your brief

lines altering the fall of light you could see to see

Bagatelles

What ghost threw my hand across my face? He roamed my sleep in that room dark under pines.

Another cried softly for an hour, till comforted.

Lakes, mansion, woods, studios all of it loss and the love of art.

Mornings I'd stare at an old story: the touring car draped in a tarp, wet grass, a little lump where all the children lay.

* * *

Skin as stone. Strokes of green and ocher defining a thin light. What the eye sees, the hand, he knew,

can make.

Perfection, that sphinx calm, eludes and terrifies. He sang to it.

Solitude, he demanded perfect solitude, stared into himself,

came to love death.

* * *

When she came back from Bali, what she heard most clearly was silence:

smooth, continuous, framed merely by the hushed tide of traffic.

Music deliberate,

set apart: no talking in the festivals, no wind chimes marking air as lost time.

* * *

Lip to lip, breath moving over the silver mouth the air turns new shapes as you work with it,

following changes.

A long open sigh, a slit, each tone has its own needs and calls to make you where, now, where? nip and sway, rising to meet it.

* * *

Flesh music had caught up once sinks and aches.

She slumps in khaki, slow fear edging her eyes.

A dancer's instrument sags in its time so the art *is* loss, a curse its precise, relentless beat: What do you have, what do you have to give away?

* * *

Three pen nibs over the rim of a box, pencil tips sharpened for different uses, brush, corked jar of blue ink set carefully

on the sketchbook.

That study of his tools a prayer to potential, a blessing on gifts:

his room, an hour of sea breeze through a window, working in watercolors the light fades.

* * *

Bagatelles, mere gestures in dry air, each pluck a dot, strokes marked on silence reaching into the dark.

Beauty is strict,

it passes:

an echo, a wedge of harmony, sudden, broken—*Who goes there?*

Barcarole

These waves

pushing *out* to sea, whitecaps erupting where wind shoves against the pulse.

Tilt of the globe,

pull of the moon day and night, this roar down a river valley all fighting in the bay.

Froth not curtains but veils skittering over wavetops,

a surface turquoise at first light, wrinkled slate at dusk.

* * *

Noon slapped the graveyard. Sun-wracked poppies in clay pots, a steep, dessicated rest.

Strict clock,

lopped calendar: time in gravel dust, drawers of ash climbing the hill behind me.

* * *

Where is she?

In the lines of another student, in hers, in memory,

in the earth.

The words change, they are swimming in the book.

* * *

These leaves which are, he said, grass.

Ubiquitous, democratic hair on the graves

of young men.

Not a book but a tonic to filter the blood—

read them,

read them in the open air every day of your life.

* * *

Research: his brain a blood sponge, a daybook, open, in the operating theater (dead so it doesn't matter), the friend sifting microscope slides as if they were his ashes. What message, where?

The skull coffer's empty. No spot in the brain for Göttingen, for love.

Pages turn, memory-thin nothing more to read.

* * *

Who will drive the car to the hospital after the cancer has metastasized?

* * *

A sketch of roofs in Mediterranean light, rapid, tiles drying from a winter shower, kitchen gardens, vines over fences caught in the moment and beneath it all the abstract planes and angles drawing the eye (deliberate, inevitable), starting

to reassert themselves as the clouds clear.

* * *

The sea as elegy: slap and meter of its surface, reminding, erasing, and the slow changes below.

What holds erodes, or diverges in filtered light:

coral growing skeletons, picked bones, shells sinking into stone.

SKY

The green blue of ocean, the white blue of sky When he looks up from chopping brush, he is lost in the sun Disease has glazed and freed him His forgetting skims across creek beds and hills to the Pacific A dry glint that dazzles, revealing nothing It shears off the past, shears history Can anyone survive such innocence The heart is strong, body flexible A smile and wave fixed in the reflexes

READ

Nothing more to read History has its orders: conquistadors, then literate friars At Uxmal pages blackened in the hot glow Records of the moon and stars, rules for sacrifice Not hieroglyphs but marks that became speech Unintelligible, barbarian, shrieking in the flames like demons Preserved now, the conquest lies sleeping in the padre's book Writing recalls what will always be lost Fire burns out that recollection

