

Dedications

To Dr. Sean Keck, or *Sean*, for your willingness to begin this entire process nearly two years ago in the Fall of 2020. Many, including my cohort, will call me crazy for jumping the gun on this project a year ahead of schedule, but you never did, and *that* has made all the difference. Thank you for always being open to a raincheck or an extended deadline, despite the fact that I set those deadlines for myself yet still couldn't keep them at times. There is a blurry line between allowing the chaos of a Grad student to fizz itself out and knowing when to intervene, and you have toed that line masterfully. This volume would not be possible without your belief in me and my craft. Thank you for every Zoom session, every line edit, and my own personal favorite, every theory as to what my poetry “means.”

To Dr. Amanda Kellogg and Dr. Jolanta Wawrzycka, for jumping into a creative thesis as expansive and ambitious as this one has been for me. Thank you for your commitment to my integrity as a poet, a writer, and an artist. To have such talented and impressive professors on my committee as you both has been an honor I still can't quite believe but am deeply appreciative of.

To my soulmate and best friend, Caitlin, for all the late nights, the laughs, and the silent yet unshakable support you have given me over the years.

To my two kittens, Goku and Chi Chi, who will never read this but have shown unflinching devotion to me and this project through silent and cuddly company in late hours.

To myself—it's been a wild ride getting here, but I couldn't be prouder of you. I know past us is dreaming of us and where we are now, hoping to one day find something we could pour our soul into and make something remarkable out of it—something that would spark the same inspiration and hope in someone else. Well, I think we've done it.

And last, but certainly not least, to Dr. Louis Gallo, or *Lou*. I am truly blessed to have found a mentor and a kindred spirit in you, dear friend, for without your brilliance and care I may never have found the poet within. I have learned more about life, love, pain, and poetry than I can ever express in this dedication or this volume thanks to you and your classroom. I am but one of the thousands of students over the years who has been forever changed by your dedication to the craft, the art, the therapy, and the lifeforce that is POETRY. All that is left to say is *thank you, thank you, thank you.*

Author's Note

I remember signing up for ENGL 310: Poetry Writing my junior year of college at Radford University with the assumption that poetry's only function was to find complicated ways to say simple things. Poetry was a writer's handicap for reaching their audience. For a writer to be confined by what I believed were the "rules" of poetry, such as meter or syllables or rhyme schemes, was the equivalent of tying your shoes one-handed and blindfolded. These "rules" that I believed constituted poetry served no purpose that I could discern besides creating a challenge that the poet could boast about overcoming, displaying their impressive writing prowess. However, I felt this challenge also limited a poet's audience to the mere few who were chosen at birth by a higher power to Understand the complexity of poetry or the tenured professors who somehow always knew the true purpose behind author symbolism. I took zero interest in rising to the challenge and held my beliefs tightly for years. In fact, the only poetry that ever landed in front of me in my 21 years of living was either Shakespearean sonnets, haikus, or the occasional Dr. Seuss, and while those had their own merit, I didn't feel they were necessary to my growth as a person, from a child to a young adult entering the "real world." I assumed my public education was intentionally limited this way because educators and school board members knew what I did—poetry was nonessential. It may be entertaining, head-scratchingly difficult to understand at times, and maybe even moving, but nonessential.

Despite all of what I thought I knew about poetry, when I walked across campus to my Poetry Writing course for the very first time, I tried to remain optimistic. I figured I'd have to sit and listen to my professor drone on about the syllabus and maybe they'd dip their toes into a lecture about the underlying brilliance of Rupi Kaur for almost an hour. Then, I'd be assigned close reading exercises about the Sonnets for homework. It would be a long Fall semester, but I knew I could manage. In fact, I signed up for Poetry Writing so that I could say to anyone who asked that I had *at least* given it a chance, but it just wasn't for me. Thankfully, this was one of those moments when life humbles you to the fact that you know *absolutely nothing*.

Lou and the course itself were nothing like I had envisioned. That first class meeting felt more like a jumbled ball of strung together concepts from philosophy, psychology, astronomy, and biology than anything remotely related to English. The professor wasn't the stiff, wood plank kind of guy that I expected. He wasn't wearing a two-piece suit, standing in front of a dusty podium, eager for the student that was talking to cease so that he could continue enjoying the sound of his own voice. He wasn't even the kind of guy who requires his own book as the textbook for the course. Lou was in (what I now know is his typical look) a simple get-up, comfortably sitting at the head of the class like a 21st century monk or a charmingly quiet turtle rather than a professor, and he used his voice to methodically probe us, the students, for our thoughts on the most recent election, veganism, and even particle science. "Does anyone know what a QUARK is?" Almost every student looked just as confused as I was. Others were already disassociating to think about dinner or barhopping later that night. The class was like a slideshow of the greatest hits from a movie you'd never seen, and I was dying to see the whole picture.

Before I knew it, Lou was telling us to go enjoy the weather outside and dismissing us. A brave soul asked from the back of the classroom if we had homework due before the next class meeting. Lou told us to write a poem that Friday and every Friday thereafter so long as we were in his class. And when a different student asked *how* to write a poem, I'm fairly certain he said something along the lines of: "IMAGES, IMAGES, AND *MORE IMAGES!*"

And with that, I never looked back.

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PART ONE

Music on the Air, in Your Chest, Beside Myself

everything comes in the body of music

the way we say goodbye

the way we break apart

the way we settle down

when I look into your eyes, I hear a symphony

careening off a cliffside

the drums beating like waves against the shore

the strings, doves in the breeze

when I think of you, I hear a metronome

ticking inside its chest

muffling the world like blankets of snow

commanding an audience

when I feel you, the record stops playing

the needle falls out of track

static gnaws the eardrum

the friction overheats to combustion

when I love you, the air dies

the opera house, an empty ribcage

drawing breath for the final quarto

an encore behind the curtain

our bodies cannot contain the notes

the words have all but escaped me

I can't remember what a harpsicord sounds like

or how your hair coifs against your brow

but I am listening all the same

waiting for the sound

waiting for a sign you've come home

when we come together

say

hello, my muse

though you are much more than that

and the rhythm rolls off your silhouette in the doorway

how was the show?

The Impressionist

You're not a painter
but the downtown art gallery is showcasing your work.

You're not a painter
but you wade in color no one else sees.

You're not a painter
but your hands are stained—
it's more than just your hands.

You're not a painter
but you cast wide brushstrokes.
With every swipe, stray bristles lodge in the paint—
a thorn in supple cheek
stabbing through the canvas,
unwarranted warmth to cool tones.

You're not a painter
but you appear as one in a crowd—
all turtlenecks choke in the summer.

You're not a painter
but the curator says each piece costs a fortune,
says they'll run for \$1,500, \$2,000 a pop
as if money has anything to do with it.

You're not a painter
but you have a cult following you'll never shake loose.
They think you're brilliant at what you do

until they discover your technique.

You're not a painter
but you sketch out every constellation
in vain—
you think Alpha Cassiopeia could break
free of her bondage by morning light if only she dared.

You're not a painter
but you're not a lover or a god either.
You're someone in between—
perpetually hung between creation and destruction,
hungry for the worship
and bathed in error.

You're not a painter
but I hung your entire collection in my living room.
Every nail found its stud like a sharp thorn
breaking the fabric of night,
poking stars through plaster.

You're not a painter
but your work leaves warm stains on my walls
and I don't believe in drop cloths.
I'm chained to my lease now—
no safety deposit in my future.
I think you wanted me this way—
blind, colorless, drifting
like dying stars in morning skies.

You're not a painter

but you'll never stop painting.

I Haven't Dreamt in 96 Days

I.

Do you know what that does to a person like me?

To take the sound of life away from the musician, or color away from the artist.

It's like returning from a marathon only to fold down into a maddening crawl

heading for a quiet, dark corner of the universe on all fours—

stumbling,

obsolete.

You hit your funny bone on the way there, colliding with a meteor shower

until white static ignites down your frame, blinding,

paralyzing,

and fizzing out into the stars.

You can do nothing but crawl and pray for the next race.

II.

The world feels concave these days.

Like someone took an ice cream scoop to my brain and chucked out all the best bits.

The sprinkles, to be sure.

There are no words for this.

There is only one long, small trail of sadness,

lingering,

like a rotten potato abandoned in the pantry next to curly old onion peels,

and then the next wave of static takes over

and you forget that you've lost anything at all.

III.

You're marching into a vacuum,

but you can't stop.

It's a siren for the oblivious

fading into oblivion.

It's an empty pocket for loose change like me.

I would like to go in there.

I think I would feel at home,
even if I had nothing to say.

Finding New Alternatives to Crippling Realities (or, A Princess Swimming in White)

I.

Today I grabbed my big red pair of scissors
 from the cluttered kitchen drawer of nuts and bolts and house hardware scraps
 and, in one sweeping flurry of motion,
 cut every string of my neighbor's windchime,
 silencing the dummy cheerful racket.

Sunrise or sunset,
 a calm afternoon or a stormy night—
 the *tink*-ing flutters of fragile glass
 conquers every quiet moment in my mind
 alongside the yawning *ding~dong* of the doorbell for every package that arrives,
 the sharp *ting!* of an incoming text message,
 the chirping trills of a fake bird demanding my social media presence,
 and so on until I dream of sucking all the noise out of my apartment
 and my brain,
 as a vacuum strips waste from reality,
 and filling it with absolute silence—
 the maddening kind that people beg for release from with their hands tied
 behind their back in bleach white settings,
 only I'm begging with palms pressed together,
 eyes to the sky, knees on the dusty floor and overdue for disconnect,
 that I can one day be restless from no noise at all.

Until silence reckons with my disjointed orchestra
 and choirs of pantomiming cherubs descend from grace
 for one hell of a clean-up job,
 I'm left with my own poor coping mechanisms—
 big, red scissors

and forgoing the desire to order
or need
anything at all,
flipping my phone over,
silencing it,
turning it off or letting it run itself dead
as I have done to myself.

II.

I saw a movie the last day it was showing in theaters
to guarantee the room and the screen all to myself.
Though it lasted over two hours, for the cast of characters
it only spanned a couple of days around Christmas time.
The fake cheer from a royal family that had shunned out the main character,
deemed her a “non-starter,”
overlaid with holiday jingle bells
and the soundtrack of moaning organs screaming
alongside a stabbing harpsicord
until it crescendo’ed into violent waves of nonsensical noise
assaulting her as she fled, locking herself in small,
dark spaces to escape.

Waves of static anxiety passed over and through me
paralyzing me as I watched in horror, the screen transforming into a mirror—
as the princess grappled with the staircase railing of her childhood home
as I with my bedframe every morning,
gasping for breath around the music and her own pitter-patter heartbeat
inching closer to the top of the stairs,
or dipping my toes into the carpet every morning,
haunted with every step she takes
that one final flight down will rid her of

all.

this.

noise.

I wept into my lap in an empty theater this year
for a woman I had never known,
for a woman that I had been far too long,
and found silence in the doctor's waiting room,
resonating from the walls through all that white.

