



Michael White, photo by William Fridrich

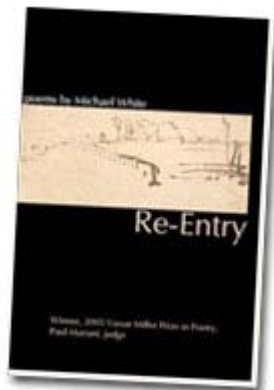
***Re-entry*, by Michael White**

(Denton, TX: [University of North Texas Press](#), 2006)

While I was a student at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, a professor urged me to read Michael White's first collection of poetry, *The Island*. That was twelve years ago, and I haven't put *The Island* down since.

Ultimately I took from that thin volume—along with images sweeping my senses a thousand times over—the idea that we cannot escape tragedy but we can turn it into something beautiful.

His themes of memory and loss, of grasping at the irretrievable, repeat themselves throughout his second collection, *Palma Cathedral*, but it's not his title opus I respond to on the most visceral level. Rather, it's "Camille Monet Sur Son Lit de Mort," with White merging the twin impulses of painting and poetry. Recently, he has extended those impulses to writing about the 17th-century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer, combining research and travels to the Netherlands.



With *Re-Entry*, White has traded his deliberate Romantic cadences for simpler ones and discovered the extraordinary in the mundane. We all have the potential to come alive through these lines as White looks back at the world and draws it to an exquisite dissolve.
--Kristy Shumaker

Kristy Shumaker, an award-winning former editor for The News of Orange County, has written for The Independent, The Chapel Hill News, The Herald-Sun and other North Carolina newspapers. She has written extensively about North Carolina writers, including Doug Marlette, Tim McLaurin, Jaki Shelton-Green, Bland Simpson, Lee Smith, and Chuck Stone. Shumaker studied English at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and journalism and mass communication at UNC-Chapel Hill, where her father, Jim Shumaker -- the legendary newspaperman and inspiration for Jeff MacNelly's comic strip, "Shoe" -- taught until his death, in 2000.

the levee

*I am this dust on the river road, I'd think.
I am this dust on the tasseled fields -- deep summer's
scent of brushfire threaded through this breeze --*

and at that age, I could believe. My world
consisted of a sallow-looking downtown;
streets named after trees; the girls I worshipped

secretly; the cemeteries fringed
with spikes; the breaks in the river hills to the south
(great floodplain vistas fading away to the south),

where everything ends in a narrow fringe of swampoaks
and cottonwoods overlooming the river . . . Part
of me is always homing, scrambling down

the face of the levee, forcing my way through willows
and driftwood -- flotsam of old tires and rusted oil drums --
down to the Corps of Engineers' embankment,

down to the seam where the elements touch, the dense
aortal dark of slaughterhouse and prairie
sweeping past me . . . There at the tip of the wing dike,

kneeling and sinking back, I'd finger the sand grains --
fragments of mussel shells -- and let the sun-scaled
body of current carry me away . . .

Sometimes, I'd close my eyes, and in the cries
of crows -- the howls of semis two miles off --
in the barely audible, hoarse note of a tractor

raising dust in the fields across the river,
I could hear the year click shut. One evening,
smoldering down to the nub, I thought I could feel

an odd, irregular throbbing in my jawbone --
skull -- the balls of my feet . . . The others were back
in the trees: I crouched alone on a spit of sand,

the pulse of an engine pounding all around me,
out of the pores of the limestone cliffsides. Something
was coming towards me, something was churning its way

upriver towards me, thrumming louder and louder
until I could see the train of barges shackled
together -- laboring into sight -- until

I could see the tow: its funnel pouring gout
of black exhaust, its pilot house ablaze
with fumes and glare, its six-foot bow wave breaking

along both banks . . . I was amazed, transfixed
by its deliberate and delicate
corrections -- centering in its marks -- as slowly,

it drew abreast, and I could see the man
inside of it, the one responsible
for all those tons of steel and displaced river.

I remember the eerie, flickering pall
cast up from the instrument panel onto his face,
and I remember the moment he turned towards me,

and sounded his airhorn three long blasts for me
as if in recognition . . . *River rat*,
I thought, and waved. And then he was gone. And after

that agitation passed -- long after the gnats
all started up again -- I ran as hard
as I could through the flood-washed cottonwoods -- over the levee --

back to the road, and my friends . . . In our back yard
today, camellias are having their second spring;
our concrete birdbath fills with the slough of blossom . . .

