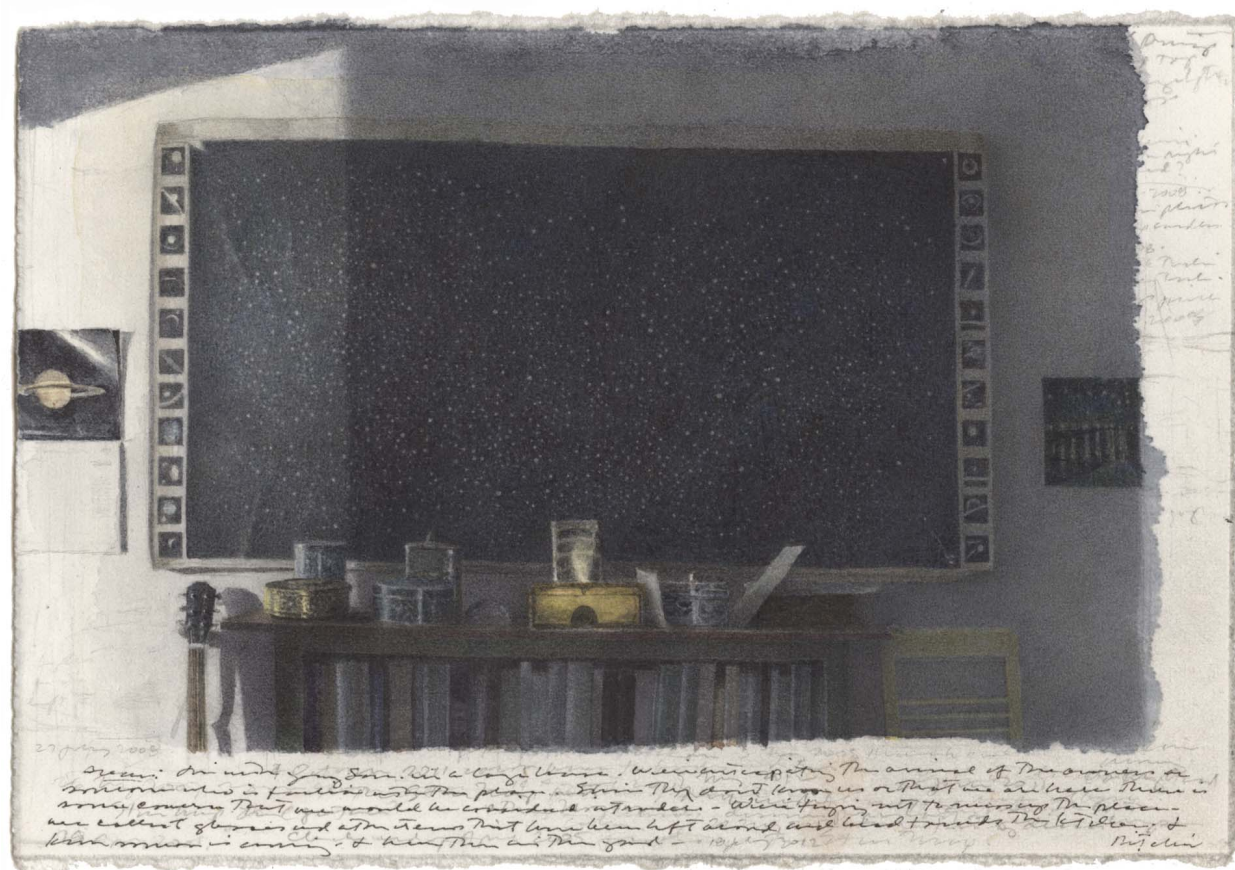




## **miniatures**

adj.(esp. of a replica of something)  
of a much smaller size than normal

Poems by  
Andrew Benbow



*The Star Map* by Charles Ritchie  
watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper  
image: 4 x 6", sheet: 4 x 6", frame: 11 x 14"  
private collection, 2012.1.7

On Viewing Charles Ritchie's "The Star Map"

Is this the universal patience of painters?  
A black business card  
speckled in a white mist  
of blank paper.  
The cosmic shadows of mythic warriors,  
supernovas, and god-beasts tangle in a mess of intersecting lines  
and make me a titan.  
This is a complete directory of the known universe.  
It is the size of a peppered sirloin steak.