PART TWO

Blood Letting

some days I hate my ass
and other days I don't
the cross-stitch Levi Strauss himself created cups me into the shape of a woman
or so I've been told
I don't find my feet, legs, buttocks, or midriff area particularly keen
nothing too far from vanilla
until I see a sweaty man struggling to rise off the floor
despite a rotund beer gut in the soup aisle
without baring his crack for God himself to see
a perverted cleavage or precarious San Andreas fault line

and then I love myself from the waist down
hairless like a newborn baby or a goose egg
but maybe that's what the doctors and the politicians and the photographers
want me to think
that hairless means good
means I eat my cereal with a spoon
and know the difference between right and wrong
man and woman
uppers and downers
feather and quill
smart and attractive

but then I bargain favor for a loveless torso
the wire and fabric, the cage
bound across my chest that brands me woman
a straitjacket of sex for fleshy mounds filling the silk brassiere we all secretly loathe
and my hands are only feminine because the black leather gloves
on my nightstand envelope them on cold nights more than any hairy knuckle ever could

fingertips reaching a crescendo of nailbed and grace a man could never touch

and so I'm woman for my garments, battle armor, the strings and metal laced around me

not the alchemy in the heart

and so the Kool-Aid man lives for a domineering pitcher careening through cinder block

not the crimson powder it contains

it's not about the Kool-Aid or the alchemy or the blood in the Nile

but it's a damn shame the hippies and devout souls poured their hearts into a black hole named Jim Jones and took a sip anyway

their bodies strewn about the campgrounds in sacrilegious contrapposto

as I bask in the cool sheets post-shower

post-rescue mission

post-rediscovery

proving a man could ruin a nation and a dream all in His name

and life-dust is richer than poison

the photographer captures me in his ancestral wet fantasy

his camera shooting me in night light

catching the mood just right

and somehow strips me beyond naked and tells a lie all at once through ultraviolet dew

the developed pictures focus on the pillows that make this boulder a head and the valley it sits upon a collar

there's nothing to drink in this trench

and the shower head won't choke itself once and for all

the mosquito on the wall always knew better than to steal from me

I've been blood letting all these years and still haven't found a thread worth wearing

The Economy of Feminine Sex Appeal

I.

The Golden Ratio for a woman lies in bust, waist, and hips—
a delicate scale threaded by measuring tape and mere inches
pricing her worth through hands and numbers.

The value of a woman is fleeting as double exposures,
as seasonal as a naked, porcelain mannequin in the clothing store.

It takes a mathematician to calculate a woman—
an upper one percent to decide
which doll part is in Vogue this year,
how thick or thin,
how much smaller their clothes should run this quarter,
see-through like leaves of glass,
violating them in a hypocrite's mirror.

II.

women are extinct
only whores these days
rubbing their tits,
their asses,
their cunts
in a skimpy number
making voyeurs of us all
the angels we are
innocent Adams before an overbearing Eve

women are extinct
only dykes these days
hiding behind their boy haircuts,

their baggy clothes,

their education

making fools of us all

professors before an unruly child

III.

as a child, I poked and prodded my mother for answers about the universe

like why soap was made to clean our hands

the tools we wield for eating

yet we couldn't take a bite out of the lavender bars

why it wouldn't clean us on the inside

make us pure

a simple equation

$$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$$

only I subtracted for a new solution

I demanded answers

like why I had to wear dresses to church

or JCPenney photos

when their seams gave me gooseflesh and ruby rashes

and Dad's tie hypnotized my reflection

I prayed one night that I would wake up

and my mother would be better at math than my father

then she would give me answers

solve my problems—

the difference between waists and hips

knowing one was supposed to be big

the other itty bitty

why some proportions ran headlong into each other

artistic contrast
canceling each other out
multiplication and division within the same body

I begged for her to lecture me
on this one subject alone
for her to explain that the universe was mistaken
that sometimes the math was wrong
that the answer key lied

IV.

I never got the answers—
breasts and inches escaped me.
I dreamed for bigger somethings and smaller something else,
begging God to figure it out by the time I turned 13,
before the world lost sight of me,
because being a woman is a race
against time—

against aging
against sex
against attention
against irrelevancy
against expectations

Being a woman is coming out of the womb armed to fight and ask questions,
all while being shushed,
taped over the mouth, choking on a sock,
and they're pushing your fists down,
taking off the iron knuckles,
scratching your name off the ticket.

Being a woman is racing against the world ahead of the trend
all while setting ablaze the season's new line,
refusing to be the next model
to mold into a pretty shape,
like pottery,
or a naked mannequin
leaning against a broken window in an empty mall.

See the Fine Print for Details

Trust the process.

Give yourself over to a being or a system higher than you,
above clouds and skyscrapers and pencil pushing suits.

There are stages of bliss only money can buy.

Everyone is a consumer,
but only a select few become investors—
shareholders to a serenity that would make the statue of David weep tears of envy.

Nirvana, Mt. Olympus, Heaven,
whatever you need to tell yourself
to buy your subscription.

You can get a premium package at a lower rate and get upgraded parking for your trouble.
Payment plans work automatically and pull directly from your spirit bank.
If you recommend a friend who also joins,
you'll get additional features for your suite per month with only a minor service fee.

The peace you've been after is so near.

Fruity pulp won't do it,
Stretches won't do it,
Venting to your friends won't do it.
The only sure-fire guarantee is to invest now—
and if you don't like it within 30 days,
you may qualify for a full refund (see other restrictions that may apply).

Simply call us and we'll begin your paperwork.

You'll be there before you know it.

You'll forget you were ever anywhere else.

Nothing is better than this.

Don't believe us?

Start a 30-day free trial.

This offer won't last long,
and neither will you.

Gold Rush Infatuation

I keep finding love in all the wrong places—finding it, synthesizing it, and calling it organic. Dancing affection sways with the breeze, the current of the stream, as lovers pan for small nuggets under the soil. Rooted desire, or something approaching love, is found by devoted miners in deep crevices of shadow long untouched by man. I've been claiming manifest destiny in places I don't belong.

I shoved my arm, up to the elbow, in the garbage disposal for the last bite of someone else's sandwich, watching in slow motion as the motor turned on and shredded tender flesh to bone. I did this in search of a meal, ignorant of the nearby fridge full of groceries. As I sat in my living room, looping cotton bandages around the wound and oversaturating the carpet red, local news broadcasted the story of a bank robber who hustled the teller for nickels and dimes in hopes of a fortune. What he never demanded was the key to the vault out back that housed safe deposit boxes—treasure chests of immeasurable wealth. When questioned by police, for a statement on motive and his grand plan, his answers were wanting. For him, thievery was the only road untraveled. He'd worked dead end jobs all his life, scraped by for petty cash, learned valuable skills through years of self-teaching, and none of it helped. In the end, he could no longer bend and mold himself into malleable shapes with the faint possibility of reward. By robbing that bank, he said from inside his cell, he was finally getting what he deserved. I laughed at the television screen until my face was wet, my throat constricted to half its size, and my body convulsed in a jilted routine—like quarters knocking together, angled and much too big, inside the paper sleeve of a nickel roll. The sun was setting behind through shutter slats and my boots were squelching in the blood undertow.

When Alzheimer's Takes Root in Me, Will I Eat Onions and Wear Turtlenecks?

My mother always told me I was impossible to clothes shop for as a child,
said I liked watching her throw dollar bills down the drain
with each piece I took to a thrift store or never wore.

It wasn't that I flip flopped on what colors I liked wearing
or didn't appreciate the value of money
or had any ill will against my mom and this was my rebellious act.

There was just something infernal about all that fabric.

The thick branches of seams that tabby weaved
under and *over* the spotted skin of shoulder blades and armpits,
the constriction a pair of jeans wielded
no matter the fit
and how they buffed out the concavity of space
where thighs crashed together like pale battleships in the night,
or how most turtlenecks bottlenecked me into a chokehold
sweaty like a Bud Light on the countertop and
sipping for air,
or how some fabrics were too soft
or smooth
or fuzzy like a grandmother's throw pillow
despite my mother declaring there was no such thing,
only too rough,
and the look I'll never forget when I asked my mother
why soft things felt like drowning while
hundreds of red static bugs burrowed under my skin.

My mother also told me I was a picky eater

unless I was in a room with my brother.

The smell of broccoli in the cafeteria line was so harsh that
I started huffing gasoline just to keep scraps of an appetite.
I used to spit chunks of onion out of every casserole she made
until she started blending them up like cat food purée.

And I pleaded with her,
told her I'd never change
and it wasn't a phase—
that there were some things I just couldn't stand
like the way she hates
green even though that's the color of her eyes
or big purses that you could knock a full-grown man down with.

One day I wrestled into a pair of skinny jeans
and the bugs never woke up.
Another time, I craved onion rings so badly I ran
to the store and bought three jumbo bags in the frozen aisle.
It was like a stranger had strolled inside me and flipped a couple switches in the dark—
my skin could now breathe through denim
and my tongue salivated at a vegetable like they never had before.

While I'm grateful,
it also scares the daylight out of me.

Who am I if not who I have always been?

Will my body begin sliding
out of alignment
with what's in my heart, my mind, my memories?

Will I be one of those people who eats pickles straight from the jar,
tomorrow? Next week?

Is there an invisible shot clock counting down how many more times I'll enjoy

wearing sweatpants and stuffing my face with pasta?

When will one time be the last time?

I tell myself aging is not a phase,

it's a process.

I talk to my mom less these days,

but I know she barely even carries a purse most of the time and

everything in her house is blue.

PART THREE

A \$78.91 Paycheck

It was one of those jobs you take because you need the money,
 but the money you get from it isn't enough to warrant the side effects and neuroses each shift brings.
 You're supposed to drop something frozen down into vats of hot oil until the red light turns green
 and you're told to turn all the frozen drinks upside down to prove they're cold—
 which you always found ridiculous because they were usually slightly below room temperature, so you always made
 double anyway—
 and shove the cups out the drive-thru window facing up when the big boss wearing a sun visor indoors wasn't
 looking—
 like the modern milkshake was some kind of dirty secret best kept hidden from the company—
 like whoever invented ice cream was standing on the copper quarry tiles barking out combo meals and God forbid if
 they saw it leave the place through a *window* in a *cup* right ways up... because that was the odd part.

And you have a coworker whose name you never remember, and at this point it's too late to ask,
 Morgan or Megan,
 that never shuts up about some new boy she's talking to or just saw last weekend,
 and you always laugh when it's your cue but all you wanna tell her is to switch it up and go for a girl once in a while
 if only to make her storytelling a smidge better and worth listening for you,
 but also 'cause maybe they'd stick around for a few more dates if she can play her cards right.

And so, one day it's just you and Maude and sun visor,
 and the phantom inventors of ice cream watching over your shoulder as you crank out the soft serve,
 when a woman too loud for the sake of her husband's and children's eardrums orders more food for her family of 4
 than a family of 8.
 There's other meals on the screen, but the voices that placed those orders aren't making your ears ring, so they get
 pushed aside.

Only, as you're three burgers in and out of cherries,
 you notice in the flurry of hollering that you can't find Molly anywhere,
 and as you make your way to the freezer to grab tubs of vanilla—
 there she is,
 passed out,

colder than the ice cream,
on the floor,
with the walk-in door wide open.

You try to shake her awake but she just sprawls out more,
so you run back to tell sun visor and all he asks in between breaking a sleeve of quarters is,
does she have a pulse,
which really reminds you that you need to put in your two weeks' notice,
but you don't know, so you go check and
sure enough she does.

Still no movement.