STAGE

As he walks on stage The president of fruit spreads his name in legacy His business school, his family amphitheater A museum he paid for, with a hall of heroes His name gleams on the monitor among others: Gandhi, César Chávez Brilliant in pixels, it will always be remembered The fruit company never existed now History is a billboard to be painted over The paint is money, the money blood

ANYTHING THAT HAPPENS

Anything that happens is too fast to see But I watched it—there are pictures in the album Less than a second's light fixed in chemicals Little boxes under a vinyl sheet gone cloudy now What are these dyes that fade at the surface That child face you wear still under your skin Whenever I look nothing changes A photo gives the residue of a lost moment It claws at memory like a drowning swimmer Who will not be saved

SLASH

The myriad slash and burn Where are my armies of die-cut cardboard Map grids, battle charts, dice in the felt-lined cup Gettysburg and Normandy worlds at thirteen I could half control History was my door closed, playing both sides Boxes that engulfed me crumble in the landfill Soaked and rotting, the worms eating through Each small thing I make now holds its edge As if to cut off time

GIVE IT BACK

Give it back—I made it all up That alcove where surplus glowed under dust Unfinished, an attic space with nails poking down Khaki of sheet metal, orange flickering in tubes Ephemeral as the smells, which were plywood, solder, and Kents Color words, smell words—I put them in a book Everything there is still missing Two lies of remembrance: it was always winter Things could speak

A World

In the jam: stalled, clotting, heatwaves from the hoods, airport an impossible walk away.

A woman, caught in despair at the stopped wheel, soundless, behind glass, as her life is made part of this.

* * *

The American plan—no breakfast, no free lunch, just husks of great cities, withering.

The ripples pulse outward, detritus at the core: skeletal towers jagging a stubble field, shell-crater parking lots,

your car

out on the windy avenues, adrift among the middens, the myriad slash and burn.

* * *

A frame makes a window you can't see out.

Bars, locks, steel-colored button shapes to press, and the comforting illusions: time a quaint archaic hourglass, motion a scroll at your control.

Enter:

your life infinite layers where everything is flat. Point, shrink, and close till the screen goes blank.

* * *

The silicon workshops of Seoul: women gowned and masked, magnifiers, soldering irons thin as hypodermics.

How many channels are on your TV, each one framing

the pulsations of changing light? They leap from the wired decisions.

* * *

Beach, alleys, port, market, rich hills—

all the city's sweet flesh,

her swells, dips, and soft turnings littered with needles, littered with needles.

* * *

War names:

Cointelpro, Brilliant Pebbles, Operation This, then That, and That—

so many,

I had not thought,

endless, blurred, compacted like Gitmo,

the newsmen embedded in their tanks.

* * *

There were guards and a wall I shot under on the U-Bahn.

I remember rifles in dim tunnels, damp abandoned platforms. I remember *Look at these*

shoes this money what is it worth?

The train of memory on a vacant spur, the train of history shunted to the shopping mall.

* * *

The plane is a room sliced out of time.

Party-in-a-box:

sad drinks, food, chatter among the headsets and hectic laptops, your book a box inside the box, opened like a stopped watch.

Nobody moves

and the world slides away.

An Algebra

Two moons, refracted, an hour before dawn.

The black-coffee edge of things in heavy air.

I was

hurrying, hurrying, crossing in front of car lights, two half-disks overlapped through the lenses, the dream face splintered, mocking.

* * *

Mask of a face,

of my face: skull box with the skin pulled over it, a map of plains and crevices jumbled in seismic disturbance and the sag of erosion, a history of insignificant skirmishes on pocked vellum, stage set

and falling curtain, the only newspaper I read every day.

* * *

71

Messages contrived and left on paper, tape, or screen, waiting in filings, in invisible flicked switches.

The net widens, its calls and cries diffuse, ever fainter demands, knots unraveling— *I have been*

negligent—

in the end all

holes, a veil of dust passing through empty space.

* * *

The house of childhood sold, or razed—

not lost but

softened, distended: diaphanous linked chambers springing from a lightshaft or a varnish smell, the way a floorboard aches, a scrap of wallpaper

tunnels the heart.

* * *

Cachot, oubliette a language turns over its roots that, hidden, forgotten, still outlive names scratched on a wall.

Who was here? Words whirling in the dictionary, bodies in a keep, left.

