

ANNUALS:

A Collection of Poems

by

John Joseph Mackey

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Maryland in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
1978

APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: ANNUALS: A Collection of Poems

Name of Candidate: John Joseph Mackey

Master of Arts, 1978

Thesis and Abstract Approved:

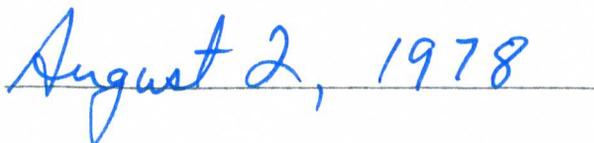


Peter Van Egmond

Assistant Professor

English Department

Date Approved:



ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ANNUALS: A Collection of Poems

John Joseph Mackey, Master of Arts, 1978

Thesis directed by: Peter Van Egmond
Assistant Professor
English Department

The poems in this collection were written during the past year and are arranged in roughly chronological order.

My intention in writing the poems was to construct a truthful recreation of experience which would evoke corresponding feeling. By selecting and ordering details of ordinary occurrences, I hoped to create microcosmic situations. The use of literary, mythological, and biblical allusions aided me in this endeavor. These, like all poems, should be read aloud, for the sound of words was a prime consideration in their making. The beauty of poetry, I believe, lies in the expression itself, the art born of ordinary experience and chiseled by the tool of language. My attempt was to create something pleasurable and universal from the raw material of experience.

Having begun writing Shakespearean sonnets as a challenge, I soon found that the strict meter and rhyme scheme were excellent aids in producing a poem from a germinal idea. Hence, more than a few that follow are in this mode.

FOR SUSIE

I am very grateful to Professor Peter Van Egmond for the hours he devoted to reviewing the following poems with me, his helpful criticism, and most importantly the encouragement he gave, without which this novice poet would have remained always a novice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgment.....	ii
Marguerite.....	1
Flights.....	2
Uncle Ernest.....	3
Some Times.....	4
Luncheon.....	5
Premature Confrontation.....	6
To a Friend.....	7
Reversals.....	8
Sherry Finkbine, What Would You Do?.....	9
On Roosevelt Island.....	10
A Memory.....	11
Awaking From a Dream.....	12
The Harbor in December.....	13
The Stripper.....	14
A Marriage of a Closer Kind.....	15
Transformations.....	16
Where Have All the Hippies Gone?.....	17
The Professor Speaks.....	18
Two Mothers' Sons.....	19
Consultants' Reunion.....	20

First Practice.....	21
Two's Enough.....	22
Tabula Rasa.....	23
Twins.....	24
Dancing Madonna.....	25
(Untitled).....	26
Instinctively.....	27
Dust to Dust.....	28
Writing Poems.....	29
Rocker.....	30
A Crafts Fair Sign.....	31
Requiem.....	32
Sonnet for a Missionary's Child.....	33
A Sea Change.....	34
We Teachers.....	35
Radioactive Harvest.....	36
ANNUALS	
I.....	38
II.....	39
III.....	40
IV.....	41

MARGUERITE

You lost your Joe a second time, you thought,
And left my car with tears behind your eyes.
My own were there; I pushed them back, I fought
Them, cursed them, waved, and said goodbye.

Now the phone is all that I can stand,
"Hello, is Nana there? How does she feel?"
I close my eyes and wave a magic wand,
But Fortune has already stopped the wheel.

The poet said that pearls are ransom worth,
I can't imagine ransoming you now.
His daughter's death came dearly near her birth,
I cannot work a miracle, you know.

Transfusions are, by nature, borrowed time,
And Nature's chosen your arm. Why not mine?

FLIGHTS

She always kept an empty room for guests,
A safety place for those weighed down by storms;
They'd fly up elevators to the nest,
Embrace her and inhale from her the warmth.

She'd punctuate those conversations well,
By laughing, grabbing, hugging them; til soon,
Forgetting why they came, the truth they'd tell:
"I'm sorry that I ever left the womb."

She wrote life's poems but could not make them rhyme:
Depression, mind control, and diet pills.
Her lover hardly touched her after time,
She sought relief from off a window sill.