In years before dawn,  
dabbing, blotting by needlepoint,  
brushing between heartbeats,  
shall the colossal spread of the night sky  
come simply to this?  
And if we shall be made atoms  
by a painter  
in his study,  
who will say we are not  
the blessed of the Earth?

Zucchini

It's the size of my arm-- if I had elephantiasis.  
You never want a zucchini to get this big  
because a zucchini this size ceases tasting quite  
like a zucchini, but, instead, more like  
crunchy water. It's a rule  
my garden taught me:  
the smaller fruits  
simply tasted  
better.

At parties  
the baby carrots and bitesized muffins are the first to go,  
followed by the donut holes and cherry tomatoes.  
This is all self evident;  
we will slog through trays of shot glasses  
but linger over a single glass of wine  
and the best chocolates come like vitamins.

Can we blame ourselves  
for craving a thousand beautiful meals in every mouthful?  
Zucchini's are most  
beloved as dust in baked breads;  
dead, we're no different.



Diabetes

My grandmother demonstrated to me  
the taste of her diabetes:

Diet Vernors, Zebra Cakes, and Jiff.  
Dinners at Tripps or O'Charlie's,  
and a night-in watching Survivor.

This is to say she practiced  
a mysterious form of restraint,  
and then taught it to me.

Flora and Fauna

After ten days of swallowing the white  
bits of mold tasting of oranges to kill  
the colonized ache and swell in my bite  
and all else throughout the wide winding fill  
of my terrain, I take only moments  
devouring living dishes in rot:  
festered beans and soured apples, in fits,  
to re-infect the linings of my guts,

and I ask myself which of us is the  
more desperate (or mad) that, along with our  
strand, we would lodge ourselves so stubbornly  
in the most hopeless of cavities for  
nothing more than food or shelter? Surely,  
it's me. I've ended trillions for me.

Wild Sage

Groping through the thrush of rough limbs  
dead and bare to the root, but  
for a few sprigs of yellowed elf-ear leaves  
peeking their tips above the whorls of  
grey and spotted limbs  
bobbing rigidly like drowning sailors  
flung far from any ship or shore  
clinging to their thinning tether,  
I drive my steel kingfisher jaws  
into the trembling tornado of elder stalks  
and bite down,

and bite down again,  
tossing skyward, and probing deeper the dry grass  
until I've splayed open the wooden sinews  
and uncovered the velvet green heart of live sprouts  
which are gasping and dizzy,  
to the fresh morning sun, the oranged and blue bruised sky  
which is blooming and golden,  
and I walk away.

I think all things must  
sometimes be completely broken  
so they may be loved.

Qu

The strange things we do with our bodies.  
The soothing clucks and chuckles we save for tiny things,  
like pocket watches, buttons, chick peas and dumplings.  
The queer sounds of wet and warm in the velvet dark pockets of our mouths  
were made for sharing.  
Sucking candy on a fence  
and showing off the songbird colors of your tongue,  
or, whispering, touching your lip to somebody's ear.  
Swapping recipes, sharing tastes,  
sharing spit.  
Breath.

I first learned how to pronounce HELL-uh-COP-tur  
in third grade speech therapy,  
in the air-conditioned pack of trailers behind the gym.  
It was where the girls bit their lips over "faces"  
and the boys turned "cry" into  
a tiny sigh,  
a question,  
sounding of "Quy? Quy? Quy?"

One of the first things I knew by heart  
was the sound made by  
"Qu,"  
the soft kiss we give to the air  
with "qualify" or "question."  
It was in the sound of chewing wads of honeycomb  
and sucking wax out from between your teeth,  
the color of the little pink droplet in the back of a yawning baby's mouth.  
Two letters the taste of a root beer hard candy.

Once a child drew me a picture  
of his ideal friendship.  
One that does everything together.  
Plays tag in an empty bus shelter,  
shoots the moon with rubber bands and bottle rockets,  
slathers the town in whatever garish tone of rose and ramble they want,  
and get away with it.  
It was just two letters:

Qu.

