

How It Felt To Run

A Project

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English

by

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Spring 2023

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APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Sharon Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Jeanne E. Clark, Ph.D., Chair

Erin K. Kelly, Ph.D.

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With love to the craft, and to us all as practitioners.

*I am always in too many worlds, sand sifting through my hands,
another me speeding through the air, another me waving
from a train window watching you
waving from a train window watching me.*

- Ada Limón, to Natalie Diaz (“Envelopes of Air,” *New Yorker*)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There exists such a vast number of individuals within this text, it is nearly impossible to truly thank every single person individually for their support, contribution, or inspiration to this project. Know that every bit of who I am is because of the love I have felt. Each hand that has reached for mine is to be thanked. I am indebted from the soil to the treetops.

I would first like to thank Dr. Jeanne E. Clark, for the guidance that only a human of her caliber could conjure up in a boy so unaware of the world that was yet to open before him. Your love, your calm, and your support held me in my moments of weakness, fear, and exploration. Thank you for every line I am yet to write, and all the ones I already have; they will always contain your influence. You are a master of the craft, Jeanne; you are the poet we should all aspire to be. I hope I can always make you proud.

Thank you to Dr. Erin K. Kelly for co-signing to work with this young man early on. You'd seen I had a vision before I did, and you helped me to focus it. What awoke within me through our modern poetry class is a feeling I will never forget. I am forever indebted to you and to all of the faculty at this university. Kim Jaxon, thank you for showing me the future in education I want to be a part of. Sarah Pape thank you for feeding the flame that is my creative and editorial passion. Thank you Matt Brown, Corey Sparks and Laura Sparks, for showing me the vastness that literature and the study of English contains, and where I could fit into it. Thank you to Lisa Corman who awoke the spirit of poetry in me when I knew nothing of what I could be; thank you for starting me on this journey.

A special thank you to Sharon DeMeyer. Words cannot begin to describe how thankful I am for your kindness and generosity. You are the shining center of this community I've been lucky enough to call family for 6 years. Thank you to Lisbed Santamaria for dealing with the

bumpy road of having me occupy the offices and the classrooms in the Arts Building, and for always being so lovely.

None of this would ever be possible without my parents, Lisa Ziembra and Jay Roberts. They are the two guiding beams of unwavering light and support in my life and have guided me selflessly through this journey with each of its pitfalls. All of the experiences I was afforded are because of their willingness to believe in me, even at times when I did not believe in myself. This is all thanks to them: my time at the university, my ability to create this project, all of it. Mom and Dad– I am me because of you. I love you both endlessly. Look, I did it.

Thank you Chico, the place that made me into the person I am today. To my friends, each and every single one of them, thank you for picking me up and dusting me off every single time I needed it, without falter, without question. Tim Wall, we were an unlikely duo, but now look at us go. To all my boys, I couldn't have had the time I did, or completed what I have without you all. 925 forever. And of course, Quincy, you are the best friend I could ever ask for, you have been right there beside me before anyone else, and you've stayed. I could only do this because I had you in my corner. Chico State I will never forget you, and I have a feeling it won't be easy to forget me.

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ABSTRACT

How It Felt To Run

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Spring 2023

How It Felt To Run is a collection of poems that explores movement both metaphorical and actual. The poems trace movement, whether moving or being moved, in vastly different ways, traverse experiences of youth, growth, trauma and sustainment. Many of the poems reveal the movement of fleeing, the running away from or towards, often in rapid succession. Above all, this gathering of poems shows the journey: the many false steps, the backtracking, the falling— and the getting back up. There is joy woven into each line, but only when those lines are read in-between, held alongside the many influences that stir beneath and beside each poem, and cherished by the boy who learned how to find a voice in this running.

HOW IT FELT TO RUN: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Running: Practice and Metaphor

I've always been running. At least that's what my parents like to say: "He ran before he walked." Then for four years, I ran with my high school Cross Country and Track & Field teams. I had a practice that I'd dedicated my time and energy to for four consecutive years, over thousands of miles. Running was something I was good at, and I was joined by a team, all of us struggling together through our shared passion. At first, I was counting the miles and that was enough. As my dedication to running deepened, running as a physical action and outlet was not only what held me. Rather, it was also the rigor and the responsibility, even though I didn't recognize this at the time. All I knew then was that I had the outlet to leave all I was feeling out somewhere along the course.

During my formative years, writing joined my passion for running for sport. So, when the physical running stopped after high school, what was left in me was a desire for this new outlet. These desires are based on a need of both discipline and community to not only hold me, but push me. I discovered a parallel outlet and rigor in poetry. Like runners, poets practice rigorously as a way to keep our metaphorical writing muscles limber. Learning the craft with its many formal possibilities required precision, just as my training for Track and Field did, and both provided me with an opportunity to see my progress, whether that was through various milestones in my poetics, or as personal records in my running. Distance translated from physical miles I'd put behind myself as I ran into the movement across the page, expression of this cathartic release of physically running into my journeying in poems through lines. Just as I once had coaches guiding me to fulfill my aspirations in my running, in poetry I found guidance from

my mentors. This transition from the rigorous practice of running to another is revealed in the second stanza of my poem “Shin Splints”:

I am young so I will heal, I can bend
so far before I break. So far— I chase
the breaking, thinking this will finally give me
rest from it all. Runner’s high, beet juice shots,
pasta dinner carb loading, dig deeper,
cut down, bulk up, remember the plan. (p. 32)

This poem represents a combination of my two loves, showcasing the intensity of my running career transforming into my emerging craft and intentions through poetry. “Shin Splints” can be read as a testament to both the glory and pains of running, for what it takes to perform in the sport, but also as a metaphor for the passion and commitment I’m finding in my new pursuit: poetry.

From the moment I first stepped foot onto poetry’s path almost eleven years ago in the 7th grade, there has been an aching inside of me to express the metaphysical and emotional movements I’ve experienced. Through poetry, I can explore emotion, work through my fears or pain, and capitalize on joy. Poetry allows me to express not only my own experiences but also the experiences of those closest to me. Oftentimes, I’ve described the process of writing poetry as the closest thing I’ve got to an unwavering emotional outlet, as I once had in running and training. What running had provided me was physical expression, as well as the time to ruminate on my thoughts and feelings. Lines from my poem “Versification” detail this association of expression through poetry’s craft and the outlet poetry now provides: “Everything I say is a first line of a new poem, / like some new kind of divinity, I crave death / by a word-slide.” These lines express both the sacrifice and commitment to poetry’s lens, and what this lens offers me: my reason for committing to the craft.

Articulation and Voice

Articulation was another major gift that poetry gave me. I had struggled for a long time, having a tongue thrust that disrupted my ability to speak clearly. This made each word that left my lips feel flawed. Any ideas or thoughts of value I'd hoped I could produce would fall flat on account of my childish enunciation. Having to miss recess to work with a speech pathologist was an additional gut punch to an already harsh process of gaining a voice. Writing provided me a realm in which my voice was not limited by my ability to pronounce my Rs, Ts, or any word with the letter S. What I was capable of expressing through poetry, despite lacking a strong voice for some time, gave me confidence for a future in something I found both challenging and captivating.

In poetry I had the freedom to detach from physical articulation and explore the page, creating and exploring a space where I could be taken seriously. Poetry became the genre in which I best articulated because it was an hyper-expressive alternative to the standard writing of prose. Line breaks, metaphor, and the use of space on the page were all tools that I could utilize to express myself. Poetic forms became my playground, a place to “play” with words in a way that I could feel confident, that I didn't need to hide from my lack of language or failures in speech. Poetry grew with me; as I gained voice it transformed and expanded, subsequently becoming a genre which I could not only express myself, but define myself within the genre and community which surrounds it. Shaping a voice with the help of poetry was the bravest work I'd ever done. Poetry was a hand outstretched into the hole I'd been forced to dig myself into, one in which for some time, I was comfortable staying. My poem “Tongue Thrust” explores this experience:

And yet the tongue, in its untrained, wildly uncontrollable state,
may still slip, flounder, fail you. Leave the wordy string of pearls,

despite their shimmering, falling just as leaves do, and leave you,
cleaning up that profound weight, once held behind your brilliant words. (p. 51)

The aspiration of the poem was to challenge the conceptions of my speech failing me and to give myself credit for the weight of my words, despite the battle it was getting them out of my mouth. This piece details the value poetry holds for me, the many “wordy string of pearls” I’ve sought to produce, even as I hold the memory of physical struggle. Alliteration is used throughout this poem specifically as a tool to create meaning with sound and enunciation, as well as showcase those memories of grasping at my voice. “Tongue Thrust” details the lengths I’ve come in writing and speaking, touching on the struggles since then, and celebrating my ability to read this poem with its complex sounds out loud. Later stanzas are inspired by poet Phil Kaye’s piece “Repetition.” In his spoken word poem, he recounts his grueling experience with having a stutter, later replicating it in his poem. “Tongue Thrust” pays homage to this poetic move in the line “*Roof *Reuhf* Roof *Reuhf** I practice Rs,” mimicking my past inability to pronounce Rs, just as Kaye did in his active reliving of his stuttering in the performance of his spoken word poem.