Now no one wants to talk about her death,
Her missing hugs have left them out of breath.

UNCLE ERNEST

He gnawed on that cigar as life itself,
The stink would permeate the butcher shop,
I counted yellow packages on shelves,
And stared at his great hand as it would chop.

I never knew he wore a hearing aid,
He'd Huh? and What? me every time we talked;
The questions I dared ask he would evade;
Instead he'd grab my hand and say, "Let's walk."

One day we sat together on the sand,
His needled arms turned toward the bleaching sun,
Some sickness slowed him down to merely man.
"Enjoy," he said. "Your life has just begun."

The cigar rolled down the gutter as he fell,
The fragrance permeates my memory still.

SOME TIMES

Sometimes I have to watch a silly kids' show,
but I've learned to enjoy it.
My solitary child snuggles with me on the couch,
one thumb in her mouth.
A little arm rests on my shoulder,
and in true Taurus fashion, her fingers
wander through my thinning hair.
Her eyes go blank and
some hypnotic trance ensues.
Myself, I follow the plot,
Am aware of the characterization,
and never miss the moral.
The mood, though,
sits next to me.

LUNCHEON

They sit across from one another now,
She reads the Sweet-N-Low ingredients,
He notices the waitress apron bows,
Their eyes still meet, but only out of chance.

Her fingernails are tapping stemware wine,
She wonders how she thought she could adapt,
And sneaks a glance at slowly marching time,
Then dries her moistened fingers in her lap.

Outside the window, pairs of autos pass,
His eyes try following paths of rain
Drops making errant journeys on the glass;
The pain of holding on seems all in vain.

The check is quickly paid. They greet the storm
That hides the tears the instant they are born.

PREMATURE CONFRONTATION

He walked up boldly,
asked straight out,
"Do I have you this year?"
Then slurring the spelling
of his name
so I had to ask him twice
to please repeat himself,
he fanned his hand
to brush the smoke away.

I held my breath and
ran my finger through the V's,
"No"
my eyebrows flipped up.

"Good. I hate smoke"
and you
he surely would have said,
were it not a bit too soon
to be so arrogant.

TO A FRIEND

Crosslegged, hands waving at arms' ends,
"keen" you said you felt
and danced where you sat.

The sky is clouded sudden over,
the earthly dome grays the grass and trees,
and the meaning of that worn-out word
is coursing vigorous through my veins.

I can understand your bitterness-
prodded into painful steps,
held together by nuts and bolts,
victimized yet.

I dare to tell you how I feel:
weather-borne to near ecstasy,
peaceful, together, alive,
keen.

REVERSALS

She asked if we are ordering
a boy or girl this time;
I answered that we just found out
we'd ordered it at all,
and that I sort of wished,
that on this type of requisition,
we both had had to sign.

She said that she is envious;
her husband needed fixing
just to have the first;
then went on out before they talked
and had the job reversed.

SHERRY FINKBINE, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Your paper face I rolled and rubberbanded,
My wobbling bike on evening streets I rode,
Then deftly took each "thunder tube" lefthanded,
And launched it skyward, porchward, to explode.

The nuns would not permit your name be said,
We whispered what they thought we shouldn't know,
The fresh forbidden news we all had read,
"How could she take a life almost her own?"

We mid-Americans survived the blitz,
Your Sweden trip was page sixteen next noon;
As long as you were not within our midst,
We lived all safe and warm in bricked-up wombs.

To self-preserve you blew apart the gates,
Today I drown in floods of selfish hates.

ON ROOSEVELT ISLAND

On Roosevelt Island, mid-October
dampened down the grass, and
wiped her fruitcake-making fingers
'cross the apron of the sky.

Signs inform us visitors
that this was once plantation,
but left to nature's tending,
furrows have been pounded down
to walkways and new trees.

This haven in a country's capital,
marble overgrown, is tended nonetheless
by peering highrise buildings
peeking through the trees
waiting for the moment
to pounce.