Suddenly, it's over. Suddenly,
the tendons of clematis flower and fade out
over our garage roof -- its metaphor,

its metamorphosis, is over and done with . . .
What I want is what I had: the landscape
beneath the landscape; hawks and cliffheads; hum

of bridges; summer's sumac, gold and cobalt
clarities which deepened as the river
gradually dwindled . . . What I want is what

I was -- that self lost utterly in vagrant
days that sank in flames as I spent them there --
my element silt, my posture prayer, my god

appearing sometimes in the guise of gnats
or hawks, or hundreds of incidents that bloomed
alone like bloodlit clouds across the dark

opacities of surface . . . Once, a man
appeared like that, *a man appeared like that*,
and as he passed -- as waves of unimaginable

clamor shuddered through that place which still
absorbs me so completely -- suddenly,
he glanced at me, and claimed me for his own.

re-entry

Then it hit me. Fumbling for a smoke,
I sank down heavily onto a concrete bench

beside the circle drive. There was no view
except for the rows of glare-shot windshields, shimmer

of asphalt -- bypasses and freeways -- and
a venomous, blood-orange dusk above it all.

I took a deep drag. Thirty days had passed
since I'd checked in, and wandered through the ward

with tom implosions in each ear -- as fireflies
flooded the trelliswork of synapses --

for three straight days, before I knew where I was.
It was the top floor of State Hospital,

our dayroom windows facing out across
the vast exhaustion of the Midwest, where

electrical dust-storms tinged the air, an aura
of migraine settling over the river hills . . .

Day after day, we'd gather there for Peer Group --
some in wheelchairs, some with our IV poles --

each trying to calm the tremors in his hands.
Whenever someone spoke, whenever someone

started to piece a narrative together
out of threads of smoke -- the infused ache

of what the flesh remembers -- I could feel
the tenor of fear in everything he said,

the word on the tip of his tongue on the tip of my tongue.
I'd listen and gaze out, listen and gaze out over

the fallow prairies, half-imagined hayfields
of my only landscape: buckled faultlines

leveling off in miles of bottomland,
where massive burr oaks loomed like cumulus

adrift upon a plain of dust. I'd stare
and stare -- untethered, ravenous -- at sheets

of lightning smoldering here and there beneath
a remote steel-blue cloudbank, as the room

filled with acetylene sun, the conduits of
my nerves burned clean . . . And this was the only cure

there was. One day I rose, and put on my street clothes,
nothing in my pockets. I remember

riding the elevator five flights down --
the sudden *whoosh* when its doors opened on

the ground floor . . . Struggling to compose myself,
I strode across the lobby with a wink

for the receptionist, but by the time
I stepped out into the sunlight, I was shaking.

interim

The glass fogged over from outside --
the view how many stories down
to the courtyard where the purple flags

of irises burn through the rain.
There are bedrolls neatly stashed beneath
chairs, black cylindrical ashtrays, pots

of ficus, styrofoam coffee cups;
there are payphones on one wall. Some people
from cities, some people from farms --

but with close resemblances. The double
doors into the ward itself
admit the loved ones only. Here

is the mortal hush, unconsciousness,
and the hiss of respirators. Here
is the body patiently at sea

in its devotion to a mind
somewhere, one feels, somewhere, one feels,
but where? Here is the day which is

not day, the hours of a night which is
not night. Here is the choice which is
no choice, and here is the look in my sister's

eye. Here is the lion of
his will not letting go until,
at last, by increments, it does.

And here is the interim -- as one
by one, my brothers and sister slip
away to make their calls . . . Without

really deciding to, I bend
down toward the untouched left side of
his brow. At first, I can't quite reach,

so I roll aside the IV, find
the lever for the safety rail,
which swivels out of the way . . . *No need*

to put things back, I think, as I gently
touch my father's wrist. And here,
at the end of everything, is the kiss.

These poems appear in Michael White's new book Re-entry, which won the Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry last year. Another poem from this collection, "The Thicket," appeared on the Council's web site on April 11, 2005; [to read it, click here](#).

Mr. White is the author of two earlier collections of poetry: The Island ([Copper Canyon Press](#)) and Palma Cathedral (Center for Literary Publishing). He has received fellowships and other grants from the North Carolina Arts Council and his work has appeared in many journals and magazines, including The New Republic and The Paris Review. Mr. White lives in Wilmington and teaches creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

On May 18, "Poetry Daily" featured his poem "[Plat à Décor](#)," which Western Humanities Review published in its Spring, 2006 issue.