Poetry Community

My collegiate poetry writing did not come gently, beginning with an Introduction to Creative Writing course during my freshman year of college. In this class, I learned not everyone saw poetry, with its boundless ability to provide meaning, in the same ways I did. However, despite this harsh beginning my experience of writing poetry alongside peers transformed my already enthusiastic view of writing poetry into an obsession. I found the translation from being on a running team to the collaboration and camaraderie in the workshop space. What I once had as a member of a team, sharing struggle in hopes of bettering ourselves and our sport, was found in the workshop, learning together and building up each member as we did. In this space, we

fostered an interconnectedness to our mutual passions and goals and all that came with writing together. To me, the gesture of us sharing our work is one of both disclosing and finding catharsis through our community, both as we write and read alongside each other. Poetry takes place between bodies, both textual and physical, and the poetry community has quickly become the cornerstone of my poetics because of what these bodies bring to it. It is through this community of writers dedicated to the craft, and the many figures from which I derive my inspiration, that poetry has provided me a community in which to thrive. Many of the poets and forms I've been introduced to through this community have given me insight into how to shape my own practices, whether this be through collaborative forms such Golden Shovel, or writings prompted by poets I've studied. This community with its expanse has provided me not only with room for growth, but the places within which to fit as I grow.

As practitioners in this craft, poetry tasks us with showcasing each individual voice, providing a platform for our own voices and the many voices our community brings us, expression of ourselves and the backgrounds which create the self. The final two lines of my poem "Versification" reflect on the acts of disclosure that take place in the community, reading: "I am the poet who lets you know my blood is in the ink, / only after you've held the page." These lines project the depth of poetry writing, as well as the community that receives it. "My blood is in the ink" stands as the line which directly expresses this disclosure of myself to the community. For me, this is the gift of poetry, how it is both interpersonal and public. We are granted the ability to impact others as well as reach a personal catharsis. This is an intoxicating circumstance to me, bestowing the gift of poetry onto others while processing and exploring myself. Our poetry community offers this: The release, and an audience to receive it.

My found identities as both college freshman and “poet” have breathed life into an otherwise jarring experience of leaving the home I no longer looked fondly on. In poetry workshops, I found a space I belonged and, through that, a dedication that I’d not felt since my time running. As my studies in poetry have advanced, I’ve dived deeper within the community, chasing the never-ending goals of bettering myself as a writer and practitioner of the craft. The form and practice give me purpose, and the skill of the authorship that surrounds me gives me something to look up to and aspire towards. Poetry has made me feel part of something again. In this community I was shown discipline, which I needed; more study brought more inspiration; more commitment gave me more work. The workshop has served as a network of support that fans the fires of a shared passion for poetry: a collective of individuals pressing further the aspirations and desires of fellow poets as we pursue the craft, sharing these experiences. Our poetic community thrives in gifting each other our eyes and ears, or sometimes simply our time for one another, whether we are sharing our common experiences, loves, and aspirations, or reaching out to the community’s welcoming arms to share what is solely ours.

Homage and Writing the Future

The practice of homage in poetics is one of publicly showing honor to a poet, praising them and their work. However, homage also serves as a way of tracing the lineage of the poets and work that have shaped our own work, detailing where our poetics find their basis. One practice in both form and homage that I’ve worked with over time is the Golden Shovel, an invention of Terrance Hayes to honor the great Gwendolyn Brooks and her historical impact on poetry, widely renowned and rightfully celebrated for her work in civil rights activism. Her poem “We Real Cool,” was the blueprint for the Golden Shovel, which as a form adopts lines from another poet’s poem and utilizes those lines as a system of poetic form to create a new poem.

Specifically, the words of the “source” poets' lines become the end words of the “honoring” poet’s lines. The form welcomes a sort of collaboration of poetic practice, which to me was a welcome aid in fleshing out my words to their potential. With the form’s ability to weave adopted lines, words, or striking phrases into my own work, my poetry was given the opportunity to converse and interact with poets I admired. In his own Golden Shovel titled “The Golden Shovel,” Hayes writes “after” Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool,” ending each of his lines with the words from Brooks’ poem:

When I am so small Da’s sock covers my arm, we
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real

men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we

drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
in them but approachlessness. This is a school
 (“The Golden Shovel,” Poetry Foundation)

As the excerpt shows, Brooks’ lines “We real cool. We / left school” find a new home in Hayes’ poem. The work of a Golden Shovel is done with a focus on praise and respect to the core poet, just as Terrance Hayes does in paying respect to Brooks’ poem, first published, then later anthologized in *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, edited by Peter Kahn, Ravi Shankar, and Patricia Smith. In his article on the form for the Poetry Foundation, “Introduction: The Golden Shovel,” Donald Share writes, “A poem in this form adds something even where it subtracts; the sum isn’t necessarily greater than the parts, but in keeping with the spirit of paying tribute, it is more than equal to them” (Share, Poetry Foundation). The participation in the form is an embracing of the original text, honoring both the poem and poet. Particularly, the practice of the form with the origin lines ending each line of the new poem gives the adopted lines the literal “last word,” the adopted lines garnering new meaning. Despite the

original work being already worthy of praise or respect, the form allows for poets to continue the legacy of the original poet. It is a form established in homage, which is to me one of the most captivating practices of poetry: an opportunity for enveloping another's work into my own to honor and carry their work forward within mine.

Writing in homage, specifically through the Golden Shovel form, also helped me to see my work as legitimate in the scope of poetry writing, allowing me to see my own words established in new contexts alongside those of poetic greats. Through the form I can treasure my own words intermixed with those which I greatly respect, explore influences and avenues guided by their adopted lines. The process of writing in the Golden Shovel form creates a whole new meaning to my poetry as my work is placed in conversation with the poets who've inspired and influenced me and provides me with a view into the future I am working towards. My poem "Ward, 51/50" is a Golden Shovel written after the poet Nicole Stellon O'Donnell, absorbing the line "but I was here first" from her poem "The Black Bear Speaks to Godzilla." My stanza in "Ward, 51/50" reads:

17 with 2 feet of concrete in between, but
at least we're safe right? I am considered lucky, I
was lucky enough, or at a time I was,
now I am the last aware, you didn't want to go back here.
We were lost the way we were found—
Me last, you first. (p. 57)

The original poem of O'Donnell's is one that her incarcerated students prompted her to write. Within its harsh imagery she carries a beautiful underlying message of lost youth and the lasting damages that come with such experiences of incarnation or detainment. The subject matter around the experiences of detainment I found prompted me to interweave my own interpretation and experiences with those thematic elements at play. O'Donnell's poem comments on the

realities of incarceration and the guilt which surrounds it. I adopted that theme and language to express images of an alternative: a speaker who reflects on the realities of detainment in a psychiatric-wellness facility and the connections created there. I felt I could offer expansion or further explanation to the subject matter, continue the lineage of thematic exploration of detainment or entrapment as an important subject. In utilizing the line from her poem “but I was here first,” I was provided an opportunity to showcase not only a graciousness for the vessel that is Nicole’s poem, but was also given the ability to interweave my own meaning from the original line the poem was crafted from. This line particularly lends itself to my work as “Ward, 51/50” explores the isolation and abandonment that takes place in both O’Donnell’s poem and my own. As a form, the Golden Shovel is a lesson and a praise song, a challenge to work with the adopted lines and the opportunity to adapt them.

Showing recognition of the esteemed writers who’ve shaped my craft and their work represent a significant portion of my interest in writing homage, showing grace to great poets, both contemporary and past, as well as my desire to establish myself within their lineage. When working as an intern in an Introduction to Creative Writing course, I taught a lesson and led a writing activity on homage and voice, specifically on the Golden Shovel form. One student in our class used a line from this poem, “Ward 51/50,” as the “origin poem” from which to craft their own. This experience only further solidified my feeling of honor for homage and poetry writing, giving insight into how I may fit into the lineage of poets which I write “after,” as well as truly warmed my heart.

Connection (Prying Open the Ode)

The ode as a form pairs with my ambitions in writing poetry, with its sometimes elaborate sentimentality, emotional potency, and a glorification of its subjects. The ode, whether

it be to an experience, place, thing, or an individual, has also shaped my poetry practice. Odes serve as a reminder of what roots my work, as a form both historically based in the craft, as well as carrying a tone that is often exalted or intense like much of my work is. For instance, my piece “Versification” serves as an ode to poetics, and is something of an *ars poetica*. The piece shines the light of praise on poetics itself. Its three distinct stanzas following the traditional Pindaric ode’s movement– strophe, antistrophe, and epode– explore the concept of the body as it becomes the verse. The poem also stands beside the many verses of *ars poetica* I’ve studied, in the celebration of the poetry, as the ode’s celebratory fashion of praising and glorifying subjects goes. My odes, specifically “Versification,” carry personification and invocation into the realm of the poem. The first two stanzas of my poem “Versification” provide a provocative view into the metaphorical body as a poem, split both in form and injury:

To tell you the truth. Every word I spit has bile in it.
Everything I say is a first line of a new poem,
like some new kind of divinity, I crave death
by a word-slide. I’ll be collecting token phrases
until they kill me, or take me by the hands,
one folding fluid motion, force my eyes stay-open,
show me the truth. Give me an answer.