A MEMORY

Sitting in the couch's corner
with his upper half hidden
behind the evening news,
my father sat there
unaware
that he was holding tight my hand,
and dragging me screaming
into the sports pages.

AWAKING FROM A DREAM

Where Abdiel has flown I too have flown,
Full blown with faith in other than myself,
I've countered purest ill in darkest down.
And looked for skyborne cross to be my stealth.

For good and evil fought as black and white,
But skies grew gray and fog dismayed the scene;
My eyes searched 'round for help to win the fight,
And turning inward, woke me from my dream.

Where day is day the gurus sing their songs,
Where night is night the priests and rabbis pray,
From dusk and twilight's rising come the strong,
The inbetween, to win and have their say.

In deathly silence man must wage his war,
No God can speak, and never could before.

THE HARBOR IN DECEMBER

They rang true that day,
those bitten words you spat at me
from behind your blowing hair and camel cape.
You kept your back to the bridge, the ocean,
and sat, staring past me
straight at boat masts.
I gazed above your head, beyond,
to the golden gate,
while your invective whistled through me
like a siren's windy shriek.
I saw my very self in miniature,
walking toward Sausalito,
pausing just to stare over the side.
My eyes grew fixed on the figure
through the mist, dropping softly,
tumbling toward the surf.
"Why don't you go and jump?" you said.
"We'd all be better off."

THE STRIPPER

From this position we miss nothing of Loretta,
not the wig, not the false eyelashes or crossed eyes.
We are as close as a doctor at childbirth
and we see just as much, or more. It did not
take her long to get so little off, and now
she displays her body like a butcher, handing
small sliced samples across the counter.

We guffaw and she loves us for it.
We exchange I-can't-believe-this glances
at each other and guzzle more watery beer.

Later, when the fourteenth street whores grab
for our crotches through the car windows,
we laugh some more, and take our friend home to sleep.

Tomorrow night, when his bride asks him,
"Where did they take you last night?"
he will have no answer.

A MARRIAGE OF A CLOSER KIND

They knew.
It was no fated half-fiction
or even accident.
No chromosome count disproved it,
no wishing could wash it gone.
Simple truth: marry and be happy,
reproduce and be damned.
Your planting must be well planned,
sow carefully
both with legs and fingers crossed,
blind babies you may reap.

Two semi-circles spun upon themselves,
compacted, then bursting,
two cousins opened into four.
Two sighted,
two blind, both singing of living,
with full view, full knowledge
that their fated lids were sealed
before their births.

They know that they knew,
and they are glad.

TRANSFORMATIONS

She sits and sorts the laundry on the floor,
Then tosses clothes to predetermined sites:
that corner always catches all the whites,
the darks take shape against the bedroom door.

Undressing as she goes, she pokes a bit
and finds her billowed blouse has come to rest
upon a suit, size nine, with tapered vest.
She knits new clothes that must not shrink to fit.

Each day she takes another mirror down,
each night she checks the tightness of the blinds,
she locks the bathroom door, and keeps all kinds
of fans to mask her face and how she's grown.

Her knitting needles move before her eyes,
they turn to serpents uttering their lies.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HIPPIES GONE?

Where Haight intersects Ashbury there are only reminders,
and the roads go on from there to America.

No one sits any more propped against store fronts
with signs: "Help us get high."

Down on the corner of Stanyon, a MacDonald's grew,
and inside a junkie fumbles at the straw dispenser.

In the classroom, my students bred on fast food
sit pin-eyed; they doze or stare or giggle;
and I, of the hippie generation now past thirty
and wearing shoes, try to ignore their stone faces
and go on with the lesson.

THE PROFESSOR SPEAKS

He speaks of himself in the third person,
as if this other party were a muse we all should heed,
and tells us what this person does not like.
We silently wonder what the muse does like
so that we can do it and he will like us.

When we cast our pearls before him,
he may scowl or grin or interrupt
or snatch them in his teeth,
brilliantly play the oyster,
and spit them back at us,
bigger, brighter, and branded as his.

We take many notes, for someday
he will really be a spirit,
and we will have to carry on.

