INFERNO AND *INFLUENCE HUNGER: A MANIFESTO*

by

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Abstract

This thesis identifies and evaluates the nature of poetic influence, building off Harold Bloom's interpretation of poetic influence as expressed in his *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Anatomy of Influence*. It is separated into two components. The first is a series of poems taking structural and thematic influence from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Groups of poems are divided and modeled after the *Inferno*'s circles of Hell on either a technical level or through a group of poems' shared content.

The second component is an extended lyric essay which presents examples of poetic influence throughout the history of poetry, including contemporary examples set alongside the author's work. By examining how a later poet's work is informed by an earlier poet's work through close readings and extensive looks at Bloom, the thesis also aims to show how poetic influence functions differently in certain contexts and under certain conditions. The role of academia and its modes of teaching poetry in Creative Writing courses is one such context, and the form of the lyric essay allows for the author's reflections of poetic development in such a context to help explain how poetic influence has worked within the poetry of the first component.

Inferno

Circle I

Soon after they had talked a while together,
they turned to me, saluting cordially;
and having witnessed this, my master smiled;
and even greater honor then was mine,
for they invited me to join their ranks—
I was the sixth among such intellects.

Canto IV: 97-102

The Brothers
after Amy Lowell

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Sleepless nights again. I have done
all that I am supposed to—legs sore
from running, a mug of herbal tea
on the desk with dregs gone cold.
I read by lamplight, no screens in sight.
When I was younger, before I knew
the value of books, I joked that the best
sleep aid was Dickens. Now, *Bleak House*
could hardly be more interesting,
so I set it aside, stare the ceiling,
relive the day, then the week,
then the month. Sleep like tangents—
like trying to read from the beginning
of an article to its end without
clicking anything. Sleep paralysis
like childbirth: how could anyone
possibly know without doing it?
I try to scream, but it comes out
as a finger twitching. A spider crawls
across my face on its way home.
A menace in the room, in my blind
spot—I can feel it staring at me.
This is finally it, I think, and I grow
sad remembering all my unintentional
last goodbyes. So stupid not to have
predicted him finding me like this.
So many *I'll see you later*-s in my life,
automatic, to people I was leaving
forever. I take them all back. I want
closure. Where will my books go
when I'm gone? *Burn my poems*,
I silently say to the darkness.
A hand finally grabs my own, but
it is gentle—and I can see him.
There is the face of my brother,
John Keats, full of sadness. His hand

is warm, pulling me up. He leads me
to the living room, never looking back.
And there are my other brothers,
Harold Hart Crane and Gaius Valerius Catullus,
in the middle of poker and waiting
for John to take his turn. Hart is drunk
already, having gone into my liquor
cabinet and journeyed through bottles,
most expensive to least—a modicum
of respect, I admit. While Gaius looks
at me, Hart switches two of the cards
on the floor and winks in my direction.
I believe this man could use a drink, John says
with his hand on the part of my back
I can never reach. I blink to see stacks
of chips in front of me and two-fifths
of a completed flush. Hart looks bored
now that he is losing—now the Caol Ila
is gone. You can tell that John only plays
because it is something to do. He is
the youngest brother, shorter and trying,
always, to be noticed without seeming
like he is trying, always, to be noticed.
Gaius has only lightly sipped his wine.
The anniversary of the death of his brother,
who is also our brother, is days away.
John, too, lost a brother before we
became a family, but he is better
at hiding it—at seeing color where
there is little of it or birdsong when
it is drowned out by machinery.
Hart knocks over an empty glass by
accident but makes no reflexive move
to catch it. *Let's go out*, he says. No dissent.
Hart runs to the closet and brings back
four three-piece suits. John wears a bowtie.
Gaius looks uncomfortable in his jacket,
so he drapes it over his left shoulder.
Hart's suit is corduroy but is somehow
more extravagant on him than ours on us.
He kisses all of us on the lips and says how
glad he is that we are brothers, but we
know how glad he is simply to be leaving
the house. Gaius sits next to me as I
drive—rolls down his window and shouts
at the pedestrians: *Give us a poem!* John
says that we mustn't do that to people,
but no one ever listens to John. The road
to the first bar is lined with many stop signs.
At the next, a young man walking his rottweiler