You run back to update him,
but he doesn't even respond this time,
doesn't break eye contact with the next customer rattling off what *they want*,
so you go back to her and she's coming-to.
You ask her if she's ok, does she need an ambulance,
and she slurs together
no, no... my boyfriend. whatever you do, no 911. him.
Her eyes roll back and she goes limp again.

As you scroll through her phone,

Alex ❤️

Candace

Carson 🚗

Davey Boyyy

Jakey

Just Joshin' 🎮

and on down,

you gamble on the one with the most heart emojis

praying it's right as the dial tone rings.

When he later arrives, followed by the ambulance you called for anyway,
you recognize him as the busboy from your last job,
the reasons why you quit looking much more palatable now.

What the hell are you doing in this shit hole?

he asks, holding his overdosing girlfriend in his lap like it's only Thursday.

The ice cream's always warm here, too,

he adds.

He's right—it is.

I Would Apologize to You If It Meant Something, but My Head's a Fishbowl Today

I've been short with you lately,
I know—
resurrected all the old arguments
and dug until I reached paydirt to find new ones
—and I'd get down on my elbows and knees,
steeple palms together in prayer,
beg you for mercy with my draught of a soul,
but apologies are like napkins stuffed in holes
of one great big dam.

What outlines me from the rest of the world—
the bills, the flagged emails I forget to reply to,
the missed phone calls and dead car batteries
—has begun to blur,
one overloaded droplet tsunami'ed over a barrier of oil,
an endless brown sludge of watercolor rippling and staining
everything in its path.
I've traded delineation for dilution,
pouring salinity from every spilt cup of me
into the endless, flowing sea all around.

I am the bills, the bank statement overcharge reminders,
the empty takeout bags that tower over the floor
by an overflowing trash can,
the cat piss that won't clump up or evaporate already—
the printer can fill in for me while I'm gone.

So can you blame me for wanting just a moment of reckless abandon,
of running along the sea floor with an empty mason jar

and the label reading “Sanity” flapping against the current,
letting all the water rush back in,
laughing for the first time in a long time
when a clownfish scuttles inside the glass and rests
like it’s the most stable place in the whole ocean?

Telling Time One Last Time

You want to slap the strange man—snoring,
spread out like vulturous wings,
on the couch—upside the face with something heavy
but you don't know why—
or, you do, but you don't want to think *about* why
because it would lead to thoughts about what you must do with him in the end
and that's beyond your limits today.

So, you want to hit him,
but not with something heavy enough to cause serious injury
or be considered a blunt force object—
nothing to shed blood,
nothing all that violent—
more like a rough pat-down from a disgruntled drunk outside a bar
that doesn't like what you said or how you said it and,
lucky for him, his duty is to right you for your wrongs.

If you hit him, there's a very good chance he won't wake up.
His meds are to blame for that,
but even so, it itches at your already raw nerves that he
still can't be bothered to respond to you,
react to your transgressions in some way,
even physical,
and that just makes you want to hit him all the more.

It's half past two
and he has somewhere to be soon,
and he's riding on you for the trip there,
only he never sets alarms

and always leaves the minute after he should.

If he isn't up in twenty minutes, you'll hit him,
you think,
and 19 minutes and 40 odd seconds later,
sure enough,
just to be contrary and insolent,
he cracks an eye open,
finding you
preying over him
with a rubber spatula in your fist
and a gleam in your eye—
and when he asks you what time it is,
as he does every hour he's awake
despite your pleas for him to stop,
you conveniently lose track of the time
and assume it's somewhere past soon and 20-odd minutes.

A Familiar's Routine

Most days I'll take the subway to work and, en route, I'm ruffled and abraded by a sea of bodies extending to the skyscraper's tuna can elevator until the lid pops off and we all swim out like newborn great white sharks fresh from the womb, ready to strike at our own kind.

When the printer jams, a coworker slams the drawer closed and takes half my left hand with it, trading out black ink cartridges for blood red and clearing the error message on the screen. When I staple together this week's report, the metal stakes through my tender nailbed, pinning down stray cuticles as a bobby pin corrals windswept hair. When the boss hands me a cup of coffee in the break room, the points of her nails poke through the Styrofoam, sending steaming waterfalls down to my blistering wrists. When I sit down in my cubicle chair, the sandpaper backing pricks my neck at its base, and I can only hope it's an epidural—that the oversaturated sensations of the day become sepia-toned or at least partially color blind.

It's only once I take the subway back after long days like these, passing through the turnstile like an urban switch against the backs of my thighs, traipsing into the foyer of my own home, that I clock every hurt and ache I endure—from my bedroom doorway, I watch as the body lies in near-death stillness under the sheets. Each breath comes in slow, holds, and releases in a time so elapsed that the setting sun has already rested by the time it begins another intake. Its left hand is whole, its fingers unbandaged, the neck untouched, and the wrists unfolded like white linen.

I rest my head on the adjacent pillowcase, praying as I drift that it never wakes—that part of me is spared.

Do unto Pets as They Would Do unto You

When my God-fearing mother reads the local newspaper every Thursday and finds the inevitable article “Young man charged animal cruelty misdemeanor,” she throttles the paper into submission and lets it rest on the coffee table before proclaiming—

If it were up to me, they oughta beat Him to death!

28

She settles back in her recliner, the sun hitting the top of her bleach blonde and permed halo—

judge, jury, and executioner all from her La-Z-Boy throne.

What people do to animals paints their true colors—

He'd do the very same thing to a person, don't you know?

I know, Momma, I know.

But God doesn't believe in murder, and America believes in God, so they pray to his son Jesus Christ for a loophole to keep their faith and their righteousness. They think He tells them it's all right in the name of War, Self-Defense, Capital Punishment—

An eye for an eye—fair's fair.

People killing people that kill other people, or people killing people for killing dogs and cats 'cause that means they kill people too, or could, so that's basically self-defense.

Guilty until proven innocent in the name of the Lord. We're all sinners, and we all must repent, even the ones we hunt down and strap to a gurney, shoot 'em up with Pentobarbital and read them their last rights as they go. I wonder how fast you gotta pray to earn redemption in God's eyes before you start to drown on your own sins.

It's fast-food religion, and the death chamber's every convict, dog-beater, and chainsaw murderer's drive-thru.

...

When I get back to my apartment later in the evening, after the sun's set, I call out to the kittens I know are holed up in crannies somewhere. The sun rises inside me as they come out trilling, and I can't help but understand the Christians.

God doesn't believe in us anymore, but animals do, so we become their God. We decide when they eat, where they sleep, and even when they die by chemicals, too.

Judge, jury, and executioner—no matter how good or bad we treat them, our pets always come running when we get home. Will God be there at the Pearly Gates to greet the murderer in us?

I lie on my belly, face full of mulchy carpet, and pray as the little paws leave impressions over me that it's penance.

Cultivating Religion

it comes to me in big, towering shadows of church steeples
and heavy bundles along the vine waiting for harvest,
stalks quivering against the scythe,
and when the Word shrieks against the air
as the choir belts worship across my backside

these are signs that God has not yet wrung His weathered hands of me

the preacher gorges on a ripe tomato in the same fluid
motion as a reaper devours souls,
crimson sluicing down devout stubble
bathing the cleric collar in blood,
and the grandmothers force seconds and
thirds of their banana puddings and
lemon squares onto my shrinking appetite,
spare tissue in hand and bending,
aching to lunge for the apocryphal teardrop

the Lord is good
they scream
and He has a plan for me
but I envision God in bibbed overalls and a pitchfork,
thunderclouds growling over His land,
eager to dress the next pig,
serve veal like mercy—
this is how the dust bowl crippled His crop

Kidnapping in a Pasture

You expect cowboys and stallions
and tumbleweeds and silos and dusty, dirt roads
in a place like Texas, a place so removed
it shoots itself out of the modern age like buckshot or self-defense—
you do not expect to see the cross-stich of reality in Oklahoma.

The ranch, that big ol' barn with blood red paint and all,
winds around the fields and the cattle like an afterthought.
A rusty windmill hangs back, sleazes through the wind,
croaks nearly as loud as the rooster crowing, and by God
it makes your city skin crawl.

A steer busted loose, splintered the pristine, white, perfect
ghosts of fencing, and you'd be lying if you said you didn't feel the same.
When you stumble upon it, breaking neck to blue mountains a ways off
and one of those Hollywood cowboys racing behind in a close second,
your eyes are wet—blind, but seeing.

There's something akin to heartbeat in the rider's arm,
the way he pumps his blue-collar, hard-earned bicep back
to sling the lasso like a noose, keeping a low and steady rhythm
that shows you why the South fought for so long.

Rope flies across the air like a promise, a reckoning—
judgement,
and you find yourself praying against the corn fields and the
tractors and apple pies and hand-sewn doilies,
praying that Stockholm syndrome steer escapes
and no longer bats eyelashes coquettishly at its captors.

It comes down like a guillotine on the neck,
cutting off the chuck,
a wild freedom choked away—
the apple in your throat sits heavy
and you weep in front of all those American men
knowing that your meat bleeds rare too,
that the country will never let you go.

If Hell Hath Frozen Over, I Am Boxed in Ignorance

There's a cardboard box that rests over my head,
confines my shoulders so I march like a nutcracker.
It rests against my skull,
pressing harder than a crown of thorns
and with less revelation
than a halo.
It muddies my words when I speak,
what little I do speak,
and muffles my screams
like a rag in the tortured mouth.

When I ask Him to clean the sea floor,
the crust of the world,
or even the kitchen,
I know he lied
or was never there in the first place,
when the ashes of breadcrumbs wedge between my crushed
cherry tomato toes and travel with me like regret.

As the seasons change, I know only by the
crunch of the bones and leaves underfoot
or the scent of pollen and copper wafting under the lip
of cardboard that beats like a war drum against my chest,
or when the box gets soggy and limp after rainfall and the weeping of angels.

There are no soft touches of contact that settle against my skin—
the scars and scales outside the box.
The only tender spots left lie underneath,
cold and dark

like wet algae or dead tadpoles,
or forgotten seaweed that washes up to shore
abandoned by a red sea,
waiting to be picked off
by a predator that can make a meal out of this relentless storm.

PART FOUR

Drink It in, Drown, Find Me on the Floor of Paradise

I'm *fighting* you

in every jacket that word adorns, shedding layers
 as the dust settles around your mountaintop shoulders in the windowsill,
 as your fingers run across that worn notebook you hold to your chest
 filled with every desire I could never squeeze from you.

I've beaten you, pushed and shoved,
 torn my throat to shreds and left my voice in ruins,
 cried a bloody Nile and begged on bended knee,
 summoned an army to lay siege
 for your attention—
 oh, that soft fatality.
 It's barely a shift of the eye, nothing coming close
 to swimming or breathing,
 but it bruises every tender place under my skin,
 inside that cold waiting room of elbow
 and the swampy heat pooling in the small of my back.

Your eye catches mine—

the heat, the birds, the light, those pages covered in empty promises
 scatter into the air like a hiss
 or a heavy fog lifting from a steep cliff side,
 pulling up and out until we're outside the movie,
 in an aerial shot where the credits have rolled,
 and we're the blank slide when the reel keeps turning,
 the leg of film clattering against the wheel,
 stained glass shattering and my words
 vibrating into one blurry cord,
 like meteors colliding and pages turning.