TWO MOTHERS' SONS

Born in near beds, before the stars had budged,
we shared a communion suit on different Saturdays,
and at separate places waxed monastic for a time;
we seemed like coupled freight cars, occasionally
changing positions, but heading someplace together.

When I heard you tried to die,
our lives rolled in before my eyes,
in waves the similarities crashed and broke the shore,
coincidences inching toward me up the sand.

I am again a child of ten as we played electric trains;
I am trying to work the switch, the one that breaks
apart the moving cars and leaves them both progressing.

CONSULTANTS' REUNION

In the Library of Congress, the line is longer
than a python, but snakes like one around the halls.
Pressed against the walls are people of poetry
come to hear twelve consultants read their poems.
The women wear their silver hair like prosaic halos,
and girls in gray and tweed apply their lipstick.
The men have wire glasses, are clothed in vested interest:
knowing "James" or "Reed" or "Bill" well enough
to drop the name so much it starts to bounce.

Alas, we are too many, and except for early comers
and those who know a poet personally, we cannot
squeeze into the theatre. Some are sent their way
while we semi-fortunates find chairs before a screen
to watch history being made in American T.V. fashion.
The show is good, and we applaud in what must seem like echoes
to the readers across the wall. Our laughter, too,
rings distant through the hollow library halls.

But everyone gets champagne and canapes
and gets to meet the poet of his choice.
From the marble stairs above the crowd,
I sip my wine alone. Between the marble bannister bars,
the poets below appear to move majestically among the people.
Except for one, who with many others in true colors,
fights elbows into the table of hors d'oeuvres.

FIRST PRACTICE

The morning had smelled of baseballs and new gloves,
but now it sweltered and stretched out toward noon.
Behind a watery haze of pollen and sunlight,
still,
the grown up, hairy man paced before us,
speeching
of grueling practices and sportsmanship.
He began to sway like a vaped desert mirage.
Young,
not knowing better, we endured like men.

Hard, the sun pressed its palms upon our heads,
but this was no passage into manhood;
this was being sport, not playing sport,
and we were balls in a game made over by men.

Cramped in crossed position, my legs cradled stitched leather
then straightened and raised me. In defiance of the rite,
nameless in my mind, I stepped among my peers.
Offering only silence and my back as explanation,
I left to find another way.

TWO'S ENOUGH

Two's enough I feel,
but I used to feel the same about one.
Modern Onans have themselves cut
and spill their seed within themselves;
others' affections are confined to careful times,
or are unleashed at whim and risk.
I do not want our love controlled by clocks
and we are at that point again.
Let's you and I be in charge this time
and not the clicking of some carnival wheel;
let's find a different game of chance,
one with only cupie dolls as prizes.

TABULA RASA

My infant child is long and will not fit
to lie wholly on my lap and look at me.
Against my chest, she thinks I am her mother
for a moment: her mouth moves toward, then away.
Doors slam and her hands attack the air
in fear of falling. So slight,
her nostrils quiver, searching.
Sights sink into pools that are her eyes
and two dark discs circumnavigate my face.

As horizons glimmer and shores grow bright,
the sunlit world is breaking in her face.

TWINS

Their mother dressed them both alike, but took
her favorite: younger by a minute, never from
her sight until the day she failed to look,
and found to death her only son succumbed.

The mirror image broken in his eyes,
survivor, left alone, misunderstood,
he grew past twenty searching for the ties
that once entwined unequal brotherhood.

On two-lane highway, he was nearly taken
by onward truck, unconsciousness as guide.
Approaching death, he would not let be shaken
his need to see the face of him who died.

The eyes in glazed stare met his. He thought
he saw, reflected back, the one he sought.

THE DANCING MADONNA

The floral couch is pushed against the wall
where windows reach the ceiling. Underneath,
its branches bowing, gracing glass, in all
of spring, the tree on genuflected knee.

She kneels on cushions, crouched up to the pane,
and cradles pad and pen like broken glass.
From outside streets she's pictured in a frame:
a simple poet gluing back her past.

As evening comes, the leaves remain at prayer
before this fair madonna and her poems.
Creating dancing pictures, feelings bared,
she writes until the moon has found her home.