I’ve been told that I’ll break for good one day–
My skin graft cigarette burns won’t last, I’ll split
and there won’t be enough twine to scarecrow stitch
my riven bodies pieces back together.
But I play bloody knuckles against brick walls
in passing, kiss fire poker for fun, you can’t destroy
a body that calendars history in needle prick
tongue bit tell-all-tales. (p. 63)

“Versification” is an ode that is bare to the reader. My goal was to showcase the unity of craft and body, displayed in the on-going metaphorical expression of the poem’s language signifying the speaker’s sustained injuries. This pairing of body and verse through the lens of *ars poetica*

poetry writing is a style I've become very fond of as the language surrounding poetry operates both literally and metaphorically in terms of sustained injury. The poem, however, finds its base in praise most of all, specifically praising the craft and its greats, alluding to those many influential poets who have made it what it is. As an ode the poem finds its footing not only in emotional expression, but in obligation to the form and craft itself. The rawness of tone communicates a passion, samples voices of caution and sorrow, but above all shows the willingness to sacrifice for the craft, contemplatively yet energetically.

There are many references to my influences in this poem as well as in my other poems, Carl Phillips being one prominent influence on this piece specifically. Although much of Phillips' work has inspired my own, his poem "Archery" particularly details his practice of weaving sorrow and sacrifice, but with an ode-like singing to an embrace of life:

Dear saddle
of gentleness. Dear moss, sweet moss that only
the dark and wet and patience make possible. To sing a song
of water, and not drown in it. And some calling that
a good trick. And some calling it

mastery... (Poetry Foundation, July/August 2020)

Phillips' poems have always attracted me, and this one is no exception, with meticulous wordplay and fine-tuned details. This work and many others like it inspired phrases or concepts like "scarecrow stitch" and "death by word-slide" featured in my poem "Versification," samples the elevated language of Phillips and the ode as a form, yet with a frenzied turn toward modern ode writing. My inspiration to write an ode to poetics came from the desire to capture all of these nuances, as Phillips does in his poem.

The work of poet and essayist Ross Gay in his book *Be Holding: A Poem* also moves with this ode-like deliverance through over a hundred pages, sustaining a passionate and raw

dedication to Julius Irving's NBA career. In this book-length poem, and many of Gay's other poems, he moves with the motions of the ode, whether the poem is proclaimed as one or not. The passion and the spirit of the ode is something that is both complex and spontaneous, historic and basic. Gay's feverishly long verse was prompted by one historical moment, Julius Irving's "baseline scoop" move of the 1980 NBA Finals. Even though the poem surrounds this moment within concepts and themes vastly separate from basketball, *Be Holding: A Poem* embraces this fullness, as well captures and immortalizes all that the moment represents. Although my poem "Versification" is specifically titled as an ode written to my love of poetics, and the praise to the authorship which inspires me to envelop myself deeper, many of my other poems gesture toward the same sentiments which the ode is based in: rawness of emotion, in celebration or mourning.

Invoking Voices & Collaboration

Writing poetry is an inherently collaborative action, whether the collaboration is formal, as in the Golden Shovel, or conversational. The concept of a borrowed voice, or as I call it, an "invoked voice," is evident throughout my work, not only through my poetic moves such as of homage or dedication, but as a practice to showcase voices perhaps unfamiliar or fresh to readers. Poet Tony Hoagland describes this concept of an imported voice in his book *The Art of Voice*: "The use of imported speech pries the poem out of the managerial hands of the speaker and breaks the possible monotony of being overly anchored in the autobiographical mode." (71) This use of imported speech, or the invoking of voices, more easily extends my poetry to readers, without making the experience jarring or disingenuous. This can be seen in my poem "Take Me to Your River," which borrows lyrics of Leon Bridges' song by the same name, specifically in the lines "You're paper white arms / speckled barn red, I try to speak *but there is blood / on my hands, and my lips are unclean*" to express the emotional theme of loss as well as the dueling of

physical and metaphysical “coldness.” The poem’s ability to form a connection to exterior voices brings a more exciting and distinctive perspective into the poem, allowing readers a wider vantage point, while also highlighting poetry’s collaborative possibilities.

In honing my craft I have embraced collaboration with many individuals across a wide variety of genres, each bringing their special niche to my work. In this way, my poetry is able to be a vessel for voice, carrying with it my influences and ideas, as well as the spirit of others’ work alongside my own. My emerging poetics is built on these collaborative actions of sampling voices from many different realms of the artistic and expressive sphere, poets and musicians alike. My poetry writing exists as a practice that samples from a vast selection of influences, literary and otherwise, all who inform and direct the work. My efforts to invoke voices necessary to me, with their vast influences, can be found within my poem “A You, Without a Past.” The first lines of the last stanza read:

We want the stories, bring us your tales,
how was your life in the sand, but please,
leave out needing saving. Stories
of your time on 24th St, climbing
bridges on Coronado Island. How perilous
were the Sunset Cliffs? Your friends,
the venturesome vagrants, tell us about them.
But please, Cody, edit around the drownings.
Bring the you for us to see ... Cody,
when you come, tell us how, how you
made it out alive, where your joys are.

The poem aims to evoke these voices the speaker is interacting with by adapting their language of manipulation, both of the speaker and their lived experiences. This poem nods to Ada Limón’s poem “The Contract Says: We’d Like the Conversation to be Bilingual” (*The Carrying*, 60) in which a similar theme of manipulative discourse takes place, those relevant identities in common. In my piece, I adapt the language of Limón’s poem, specifically her first line, “When

you come, bring us your—” to show the clashing of these voices in both pieces. Limón’s poem also offers the lines “Will you tell us the stories that make / us uncomfortable, but not complicit?” (60) which directly inspired the writing of this poem as I followed this theme, and borrowed the language of commodifying speakers for another’s gain. Through my poem, I showcase the voice of the speaker, those disregarding that speaker's experiences for their own use, and Limón’s speaker's voice of the same refrain. My use of additional voices such as Limón’s and the “others” serve to amplify my influences, as well as show the experiences that lead to the creation of the poem and the mutually felt ideas shared between my own poem and Limón’s.

My work has been nurtured not only by my own influential experiences, but also by publications, writers, musicians, and the poets I study. One of my favorite interpretations of the poetic impact of influences is by Carl Phillips. In Philip’s book *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry* he writes a chapter titled “The Book as Bridge,” and explains rather metaphorically that “I cannot reach you *until* I’ve left one place and reached the next space in which, eventually, I might find you.” (191) This concept of a book as a “bridge” is a captivating concept to me as it represents the act of lessening the distance from writer to reader, the book bridging that gap. In this chapter Phillips also asks a question, “Why should the reader wish to cross it, or why this one, as opposed to the many others?” (193), begging the most basic yet crucial question I’ve set out to answer through my writing: Why should people read this? My poem “The Problem With Carrying On” acts on the motions of bridging to a reader, as well as addressing this question:

The bills didn’t stop piling, the dirt had to wait.
All we ever do is save up, work hard for when rainy
days come, grunt work 9-5 overtime, even on weekends,
even on holidays. It feels like every day is rainy now,

but I can't afford to miss another funeral,
and I know our deaths won't stop eviction notices. (p. 58)

The poem confronts the unfortunate experience of financial struggle, one that “we” find common in our experiences. The aspiration to connect with readers, despite the circumstances of the poem, informed my work and motivated me. Not only do I aim to examine experiences through my perspective in my poetry, but also through the perspective of as many people as I can. It is not only the inclusion of these common experiences within my work that directs my intentions behind my writing, but how those commonalities are delivered, the means in which the speaker is offering comfort to readers through their own openness on what may be shared. I embrace Phillips’ question of why readers should spend their time with my work and answer it with experiences that are not unique to me, but that I place into the poetic sphere so that readers might “find me” just as Phillips wrote.

I want to share the belonging that poetry has brought me with others, to further the craft of poetry writing with its benefits and triumphs. The access to untapped emotion and an ability to find release and explore in ways other kinds of writing cannot drives much of my work in poetry. As Tony Hoagland writes in *The Art of Voice*, “Poetic intimacy means *confiding*” (23), and to me, this expresses the opportunity for readers to form a bond with a poem, even if the world of the poem is one they are unfamiliar with. Such a cathartic confiding can be found in my poem “The Problem with Carrying On,” in lines that read: “This is why my best friend’s mother / is rotting in the corner, she is here with me / because I couldn’t be there” In these lines, the speaker confides in the reader, both as an act of confession as well as a view into the speaker’s experiences. These acts of confiding I find to be special to the kindred and interpersonal nature of poetry, the voices evoked giving readers a space to feel represented, be seen, or more-so held, and no genre holds us the way poetry does.