We lock ourselves into a world—
 a place where we go when our eyes touch this way
 that takes me back to Kubla Khan,
 our milk of paradise,
 and we *sip, sip, sip*,
 and take a big fat drink
 of the lake we float in face down,
 the overhang of vines and telephone cords pulling our limp
 wrists and ankles through tendrils of water,
 broken toasters tangling down like pythons
 hissing against the ripples we make,
 where we wade with dead eyes and see reflections of hole punches in the sky—
they're collisions, they're disasters, it's a beginning and an end,
 all while holding our breaths,
 puffy chests in romantic rigor mortis and,
 carefully and with much disaster,
 drift through the ripples and crash,
 toasters sinking to the lake floor as sparks fly into night air
 painting friction like a struck match.

It's blindingly dark out, and it's bright,
 and the stained glass is broken around my palm,
 the wound crying blood around the sharp cheekbone of an apostle,
 and the notebook is empty, it always was,
 and your hands never left your pockets,
 your eyes in some starless place.

The fight bubbles out of me like water in the lungs,
 and the stars burn out through all that paradise,
 and I drink it in,

reaching out with one final glance
but all I can see are the afterimages of dust and
double exposures of where you once stood,
the words un-scratching themselves from the page,
the wheel turning—

of where we touched, once, but our skin had nothing to do with it,
and we blinked.

I Found You in a Bar or an Arena, Victorious, a Gladiator of Bliss and Miserable Devotion

the bartender didn't hear you the last four times

but that doesn't stop you from trying a fifth

I haven't been able to tear my eyes away from you all night

despite the busy crowd

and the exotic dancer on stage strutting through cigarette smoke and dollar bills

or the line to the john that coiled around our table and out the front door into the blizzard

there's a game on above us

overhead on the clunky plasma screen

and someone kicked something or caught something else

the stands roaring like Romans in an arena after the last drop of blood was spilt

I can't stop devouring you

your jean jacket with the pockets stuffed by napkins and crinkled wrappers

overflowing with old habits and regret that never outweighs a smile

a smile from you

a foreign twitch against the scars of your past

a smile that's not always been there

has been just a pair of lips before

meat

a place for misery to pour in and out like drinking or confessing

and the bartender finally hears you

you're coming back into yourself again—

returning to your place on the barstool like a deck of shuffled cards contracting,

like an accordion, into a cupped palm

—your right cheek locks back into the phantom space it occupied before

but your old misery dies in the throat as the crowd roars

the vile things never erupt

the smile lasts

and your new posture mimics mine

a pair of lions before they strike

and you just keep staring back, thirsty

like you hadn't forgotten my drink

hadn't done it on purpose to see my cards fall across the floor like abandoned snowflakes

see what happens when a tsunami smothers the lakes and rivers

how they all bleed together

but nothing works the same anymore

the salt doesn't know where to go

and the fish don't know where to fuck

or where to sleep

so they flop around choking on air in the summer sun

stinking up the pier and curling the wood slats below

arcing in the same fluid motion as the counter the bartender pulls back

searching for another bottle from the basement

you're drowning me in the hope that our saltwater tastes the same

I haven't told you I bit off my tongue in the arena

and now everything settles like forgotten, low shelf whiskey

like a smile after the flood and before the blizzard

like the fifth call for a drink

you haven't drank the blood in my mouth yet

but it pools, pours down the throat

burns like an apology or something I'll savor in warmer months

with you, bleeding out in front of the crowd

smiling like we're more than just marinated meat

Sweep me Along with the Fish as Smoke Rises from the Sea

You crest the beach as I breach the surface;
our slumber against the coral broken
like a fairy tale, Snow White's drift into oblivion;
my tongue worries at the incisions you kissed through my cheek,
reminding me with each painful stroke
that you were always a mouthful of sharp,
rusty nails and saccharine youth.

We have been stomped out,
sizzling into ash like an over smoked cigarette;
I crave the secondhand smoke
you left behind, stark and alien
like forgotten cherry lipstick hugging
the filter. Our bed and its tousled sheets,
seas of gray ocean, pool like an ashtray
drawing me in with undercurrents of you.

If I were offered a sand dollar,
naked with the power to turn back time—
when our match was unlit, to beat the smoke
out of my thick winter clothes,
dusting ash into the night like a solitary crooning
before the seagulls dove against the waves—
I would stare, transfixed,
as you wade into the sea,
redraw the shape of lips with my blood,
unhinge my jaw as nicotine breath swims free,
and let the saltwater wash over every burning cut.

I would weep along the shore at the sting,
heave the dollar and curls of smoke into the deep
as you surface,
timeless and bottled,
forever walking the shore where I drown,
my gaze simmering your naked back
like old cigarette burns and lipstick stains.

Soul Rot (or, A Reminder that the Human Condition is Full of Unlimited Pain and Limited Time to Endure)

Clawed from the ankle up

and served like ceviche.

These wounds have festered inside me—

pulling a Moses, turning blood into green pus,

oozing like terminal pea soup.

Deep gashes went down to the bone,

the spinal cord,

all four chambers of the heart,

and even the lower gut

where all my bad decisions about you laid, unrestful for years

boiling to overflow.

There's no bloodbath to prove you were the culprit—

no blood, no fuss, no mess,

just firm, but pliant, carved meat—

I thawed on your slab.

Only those who witnessed our downfall,

our last battle,

when the flames of lust turned to ash in the mouth,

will tell the tale of how you ruined me.

But there won't be a pyre for me,

just a sickbed and dirty sheets to burn

after I spoil away.

And when I split my wounds apart,

rub salt and lemon pepper in,

peeking at all the abandoned highways and choked vessels underneath,

I realize why I always favored villains.

I am dying, slowly,
as Beowulf did after slaying the dragon,
but I'm no hero
and you're no mythical beast.

Unrelenting, Cosmic, Eternal Tennis (or, How I Reckoned with Space and Purpose)

I lobbed my love over the mountain

the net

the highest peaks where the birds build their nests

where the wind curls into a hook,

clawing out the blue sky one jagged cloud at a time,

where all the prayers get lodged in with the CFCs like syrupy toxins

or sludge halfway down the garbage disposal

call a plumber, a shaman,

a tarot card reader,

an eHarmony IT technician

to help squeeze the latest shot through all those layers

pivoting the air between its absence and the eternal night sky

the stars, the burning gaseous orbs that You lobbed back down against the planet

piercing through the veil and crashing

down, over the other side of the peak,

intertwined with faith and dastardly dissent and

wind and space rocks and chemicals

until the biggest, brightest one embedded itself like a solitary golden goose feather

not yet plucked from the fleshy crust of the world

that shattered the turf on impact beside me

your dying star found me

down in the shadowed valleys

just after a buttery summer evening

when the moon and the sun were switching the lead in their waltz

and stalks of wild grass fluttered in the cool breeze like a crush

or baby breaths after a third kiss, leaning in for a fourth

and the silt became filled to burst with stardust,
the air charged with vestiges of affection from outside my stratosphere

You and your lobbed affections found me there
as my heart was lobbing a game of tennis between itself and You
the plumber, the aliens
Hell, God, even,
sending meteors and flaming balls of passion and purpose cascading all around
burning ancient cigarette marks into the hillside
where I, bathing in the dusk and the smoke,
the thin streams of fog that slithered over the sedentary earth all around
in the deepest valleys,
curtaining my eyesight of the peaceful nirvana,
decided that this is a particularly good resting place

a place where the plot would surely cost a fortune
where I bury myself,
or You cease to pull me out,
sinking deeper into the ground beneath me
soaking up the interstellar space all around
flittering through the soil and the roots like rainbow static space worms
as a clock ticks methodically along with each centimeter I sink down
plunging like a heavy drop into a deep body of water
echoing a baritone note that will eventually silence itself

and my ears were plugged,
my pores,
my eyes,
my mouth—
everything was engulfed with the absence of light
like the black afghan that blankets the sky,

despite the dying star nearby—
everything was engulfed except the still beating heart within my chest
winding back to lob the next one higher than before
knocking along the constellations
making a mockery of the little dipper in front of all his friends outside in the schoolyard
setting off a chained collision and enlightenment
like a game of pin ball hitting the highest score
electrifying the cosmos until I get shocked—
a bumbling toddler sticking a fork into an outlet and expecting a different result than last time,
yet coming back for more after each globe-shattering swing

love—love
that's our game
nothing lost
nothing gained
a never-ending duel of the hearts
the wills
the inexhaustible effort to believe in something else besides oneself
even if they created the universe
or submitted to love
or simply wanted to fight every inch of the way
until they were buried in starlight

we never find each other
or entirely lose one another
within this zero-sum, unscorable game
where we beg,
not for a view of the stars afar or in a field,
but for the high score—
to win
surpass

love, and a sense of belonging,

whatever that wins you

PART FIVE

An Elegy to Good Flesh Continuing

--*"Meditation at Lagunitas"* by Robert Hass

You said I had narrow shoulders like a starving sparrow
with hollowed bones—something brittle for you to break.
As we made love on the veranda or the dining table, or any
suitable place

for you to plant your bombs,

I caught you moving to the tune of their chirps—slinging me
around like birdseed across a minefield and bending over,
heaving breath as if you'd run for years and finally caught the
maddening, escaping prey in your talons and didn't know
how to stop—spreading me into the grass with the worms.

When you flew away, beak pinching dangling strips
of my flesh, the beat of your wings
made a whistling noise—a trill, a Bouncing Betty I mocked in a death rattle.
Grief is a lot like scavenger birds pecking at a body long gone.
There may be good meat left on me, but
you did not want it—all I have are leftovers. Debris.

I spread myself across early mornings,
patio doors swung wide to let in salty ocean mist
and predators. I lie there and break apart the bread
into tiny little bombs for the birds.

The sparrows do not choke, though I hope they do.
I tip my head back against the birch tree, the grass, the bed,
dropping bombs down my throat and *break the bread,*
break the bread, break the bread.

28 Butterflies Dying in A Row

save the date!

save the date!

the day when every teardrop finds its home again

travels up the face

tucks itself back under the duct

28 butterflies lining in a row

on the 28th day

the day we planned

but never spoke

the day that came

the day I didn't

a birthday cake half eaten

all its candles lodged in the levitated frosting

wax crying down onto the empty plate

the place where our slices once were

the day when I buy a plane ticket to see you

when all I ever did was drive

the day when we reunite

and everything is remembered and forgotten

the tears never fell in the first place

we were never getting older

28 butterflies flying on a cake

28 butterflies I never followed through

in 28 days I killed me and you

The Instantaneous Infinity of Loving and Losing

love comes and goes

fleeting, *fluttering*

wings on a hummingbird

rapid and fragile like the heart

falling in and falling out of it

the gravity of the situation is endless

all I know is one day I woke up—

found your signature on the outline of all my tears

my eyes wide shut

my heart shuttered open

like shutters and clapboard peeling off in a hurricane

nearly through with its wreckage

—that was the instant I defeated gravity

and forever outloved,

fell out of love,

with you

but what is an instant?

is it the instant I woke up from the nightmare,

or all the smaller moments

another petal from my rose heart that died off?

can an instant be the accumulation of many moments?

the bloody red petal pile raked up as one,

little whispers from the brain to the heart

telling what Feeling has no ears for

there's instant culture
making grabby hands for the thing they wanted an instant ago
seeing only what they don't have
blind to what's within their grasp
asleep to the present that never takes its first breath

is it the instant it takes to make coffee,
or pudding
which is really several minutes?
the waiting of water to heat
or powder to mix,
solutions to cool or set,
the collective, the accumulation at rest

as the heart rests at the end of it all
how people say it was an *instant death*,
even white coats,
but how would they know?
if a car barreled down two football leagues of highway
at 105 miles per hour
careened into the grassy median
and rolled seven times before smacking the guardrail—
what sounds instantaneous about that?
how many single instances and moments piled together then?

how long were you two together?
over two years, and you moved on in two months?
isn't that a little fast?
so you got over him pretty instantly, huh?

little do they know

I'm still raking up from last year's fall
falling into the pile
in a constant state of paralysis
living off a moment's worth of pudding at a time
still unsure of what rest feels like
but saying a nighttime prayer it comes
in an instant

All of the Old Thinking Is About Innocence.

