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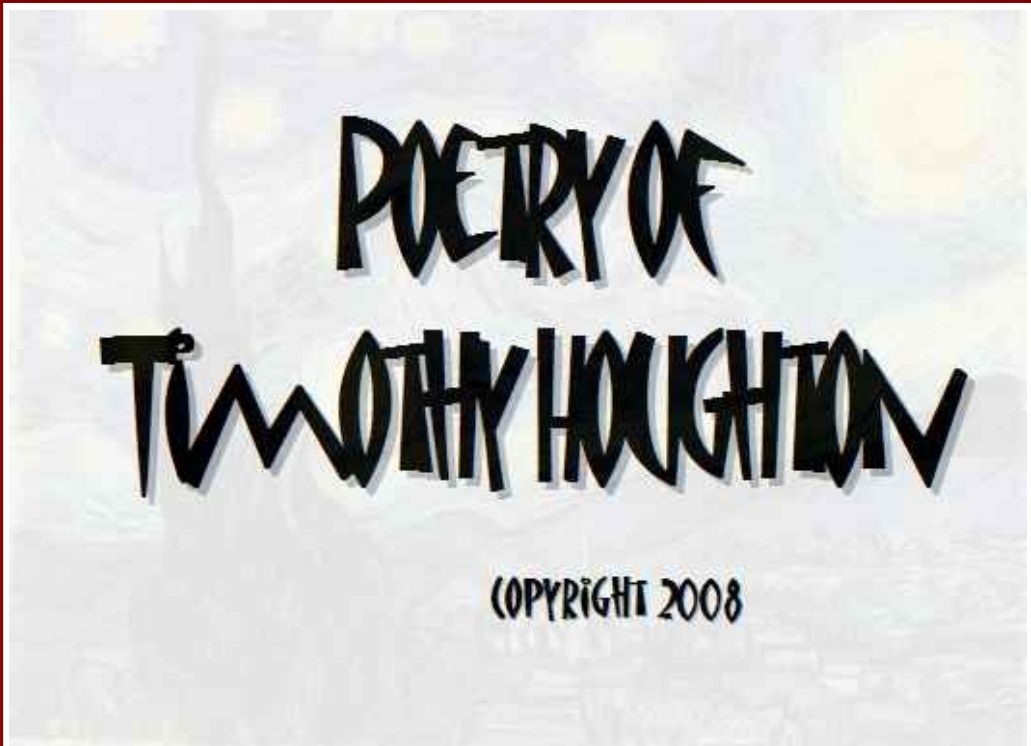
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Middle-Aged Karaoke

A big woman jumps
out of a booth

deftly, avoiding
tabletop and plastic
vines behind her head.

In the chrome diner
she sways at a microphone

singing "Daydream Believer,"
The Monkees' best song.

She's a slow tsunami,
same as me, though I sway

sitting down, enervated
by many drinks. Her friend

--a girls' night out--
closes the paper umbrella

above the rim of a mug
and waits her turn.

I envy their courage.

It's early evening.
I'm the only one watching.

Spillway

I can't lift beers--I can't
drink without spilling.

When beer runs out my mouth
down my chin

to soak absorbent cotton
--I know I'm alive.

I do it for freedom, asserting
presence,

reaction. Anger too
explains the decisive quality

of such joy. Teeth clenched
and abraded by day

are raised and open at night
beneath the cans.
Such rebellion is small, a fit
for democracy.

Ode to the Legend Itself

or Jimmy Pichford

The mean guy entered
the sporting goods with stories around him

like a snarl of Dobermans
leashed to his fists. Black discs

a little bigger than eyes--his sunglasses
distilled menace against the pale expanse of his face

while I folded shirts
and peeked. Jimmy had the world framed

in those glasses--in sinister, circular
perfection. They seemed to motor him, his bulk

stretching a sweaty undershirt
to the limit, overhanging

dirty white shorts--not as funny
as it should have been. I forgot to mention

the immensity
of his emergence from a tiny MG

with top down. He walked with grace
on his way to the door: poise

of the absolute. Above his sandals, summer itself
lay in fear--a shivering glare.

The Bosses

Those you envy
stare first

at animal heads
mounted above the door

then drop their eyes
on you,

looking for purity. The soft
killer tapping

of their fingertips
on palm computers

spells your name.

Corrupt Administrators

We know you're the polar regions,
hugely expanded

on a flat map,

or digital squeal,
a malfunctioning

answering machine--

what
were you

before? Does the word *choice*
inhabit your character?

People worry
about their futures

under your shadows. You've hoarded

a lifetime of slights
and harnessed

a subtle intelligence
for potion and power--

we call it *spin*.

We buy it or lose,
and lose by choice.

Road Cut

exposed by demolition

Dad, here's a design once pounded by winds,
its life taken by minerals --
a fern you'd find in any wet woods, except the skilled
rock that explains it.

Perhaps now you're located to know
how sky resembled blue-grey shale
after the asteroid hit Yucatan.

~

One Sunday he
pretended -- too much hesitance, too much effort
on display. He knew it was *the last time*
before I knew it, the smile on his face
both acted and felt, the anxiety
a templet --

the hospital room won't leave my mind
(window, light, five people,
the terrible matte texture
of space itself),

a dwelling for many years -- not every day,
just off and on like long-wave peaks from a resting brain
hooked to an EEG.

I've tried often to put myself in his place,
to understand his trial, his mind
with body stuck on a bed,
trying to think
beyond the limits
of empathy, in order to carry him forward.

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Timothy Houghton's latest book of poems is *Drop Light* (2005, Orchises), and he worked on poems for that book at The MacDowell Colony and Hawthornden Castle International Retreat. Relatively recent reviews of DL appeared in *The Literary Review* and *Chelsea*. Poems have recently been published in such magazines as *Chelsea* and *Stand Magazine*. He lives in Baltimore where he teaches at Loyola University. He also leads local birding hikes for Audubon.