Association

Similar to the practices of homage, invoking voice, and various forms, I also liken many of my poetry practices to those of associative poetry, which Carl Phillips describes as a sort of pseudo-musical technique within his book *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry*. Phillips explains that “the gathering together of images can be likened to a musical chord, several notes held simultaneously to produce a meaning that in music is called harmony; in lyric poetry, we call it resonance—” (93) I practice this move of creating an association in poetry through joining many images, sometimes even clashing them, in pursuit of creating deep associative meaning as opposed to a merely descriptive one. In this manner, I can accumulate images to craft a more direct, even more complex, scene in a poem. This building up of images also allows for a slow-burn of conjoined images and felt ideas throughout a poem, intensifying the experience of reading as the pieces build.

Collaging multiple images within a single poem is a gesture I lean toward. One particular poem of mine which reveals this image-driven association, in opposition to a more straightforward narrative structure, is my piece “Coffee from a Travel Mug.” The end of my first stanza reads:

Running out and running away,
it’s as if they share a set of lungs. I’ve run out,
or been run out of many front doors, back gates
over fences, out window sills. The count now
is beyond me, *but* I’d never felt I was running
away, I was always chased, tormented to my feet with
untied laces, prompted to run. This feat, the running,
was always for escape, never my choice.
Just the only option. (p. 33)

This poem combines images of youth and trauma into a single piece to showcase the feeling of being pressured and forced to flee, both physically and emotionally. The various images and details build on each other for this poem to have its associative impact. This poem curates emotional imagery, like the many instances of being “run out,” giving readers a bigger picture. Following Carl Phillips’ methodology of harmonic simultaneous images, each one must function to the best of its ability to further hold the “chord” in conjunction with others. Specifically in this stanza, the many associated images swell together, through a continuous building of the images alongside one another. The core idea of the speaker being forced to flee, that emotional turmoil, is paired with nostalgic and physical imagery of being “tormented to my feet with / untied laces,” which comments on the inherent harshness of the experiences present in the poem. Each image is setting up the next, such as in the lines “front doors, back gates / over fences, out window sills” each image moving through association from the prior image.

Much of my work adopts these associative impulses Carl Phillips reveals in his own poems. Phillips’ poetic stylings grip me due to his ability to pair imagery and emotive language, and his ability to juggle these complex images and feelings within a single poem. One of my favorite poems of his, and that illustrates this talent is “The Greatest Colors for the Emptiest Parts of the World” from Phillips’ collection *Reconnaissance*:

What if all we can do is all we
can do? what if longing, annihilation, regret are all this
life’s ever going to be, a little music box throw across and
under it, ghost song from a cricket box when the last
crickets have again gone silent, *now, or be still forever,*
as the gathering crowd, ingathering, slowly backs away? (11)

In this final stanza of this poem, Phillips moves between the metaphorical and the actual, as the “music box” becomes the “cricket box” compelling readers to sense meaning from the many

images viscerally as well as intellectually. Such associative methods have found their way into my toolbox; multiple images meeting to relay what are both unfamiliar and common experiences. These moves of association ultimately have allowed me to evoke my own experiences into my poems, images based from my own memories or experiences, while still rooting the poems in what may also be known for many readers.

Experience: Curating Poems

The work I have done in the literary editing and publishing program has also informed my work tremendously. The many opportunities I've had to compile manuscripts, chapbooks, or other poets' collections of creative work have provided me with profound insight. Working on these collections has shown me how the interconnectedness of poems can transform bodies of text into something more than their individual pieces. The book as an object is one fascinating element in my practice. Shaping texts which intertwine theme, genre, or subject matter into conscious textual bodies, as well as physical objects, the poetry book or collection, removes the idea of a poem as just one singular entity. Instead of simply a file or page, opening and studying the book as an object opens the collection to readers as an ongoing experience. This concept of the book-object heavily guides my perceptions of formatting and stylistic aspects of poetry writing and curating my collections of poems, both for this project and going forward. I write with the thought in mind of how my poems move, how they are received visually through their formatting, as well as received textually. The poem's themes, images, language, and voices are curated to best showcase each poem as they are ordered, as another way to better facilitate experiences of readership.

Many of my poems in this collection as they've been laid out work alongside this objective of each of the poems as experiences within and across the pages. The collection begins

with poems I've written alongside the emotions of fleeing, both physically and emotionally, the acts of running from places or individuals. The poems that follow then transform these poems of fleeing and their language to explore relationships and the more metaphorical escape that takes place through them. The concepts of identity, youth, the body, love, and loss are organized throughout my manuscript to build on top of one another, basing the collection in not only the fleeing of a body, but also that of fleeing time. Each selection of poems touches on many core themes or subject matter, though all of them interplay with movements between the physical and the metaphorical.

Additionally a large number of the poems function with the body as the subject, specifically the body as both a vessel and a slate for cataloging injury or trauma. These poems oriented toward the body were ordered in a way that begins with my poem "Weak," a piece which invites the reader to move alongside the speaker. The bodily poems slowly open as the collection continues, first touching on physical bodily injury, with imagery of scar tissue, burn-cream, or broken ribs, and then later becoming nostalgic. This transitional movement from poems on sustained injuries to the body becoming pieces that are reminiscing on the past is seen in my poems such as "Volcanoes in the Sandbox" and "Little Light," both poems in which I reflect on my own youth and experiences; firstly, from my own fogged memories of childhood, as well as on the birth of new life, new family members, eventually ending on a poem written to my metaphorical child "Mercy" in my poem "Thank you, Mercy."

The concept of voice, whether it is borrowed, found, or earned is presented throughout this collection in a variety of ways. In fact, many voices are presented throughout each poem of this collection, yet the quest of finding a voice throughout life's experiences is represented specifically in later poems, connected together in series that are both literal and metaphorical.

The poem of mine “Sunshine Pseudonym” begins the exploration of identity and articulation of voice discussing my nickname, Coders, and the process of naming as a concept interconnected with my poetics. As the collection moves forward the harrowing nature of my poem “Tongue Thrust” is brought to light, followed by a further expression of the experience in my poem “A Mouthful of Marbles.” The curation of the poems, which make up the last quarter of the manuscript, exemplify a battle with past and present, many of them conversing with the idea of loss, whether that be of the self, or of others. These poems adopt a realized voice, one of bitterness toward what or who could have been saved. Specifically, the poems “Alkaline Love,” “Diablo,” and “The Problem With Carrying On” implore the reader to mourn figures whom they do not know, though, through the reading of each poem, learn much about them.

In keeping with the experiential aspect of what I’d learned in literary editing and publishing I moved to end the collection on notes of hope, given what had come prior was a delving into a multilateral web of themes surrounding bodily and emotional expressions. I had concluded that there was brightness in the collection, despite the physical and metaphorical pain that was depicted throughout, that the “light” of a collection based in movement was the ability to continue that moving. The final three poems are awash in this potential for hope, the speaker of each expressing the findings of empathy or compassion in the otherwise draining world of the collection that houses them. My poem “Versification,” as priorly mentioned, is proud despite its grim nature and my second to last poem “To Be Alive” channels poet Gregory Orr and the spirit of this hope based in poetry in its final lines, “I tell her, *how do you expect me to not to dance, / when all there is, is music.*”

Conclusion

It is not much of a reach to claim that my poetics are built from witnessing. My inspiration for my poems comes to me impulsively, through what I perceive around me constantly, like a dog with three legs, or a couple on a first date. I find that there is endless inspiration sprouting from each corner of everywhere I look now, when I look close enough. It is this process of witnessing and cataloging the wonder surrounding me that continually draws me deeper into poetry, the roots of the craft deeply set in my every day life now. Carl Phillips explains in his interview with Nick Flynn for *Coin of the Realm*, “It isn’t that I court difficulty—in a life, any more than in a poem—but I can’t understand complacency, how anyone can be restive and still think of himself or herself as living a life of inquiry, which is to say, as living a life at all.” (133) It is not only from what I witness but how I have learned to witness that compels the poems I scribble in my journals, the sticky notes with newly learned words or phrases across the room, and each little beauty I notice. I am compelled to write because it is what brings me such a fulfilling life, and to me that is poetry.

My life now is one of witnessing and appreciating, constantly practicing what Phillips calls inquiry. The genre of poetry has allowed for this type of spontaneity and specificity, to focus on the meticulous details of any given moment within a poem. All the while, I am still reaching out to the finer points to create meaning about the bigger picture which surrounds me. such as the inner workings of parenthood navigated through my poem “Thank you Mercy,” which I wrote about seeing children playing in a fountain. In writing about something as complex as love and death in my poem “Alkaline Love,” the writing of the poem was focused, based on true experiences: my mother and the loss of her best friend. Poetry provides a slate for words to be artfully pieced onto a page, a creative gesture invoked by the spirit of finding beauty in our experiences, while shaping it on the page.