...when I was a child...

...I once was...

...remembering back...

I met a man who lived a hundred lives.

He had either never known innocence
or the soul stains had all blended together
until his was dyed in splotchy agony.

His old thinking was blurred in clashing colors—
muddied bruises and aborted love.

There were few spots unstained.

Too little innocence for an inner child and bright watercolors.

I need some normalcy in my life,

he said, while wringing out his drenched soul
letting it hang along the clothesline
and drip, blanketing color across the lawn.

Are normalcy and innocence the same thing to you?

His hands, freshly stained, rested on his hips as his mind soared,
left impressions in the fabric.

His mouth twitched like he hadn't flown in ages.

*Now, they are. I don't think I ever knew them before,
or had them on their own, so I wouldn't know.*

They were conjoined concepts,
and I was a child in his tall shadow.

His hands, still soaking wet,
cupped outward, like my innocence was something he could
hold, drink, bathe in and be born again.
He had no religion, but water contained the same properties of worship.

He worried he was too stained,
too drenched, for me—
something to be hung out, left to dry for years and
forgotten, abandoned in an unforgiving sun.

When I was a child...

He laughed at me.

You're a child, still.

I amend—

When I was more of one than I am now,

—because this is how we worship,
pouring into one another's hands,
exchanging water and words
like innocent children who had never known color,

I could never be contained.

The wind picks up—
pronounces the rivers running down my elbows
and the biting chill of my own soaked soul
—carries us over the line.

But you've never been gutted.

You're wrong.

I have, but it doesn't sting the same.

We talked like this, like philosophers or poets or strangers,
to distract from the pouring that began to unravel,
when a stream became a pond and control flew away like reckless youth and lost time.

I need a different kind of pain in my life.

I wondered if he needed a single ounce of pain at all,
ever again—if he could maintain shape without it binding him together,
or if the dye would spill out, the dirt soaking up the past.

I wondered if he could be that selfless
or if I could be that innocent.
We were both soaked, boundless, dousing each other—
washing away the hurt.

Nobody had ever bathed us like this before.
This is what some people mean when they say *self-care*,
but we were too broken to worship alone.
Water became a way for us to heal, to revert to childhood.

All of the old thinking is about innocence,
but all of the new thinking is about rebirth.

I met a man who lived a hundred lives.
I had lived none.

Together we turned back time,
found a midpoint for hurt and love,
found a way to color outside the lines
without losing shape.

We wash each other every morning and night.
We never bother with the laundry.
It never dirties.

I Walk Away from the Storm, but I am Drenched

A raindrop can ripple our soul ponds—
the places where we find
fluffy dogs we can't fork through breakfast without,
the precise moment a bad kiss became a great one,
and the way red hair settles against freckled skin like misery.

We can struggle through a plate of eggs and a glass of water alone,
feel euphoria settle against the spine like a quiet stream,
replace auburn with raven and pale for olive—
drag our eyes away from the poetry.

As architects, or construction workers,
brick layers,
we lay each memory and ideal down in a long row
to form a seamless wall to shelter us from the storm.

We can survive the rageful ocean and the whipping winds,
the hurricane that threatens the quiet still of the pond,
without thoughts of dancing in a field
or cozying against a chest in firelight,
but we want to do more than just survive—
we want to lay the bricks and find comfort in the labor.

We can lower ourselves, down,
on hands and knees braced against the world,
and lap up a brook until we are quenched.
Our thirst does not hinge upon the drinking glass—
it is merely instrumental,
and the natural course of things is barbaric.

The glass is what separates us from animals,
what rose *homo erectus* to the sky,
what keeps our hands out of the dirt.

That which was once important has now become relative.
You are important to me, yes,
maybe even instrumental,
but you do not contain me
and I do not need you to survive.

I may lower myself down for a while,
go thirsty in late hours,
but I will find water all the same—
crawl my way through every meal,
find kisses on other lips,
forget the ruddy sheen of your crown reflecting the coming sun
like a raindrop parting its way through mortar,
flooding through the hole your brick left behind,
and heavy clouds before the deluge—
a leak before the dam breaks and bathes the world anew.

One day I will do more than survive you,
the tidal wave in storm,
but Rome was not built in a day,
and evolution never reaches its end, does it?

We Are Without Lungs, Absent with Reason, Bathing in Starry Flesh

Starlight and fireballs rain upon us in our
weakest moments. When the daylight clouds the eyes,
distracts us like infants from a crib's mobile of the planets,

we see a reflection of ourselves in the fog. Humanity's breast
cannot harbor the boundaries of love. It is an unquantifiable chemistry
ransacking our minds and bodies. To dissect it, we extrapolate and implode

the enigma into other-worldly wonders. We implant shards in
an inky sky, outline madness in a comet's brushstroke,
record whispers in the echoes of canyons. We do not find

comfort in the unknown, so we must create meaning. We are
jealous beasts seeking solace in our own skin. I—a dark and nebulous
solar system muted by obscurity—have found reason in your violence.

As you tear me apart with fangs and snarled lips, I see the caress
of the moon against earth's stratosphere. The fog has been lifted.
My planetary orbit is locked in a magnetic hunt, gasping for a Magick

or the hand of God to align us for collision. Your claws rip my
chest into blades of grass, the gashes uprooting *terra* and fossils
a world ago. We are oriented toward catastrophe, hinged upon

fine balance of the practical and the heart. The sun will one day
implode—scientists searching every meteorite to attach reason—
and our mindless reckoning will spawn the next Big Bang.

If the Act of Writing is a Plague, That Must Make Us Gods

The physicality of writing is like an expulsion of poison,
of losing oneself to the agent killing it—
a double-edged blade of mercilessness and unforgiving need.

There is an elegance to the curvature of spine dipping low,
bowing in subservience to death itself
when shards of life and light erupt from the body,
dragging against a columned neck
as a wild animal clings to breath in its final moments,
as the rubber wheel of tire digs its teeth into dirt
ripping up sod and powdering the road in a mineral mist before tipping over the abyss.

Words infested humanity from time immemorial,
found a home in our host,
settled down to slowly choke us from a cellular level,
tangling thoughts—the bolded edge of a barking laugh,
the wisp of hay-colored hair against a breeze—
and tying them into giftwrapped and predetermined shapes
blind to their original form under all that paper and twine.

When a divorce of the image and the ideal emerges,
the body is plunged in a state of shock—
locked muscle and a system shutting down entirely
suspending all energies for the flood knocking at the door of the throat,
the *pitter-patter* marching of pointy-toed loafers peeping through pinholes of fingertip—
performative reconnaissance for the next sickbed that awaits.

The mind and the heart duel against each other in fever—
too stubborn to ignore the fatality of the surgery,

the gut-wrenching evolution of shape,
and too flooded with firelight bathed upon the coals of each precious memory,
stubborn at the thought of parting with even a single ounce of heat.

But the words come out, uncaring of the destruction they leave in their wake—
their singular purpose spawned in iota membrane
driving them to conquer a new settlement—
to jump, perilously, from one burning tower to another
in the desperate and utilitarian attempt to reach ground before the frame collapses.
The burning shell they leave behind is inconsequential to the overarching goal.

Words must discover us—
in the dark of night, between the chambers of our hearts, inside our stomach lining,
swelling into a vat of acid so pressing we can do little else
besides tip the mouthpiece toward the path of least resistance
of highest probability for success
and watch as they feed
upon the freshly upturned soil, naked flesh of nape'd neck,
leaning on science and molecular destiny as we pray
the expulsions and splatterings of vomit, the white autopsical sheets of nausea
paint themselves prettier than the last.

Settle, Darkness, Against the Colt that Runs

It is said that the late Bukowski poured himself a generous drink,
at least two fingers and skipped the ice,
every night before he spilled into ink on every page—
the beat of his ancestral hand signals punching in tempo
the clacking of the typewriter a whip against the night air.

I wonder if he was ever lonely
resting inside a black hole,
enveloping himself in one
until it became him,
and I find the smudges in his ink—
hear a wistful crooning about the universe and the cruelty of God
reduced to simple math like horse races and betting tracks.

I hug the darkness around me too
even as the day spooks and settles,
for in my mind the horses gallop to the checkered finish line,
every glass is both empty and full,
and the paper runs endless in the metal machine's teeth.

There is truth in darkness.

It swallows me until the soul reflects the world through a rainbow prism and springs free—
a jack-in-the-box spouting over cardinals buried under the earth
below the sun's purview
where the blanket of light cannot smother me into complacency and masquerades.

There is a force I can never trust in the light
for it shuns me from a promised paradise,
succulent and just this side of too sweet,

pelting me with gaseous starlight at Saint Peter's doorstep,
keeping me at bay from a place unburdened with mountains and cliff faces—
the light is a gentle and rolling stream I will drown in, face down in the silt.

It is a distant and abusive light
and the ringing reminds me of church bells that rang too long,
communion held in the sticky heat of the summer
when a sale and a secret were struck between oak
signaling a red light of redemption for a short while.
The ringing sun plugs my ears and covers my eyes with blinders,
the crowd deafening into the white
where a lord that cannot touch me
bets on the bridle.

And in the darkness I have grown
to seek a comfort close to the cheek.
It breathes hot and wet,
unbroken and unkempt,
the way it was created and destroyed in the dark.
It is all too familiar with me
as it pours into a liquid embrace
shifting around like shadow reckons with the body to dance,
seduces the lungs to play a quaking rhythm.

The dark is not afraid of me or what I may be, come daybreak.
It sits low,
a jealous and prideful thing,
resting against the tender flesh of ankle
as the typewriter lashes against the backside of the day,
finding a bottomless glass that I may race headlong for a photo finish—
sans the flash.

And Bukowski will be lounging there against the damp glass,
though he has never materialized or faded from the start,
fiddling with something he will not show me,
all the while drawling over his bent shoulder
that's not half bad,
he drinks,
raspy and slow after a long night of pouring out the light,
but you lost before the gates ever opened.