This ballet makes her sleep. She dreams of words
in pas de deux, and wakes to rich rewards.

(UNTITLED)

Familiarity will breed contempt,
it's said, and foster ill between those who
once loved. From laws like this we're not exempt;
at times I've thought that nothing else was true.

Within the womb that is our home, we've grown
into each other's darkest parts. Our roots,
in thirsty seeking, wandered forth to know
from where the other got its stranger fruit.

Like Alice we have tasted what was found,
and lived to see ourselves outgrow our walls;
we've chased imagined rabbits to the ground,
and took, down different holes, our separate falls.

I want that you will know I will not quit,
our roots are thread together, tightly knit.

INSTINCTIVELY

In early May, the caribou in herds
of hundreds rushes over frozen soil.
Without her mate, she leaves behind the birds
just now returned: to northward instinct loyal.

In width from side to side the Porcupine
is half a mile and thawing fast to ice
in blocks. Her heaving belly is her sign
to risk the swim. Like tossing of the dice,

where some are lucky, some are lost to fate,
here many drown and sink between the rush
of gushing water, carried down by weight
of young inside whose pull replaces push.

Survivors don't look back, but stretch their necks
out front, and listen for the murmur of their sex.

DUST TO DUST

So, to avoid talking transcendently,
my wife explained that everyone
goes to sleep forever, and they
are then put into the ground.

Well, one thing led to another,
and soon people weren't "buried" there,
in that big green field by our house,
but rather "planted,"
waiting to germinate.

So, now philosophy classes are held
outside our windows: lengthy
discussions among the very young,
after which the neighbors give us strange stares,
then try to reinstate heaven where
my daughter has posited a flower.

WRITING POEMS

They don't flutter visibly through the air
or filter through a cracked cloud,
all golden against a blue sky.

Nor do they sing in my head;
they don't bounce or roll around
like gumballs in a runaway machine.

The words lie all bunched together
waiting for a penniless child
to smash the glass with a baseball bat.

ROCKER

Back when you sat, a wallflower of old wood,
on top of the table, I saw your possibilities.
I snatched you up for the price and brought you home.
A refugee from many little girls' rooms,
spray painted pink a dozen times,
you had seen many adolescent tears.

At first we were not friendly.
I drenched you in harsh chemicals and rubbed you with steel.
You came back, though, bare and clean, rungs straight.
I got gentler as I saw your newer skin,
and you responded well. Smoothing the rough spots,
I sanded your every surface, soothing you.

Now, beneath us both, the earth rocks
in a rhythm only we can understand.

A CRAFTS FAIR SIGN

"Batik on 100% cotton...
Machine wash in cold water, tumble dry.
Pure vegetable dyes, hand made.
Master Charge and Visa accepted."

The artisans of denim, leather,
and dirty hands have come
from a dozen states. They look
young even when they are not.
I am on this side of the table
and have paid a dollar-fifty to get in.
I admire the work of those
who create and hang their art.
They are in touch with nature, and
I am in touch with the suburbs.
I meet an old college friend
displaying his original dulcimers.
We have little to say any more,
but we converse better when
a credit card comes between us.

REQUIEM

The avocado tree is dead - finally.
Tonight I called it a "goner" to its face,
my wife shuddered at my insensitivity.

Personally, I'm sick of the damn thing,
I did everything I knew how
to keep it alive, and from floundering.

Four years from the pit; the money we spent
on pots and more pots and fertilizer!
Little by little before our eyes it withered and went.

"Fuck you!" I scream to it now as I pass,
"A lot of gratitude you've shown.
If you had one, I'd kick you in the ass."

I guess I can't take it when things die,
especially after I've nurtured them.
I don't whimper, I demand to know why.

SONNET FOR A MISSIONARY'S CHILD

"A three week infant was among the slain."
The details of your death made news today;
the Post, however, failed to give a name.
For us who learned, anonymous you'll stay.