My studies of poetry have offered me an outlet for expression and connection, a community that consistently pushes me toward my goals and a perspective into the future I will be a part of. I owe much of who I am today to the genuine nature of poetry, and to those who make it what it is. All these brutal truths I've witnessed being pulled forth from life's experiences, brought to life on the page to dance, are due to the poets that have come before me. The craft of poetry serves me, in as many ways as one could describe, and gives purpose to what otherwise may pass me by as standard experiences, images, sounds, or sights. This is why I dedicate time and energy to the craft of poetry, out of due respect to what it has given me, back pay to the monument that is the timeless genre and those poets who made it. My lessons on witnessing have been bestowed by the many authors and mentors I've encountered all stem from the genre of poetry, from poets. This genre has welcomed me with open arms and pointed me in the direction I'd been meant to go, the direction I am now going. I want to carry on the honor of poetry as an art and as a genre that allowed me to become my fully-realized self, and join the ranks of all the poets I've praised and the countless who I have yet to. As I conclude I want to continue, as Rainer Maria Rilke penned, to "live the questions now."

How It Felt To Run

*Be. And, at the same time, know what it is not to be.
The emptiness inside you allows you to vibrate
in full resonance with your world. Use it for once.*
– Rainer Maria Rilke

Home. Or Wherever You Are

Don't send the search party, I'll be back again soon,
this much I can promise you. I'm off searching
for what puts these lines in your palms, learning how
the hills curve like hips do, those dimples in the landscape
where I'd love to nestle. This land with its expanse
is as good of a bed as any to me, sun blankets,
zoysia pillows. The monarchs are flying back.

Look hard enough— you can see
how my mouth still purses like it had
in my childhood, my smile lines,
those lofty windows to my home. Fitted
with rain or shine runs, bare feet on lawns.
Butterflies moved through my hair, mistook
me for a flower, like that I am the home.
Alone in the memories I can hold,
between my spotted palms. Before
we had to paint the grass green, when I,
housing the butterflies,
could still be a flower.

Shin Splints

The muscle peels off from the bone.
It is a forced separation many can ignore
by just pushing through it. Pain, as they say,
is incredibly temporary, when considering
glory. When I could not bend my ankle,
I'd massage the lactic acid until numbness
swept me, ran on it anyways. When I broke
5 minutes in the mile I could limp
to the podium. My pride is strong enough.

I am young so I will heal, I can bend
so far before I break. So far— I chase
the breaking, thinking it will finally give me
rest from all this. Runner's high, beet juice
shots, pasta dinner carb loading, dig deeper,
cut down, bulk up, remember the plan.

Pace yourself, you have to.
This is a play in three acts— minutes, miles.
Focus, time to turn over, go smooth, then
strong, then fast. *Ignore those thoughts*, ignore
the pain, apply the tiger balm. *Cry off the field*,
do it alone, leave it all out there. *How bad*
do you want it?

My grief is a track-spike, his a hockey puck, hers a dumbbell.
Together we didn't have enough metal in us
to make up any medal, or trophy, or plaque we earned.

My ankles pop when I walk now, morse code.
I can't remember how it started, but I know
how it finishes, trophies sit collecting dust,
my lungs burn, my shins are skinned ivory.
The muscles attach back to the bones, I heal.
Then phantom pains remind me, I'll never really
stop running. Form changes, pace doesn't,
I don't need spikes to catch the torture
that I'd always trained to chase.

Coffee from a Travel Mug

I start drinking my coffee black,
not for some reason of mettle or grit,
not depth or clarity, but because I've run out
of creamer. Running out, and running away,
it's as if they share a set of lungs. I've run out,
or been run out of, many front doors, back gates
over fences, out window sills. The count now
is beyond me, *but* I'd never felt I was running
away, I was always chased, tormented to my feet with
untied laces, prompted to run. This feat, the running,
was always for escape, never my choice.
Just the only option.

*Every scar upon each of my bony knees shows my journey,
a map of where the running outs occurred, with each
of the times it failed, those times I wasn't fast enough.*

When I imagine running away, truly running for it,
I can see the bright field of Yosemite's Basin, tall
grass, chilling air raising my hairs, nothing behind
me dictating my speed, nothing lurching me forwards,
only a sunrise drawing me inward. The clouds when
I run away are just watching me go, letting me pass,
never minding my strides.

So when I run away, *I won't*
be chased, not urged or dared, *I will go* loudly, and
I will go quickly, but *I will go* on my own.

And when I run, I won't be followed, I'll have finally
run away, not been run out, and then, only then,
will I drink my coffee with cream again.

Safe Travels

My astronaut jettisoned from ship,
to places words can't slip from swollen lips,
bruised tongues airless dark. "We bid him
safe travels," His mission, given no end-
sight, context fell in an airtight room, built as box,
they told me, to tell him, *you're doing what's best*,
but the microphone cracked, rattled, then sparked.
He'd never heard a word, far too busy staring
at the moon with her sprinkled stars.

He'd written "I love you" in zero gravity,
A traveler once stuck to earth, floating now,
smiling at me, down here. They'd said
we've lost him when the ship moved off
course, but I think he found himself
up there, beyond the stars.

If life and death are cosmic,
my astronaut is there exploring both.
He can't report back, so I wonder
where he really floated, or if he floated at all,
or if I'm the one floating, and he really just fell.

Gas Prices– The Middle of Nowhere

When bisecting the state of California,
you'll reach a moment of truth or dare.
Swear you'll outrun the sunrise if only
you can keep the pedal to the floor, and
the gas tank a tick away from E. Early hours
of the morning will only egg you onto this,
until you find yourself rolling empty into
a gas station, thinking, *This is it, bumfuck nowhere.*
Half joking, half fearful, lacking a recollection
of the previous 5 hours. You ask yourself,
can your hatchback really go fast enough,
escape the bitter memories that hold on tight,
just like your bumper stickers do?

Cracking open the door to trudge
dust-filled deserted landscape,
a Mad Max conquest for refueling.
Squinting as the sunrise overtakes you. You learn
the race is over, you've lost, a man exhales smoke
far too close to the clunking pumps, and you wonder if he too
was racing the sunrise. As you trace the imaginary pipeline
deep within earth, it points you home, just as your map does.
The gas pump clinks, sounding as a ricocheting bullet would,
ripping the receipt you speak your first words in hours,
“90 fucking dollars, for 12 gallons!” before clutching out to catch
the outburst like a fog. The smoking man chuckles at you,
“this is going to put me in a hole” is all you can muster,
“If you want to get out of the hole,-” he coughs,
“-you've got to put down the shovel.” and drives off.
On his bumper you catch four words–
You shift into reverse, hoping he's right.
Live Today, Die Tomorrow.

Peach Tree Peace Treaty

We could spend all day watching
the leaves take that brave leap,
unpin from wind's encouraging nature.
I'll twist the peach from its stem,
cradle it like a child in my two tender palms
until it feels safe enough. It's a joy
to spend a little more time with fruit.

The world washes my car without asking
for a nod of approval, so I think the land
should swallow us whole for golf courses,
the grass and moss are green with envy
at our ability to use our fingers,
they just want a place to tee off, too.

There is a signature on the dotted line
of five birds flying in unison, wisped clouds
writing their name like a careless painter.

So maybe I am the weed, popping up
out of cracks like dandelions do,
I'm soft and mighty and full of wishes,
but the wacker still wants to chop
my head off.

Grassy Knolls, Butterfly Kisses

Seeing double, laid flat on my back,
every billowing cloud adds yet another pound,
to the swelling weight of my head. I'm nestled in
the ground. Each passing moment I'm closer
to the moist center of the lawn. I can't help it,
I want to sink deeper into the drift.

All the scattering sunbeams take their turns,
each grazing my taut cheeks, all I can do is feel them.
A gap in the clouds opens a hungry mouth,
disturbing each loosely identifiable shape I created.
The castle floating above my gaze, slowly reduces
to wisps in a blink or two.

Despite the gash slashing itself across my daydream,
I make out one single form, a single fluttering pair of
bright orange wings, loosely it sails above my furrowed
brows, bestowing butterfly kisses— Close enough
to compel me into squinting my eyes.

I'd had little reason to move. Now I've lost
my ability to breathe, fearing any effect
exhale could bring to this flight pattern
on the tip of my nose. My hands collect
the blades, one by one, green and dewy
from last night's rainy show.

In each missed breath, I feel myself merging into the knolls,
the grass blade moves in the wind, their breath becomes mine,
dew drops soak into my still skin. There is a sign driven
into the ground 15 feet or so from my motionless pointed toes,
it reads boldly, *KEEP OFF GRASS!* Below the command,
a tiny drawing of a flower, a text bubble stemming from a pedal.
The flower says, *No.*

Take Me to Your River

After Leon Bridges

I wrap my hands around yours, all I can give
is my rigid warmth, though it isn't much.
This is my attempt to bring you back,
we're both sputtering, each icy muscle sore,
our lungs are fluid reservoirs.

We share one unlucky kiss of life, then we drown,
going down clawing at each other. Calm treetops peek
at a pale— obscenely beautiful sky. River bank limestone
shudders at our gray skin. Your paper white arms
speckled barn red, I try to speak *but there is blood
on my hands, and my lips are unclean*. Two blue fingers
on coral pink cheeks. The river does not forgive our love.
I promise I tried, I tried to save us from the current.