CRITICAL AFTERWORD

Avant-Garde Film and Poetry: The Convergence

When we read poetry, we also view it whenever and however possible in our mind's eye. I would argue that we also hear it, and all other sensory receptors, when we can. Some poems may have content more predisposed to audial perceptions, or some may shy away from imagery (like some minimalist poetry). While poetry is subjective, I find the most rewarding poems to be those that create what I would call sensory immersion for the viewer. I can envision a roadway as calm and sunny or as unsettling and storm-like as possible, given the poem's content, which creates an identity. I can supply the moment with a rotten odor or a sweet lick of perfume, so long as the poem doesn't create a contradiction to my perception. This is, in part, because of literature's ability to be adapted or perceived limitlessly by the viewer. Poetry also creates this opportunity where we can adapt our perceptions, either in our minds or on the page, as entirely new poems, prose, or graphic literature. However, I would argue that this is also due to the inarguable connection between poetry and film, spanning back to the late 19th century.

A side of cinema that is all but dead today but once thrived is attributed to being one of the major proponents for poetry's early inclusion in film: silent films. The *cinéma pur* movement, translated as "pure cinema," was created in the 1920s in Paris and definitively focused on "the pure elements of film like form, motion, visual composition, and rhythm" and planned to "expunge the cinema of any residues of literary contamination in order that it might develop as an autonomous art form" ("Cinéma Pur"; Knowles 48). At that time, there were also a select few films which used overlays of words and phrases to supplement audio or to give designation to figures in a film (Knowles 47). Those within the movement inadvertently spurred the poetic convergence of film, as they stressed that subtitles "unsettle[d] the movement—and the spectator"; poetry, however, was used to strengthen the image and the movement, as it also

achieved both, and rooted the viewer even more deeply into the film (48). Silent film's attempt, and the "pure cinema" movement that supported it, to keep the viewer processing an image only spurred filmmakers to create a film that challenged the traditional ways we view and read. Many, including Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, had their doubts about poetry's place in cinema, as they described the relationship between image and text as "parasitic," an imbalance of power and focus to create "dominance" and "subordination," and even went so far as to state that the two "can neither merge nor intersect" (Knowles 48).

A handful of films challenged these doubts with the overlay of poetry and film, creating what Stéphane Mallarmé described as "kinetic" film wherein it is an animated, "mobilized" process in which the reader/spectator views text brought to life through different fonts, styles, and movement on the big screen (Knowles 49). Films such as *L'Etoile de mer/Starfish* by Man Ray and inspired from the poem by the same title from Robert Desnos attempted to do this, as well as *Anémic Cinéma* by Marcel Duchamp, which included spiraling sentences and words. *Anémic Cinéma* questioned the autonomy of the image versus the word through the "combination and alternation" of the two, creating new "modes of representation and... reception" and stressing the exercise of both "*mimesis (showing) and diegesis (telling)*" (Knowles 49-50). Another early convergence of poetry and film is dated in 1921 through Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's film *Manhatta*, in which they "intercut between modernist cinematography of Manhattan and intertitles made up of excerpts from Walt Whitman's [poetry]" (MacDonald 38). Though an early form of the genre, the film features starkly contrasting black and white stills of the skyline—the shining, twinkling skyscrapers pointing toward the black, nebulous skies above which are transposed with the cursive quotes from

Whitman: “City of the world / (for all races are here) / City of tall facades / of marble and iron” (38). What both of these films achieved was the “potential of words as images” (Knowles 50).

As critical forms of cinema spread in the 20s and 30s in the UK and Europe, it wasn't until the 40s and 50s that America really delved deep into the experimental film industry. Scott Macdonald, on his collective history of the avant-garde movement of cinema and poetry, comments on the immediate intertwining of poetry and film when he says: “...poetry became as important for filmmakers as the visual arts” (38). The trending act amongst those in the avant-garde scene in America was to feature poets as filmmakers and directors, to create “suggestive, complex visual images” unseen in the popular cinema of the time (39). In fact, by the 1950s, Cinema 16 (“then the most successful film society in America”) held a symposium titled “Poetry and the Film,” cementing the two artforms as linked in adaptation (39). What was so unique about this convergence of poetry and film was that the meaning of the art played out both “horizontal[ly]” and “vertical[ly],” terms credited to Maya Deren, as “meaning made clear through the developing narrative of a [film],” which was horizontal, akin to a film reel unrolling and extending to show the succession of still images, and “the multiple *layers* of meaning that accrue in forms of expression normally considered poetic,” which was vertical (though it cannot be ignored that a poem is also, through the English language, read vertically, top-to-bottom, creating a literal understanding of the term as well) (40). By the 60s and 70s, foreign films projected in America had become so commonplace that they changed the mindset of viewers. Foreign films of the time tended to stress artistic form over simple distractive entertainment, an inherently Western approach to cinema, and so the audiences in America became more educated, artistically exposed, and thus developed varied preferences for what they wanted to see when

they sat down in a theater to see a film (40). By this point in time, it was undeniable that poetry had forever become entwined with film in the minds and hearts of Western viewers.

Analogic Cinematography and Ambiguity in Poetry

Though the historical context of how poetry found its way into cinema is easily accessible, finding the reverse on how film is featured in poetry is surprisingly more difficult. It shouldn't be—the boundaries between poetry and film are blurred artistically. One unexplored creative and theoretical connection between film and poetry is how we perceive movement in both.

Let us imagine that we are viewing a horse running.¹ At first, we see the horse in a state of pause; then we see it start, taking off and gaining speed with each muscled leg ahead, hooves kicking up the dirt below. Finally, we see it slow itself down to a trot and return to a state of pause. What we view here is motion; however, if broken down into seconds or frames, like a reel of film, we see a sequence of images unique to themselves capturing that flow of motion one still image at a time. There are differences between a slide and its closest neighbors—a front leg stretched toward the ground here, a back leg curled in the air there—but we do not assume the flow of motion has stopped simply because we cannot see it between one frame and the next. We continue to picture that sequence in our mind regardless of the fact that we do not know the exact positioning of the horse's legs, its gait, or the trajectory of the dirt between each frame; how I envision the details between one frame and the next is unique to me. You may envision details not so dissimilar to my own, but the horse is still running; how the horse achieves that motion

¹ See the cabinet cards of 1877-1879 by Eadweard Muybridge, commonly referred to as "The Horse in Motion." Note that all three card collections feature a running horse, though one includes the horse pulling a stagecoach and another features a rider. For the purpose of this example, mentions of the stagecoach and riders were removed (Wikipedia Contributors).

between each still image is an unknown. It is the role of the viewer to fill each absence between still images in the sequence.

However, this role of the viewer is not unique to photography and film; it is also true for poetry. Poetry invites a similar sequence and flow of motion through its formatting of lines, its choice of stanzas, and even the content itself. The viewer is responsible for filling in the absence between these instances in a poem, though how often they are charged with this task is in accordance with how much ambiguity the poem leaves the viewer to interpret. Ambiguity in a poem—be that context unsupported, questions unanswered, or lines unclosed—is what the absence between still images is for a film reel. If the poem is a galloping horse, captured in limited form through words instead of still images, the viewer envisions the details between both what is said and unsaid. As Gilles Deleuze once said, “An animal moves, but this is for a purpose: to feed, migrate, etc. It might be said that movement presupposes a difference of potential, and aims to fill it” (8); so, too, does poetry move with purpose, unique to each poem itself, and its viewer finds a difference of potential unique to their own understanding and fills in ambiguous opportunities. But a poem is not entirely ambiguous; if that were true, then there would be no control, or no sense of identity left for a poem. The identity of a poem is its recognized subject. While it may be harder to accurately describe what a poem is, I believe it can be safely admitted that a poem is *not* an empty film reel seeking the viewer’s engagement to give it a subject.

Let us return to the viewer’s role to envision the details of both what is said and unsaid in a poem (i.e., to engage with ambiguous opportunities). Deleuze, adopting an analogy from Henri Bergson, explains movement and change as follows:

$$\frac{\textit{Immobile Sections}}{\textit{Movement}} = \frac{\textit{Movement as a Mobile Section}}{\textit{Qualitative Change}}$$

On the left side of this equation, an immobile section constitutes part of the whole imitation of movement. The fraction of immobile sections over movement is like a single frame image that makes up part of the whole motion that is seen when a film reel is run through a projector. Deleuze breaks down this relationship between the part and its whole for the left fraction to explain that “immobile sections [compound with] abstract time,” creating what Bergson calls the “cinematographic illusion” (1). Thus, immobile sections are instants in time, and their addition in succession to each other *imitates* real movement (1).

On the right side of the equation, real movement (conceived as a mobile section) is part of a larger qualitative change to a whole that includes both the viewer’s experience and the world. The fraction of movement as a mobile section over qualitative change is like a real horse running that we can see in real time that makes up part of the whole of the horse’s run and how we as viewers perceive the horse. Movement as a mobile section is real movement that is “present...indivisible” because it cannot be broken down by the naked eye into single instants or frames that are immobile (Deleuze 1). A horse will continue to run and generate real movement, and the qualitative change it is a part of contains the various perceptions of the horse: by myself, those close by, those distant, and even their positions, such as those who see the horse from the front, the side, the back, and so on. All viewers and their perceptions of the horse may be different due to their own interpretations or positions, but the horse remains true and in motion.

This analogy of parts and their wholes can be further broken down to understand the difference between what Deleuze constitutes as “an illusion” and “a reality” (9). Immobile sections over movement, or the left fraction, is “an illusion” because the immobile sections

imitate movement through their succession (9). A film's singular frames do not move themselves; they imitate movement because the subject is in a slightly different position in time and space with each frame. Movement as a mobile section over qualitative change, or the right fraction, is "a reality" because the mobile section's movement is indivisible as singular frames (9). The movement of a mobile section is like a horse running in real time; the movement is not imitated through the succession of any images, but instead is naturally generated through motion in physical space. The viewer's perception of that movement in reality creates qualitative change because one person's view of the horse running will differ from another's.

Through Deleuze's reference to Bergson, we can frame the very relationship between a poem, its content, its ambiguity, and the role of the viewer as previously mentioned. The new analogy when applied to poetry is as follows:

$$\frac{\textit{Lines or Sentences}}{\textit{Interaction with Lines and Stanzas}} = \frac{\textit{Poem Ambiguity}}{\textit{Reader Engagement with Poem}}$$

If an immobile section within a poem is its line or sentence, its imitated movement is created by how each line or sentence works with others and stanzas; I call this illusion of movement *poetic expression*. In my poetic model, real movement (what Bergson terms movement as mobile section) is equivalent to a poem's ambiguity. Poems create ambiguity through vague or interpretive word choice, enjambment, imagery, and other means. The poem's opportunity for movement as a whole (what Bergson terms as qualitative change) is created by viewer perception of those means. I call the viewer's active engagement with this movement *viewer's expression*.

My terminology regarding poetic expression and viewer expression comes from the field of aesthetics and art criticism, specifically Robert Stecker's theory on expression across the arts. Stecker asks where the emotion in a poem or other artwork originates. Is it with the poem itself

or with the audience? He theorizes expression as a combination of a work's capability to be expressive and the viewers' ability to thrust expression on a work. Thinking about the way we discuss artistic expression, he emphasizes the importance of vocabulary:

We say that works *are* sad, that we *hear* or see sadness in them, that they are *expressive* of sadness, that they are *expressions* of sadness, or simply that they *express* sadness. In the preceding remarks, I have already used 'expressive' and 'expression' without distinguishing between them. In ordinary discourse about art (and beyond art), I doubt that there are sharp distinctions in meaning segregating these locutions, but they are not always interchangeable. They can be used to say different things... (85).