Fruit in Still Life

No one would want these apples—  
oily green and blushing,  
rubbed in pastel like caked mud.  
I think they would taste  
like chalk  
auditioning as apples.

If I squint  
in the frame, I don't see anything  
my grandfather might have eaten  
in a clay coated tobacco field.

Pulled from his deep overall pocket  
is the glossed red pearl  
fresh from the jaw of light blue lint.  
In spring, the wasps  
would have laid their eggs beneath  
the skin, until the yellowed and pocked  
blisters bulge out like warts  
tasting of woodchips and wine.  
It was warm to the touch.

I refuse to see any of this  
in the muddy canvas,  
or the frame  
so obviously from AC Moore,  
I hold this is merely an insult resting on top of a piano,  
but I am too weak  
for my own memory.  
And I nearly bought it.

Seven Haikus for Tanizaki

White cherry blossoms  
beneath a streetlamp; I'm cursed  
by Tanizaki.

White paper *shoji*  
framed in dark wooden crosses  
over Wal-Mart's doors.

Bashō would be proud—  
Tanizaki built his home  
among skyscrapers.

Specter in the night—  
heavy plate armor of a  
blooming cherry tree.

The glory of filth:  
the lines of dirt packed under  
her translucent nails.

Stern black lines, milky  
pale walls— I could see myself  
living in this box.

What martyred itself  
so elegance was frigid?  
Was it just in bloom?

Jump

In between the smog and the cement  
we fall into the rhythm of the blacktop  
slapped and sliced by the rhythm of the rope  
and spit the songs our sisters taught us.

After we scrape our palms,  
we mix our blood in a handshake  
and say we real close,  
the scabs that dry and glass over  
in a week drop like dead bugs.

When it's hot out, we drown the sweat  
with more sweat.

When it's wet out, we wish our mammas  
got more rest.

When it's cold, we cry over the high-rises  
so the folks inside can read our white names  
among the snow that's falling by their windows.

Sculpting

I compose  
with bodies.

The frame  
of your body  
couched  
within my word  
and these moments  
that follow waking  
are my sculpture.



World Pantry

1

In the dated pictures of men  
constructing the Empire State Building  
you can clearly see  
the worker's hands  
were slices of bread.

Unharnessed and embracing each others oily arms and  
salted skin on those precarious red I-beams,  
those tinker toys cut against the chasm of the sky  
where they would sit and chew on empty sweet things  
from their steel-cut lunchboxes,  
the whites lining their smiles were smooth stones of salt.

2

On the side of a brambly hill,  
grey, shaggy with frost and dead grass,  
we rolled trunks and logs into a hydraulic  
splitter.

Our sweat pops out of our pores  
like fountains of champagne bubbles.  
We cut the monotonous drone of the diesel engine  
by couching our ears in rounds of donuts.

We looked forward to the kitchen,  
the egg noodles like helical half twists  
drizzled in butter and salt;  
the toasted and crumbling everything-bagels  
encrusting our fingers with poppy seeds,  
the little cubes of garlic,  
smears of butter. Orangey cheese quesadillas  
burnt black and smoky on his mother's  
gigantic grease filmed gas range.

The craning sunflower sprouts giggled at our  
gangly sausage link limbs  
as they pulled and prodded and wrestled logs  
into the macerating metal jaws that were never full.

3

The world is made up of three main ingredients:  
bread, oil, and salt.

We, also, are of three parts:  
flesh, blood, and bone.

Americana

Let's play "Heads I Win, Tails You Lose"  
with our missiles neck deep in the Red Sea.  
Soviet space shuttles unfold their long olive wings but  
the planets already revolve around Florida.

With our missiles neck deep in the Red Sea  
Eisenhower waved to us from the moon, where  
the planets already revolve around Florida.  
I looked through the sextant,

Eisenhower waved to us from the moon, where  
this was a charm to ward off evil.  
I looked through the sextant,  
the coin, the tiny hole between LIB ERTY,

this was a charm to ward off evil.  
Dominoes, airplanes and warheads fell into  
the coin, the tiny hole between LIB ERTY,  
but everything has stayed the same.