I want to move your body like the river does,
trace each corner & curve as nature intended,
navigate each of your twists & bends of ever-
-flowing majesty. The rapids drag me along
a path with passion. I'm consumed in its intention.
Paddle against the ebb and flow, let rough rocks tear
me apart, leave me grated on the boulder barriers.
I cannot stop the motions of a mountain's mouth.

Snow melt signed our fate. It's foolish to make love
in freezing water, kept alive by our limbs
lacing, risking life for such a lethal coupling.
You always ran hot, I was the shivering sacrifice.
Our local river sounds the way freedom would,
how you thought it should. To me it sounds lonely.
I try to move like the water, strip naked, wade out—
the way you taught me, but my knees buckle, and you
aren't here to catch me drifting.

What Kind Of Thief?

Is love an innocent emotion?
A raw stealing, of gaze and breath,
what else to call you, but a thief
in shuttered tongue, stifled words begging
for the second, third, held at finger-gun point
dripping sweat, cocked brows flying off
as childish drawings show birds.

I've been robbed, one sharp smirk
held to my jugular, left with empty
pockets— Hands full of regret folded into fists
clutching my discipline, love is not so
innocent, my time was stolen, and I don't
own a watch. I was blind-sided, sucker-
punched with lipstick across my blue cheek.

You made off with everything.
My heart the worst of the bounty,
what kind of thief steals you away
when all you want is to give more.

The few words you left me with

I swallowed. Each one felt like a thumbtack
dragging down my throat, then sticking
in, hanging your photos within me.

My every breath is a gust of wind,
rustling your decorations inside me.

Those few words you'd left me with,
I chewed on them, for months that started
only as days. Then I swallowed, like pine-sap.
Those needle-covered trees we'd basked beneath
together, joined by spit and lacing fingers.

Pieces of your tongue's lashing have settled
on my lips, still now I can chime out our grief.
The love we have perched on our hearts...
The hearts on our sleeves that everyone adored
but they never missed diluting. What a voice
you own, darling. Songs won a new meaning, played
louder with your turns and sways, dance with me
again like we'd pretended to in nuptials.

Drag those three keys out, one for each word,
dust each off before speaking their grit,
say you'll love me again, lock away the three
dozing syllables between us now.

Love, Come

Love, come and save me,
spare some tenderness or care,
make my low hum tune return,
give my pickups a pick-me-up.
Love, come and save me, before the song ends.

Time tells me I've got some guitar heart strings,
a beat up old instrument sitting in the corner,
plucked upon until the highest string snapped.
I can't be bothered, can't even bear, to tune up anymore,
coil up each wire knowing I'll watch them loosen up
again. Pass me around this town, strummed and smacked,
soloed, toss me to the side when my cracked neck can't be
fixed, celebrations of my song too often require smashing,
to some eerily ear-rung crowd of unknown band's biggest fans.

Have you ever seen a man

burn brighter with love

than the man that you were looking at?

Today I could barely manage a beat,
I can't produce a chord, when I was held I'd whistle notes
like a parakeet, my clipped wing caged bird songs now
only sound like a cannonball, searching for a sunken body.

Cellular Conjuring

I make another call to the number I can't remember
if I know is right, and I'm too afraid to ask if—
I could even ask to begin with... Too worried
I'm wrong, without enough words to fill the spaces
if, or when, I'm right. Here in this place,
a bedroom of a child I knew was happy, because I was
him, I'm trying to pull a number from thin air, squeezing
my thumbs in my hands together with my eyes.

[The ringing never ends]

Numbers are supposed to just appear
in front of me, within a ring of light,
be divine, be heavenly, and be yours—
But they don't show up. I start guessing.
I dial randomly, I'm asking for you, bound
to find your voice on the other end eventually.

Hello?

I hope you know I'm calling, maybe you've heard
about it? Through a thread of numbers I don't know
are right, and with rings in between,
can you hear my voice asking
if yours is around, or when you'll be back?

Hello?

Weak

After Ocean Vuong

Anger allows you to test the waters.
Find the gauge which levies— internal,
external, temperatures that come only
from truth, as passion or pain, the agony
in the scorn and scorching.

Let yourself be hurt. Envelop yourself
in the emotions you dispel, if only to know
that you still can. Be weak as you can be—
crumple in, humanity is built from the post
and rash feelings. Mourn it till you kneel
to the splendor that is loss, grieve the place
with its people, cry for losing to yourself.
We will have to lose sight
if we ever want to see any clearer.

Cigarette Burns

Pink, paraded upon countless arms, legs, chests, so frequently in this town of rooftop chain smoking, binge-drunken numbness. Flickering, a bright orange tip of an American Spirit makes a connection, another helpless patch of tender skin, and then is extinguished, with a holler and blunt palm hit, searing pain sprinting against a glazing intoxication of a body, who will regret the decision in the morning.

Much like someone plunging their body through a table, bits have aged. Debauchery so common, we barely even glance anymore. Common enough we can slip past public eyes, avoid arousing a suspicious, or more likely. . . curious sets of lingering glances. Arms blotted in countless ember kisses. Socially acceptable means of bodily destruction, right there in plain sight, with all the glory, all the internalized self directed hatred, it is nearly *too easy*.

In the times our burn-cream covered arms, in their stinging envy, are brought to light, the menu of possible lies is nearly endless. *I dropped a grill, I was fixing my car, I wasn't paying attention, I passed out with it lit.* How inviting, this wholly normalized, run-of-the-mill party trick. Our parents don't think far enough to inquire, only angry we were smoking cigarettes, then again, *we all did in college*, our novelty of turning such normality into weapons against ourselves.

My Questions on Pain

It is difficult to brush my hair,
with my clinging fingers bandaged,

a warped metal-base hugging blown out
ring wearer, gnashed white, reddish-pink,

my thick blood blackened on a t-shirt green,
I am the plagued purple of aged black eyes before—

before yellowing to airy complexions
laid on levels like spackled freckles.

Each muscle tension, my painkiller stomach-ache,
dripping blood trails to the paper-covered

table. Faint feeling, into fainting, a cold
sweat, wet neck, damp forehead, sharp—

sharp needle knuckle-dusters. Each
plunge, stitch by stitch pulled taut,

a ghost mutters from my chin gash,
taught like some ancient history.

Sealed then secluded, dissolved
into scar tissue, my gauze clean white.

It is difficult to bend, both
my will and my fingers,
locked in splints.

Curiosity crashes over, a question
on pain, when the body finally
does succumb, does the heart
hurt any further, only then
does it all really end?

Volcanoes in the Sandbox

I'm clad in child-worn denim overalls, I am crafting
a channel, tossing sand with the conviction of a crazed artist,
my easel is a simple 2x4 sandbox my father built.
Assorted plastics surround me; shovels, spades, a rake.
I'm a young landscape architect, just like him, father.

The dirty work only gets dirtier, grubby hands of
sand-slobber, indistinguishable from chisels on marble sculpture.

My buckets are packed tight, then smacked,
stacked, and repeated. What grows before me
from fits of giggly glee, a mass of all fifty sandy pounds,
bucket by bucket, meticulously moved, work of one
drooling toddler. Shade blankets me,
the height blocks overhanging sun.

My small figure waddles from the box, I plop myself
at the feet of my parents, still giggle-filled in glory, uttering one
toothless word, *volcano*. My parents both know, there is
nothing left to do. My mother picks me up,
my father mans the spigot, our family watches
the hose sputter, spit, and explode from the structure.

I clap my blunt hands together, tilting up to watch the rainbows
form, back again to watch the mountain muddle into sand soup.
My mother gently tosses me into my father's arms, turning off
the spigot, he kisses my sand-covered cheek.
I'm placed down, they just watch, knowing soon the structure
will begin its reconstruction, and once again I will be smiling.

They say a koi pond once stood where my sandbox lived,
its beauty was not enough to save its destruction.
I feel guilty— My parents assure me,
koi ponds are nothing compared to your smile.

Little Light

For: Heidi.

Long ago in chapter eight of our story,
one baffled boy lost a star to a gust of wind.
Extinguishing a brightness so warm, so dear,
the earth chattered its teeth from the chill. Light left
with the star, dimness fell over what once was illuminant.
Though baffled, boy's eyes still shined, now collecting with tears,
in place of the star's reflection.

Chapters went on, pages turned.
Boy turned brilliant, became strong, chapters flashing by,
in growing up boy saw life's beauty, though he missed the star,
looking for it in the sky, even swearing he'd seen a glimpse,
though never could he convince himself. As the boy changed,
he began his search for the star in others, giving love away, hoping for light.
Though nothing, no one, shined properly. So he kept searching.

Now these many chapters later, the boy, now man, never gave up
on his star, finding shimmering in himself throughout. He found it
in his own eye, much more, he found not only one new star, but many,
all as bright as the one he'd lost. These stars sharing his love, his blood,
his name. This story, is how the boy found you.