* * *

I can't remember what I forgot in the dream.

A deed or some contract obliging, a last required class, lost child, the house collapsing on its untended foundations as I learn before the sudden waking once more,

I can't

remember

Give it back—I made it all up.

* * *

The wing of the hospital folds under itself

and drops.

Trucks in the rubble,

a crane

dangling its jaws on cables.

Brick skin stripped away, then plaster and the barer functions: wires, airshafts, a water line connecting each private sink.

* * *

There is a memory

I can't remember, a closed room where I couldn't speak.

Big foam earphones of the fifties, tape reels I know from photographs,

something about the sounds, I couldn't say:

s's that lisped, waddling *r*'s, stuttering—everything then, speech, this music my tongue aches to taste stopped, in my throat, caught, everything a compensation?

* * *

Landscape of walls in the afternoons: stucco the color of warm milk, ocher tiles and, higher, shutters sealed in sleep.

The hills slip away from the town.

Dry gravel flap of my heart as I ran past a house called *sans souci*, a house called *carpe diem*.

* * *

A camera teaches you light, its texture—

not shafts of a god through clouds, not a blank glow or a pinprick laser, but moments

this low sun marks passing over thyme, mimosa, and scrub oak,

paths your eyes caress, tracing depth, the shadows' touch.

* * *

An algebra, its shifting equivalents: numbers with their stated values, and letters, italicized, interchangeable, rippling in the balance pans.

The trick is

that nothing's lost.

A magical innocence. This operation sets the bones to reunite the broken parts.

COULD NOT SPEAK

Could not speak but only arrange Made tiles in a tile factory, painted on them Nine different scenes: trees on cliffs, vineyards, estates Permanent, unreachable under the glaze Could not speak but worked at a table with others Signed the clients' names Breathed clay, clay wash on my fingernails

In fall made crèche figures, painted them Simplified folds of the swaddling Two dots for eyes, lips one red stroke God after God after God Could not speak but arranged them in lines Cut off the excess, smashed the defective Mixed paint, fed the oven, baked and made them

Flat scenes, little men, little animals In lines as if they were an army marching Sold at the fair: cut off and wrapped up Hung on walls or set out at holidays Stiff, bone-light, caught in sheen Could not speak but was everywhere Maker of what is made An Algebra is an interwoven collection of eight sequences and sixteen individual poems, where images and phrases recur in new contexts, connecting and suspending thoughts, emotions, and insights. By turns, the poems leap from the public realm of urban decay and outsourcing to the intimacies of family life, from a street mime to a haunting dream, from elegy to lyric evocation. Wholeness and brokenness intertwine in the book; glimpsed patterns and startling disjunctions drive its explorations.

An Algebra is a work of changing equivalents, a search for balance in a world of transformation and loss. It is a brilliantly constructed, moving book by a poet who has achieved a new level of imaginative expression and skill.

"Don Bogen is a wise and playful poet who manages the political and the personal with equal aplomb. He takes hold of poetry, the shape-shifting god, and in his hands it twists, morphs, relinquishes. Bogen reinvigorates the art by defining its limits, then pushing bravely past." D. A. POWELL

"A private, clarifying testimony refracted by sensuous moments and clawed reflections of a speaker shedding everything that isn't wanted or needed everything except the intoxicating pull of the past bound to the deep desire to be 'always becoming.' The subtle operation of these skillfully interset lyrics makes for a consummate reunion of broken parts, an algebra." C. D. WRIGHT

"An Algebra registers a series of unrelenting impingements upon a sensibility that may in more guarded moments find ways to deflect them. What comes through are only the essentials, pared down to the force with which they insist on being taken account of. The movement from poem to poem is headlong but strangely not rushed. The lines are short, the diction a model of clarity, and the rhythms impeccable. It's one of the most compelling books I've read in years." JAMES MCMICHAEL



DON BOGEN is professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of three books of poetry, including, most recently, *Luster*.

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Author photo: Gabe Gomez.

Cover illustration: Alex Hirsch, Highway tot (detail). Fused glass, 11" x 31.5" x 5/16" (2006). By permission of the artist (www. Alex HirschArt.com). Photograph: Bullseye Glass Co.

COVER DESIGN BY NATALLE F. SMITH