Dominoes, airplanes and warheads fell into  
the ocean to remind us of our commitments.  
But everything has stayed the same,  
we wear the same clothes, carry the same pocket change to watch

the ocean to remind us of our commitments.  
There's no dark conspiracy;  
we wear the same clothes, carry the same pocket change to watch  
the flaming tails of rockets piercing the sky as we wish we were on top.

There's no dark conspiracy  
consuming the moon, or the canvas overhead freckled with  
the flaming tails of rockets piercing the sky as we wish we were on top.  
This is the way it works everywhere. Except for the red one we missed.



The Dangers of Reading

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark  
is dead  
and I'm cradling the knife,  
gazing at it  
as one would a glossy ripe strawberry.

You are my accomplice  
daydreaming and patiently  
sniffing page after page of you paperback.

The quivering names on a page  
are a very private affair  
we choose to believe.

In our minds,  
we killed him the same way we made him:  
he was dead with the very notion  
of what we've read  
and we buried them all;  
*[Exeunt]*

Sea Side

Three of them,  
the long and bony sister with  
a halo of woven straw round her head  
is standing beside her young brothers,  
two dusty pasture boys  
in baggy rolled up overalls.

The generations of greasy Oak Ridge fingers  
have passed this around the table,  
everybody pinching the corners after supper  
and tapping underneath each young chin  
naming the faces out loud.

Lightbooth

Little black box  
suspended in the sky.  
Box I like to hide in. Box  
no one can enter. Box with  
lights on the outside  
I control.

Out from the void  
I pull the ropes and chains  
that hold to the ground  
and unfold the streaming  
sky in shades of blue,  
and blue fabric, and curtains,  
and light. And I invite the legions  
of devout and white robed  
who merely rent this space,  
the stage I made for them.

They can't see me.  
They don't hear me,  
even if I were to speak.  
I may not even exist  
to that great Him of whom they whisper.

I am a curse,  
and yet we all are blessed;  
and everything we see and receive is blessed,  
and all in the light of Heaven and Earth is blessed,  
and in this grand theatre of my making,  
I am He who anoints.

American Course

*Written using the prisoner's constraint, which assumes the speaker has very little paper, and must conserve space. (i.e. writing without the use of the letters b,d,f,g,h,j,k,l,p,q,t,y, which have stems that extend above and below the main body of the letter).*

*sun-course i. nov. sunrise.* no crewmen saw us come on. seas are an in azure coma. warm. no coarse airs. we are unseen even now in our narrow crevice near some cases o' cure-cunner so we can consume some sea cuisine. wise seamen rumor over ocean omens, crimson suns & sea vixen romances, so we muse over our anxious course: ensconce on a crown's scooner & rove across oceans on a course 4 america. are we so insane as 2 imagine our move a success? sure. even so, we own no sincere recourse & ransom irons & iron screens are secure insurance, a sea souvenir, even.—*sun-course iv. one in morn.* a moan near us rouses us in noir. we saw no source, so we cower w/ our noses in rosin & reason our ruin. so soon were we mince scooner vermin! soon, i sense a curious noise: *mews & meows*. on a case over me cranium, i saw 2 eerie moss moons & saw a mere siamese mouser. our aroma can uncover us in our crevice as we snooze. we convince 'er 2 remain w/ us w/ our sea cuisine & some cream we saw in a case. —*sun-course xx.* we are in sour seas o' ice. no snooze'n, even w/ our mouser. we are nauseous & we sneeze in noxious air. we are anxious some coxswains sense our noises. our marrows are so raw, we crave some warm. i cozen some sacs o' rice so we can cram our nauseous arses in 'em. some seamen rumor we are near america, 'owever no one can see in rains & snows, no one is sure. we curse our sour veins. ice. ice. ice. now we snooze.— *sun-course xxi.* we are arinse in ocean sauce. near noon, a noise rose us in a snooze. over our case, we saw crewmen say our scow was in a sea-course once more. once more! oversnooze! we were unmoorin' in america. so we ran. we rise over our scooner, we weave in roarin' crewmen, over the rim & nose in an azure american ocean.



Black Box With a Red Button

You are empty.  
You are useless.  
I know this.  
I made you that way.