Undercover Valentine

Would you like to be my valentine?
With flowers & forehead kisses landing,
in perfect time, just like our feet
in sync despite being out of line.
I was only wondering, if you
would be my valentine?

We don't have to be stereotypical,
we can just collide like any two beings do,
find feeling in the falling. We'll build from hopes,
hopes we'd been too afraid to say in the light,
hopes you'll only whisper in sleep, our faces
can hide from being matched to our words.

What I'm saying– pleading,
you don't have to kiss me in the sunlight,
nowhere other's wide open eyes can pass us,
in public where judgment lashes your shoulder.
Although I dance around the word– embarrassment,
I know that's what I am– to you.

Keep me spinning around the pain, just as I've
spun you, spun us both around my brain.
Hold me like I hold you, tender & smooth, make me
believe, you aren't ashamed to hold my hand.

Sunshine Pseudonym

If you've ever seen the soul bellow out of the lungs of a lover,
float to the cosmos and tickle angel's feet, hear tranquil laughter,
all due to a silky selection of your carefully curated words, then
you'd understand its reverberance. A name not by birth, not one
even chosen, but bestowed like a winter hat, when ears found frostbite.
Nicknamed gilded, golden, like every hair on my head, sprung
from a mother's supple lip to a father's sunburnt ear,
caught by the carrot-topped toddler rolled in a blanket.

Followed like a spirit through cruel adolescence,
utterances, *freckle-faced fuck*, *firecrotch*,
nicknames that would spit blood in my eyes,
like the concrete that never lets me forget
how rough it is. One prevailed, saw me
through blinding crocodile tears, punched
purpled eyes lined with sickening yellows,
the unmixed paint of my mother's bedroom walls.

I wear this name tag because it is mine,
earned like peach smoothie scars, and
yes, you can ask me about it. I've
never been one for platitudes, I don't
need your sorrows. . . tell me what to
call you instead, then tell me when.
Wrap your fingers around mine,
I'll give you the permission to purse
your lips, say my sunshine pseudonym,
"you can call me *coders*."

Tongue Thrust

After Phil Kaye, "Repetition"

I. You can try and try, force syllables thru your gritted teeth,
until a flurry of words fly from within your lips, like a bird
freed from cross-barred cage, adorned in colorful rubber bands.
Within, you speak with a power that you can watch take shape,
as it reverberates behind the eardrums, lights aflame the pupils
of those standing before you, slack-jawed and open-palmed,
finally– truly hearing you.

And yet the tongue, in its untrained, wildly uncontrollable state,
may still slip, flounder, fail you. Leave the wordy string of pearls,
despite their shimmering, falling just as leaves do, and leave you,
cleaning up that profound weight, once held behind your brilliant words.

A crooked-tongued bucktooth-benevolence, the only weapon
adorned upon my tiny palms, where all I can offer, are beaming eyes
when bright thoughts sit under lock and key, held captive by a tongue
too rowdy to stay put, but too clumsy to move slickly.

II. The speech pathologist pulls me from the playground again,
a bi-weekly occurrence of social separatism, which only the meanest
of kids come to realize they can bully me for. My tender brain learns
too early, their stuck-out tongues do not mean they are laughing with me.
In order to control the muscle responsible for my own self-expression,
my very means of communication, I must firstly understand how to keep the
muscle hidden. *Roof *Reuhf* Roof *Reuhf** I practice Rs, making the verbalizations
assigned, I must practice this at least fifteen times a week, at home, school, everywhere.
When I *Roof *Reuhf**, eyes dart towards, fearful that this sound is a child vomiting.
Years later I watch a poet, he is weaving words like my favorite blanket,
he recounts his childhood stutter, its dormancy, its reawakening, I tremble,
yet in between my shuddered breaths, I find hope, I see a future. One in which
my slick tongue slices syllables like silly, really rolling Rs responsible for
representing a rigorous route to reading, without so much as a *Roof *Reuhf**

A Mouthful of Marbles

I've made habits of talking myself out of trouble,
or at the very least, the troubles that comes before real
trouble. All of this, I say, to avoid the problems, spin
a web, weave a tale, make a narrative.
Slickness through my word of mouth,
bundled up in phonetic safety.

*It is only appropriate to use a silver tongue,
when your heart is made of gold,*
Otherwise I'd be more keen to have bones made of rubber.

As I lie, it is like my mouth is full of marbles, each word
sounding like a game of Mancala, eyes darting into corners,
my brows dripping like a sprinkler system.
Each of my five fingers may as well be made of matchsticks,
too often paired with my quicksilver tongue,
they let me start fires with just a snap. Which is
all too easy. Until all burns up around me.

I am learning I can only talk myself out of so much,
with a back against the wall. My best bet becomes
keeping my teeth clenched, hoping my silver tongue
still functions after I'm gifted a crooked chin.
Learning that my salty tears taste the same,
whether I am the hurting or being hurt.
I am learning marbles taste
better than pennies do.

Chewing (Our Food)

A man's mouth is wide open, enough to see
the tonsils black from years of cigar
ash, dust particles on each pink inch.
My pursed lips are pussy pink,
tight enough to cradle a tongue thrust
between the drawn out vowels
passing through. I hinge my jaw,
feel the ghost of wires once piercing
through tight laces, my false
porcelain implant discolored at
years of opened closure, poor decisions.

Her mouth is gaping in yearning—
No one may not tell her to close it.
Each tooth crowned in gold
and silver, a jeweled smile,
heavy metals fight her words
with lassoes around her tongue's
lisp, each sliver sounds like a call.

Our two empty mouths meet,
rivers joining flow, speed
carrying sediment and saliva.
Together we speak in tongues
sickeningly enough to halt
traffic, garner stares, distract
from our differing impediment.
We take time with each other,
our words draw out over naked
flesh. I trickle the synonyms
across the floor to the bed,
she speaks my name the right way,
with love and caution,
how I thought it should sound.

Snap Buttons

I fell asleep on that sand again, I was digging
again, the beach glass called me in, beckoned

for my blood to spill out into the ocean,
for the ink to run down my cheeks in trickles.

A wet fleece jacket wrapped around my neck
tight with age, its cold, dew-filled pockets

floating with napkins, all had right handwritten
phone numbers— addresses where all the fours

are backwards. At home sandpits crawl in again
like the winds compelled them to fly up north,

Your mother calls, asks about me, want to know
where to find you, I can't manage, didn't know
how or why I'd tell you, but I do... Her message

floating in a green Coke bottle to your gutter.
Full of each button, undone, just you've become.

A You, Without a Past

After Ada Limón

When you come, bring us that
feisty nature, your torqued bite, toothy
smile... The one you always bring.
We know you— as quick remarks,
as subtle chuckle, gripping gazes around
rooms. Warm us all without burning
out, bring that boy with his fractured body.
Bring us the boy you've made for us.

Don't come in here sulking. No, you can't be
cautious, not you smiling boy. With your voice
of booming drumlines, be pronounced—
be that proud in your own skin, only cower
under the loose cloth. Your fretted mind, it won't fit
through our doors. Just leave that in your home,
then leave home all together.
Bring your loving soul and only
that, forget all about your being forgotten.

We want the stories, bring us your tales,
how was your life in the sand, but please,
leave out needing saving. Stories
of your time on 24th St, climbing
bridges on Coronado Island. How perilous
were the Sunset Cliffs? Your friends,
the venturesome vagrants, tell us about them.
But please, Cody, edit around the drownings.
Bring the you for us to see... Cody,
when you come, tell us how, how you
made it out alive, where your joys are.
We love the rough-housing, your pre-teens
spent fighting. Don't leave out the blood on
the pavement. No, only leave out
how hard it was cleaning it up.

Alkaline Love

For my Second Mama

There is no love like a woman's for another.
There is no love like a fierceness for
changing, a sacrifice for another in the face
of what only fools call hopelessness.

Losing this love is being calculated enough
for longevity, love is faith in humanity
despite the extinctions.

Love is nothing if abashed, soiled with shame
spent on waiting, sporadic as falling out, or
dying. Frivolity is not practice, it is a punching bag
before the bell rings and you have to meet her
out on the blacktop to pick up your sons.

Denial is the black dress you never wore,
the phone calls you screened. Her
photographs are somewhere here,
in a box her son would love to find,
and yours would love to see.

Kernville is underwater today.
The last of the good memories in
its rich soil, sprouting the flowers
that will be carried and placed
for the love you'd shared,
when you're no longer afraid to admit it.

Diablo

For my brother

What's that thing we used to say?
The song we used to sing rowdy
in the backseat of your mom's SUV.
Cause everybody got dead homies,
we got buck to that shit, before
we'd know what it'd feel like, before
those years went on. We had to *save*
the coffin spaces, I left you searching
for homes nestled on the bad blocks
in cold places that were *empty as apartment*
basements. Do you remember rolling
miles just to get some Taco Bell,
wearing hot Cheeto dust stains
on our white-tees red as our bleeding
knuckles, or skateboarding with skinned knees.
And those fights, they were all jokes— Right.
We loved each other.