signals us to go. *Give us a poem!* And the man
begins reciting "L'Allegro" as the dog sits.
We wait there until he finishes, the car
behind honking in iambs. *Bah*, Hart yells,
leaning out of the window to his torso,
Rubbish! But Gaius is silent the rest of the ride.
The first bar is for Hart. It is lively but not
large. There is room for a single pool table
and an arcade machine. The owner is Irish
and has decorated everything with home.
I recognize the patrons, all friends from
high school who never moved away—
they found peace in this quiet city.
Hart is getting chummy already, teasing
the owner: *What kind of Irish pub doesn't
sell Irish whiskey*? One without a license.
They have never seen Hart drink beer
like water; he goes to the jukebox,
finds Zeppelin's "In My Time of Dying".
Gaius plays *Street Fighter II*, so John and I
talk. He asks me about love and death—
wants to know what to do when you
love someone so much you cannot
bear to be around them. I tell him
life is unpredictable and that if you
wait on love until it crystalizes—
until it is as perfect when held by hand
as it is when held by heart—we
will all be dead by then, and love
won't matter anymore. He wants
to know what it's like to have a
younger brother, so I tell him it's like
watching a better version of yourself
doing the things you wish you had done.
He reads his most recent poem to me.
It opens with a trochaic inversion,
and when I ask about it, he says
it was because it all felt so urgent.
Is that a good enough reason, do you think?
I don't have a satisfying answer for him.
Neither of us is a beer drinker. I've
already decided to leave the car here,
so I order based on percentage; John
orders based on glass shape, coming back
with a snifter, which he enjoys swirling.
Someone has paid extra to interrupt
Hart's playlist, and he is willing to go
to blows over this. The bartender asks
us to leave, so we call a cab. The second
bar is for Gaius, the back room like a

carnival: darts, shuffleboard and
two basketball machines. Gaius is
the kind of person who wins at
everything. No one wants to play him.
He approaches a threesome sitting
and talking in the corner, offering
to buy them drinks if they play
shuffleboard with him, which they do.
John walks around and asks
an employee to show him how
the beer is made at the brewery.
Hart looks bored again. I pass him
my flask of Ardbeg. He asks me
about love and death—wants to know
what being in love with someone
other than yourself is really like.
I tell him not to listen to people
who say it's like finding a second
half that completes you; we are all
whole people. I tell him it's like
finding the most incredible book
of poems from someone you never
even heard of and the librarian
telling you that, since you've
checked it out so many times,
you can just have it. He says
he's never checked a book out
of a library and mostly borrows
from friends without returning them.
He wants to know how I would
kill myself, if I had to. I say it would
have to be a warm day, since death
seems so cold. Someone would need
to find me. Maybe pills on the porch
while reading. *What would you read*?
Shakespeare, of course. *Lear*? *Hamlet*?
No, something funny. Feste, Sir Toby
and Sir Andrew singing "Hold thy peace".
Hart smiles. *Shall we make the welkin dance,*
indeed? *Shall we rouse the night-owl*?
He leaps onto the table, hitting
the butts of two tankards together,
shouting *Hold thy peace, thou knave!*
The bartender asks us to leave,
so we call a cab. The third bar
is for John. The music is low enough
to be able to hear the person opposite
without needing to lean into them.
Hart is sad drunk by now and sits
at the bar. John notices someone

wearing a T-shirt with the phrase
"Prose before hoes" and the familiar
bust of Shakespeare. He approaches,
asking if they know the inaccuracies,
Shakespeare having been a poet
and a dramatist. Gaius and I
play pool. He asks me about
love and death—wants to know
what to do when someone you love
begins loving someone else instead.
I tell him to not think about it as
instead. Think about it as *as well*;
you can love more than one person
at the same time, and there is no
shame in that. He wants to possess
someone, which isn't love at all.
I tell him my history of jealousies
so he feels better about himself.
Have you ever lost a brother? he asks.
John has lost a brother. *But John
is stronger than he looks.* I have lost
a sister, I tell him. *And how were you
able to keep on living*? Barely, I say.
It is of little comfort, but my
brother holds my hand and looks
at me anyway. My other brothers
surround me. Gaius, you fighter.
Will you ever learn the pointlessness
of the anger you hold onto?
Will you ever be treated poorly
by your neighbor or your lover
and be happy in knowing that
birds exist and that the sun rises
every morning? Will you find
the gravestones of young men
you loved in life and leave your
laurel wreathes there without
lying down on the grass, waiting
for the time to pass? And John,
you lover. When will enough
be enough? When can you be
a poet and stop worrying so much
about being a poet? When can a
garden be a garden and not
a scavenger hunt of rhymes?
When will you go to bed at night
and be satisfied with a job well done?
And how now, Hart, you scoundrel?
How the leaning over the bar
and unloosing of taps to fill your