Yet,  
people are nervous  
when I press you  
into their hand,  
waiting  
for the sudden  
lurch  
of some horror, thinking

the silent movie villain  
slips you from his labcoat  
slowly. Slower still,  
and dark.  
Twitchy thumb, twitchy smile.

However,  
I cannot speak for the silent death, or  
when marble bodies are found swollen  
and floating-- the unsolved, gentle  
easings between sheets,  
the pulsing moments after  
I've pressed you  
and waited.

Levi's Theory of Consciousness

My father taught me how to make trees laugh—  
how to make maples red in the face,  
and make pines shake off their sheaves of whiskers  
by standing in a clearing, and waiting.

Waiting for the sound of the distant hint of wind whispering  
first between the furthest hills,  
then over the fragile green cones of pines,  
through the wild reaching arms of oaks and maples  
closer and closer, waiting, rooted and still,  
right up until that moment where the wind  
seemed to die just before you  
and then yelling out the dumbest joke  
you can imagine;

What do you call a guy with a rubber toe!  
What do you call a guy hanging on the wall!  
Roberto! Art! Orange you glad I'm a banana!  
and then we crash backfirst into the storm of leaves, twigs,  
the little bits of bark and sap, as the trunks quiver and crackle with laughter.

Unsorted Haikus

Sometimes, I will lie.  
Moths may chase a flame so long  
before themselves bursting.

I hate my father.  
Tearing out grass  
to make space for my garden.

Snowfall in April;  
a crow hops from cherry  
bough to cherry bough.

Revolution

“America is a place where the Old World shipwrecked.”  
Charles Simic

King Louis XVI’s head is rolling down a string,  
and back up again,  
and now it’s walking the dog.

Two children pause at a toyshop window— their mother looks down and says  
*Vous pouvez attendre jusqu'à Noël*. Frowning, they count up the contents of their pockets:  
a few violet seeds, four golden dog hairs, a rough knotted cord, and two silver crowns.

The toys our great-grandparents laid down as children  
are propped up on our mantles and tucked into the corners of our jewelry boxes;  
our household museums are decorated with Victorian trash previously owned by French dogs.

There is a portrait of the French prince, a wooden yo-yo hanging down from his milky hand.  
The children must have felt something in the streets. Kids don’t just dream up ideas like this.  
Down, up, walk the dog, tie the knot and wrap it tight, catch the crown and toss him down.

Liberty spins and wobbles down dark alleys; a yo-yo made of two coins with a king’s silver face  
hangs, suspended, midair with a jerk all comes running freely up, back to the child’s little palm.

Demi

She loved her mother  
but she stepped on cracks anyways.  
It would be ridiculous to believe  
one person could do something  
so remote. Besides, she broke her back  
before she was a mother. That was as good  
as a free pass.

Here is where she comes from:  
the little reliquary above the fireplace  
is carefully arranged with tarnished cups,  
several candles in crystal,  
and a wooden box  
holding a silver crucifix  
and the blue eye  
of a peacock feather.

In the pink hat box,  
deep in her mother's walk-in closet,  
she found dated guide to lady's courting  
which reads *morale is a woman's business*,  
and she kept it.

She played indoors with paper and ink,  
drawing impossible women in beautiful clothes  
who wield umbrellas like monstrous blooming flowers.  
Each turned to gaze back at her  
as if through built up layers  
of city brick, and mirrored glass,  
smoke and steam,  
their blazing ruby lips parting to speak,  
or return her smile.

On the nights her mother goes out,  
she swaddles herself in the big bed  
tucked under a blanket tent with a flashlight.

She could make herself glow  
through the skin,  
and in the late hours  
beneath the dim flashlight,  
she examined the branches

like an open road map  
red and blue  
just beneath the skin of her palms,  
and wondered to herself,  
“When does anyone know their passion?”

Stone Garden

Some hold life in their root;  
these plotted rows of tubers  
sprout and bloom overnight  
through ritual, the marble petals  
bearing the names or faces  
of their sleeping roots.

Three Haikus On Writing Poetry

It would be simpler  
bearing a window screen towards  
the waves to catch salt.

That way, when I'm soaked,  
I won't know if it's from tears,  
or just the ocean.

I will write all my  
poems into the sand and watch  
if the tide stops short.