I was 5 months into school when the county
called, 18 years old, trying to figure out
how to pay a bail. Where did it go wrong,
enough to fall behind the bars, I said *don't come up*
missin', you dropped off the face of my world,
and came back with a new one, fit with bloodshot
eyes and countless promises— How
we'd make it out, how we'd do it for them.

I tell myself you're still missing,
that you have been since we lost her.
I make believe that you got away from it.
Do you think our words rang too true— Brother?
My brother. From every other side, we're down
one mama now, and you won't call mine.
We said everybody got dead homies
till our family died.

Ward, 51/50

After Nicole Stellon O'Donnell, "The Black Bear Speaks to Godzilla"

They built you of plastic and cloth in the studio, but I was here first.

We heard you didn't make it, they
with those hooves tight on your neck, built
the cell before the keyhole, the one that you
peered through to us. Footsteps of
survival shouldn't land us in plastic
bottomed shoes, laces taken and
doors forced to be kept open. I lost the cloth
I'd been cut from when we went in
there, no necklaces on besides the
collars they forced, 25 miles from studio
17 with 2 feet of concrete in between, but
at least we're safe right? I am considered lucky, I
was lucky enough, or at a time I was,
now I am the last aware, you didn't want to go back here.

We were lost the way we were found—
Me last, you first.

They might fear you, but only in velvet seats-

I didn't wear black to your funeral, I didn't go to your funeral, because they
never invited me. There are many reasons why, why that might
have happened, invitation lost in the mail, fear
that I may tell the truth of what happened to you,
I may never know why, but
the truth is something I have. Truth is the only
thing I've got left of you, of our time in
there. I still sit out on moist grass, under the sun you'd say felt like velvet,
I sit there for the both of us,
& you'll never come back,
but you'll always have a seat.

The Problem with Carrying On

The business as usual shouldn't be,
let us mourn our dead for decades.

My loves are dropping like flies,
their bodies carried off by the vultures
within hours— Then rent is due, my water
gets turned off, the power bill minimum
payments don't stop flooding my mail.
Everyone still knocks, I'm still expected
to answer, there is still work to be done.

I catch myself looking myself in the eyes,
I am with you in my reflections on the screen.
We don't look happy, I know why.
The fridge is empty, it will stay empty until the 30th.
Wifi is due, and it needs to be paid, work—
work can't be done without it, work
needs to be done to afford it.

This is why my best friend's mother
is rotting in the corner, she is here with me
because I couldn't be there, and she won't rest
until I do. I was supposed to bury her.
I was supposed to be there in a seat reserved
just for me, next to that mound of dirt,
but tuition was due and flights are so costly.
The bills didn't stop piling, the dirt had to wait.
All we ever do is save up, work hard for when rainy
days come, grunt work, 9-5 overtime, even on weekends,
even on holidays. It feels like every day is rainy now,
but I can't afford to miss another funeral,
but we know our deaths don't stop
eviction notices.

Goulash

Love boils. Thick like a stew, coagulates
with fat, muscular bits, it simmers in its base
of salt water to bend us, us noodle folk.
The more tender we are, the better we cook.
As we combine and mix, the better we'll taste.
There is so much flavor in this journey, the spice
of life which shows my scars as morsels,
that make loving me delectable.

My father cooks me goulash with a caterpillar scar
across his knee, I think it is magical how the body heals.
My own knees look tenderized in deep fleshy pink
with bits of marbled white, together we are a glimpse
at the seasoned ways of living. The secret to goulash,
good goulash, is to try new things like riding a bike
or rock climbing, at failing in pursuit of joy. This is how
my father crushes saltines over the top of our food.

When I got sick, stayed sick, my dad
made goulash. I smiled for the first time in a while,
not for of my love for the meal, for his addition
of paprika. An old recipe awash in our new implementation.
Enjoying another lesson in goulash.

Failing and falling to tenderize myself, to eat shit,
swallowing a bad twist on a great recipe did not heal me.
The nourishment came when I did not starve,
even when I was the main course.

Thank you, Mercy

After Bon Iver and Ross Gay's "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude"

What is your favorite birthday cake,
how can I, should I, prepare for you?
These moments feel like deciding to change
the song in the car, and whether you'll
indulge me in singing along. I can feel
your tiny hand in mine, hear whispers
of your small lips over the crashing
waves at the beach that is my home,
our sand castle manor— seaweed decorum.
I am spared, Mercy, I am grateful.
Grateful for you not taking me when you could,
for saving the tears of my loves, Mercy.
I think I know why you took my father's father—
That lesson you laid on his shoulders
which is carried by the man who hoisted me on his,
passing to me enough to live through sorrow.
Merciful mercury-colored love is in the tears
on my cheek that are not only mine, carrying
me home so I may return the favor, I am asking,
mercy me, let me hoist with those same shoulders.

Splendid are those gumdrop sugar crystals
filed like paperwork neatly across your lips.
Your babbling laughter, mercy my child,
mercy my love spawn, swaddling the pacified
party goers in my living room telling me
their gratefulness, the cold world flailing
for a warm cup of tea. Ginger, mint scent,
waft from the steam that is breath, breath
which shows us both we are so much alive and living
and trying. I enjoy these reminders. Thank you, Mercy.
Give me change, in nickels, dimes, 4 quarters,
mercy the fountain, the child deep sea diver in training,
Mercy let me toss another coin, a light and soft lob to the blue
bucket at balboa that little life plays in.
Let them keep their treasures, in goggles,

Mercy give them childhood, don't let me grow
too fast before I can teach all about you.

I Ask Him Another Absurd Request

After Saeed Jones

His home is beautiful, but almost too clean.
Behind him there is a large windowsill,
I can see how it has housed countless lost gazes
through its lifetime. Across his neck, hangs
a .22 caliber bullet fashioned into a necklace,
It still contains every grain of gunpowder inside.
I ask him an absurd request– Stop playing with fire.
One spark has enough force, it could splinter
those walls, decimate the home with its people.
The ones that have built these walls around him.

I ask him another request– Make the world
stop shaking where his fist begins. I fear
the glass may shatter, that those eyes behind it
may be blinded. How crazy I must be–
To question the values of a boy who I can save,
if he'd just put his hands down,
and his arms around me.

Versification: An Ode to Poetry

To tell you the truth. Every word I spit has bile in it.
Everything I say is a first line of a new poem,
like some new kind of divinity, I crave death
by a word-slide. I'll be collecting token phrases
until they kill me, or take me by the hands,
one folding fluid motion, force my eyes to stay open,
show me the truth. Give me an answer.

I've been told that I'll break for good one day—
My skin graft cigarette burns won't last. I'll split
and there won't be enough twine to scarecrow-stitch
my riven body's pieces back together.
But I play bloody knuckles against brick walls
in passing, kiss fire poker for fun. You can't destroy
a body that calendars history in needle prick
tongue bit tell-all-tales.

To tell you the truth, everything I do ends up twisted here,
flurries of hailstorm lettering, in the mirror, on a countertop,
carving into bones something as beautiful as a poem.
I am *subsisting*, and these are ways to turn pain into beauty,
the only ways I know how, the only way I will now.
Plagued artistics let tears fill their watercolors,
I am the poet who lets you know my blood is in the ink,
only after you've held the page.

To Be Alive

After Gregory Orr, "To Be Alive"

Today I cut my nails too close, now I'll be grim all day.
My fingers hurt to hold anything, and this
is how I think wars start. We forget
about music, we stop humming.
We love to have a reason to grit our teeth.

There's a rhythm to the way every mouth
moves when it smiles or talks— The tongue
flicking and dipping, swaying out the syllables,
caressing the consonants. How do you expect me
not to love the sounds a stranger's feet make
on the concrete stairs, or the slide of vinyl flooring.
We're all singing, whether we want to or not,
we're all humming a tune or whistling between agonies,
it's the music we make, buzzing ant colonies
of vibrato voices, harmonize with the crying,
the tearing of a letter, sing with it, dance with me
to the unexplainable hopscotch on the sidewalk.
So carefully scratched by a child with chalk, and chaos.
She expects us to do a somersault on asphalt, indulge her,
do the dancing to the song you can only try to deny is there.
Have you seen the way your feet move,
left and right on beat across the courtyard.
My lover asks me, *how do you keep going, even now?*
I ask her, *how do you expect me to not to dance,*
when all there is, is music?

Leaning. Falling. Being Caught.

This is not to say a younger me would know
that change comes with the rain. That I,
while too busy splashing through the puddles
in my green John Deere Gator, could've known.
It was late when I realized how to ask for help.
Learned the way to say, *I feel small,*
and then some. To let those words
burn instead of quenching them,
to watch the sorry smoke rise.

My parents say I ran before I walked,
that I'm no stranger to jumping in
head first, figuring it out after. To falling,
then finding out the consequences.
My best friend tells me— *you can*
lean on others more, now. I was late
in learning, how to lean despite
my fears of falling. But all I've known
is falling. This revelation is not disclosure,
it's my lesson to teach, that you can be
caught whether you are falling or not.

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