What he does thereafter is break down the ways in which we can use this terminology to understand both the role played by the work and the viewer's perception. Essentially, he distinctively analyzes the 1) idiosyncratic and perceptual state of misperception by a viewer, 2) the problematic statement of a work *being* any perception, and 3) the difficult task of proving a work expresses any one thing. For 1) misperception by the viewer, he gives the example that although a viewer may hear sadness in a character's voice, that may be because the viewer misinterpreted her content or tone by "reading something into what she said that simply wasn't there" (85). For 2) a work being any perception, he explains that this is when the viewer "attribute[s] some property to it, but not one that implies that the work is an expression of sadness. A work is an expression of sadness only if it in some way conveys, communicates, or makes manifest... someone's sadness, and a work can *be* sad without doing this" (85). Saying a poem is an "expression of" some particular person's/author's emotion is a problem because it assigns a perception of the poem as "correct" and thus limits alternative reader perception. For 3) a work expressing sadness, there are a multitude of variances in perception, but the gist is that it

“can mean either that it is expressive of or that it is an expression of sadness” (85). The distinguishing note between these three ideas is that the first involves viewer perception misdirecting the work’s identity in that moment, the second reshapes works as a channel with which it conveys sadness from someone or somewhere else, and the third is that the work in some way inherently becomes personified to actively express or be an expression of an emotion.

Stecker’s distinction between what a work does and what its audience does further refines my Deleuze/Bergson-inspired poetic movement analogy. A work’s lines or sentences can present images and convey emotions like sadness through words, just like how lines move with other lines to create a stanza, to move with other stanzas, creating a possible identity of sadness that one could say makes the poem an expression of sadness. However, the poem’s ambiguity allows for viewers to perceive alternative interpretations of the lines, of the imitated movement between them and stanzas, to create an identity of nostalgia or resignation instead. While the readers may take away different emotions or expressions from the poem, the words on the page remain the same; how we choose to read them and see them interact with each other allows for a poem’s reader engagement to be varied.

Is there one “right” way of conveying sadness through language? Is there an ideal choice of words that everyone can universally recognize *and* relate to sadness? Does sadness translate from personal expression to the page completely and accurately? I, and I believe Robert Stecker, would argue “no” to all of the above. A poem can express sadness because it is either expressive of sadness or is an expression of sadness. Ambiguity creates opportune moments for the viewer to *perceive* sadness. There is the “illusion” within the identity of a poem; that illusion is that all feelings, experiences, and events can be completely and accurately conveyed through language. The “reality” of a poem is that, no matter how meticulous the poet is about what words they

choose or where they go in a poem, translating an idea or a reality through language is in some ways limiting. This is also true about film reels; they are limited by their slides and still images, and the succession and rate at which they work together to produce the illusion of movement or “false movement” to replicate what the human eye records and translates for our brains to recognize as real movement (Deleuze 1). This does not mean that a poem never stands up to an idea or reality; rather, it means that there is never a perfect translation of that idea or reality into a poem. And why should it be? Why should a poem try so hard to replicate something else, when instead it can flourish confidently in its own new ways of understanding and articulating an idea or reality? These new ways can be achieved through a poem’s real movement, or its ambiguity, creating the qualitative change Bergson theorized. Poetry’s obligation, if it has one, is *not* to articulate a “true” sense of reality or to hold fidelity toward any one way of thinking, feeling, or understanding of an idea or reality. Poetry’s obligation is to stimulate the poet to create and the reader to engage and interpret.

“Film Poetry” Through Ambiguity: A Case Study

What does poetry then look like through a cinematic lens? For me, it appears twofold: the way description and detail create sensory immersion that a viewer experiences, and the intertextual play through language that a poet creates in reference to film and film-like qualities, practices, and visuals. Often, I find them in the poetry that I read, and so it shapes my poetry. Poems that have sensory immersive details and/or play with film-like qualities can be considered “film poetry.”

The first “film poem” I will consider is Robert Hass’ “Privilege of Being.” I see both components of “film poetry” presenting themselves as the writing hints at the content relating to the theater and the stage. Its details and transitions (or lack thereof, and instead stark jumps from

one “scene” to the next) beg for a cinematic lens to better view these jumps as “jump-cuts” or cinematic direction as the view of the poem mimics a camera capturing sweeping views and close-ups. Thus, I will analyze the poem through a cinematic lens.

The poem begins with a couple making love—and it’s immediately a top-down shot, watching as the two humans bump and tussle across the bedsheets like lumps of clay finding shape, because of the angels we are soon aware of in the next lines. The angle flips swiftly, going from top-down to bottom-up, as we discover the angels up above watch, like rich patrons snobbing from the theater’s gallery through their lorgnettes, disgusted and horrified at what they find. That “awkward ecstasy” down below brings the act back into uncomfortable view, the view flipping lazily and jerkily back down to top-down perspective, the two like “featherless birds” as they toddle until there’s a climax (Poulin 201). But the climax is interrupted by the demand for eye contact, the perspective shifting to up-close shots of the eyes and little else, blazing and bright like the white sclera of the eye. The moon is rising at the hands of one of them by the same rope that pulls back the curtain in the theater, their bedroom the stage. There’s a shuddering, a graceless fall from sinful bliss, and “all of creation is offended by this distress” (201). The love leaves them emptier than they can bear, silent with the feather-light impression that comes with being filled with nothing like the ever-growing hunger of a black hole in a nebulous solar system. It’s a blank slate, an absence of all the heavy emotions like grief, regret, and sorrow. The sadness that overcomes the couple is unforgiving, and the man finds himself running alongside her as she departs, as he grapples with the idea that they can fail at something so primal and intimate. To come together as two souls and depart as shriveled up raisins of failure, to watch as other pruning couples on a beach somewhere read about how to make the

most of out the limited time they have to live and love, makes the angels above all the more inconsolable (201).

My analysis, using a cinematic lens, is inspired from the generous ambiguity the poem allows through its structure and its details. Firstly, the structure of the poem is one long passage without stanza breaks. Reading the poem without breaks, I immediately feel the rush, the *imitated* movement or momentum of the poem that feels image-driven like a roll of film set to play without pause. In the first line, “Many are making love. Up above, the angels /,” the short sentence, its punctuation, and the immediate indication to the angels above create the blunt direction that I perceive as a camera view flipping from top-down to bottom-up in blurry motion (200). This combination of short, choppy sentences and their long counterparts creates a complex perception of visual direction similar to how a film can be edited to include blurry jerks of the camera or calm, careful, steady shots. Secondly, the details of the poem inspire a cinematic approach for me because of their generous ambiguity that allows for a more dramatic visual stimulation. An example of this is the line: “and one day, running at sunset, the woman says to the man, / *I woke up feeling so sad this morning because I realized / that you could not, as much as I love you, / dear heart, cure my loneliness...*” (201). The lines just before this are spoken in third person, describing their eyes holding each other, and the switch to first person for the dialogue as they remain transfixed, evokes for me the super-imposed image of two intense sets of eyes (the man’s and the woman’s) staring at each other as the dialogue plays out. However, the culmination of the eyes staring and the first-person shift to dialogue when viewed cinematically can also be perceived as how metaphor manifests. The woman’s loneliness, and her realization that the man cannot cure her of this affliction, is applied to the close shot of her eyes drifting from focus and losing contact while his bore into her eyeline and overlay to become the one and

only dominating view. Her set of eyes may be more expressive of despair or shock through their bloodshot state or their gravitating need to drift away from eye contact, while his may be more steely, closed, and resolute in their defiance of this departure to reveal how her words cause deep lacerations to his heart yet still he cannot let go of pride to accept an ending. The ambiguity in these lines lies in the possibility for the dialogue to be delivered in various tones, with or without pauses, and the identity of whose eyes belong to whom to give context to the speaker and the listener's visual reaction to the admission.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's iconic poem "Kubla Khan," I see the level of description and the imitated movement as inviting an analysis using a cinematic lens. It's worth noting that the poem starts on "*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment,*" because I theorize that many dreamscape poems, or those that take on a descriptively surreal quality, are even more prone to being viewed cinematically due to their lengthy, descriptive drawls in some parts and then rapidly change direction with little notice (Coleridge). Additionally, the surreal settings, imagery, and pacing of dreamscape poems allows for greater ambiguity as the reader is responsible for filling in these shifts in time and space even more so than with a "realistic" poem.

Coleridge's poetry, written in the British Romantic literary movement, obviously predates the invention of photography and cinematography by roughly 100 years or more, and their respective developed stages as we now know them by even longer. However, a cinematic lens is *not* restrictive to works that come after photography and cinematography's invention; the reason for this is twofold. Firstly, ambiguity in poetry, which I argue facilitates and allows for a cinematic reading and analysis, predates these inventions. Poems of Coleridge, Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, even Sappho herself, and other poets of the near and distant past all present ambiguous opportunities for qualitative change. Ambiguity's place in poetry does not

begin with the technological advancements of cameras, nor should it be limited to an arbitrary hold on the chronology of a poem's creation and the cinema's. Secondly, we as contemporary readers are pre-exposed to the cinema, to a camera and its capability to capture real movement and transfigure it as imitation through the capture of still images and present them in quick succession. We should not feel limited in analyzing poetry and its ambiguity in a vacuum that ignores or erases our familiarity with film. While there are opportunities for that through formalist criticism, as contemporaries, we should use this experience with film often as it becomes an advantage to further understanding and perceiving a poem.

Kubla Khan, in Xanadu, declares a "pleasure-dome" be constructed—near a sacred river that runs through caverns and down into the sea (Coleridge). We are immediately drawn toward these panoramic, arial, sweeping shots of the landscape surrounding Xanadu, and we pan up above the towering walls to see verdant gardens and a tall, blossoming tree with the strong aroma of incense. The smell of the incense roots us to the tree, pulling us deeper into the ancient forests and rolling hills, taking in the beautiful outdoors like a breath of fresh air. But then we discover there is a chasm down and around the bend, a place "holy and enchanted" under a "waning moon" and "haunted by [a] woman wailing for her demon-lover" (Coleridge). Immediately the picture of paradise has been thwarted by the potential conflict or climax of the story that is inevitable—the woman. Through the crack in the earth a fountain of water sprays above, and as if in a movie, mystical and ethereal voices project across the land and are heard by Kubla as "prophesying war" (Coleridge). The moment cuts hard and abruptly to a vision of a damsel "in a vision once [Kubla] saw," where she sang atop a Mountain and charmed him deep at the center of his soul with her song (Coleridge). And suddenly her song, through the vision, has transfixed him in present time and transformed him as he becomes otherworldly, his eyes flashing and his

hair floating, and he himself becomes a dangerous and threatening omen of “holy dread / For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise” (Coleridge).

In my reading and cinematic analysis of “Kubla Khan,” I find the long, descriptive details of the setting throughout as an imitation of pastoral landscape, wide shots common in film, sometimes the only sound filling the silence is the quiet blowing winds. We see this description in the first stanza of the poem, as Coleridge describes Xanadu as “... garden bright with sinuous rills, / Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree; / And here were forests ancient as the hills, / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery”. The cinematic lens allows a viewer’s expression of the stanza to take shape as the camera rolling peacefully along the ground, almost as if it takes the point of view from a field mouse or drifting pollen in the breeze. The tree’s olfactory compound adjective invites the viewer to imagine something akin to incense flooding their nose, the blossoming spring setting coming alive within our very bodies and senses. If another viewer’s expression interprets the stanza as being viewed on a tripod or a mount, creating a steady imitation of movement as it pans lazily across the hills from right to left at a distance, that is because of the generosity the poem’s ambiguity allows. This alternative perception of the poem and its direction is completely within reason, as it does not invalidate or contradict the *poetic expression* or the identity of “Kubla Khan.”