Rhodesia seems to me a world apart
from us. The black and white of news may bring
it closer. News of death is dormant. Heart-
felt sorrow seldom wings its way, or sings

to us. Racial hatred kindles wood
gone dry, and fire burns in minds of men
who think they love their country as they should,
but only love the lust of murder. When

they saw your tiny eyes of tiny sight,
their vision warped, they bayoneted light.

A SEA CHANGE

"Open this door for me," he said.

"I cannot take the darkness any more.
Existing here I might as well be dead.

"This union has become a bleeding sore.
She's not the one who took the key,
she's not the one who closed the door.

"In here I have forgotten which was me,
confusing clothes and hangers for what's real.
Now I know I want to let it be.

"I must get out before the seal
is set so tight I'll never let
the wound get air and start to heal."

Out of the closet, he met his wife,
kissed her soft and took a man instead,
and paid himself the debt that was his life.

WE TEACHERS

We teachers, masked and holding coiled whips,
walk gingerly around the cage. We tease
the audience, the captives in our grip -
a combination spectator and beast.

They look attentive, staring, unperturbed
by sudden movements - rabid zombies all.
By us their savage appetites are curbed.
We make them jump the hoop and toss the ball.

This bare and barren stage a lion's den;
like Daniel we're aware of our demise,
no whispered prayers will come to rescue then;
the beasts will tear us up, exposing lies.

They'll come upon decayed machinery,
beneath the plastic flesh - chicanery!

RADIOACTIVE HARVEST

In Monticello, Utah, children go
about their business being unaware.
Their parents have no business being so,
but never knew they had a cause to care.

Astronomy's muse, Urania, deceived
herself. Convinced it was a gift, she blessed
the underground with precious ore; she weaved
a tangled web of human veins enmeshed.

Pandora never dreamed or else she'd known,
for nightmares visit all of those who sleep.
Far worse than evil, worse than cries and moans,
her curiosity has grown, roots deep.

In ignorance no less than Greeks, today
while mining "gold", we our children slay.

ANNUALS

I

In summer, bats in blind obedience
to night, flutter overhead in flocks
of hundreds, coming down along the fence.
They circle round and round like erring clocks.

Against a chalky sky, their whooping wings,
like brittle inky tents or hands outstretched,
are bent away from me. The bamboo sings
and sways, on clouds its tiny fingers etched.

I startle them, I think. They rearrange
themselves, alighting on the fence to face
me now. Like flickering gems their eyes can change
from dark to light, though cannot see a trace.

Crescendo builds, their humming growing loud;
they bore a hole into the gathering clouds.

II

The cars in streams come flowing from the towns,
and wind their ways up mountain sides in floods
to pay the toll and see the Blue Ridge. Browns
and golds and amber leaves hang thick on woods.

Our faith the mountains move, drifting dreams
of crazy colored waves. A highway swerves
before us, running soft, itself a stream.
With care we navigate the concrete curves.

This fluid landscape is a painter's prayer:
a palette of a million colored swirls
all blended randomly, in waiting where
a brush can drink in deeply of this world.

From windows of the car our souls we wave,
retrieving rainbows worth a year, to save.

III

Inside, the cold that caught us by surprise
is seeping in our car, wrapped with hours
of icicles. The earlier crystal skies
have shut us up in cold gray icebox doors.

Adventurous more than we, some
are lost along the highway. Staying still,
obeying warnings on the news, more numb
we grow; we think of pitting cold to will.

Miraged, they trudge through snow a mile deep
and sink with every step; then reappear
like sunken ships dislodged. The drifting heaps
move somberly as if bearing shrouded biers.

Behind the rescuers (descending swarms),
the winter sun is setting, glowing warmth.

IV

The snow is near completely gone away,
and grass begins to cover the garden plot.
(While hair on my head thins out, won't stay
no matter how it's wished.) Outside in the lot,

the ground is soft to touch. Already the order
for new and virgin seeds arrives. I've planned
where different rows will go and built the border
(in my mind, at least), and finished saving cans

and labeled sticks for what will come up where.
Each year, just now, I freeze in fear
of turning over dirt, and leaving bare
those seeds whose sleep has been a year.

Again, I know, they'll volunteer to show
me how to resurrect from sleep, and grow.