

# Mel Weisburd

## Selected Poems



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Weisburd was, in addition to his poetry, known as an innovator in air pollution control. He earned his M.A. in English at UCLA in 1950 and went on to study with Thomas McGrath at Los Angeles State College. He and Gene Frumkin — both members of the “Marsh Street Irregulars,” a group that met regularly at the home of poet Thomas McGrath — co-founded in 1955 the journal *Coastlines*. In the 1970s, Weisburd founded and served as president of Pacific Environmental Services, Inc., an environmental engineering firm.

*A Life of Windows & Mirrors: Selected Poems 1948-2005*. Marina Del Rey:  
Conflux Press, 2005

*The Gloria Poems: A Short Memoir of a 50-year Marriage*. Marina Del Rey:  
Conflux Press, 2009

# The Case of Windows Vs. Mirrors

The window is chalked with smog in that contentious  
real-time reality that rudely interrupts speech  
and disconnects my thoughts.

The sun breaks through and reddens the sky  
like an old woman rouging her face. The gloom at dusk  
is a Power Sink, the ebb tide in the weakest moment  
of day. Downwind blows the deceived consensus.  
The air's acidity is proportionate to high-level corruption.

Somewhere through the malaise beyond the window, presidents  
lie, ideas lose their value, facts their veracity,  
scales their calibration, perspectives their horizons.  
The sky is an erased blackboard.

While inside, in the mirror-lined wall of my Louis XIV deposition  
I see myself reversed from left to right, stunned by my creatureness,  
facing an attorney whose actual face hangs beside my reflected image,  
about to collapse from his allegations. I see my soul beneath the foliage  
of my image drowning in the mirror. Between his questions I remember  
I was beautiful once.

# A Metallurgical Plant

With safety helmet and glasses I plunge into a foundry  
alarmed by high temperature, heat-cycle horns. The faces of  
slag-stoking men are eaten by the alkaline air  
from the taps of bright orange, yellow pin point, burning rims  
needle flows, while casting molds are laid out  
in nurseries of man-made things?

What should I address: the rush of images that rise in the fumes  
before my eyes, or the image-less relations of  
time, quantity, emissions. Appearance and sound  
seem so real the furnaces look like giant locomotives  
harnessed to power the illusions of the mountains  
or the turmoil of the earth below the mantel.

Concentrates are charged into the furnaces cars  
and poured into ladles upended snug to throats  
of converters. In the fireboxes streaks of red orange  
from the black matte and the still-glowing  
slag lurk behind the willow shields of duck blinds  
in marshes of miniature sunsets while extruders squeeze  
out miles and miles of copper wire to fleck with lights  
the misty nights of Los Angeles.

# Even a Crematorium

Entering, I find it spotless and the lone operator solemn.

He gives information with utmost indifference.

“There’s some unavoidable smoke on light off. But this morning I accidentally set the fuel rate too low.” Out of habit, I look into the firebox and am shocked to see a corpse on a pallet with his arms neatly arranged to his sides, serenely burning away with a fatty, yellow flame while black smoke like a rubber tire wavered around in dances of satin and chiffon like an aurora borealis.

—I jerked my head back to reject the unexpected shock.

“It’s 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit in there now,” he says.

“Like any living thing, complex proteins are rare in the universe, and unstable.

Fat has a viscosity lower than a rubber tire,” he says too knowingly.

# The Infra-Red Spectrophotometer

Next they search for 'Compound X' in chambers  
running samples of synthetic smogs through a long path  
infra-red spectrophotometer which detects constituents by wave lengths  
on scales of increasing strength and signal vs light  
absorption in a spectrum from 20,000 angstroms to 2 micron wave lengths.

Hearing it snap and buzz, I could not help asking myself  
who I am and why in such gradations of light?  
We look for illuminations through long paths of dusk  
to see what the light does to the sky in order to feel  
we are truly alive in a natural world.

I see light on the surface of the snow  
through the haze over a bluff  
through a drinking glass  
a dusty threshold underneath a door  
slivers of light just behind the ear lobe.

# Along the Coast

We drive the boundary between land and ocean.  
waves rebound from coves and peninsulas,  
revealing the earth's surface is mostly water  
and unconscious, to be farmed only by poetry.

Farther, on ignition a missile sets off a ground cloud sucking  
steam from the launch platform, taking swirls of sand and dust with it.  
The hot gas cloud becomes buoyant miles high layering combustion  
products down the sky. Booster trails look like creme de menthe in dusk,  
tinged with pink strawberry soda.

Near the oil platforms divers install sub-sea trees  
inside chambers over wellheads dropping 1200 feet below.  
Valves shut automatically should loss of hydraulic pressure occur  
as a precaution against blowout. (All this is happening  
in the Eko Fisk Field, North Sea, Zakum Field, Arabian Gulf,  
Gulf of Gabes, Tunisia, the Gulf of Mexico, the Santa Barbara Channel  
and in alluvial fan catchments and the great basins of prehistoric lakes,  
landforms of organic sludge bound in their rocky matrix:  
Uinta, Washakie, Piceance, Green River.)

The tension of the world is in the surface of the sea.  
Oil tankers and cargo containers sail as clods of continents,  
jig saw pieces breaking apart and coming together in the puzzle  
of the earth's resources. Oil is the protein of the world's economy.  
The consolatod el mare rules land and government,  
surplus and deficit, haves and have-nots, war and peace  
and the routes of tourism to historic scenes.

At night the sea puts fishermen to sleep  
the platforms light like skyscrapers offshore  
a huge tanker comes alongside a pier  
and floats on the reflections of the harbor  
to pump its crude to port and take on ballast.  
Vapors rise through its ullage vents.

Faces of the crew peer over the side  
despondent in the lights of the foreign shore.

There was an odd instability in the stagnant air.  
The sea seemed to fill with tumors of scattered being,  
the land patched from the crusts of dead planets.  
Odd, glancing visions never seen before chance with the wind—  
too imminent to be put into words.

A flame between the layer of the evening  
and the lights of the harbor on the lapping water  
wave and snag on the tip of the widely distributed shore  
and then unwind from the darkness to barely  
touch the tip of the tanker. A reactive scream  
of matter is heard to the edge of the atmosphere  
for miles and miles around

























































































































































