I take inspiration from “Kubla Khan” for my own poem, titled “Drink it in, Drown, Find Me on the Floor of Paradise.” There’s an immediate likeness from the title alone, although some similar language appears and the surreal, dreamscape storytelling and setting are also a prominent commonality between the two. However, the poem also draws heavily from the super-imposed shot of the two sets of eyes from Robert Hass’ “Privilege of Being,” as the narrator is dueling it out through eye contact with the object of their affections, whomever they are, and

there are shoulders akin to mountains and voices shredded like a bloody Nile, and a war within the narrator's heart is waging for their lover's attention. And then their eyes meet for a fraction of a breath, and suddenly we're projected into another world where the fog is lifted, "until we're outside the movie, / in an aerial shot where the credits have rolled, / and we're the blank slide when the reel keeps turning, / the leg of the film clattering against the wheel, ..." Here I combine the sensory immersive detail and the film-like references as one, the poem taking on a literal cinematic direction as the perspective is identified as a camera capturing the events taking place. There's a world they can escape to in this quiet and brief moment of contact, of intimacy, or so the narrator perceives, outside of the credits, the film reel, the audience's sight (a world that may mimic their escape from reality, the public's gaze, etc.), where it's just the two of them. Kubla Kahn makes a return and the two lovers drink the milk of paradise and wade in the lake until the world takes on a more sinister view. The toaster cords acting like snakes hit the water, the sparks fly, and the moment is broken as they're forcibly shoved out of the paradise and thrust back into a space that can be perceived by others besides them. The narrator grabs hold of the last images of their lover, vestiges of their presence in the other world, seeing "double exposures of where [they] once stood," and then the movie begins to wind back in reverse, a slate being wiped new again, until they are both blinked away like the black absence of subject at the very beginning of a movie.

Context on the Poet

My poetry has evolved rapidly considering that my experience has only spanned a few short years. I give a lot of credit to that because of my drive to find and read more diverse volumes spanning style and time. My own poetry reflects those inspirations a lot, some more directly than others, which are evident in this volume through just a few incredible poets: Samuel

Coleridge, Charles Bukowski, and Robert Hass. However, my inspirations span to include the works of Billy Collins, Anne Sexton, Langston Hughes, Richard Siken, Ted Hughes, Jeffrey McDaniel, Louise Glück, Robert Creeley, and many more.

I knew I had to analyze Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" in this thesis because it's one of my favorite poems from the Romantic era. I have a soft spot for Romanticism literature because the works that come from that period have such a unique quality about them due to the surrounding circumstances via revolutions, women's rights, ecocentrism, etc. I find the poetry of that period, especially Coleridge's, to feel so alive—it feels like the incessant desire to communicate and convey new ideas during this period is very reflective in the work, as the pastoral scenes and the exaggerated conflicts within them are painting a moving picture clearly in my mind. That immediate and natural idea to bring these words to life through aural and visual cues is a huge inspiration for my cinematic lens and my theory on ambiguity. I'm only a tad bit resentful toward whoever interrupted Coleridge while writing this because, if what we know as "Kubla Khan" today truly is the incomplete version, I can't imagine how much farther it could've progressed if given the chance.²

While Coleridge opened my eyes to a new way of viewing poetry, Bukowski gave me the candid jolt that I needed to begin writing my own poetry. What I love about Bukowski is not the well-known understanding that much of Bukowski's work and his outward appearance toward life reads as cantankerous, but rather that his style as a person translates perfectly into his own writing style. It wasn't until I read "to the whore who took my poems" by him that I realized that

² Coleridge accounts that the poem "Kubla Khan" originally came to him as a dream and, upon awakening, he began freewriting the dream from memory. However, he was interrupted by an unknown person entering the room, and so Coleridge lost all remaining memory of the dream and had to end the poem prematurely. The interrupter of Coleridge is historically referred to as the "Person from Porlock," "Man from Porlock," or even "Porlock." Ever since, "literary allusions to unwanted intruders who disrupt inspired creativity" are sometimes referred to as such (Wikipedia Contributors).

poetry can be a tumultuous ocean of emotions and topics at once. The idea that a poet can address their own poetic skills, their own work, the process of writing and the discussions surrounding that seemed like a poetic taboo until this poem found its way to me. I remember first reading that poem and laughing at the absurdity of the situation, at his own self-deprecating jabs toward his artistic abilities and the familiarity of this thieving situation with women of the night. But it all became sobering with the tragic and alienating realization that life feels so frustratingly unfair and artless to a lot of us because we ourselves see a hopeful, yet unrealistic, perspective of the world; Bukowski surmises that this is because of a failure on God's part. I was *stunned* after reading this—I'm stunned still at the brilliance of it. My emotional response to that poem and its complexity, of somehow tying this back to a question about God, was so memorable that I knew I had to devote myself to poetry. Bukowski's freedom of expression, though grouchy and somber at times, inspired me to explore poetry as my means of understanding myself, the world around me, and the human experience at large, and made it possible that I could touch on all these things and more within one poem.

My creative process when I approach writing poetry is something that might be considered unorthodox. I know there are many writers, many poets, even, who wax poetic in an office space, over a keyboard, clacking away as the midnight oil burns until the most refined work emerges. However, I do *not* do this. I have tried, and it has completely killed my creative momentum many times. I attribute this problem to my obsessive tendency to over-edit myself until I reach a "perfect" product; this happens with all writing, but it becomes especially damning with creative writing like poetry. My work-around for this habit is to monopolize pockets of time when I can't over-edit myself, which is typically in a vulnerable state of some sort: drifting off to sleep, the first few minutes waking up, and moments of sheer exhaustion, to list but a few. In

these moments, the critical walls that I construct for myself toward my writing are temporarily deconstructed because of something more primitive and pressing, like sleep or disassociation.

Many of the poems in this volume, in fact, originate from a late night of winding down and reaching for my phone to get whatever ideas or images recorded before I fall asleep. I find that this method, of being in a vulnerable state and typing anything out on my Notes app on my phone, supports the creative aspect of my poetry more than any other. What's important initially is simply taking whatever theme, emotion, topic, or image out of my brain and putting it somewhere that I can return to when I'm in a more conscious, critical state of mind. Writing this way has been incredibly productive for me, as I don't question anything in the moment and instead focus solely on recording these ideas. Sometimes I only think of disparate words or single images, other times entire scenes as if from a movie or entire poems. Sometimes I use the time to intentionally free write anything at all, other times I simply lie down and wait for words and images to conjure in my mind.

Lying down is also a huge part of my process, because it makes real the intention behind using this vulnerable state to be free and uncritical of my poetry at the time. It's much more casual, relaxing, and it's almost a trick of the mind because it seems unplausible for someone to be "productive" in the traditional sense if they're horizontal. This positioning is very symbolic for me and helps me with writing creatively. Sitting or standing vertically feels very "on," like a light switch that's flipped on; it's representative of working, being alert, and going about your normal day. Lying down feels "off," like the lights are out and business will resume tomorrow, but until then, you'll find yourself on a couch or in bed in this position and relaxing. The standard hard thinking and productive mindset happens in the day, in the vertical world. Once we all go horizontal though, it's time to escape—to another reality via television or movies, or to

another unknown plane through sleep. And, in both forms of escapism, we have an intense visual and aural experience, be that the shows or movies we watch or the dreams we have. In fact, “28 Butterflies Dying in a Row” originates from a dream, as do several others from this volume. This overlapping visual and aural experience allows me to easily tap into my cinematic lens as I am recording these initial ideas or images, which is how I would classify much or all of my poetry as “film poems” if viewed this way. Their origins in this visually and aurally demanding landscape make it a very easy transition once I begin editing at a later point in time when I’m vertical.

Once I begin editing, the process is similar to trying to restore an old, valuable, and cherished painting without infringing on its composition or credibility. In my mind, the initial draft of a poem is often its most raw, unfiltered in both words and images, and to me that’s very valuable, and so I want to retain as much of that connection to the cinematic experience as possible as I edit. My drafts are usually very strong visually and in flow, but I recognize in the editing stage that sometimes there’s a need for stanza breaks to allow the reader a moment for air or a pause in thought, or that a stack of images may need some exposition between or surrounding them in order for the reader to more easily understand and perceive them. Some drafts can be very unrelenting in their flow to the point that they seem to mimic stream of consciousness or train of thought, wherein certain words or images might not be explainable but are understood in relation to the context. Regardless of how my drafts appear in a vertical state, I try my best to maintain a sense of fidelity to their earliest stages as I believe a lot of my best work comes from these intense, oversaturated moments. My editing experience ends once I can read the poem through and feel that it maintains a strong cinematic appeal yet also is articulating something throughout that those who don’t view poetry this way can still find some value in it.

Poetry written and analyzed through a cinematic lens, “film poetry,” has unquestionably shaped me as a poet and a scholar for the better; I only hope others begin to open their senses and their eyes to a creative landscape where they can explore their favorite books, or poems, through this lens. For now, I know my poetry centers around appealing this lens to my audience, as is evident from my editing goals for each poem. I think this is necessary at this time in order for my own theories on ambiguity and the cinematic lens to be better understood and explored by others. However, I think I will eventually reach a mature stage in my poetry where my work focuses solely on the cinematic experience I want to write for myself, as I will be more confident knowing there is demand for this style of poetry, and there is an audience ready and willing to view my poetry with this lens to have their own diverse perceptions.

A Conclusion

To make concise a breadth of research and theory, creativity and experimentation, as shown in this thesis, is to relate everything to itself. My inspirations, like Coleridge and Bukowski, became what I would now call the *real* movement; their ideas were the poetic horses running that spurred me into motion. Their poems, much like my own process of articulating images and ideas through poetry, and of maintaining their creative “juice” through editing, became what I would now call the imitated or illusion of movement; my writing process became a cinematic journey of attempting to record sounds, images, sensations, and emotions much like the production of a film, of recording the horse in my mind’s eye for all to experience. The immediacy of that illusion via my poetry’s pacing, direction, as well as the sensory immersion that we get from analyzing it through a cinematic lens, will spur the real movement of a creative horse within the minds of my own readers. And thus, the cycle will continue, as the real movement of our imaginations and our perceptions will always be imitated into articulation such

as poetry. “Film poetry” takes me to that other place, to a spot like Xanadu where I am rooted, helplessly and devotedly, to whatever words and images are running along each other in quick succession to my mind’s eye. “Film poetry,” if given the chance, through its own *poetic expression*, can change our *viewer’s expression* and the way we read and how we understand writing as limited or limitless. Ambiguity’s place in poetry should be cherished, as it enriches a poem’s ability to touch the viewer and the viewer’s ability to understand themselves and others. If more poetry was viewed through the cinematic lens, I wonder at the possibilities poets and readers alike would explore to achieve a sense of understanding, likeness, and even belonging.

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