empties while the bartender is
away? How the charm of your
smile and the seduction of your
gait when the next brother asks:
Whose round is it? How the endless
cigarettes from the teenage girls
outside who will never know
the disappointment of loving you?
How the flickering lighters from
their teenage boy companions
outside who will never know
the disappointment of loving you?
I give to you, never using
the words *lend* or *borrow*. I am
willing—you are my brother.
You three are all my brother,
and I will ask you all my questions
when I am ready. But the bar
is closing; the bell for last orders
echoes out into the night,
joining the rummaging of
raccoons and the idle engines
in drive-throughs. John is the first
to leave, and his goodbyes are
as awkward as he claims—
he looks for the right words,
but they are never there.
His hugs linger—past perfunctory,
past discomfort, past understanding.
Which direction he walks,
I cannot tell. Gaius is next;
he is inscrutable by now.
I want to tell him so many things—
to correct myself and say
he must do his best to win
the prize—but he concentrates
on the eight-ball and sinks it
with grace, finally wearing the
jacket that doesn't quite fit.
Hart is the last, eyeing the dram
that remains. He swirls the glass
in front of me and tilts it and his
head at a forty-five-degree angle.
The scotch runs thickly and slowly.
Do you know what they call these?
I can see how he wants to tell me
that they are the legs. I want to
let him. But I am beyond drunk.
The legs, I say. He looks to me and
to the glass and nods, putting it

down—the legs are still running.
His coat looks heavy on him, like
he uses all his weight to stand.
But his exit is effortless, like water.
The relief is everywhere in the room.
I blink my way home, where I sleep
soundly for the first time in years.
My brothers sleep next to me,
whispering from their volumes
the answers to all my questions:
Love! Love! Love! Love! Love! Love!

Circle II

Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me—how that was done still wounds me.
Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.

Canto V: 100-106

While I do not expect to see
old age, should I be surprised,
I will resolve to think fondly
of these days of grief and isolation,
as I think of your hand—not its absence.

I cannot blame you
for loving—for existing...
cannot blame myself
for letting you inside me.
So, please, tell me who to hate.

We were never the lovers
separated simply by space, capable
of sharing the same moon at night.
Time, too, did this to us. Now,
your moon wanes while mine waxes.

Since your love created necessity
in my heart where there was none before,
you might have left me
the number of a surgeon or else
ripped open this chest yourself.

Would that we had never met—
that I would not despise you
for turning away from impatience,
that I would not disappoint myself
for learning to love till now.

You have left me
running alongside the line of
eucalyptus trees on Central Avenue—
the people in cars look at me
with sad eyes, too, and drive away.

"White shirt black tie"—
the subject of one of many e-mails
I cannot bear to open. They are saved,
but there exists no folder for you.
The shirt and tie hang in the closet, unworn.

I thought to open
“Forgetfulness” by Hart Crane,
but all I found was
my name (the title), white space
and, below, your name—author.

Am I pathetic
when, even now, I expect
to wake up and see
a letter from you saying
all these years—they were just jokes?

Circle III

And he: "They are among the blackest souls;
a different sin has dragged them to the bottom;
if you descend so low, there you can see them.
But when you have returned to the sweet world,
I pray, recall me to men's memory:
I say no more to you, answer no more."

Canto VI: 85-90

Before figuring out whether or not
it is ironic to not know the meaning
of onomastics and having to search
etymology of names, I decide to exhale.

There is a football on the outside
of the pitch, rolling in dirt and grass
away from my course trajectory,
and I wonder which of your instincts

would kick in: the embarrassment
of your weak arms or your maternal
impulse of wanting to care for every
concentration of organic matter.

My name means something like
God's gift, but no one ever told me
which god. I came across you in
Hesiod once. Maybe I'm there, too.

I was never good at giving presents,
so I built you a model of an atom
and said “This is how I picture us.”
I think you took that to mean we
were the protons and neutrons in
the nucleus, which would have been
the kind of premise to a film
we never would have watched.
But what I actually meant was you
were the proton and I was the
electron, pacing back and forth—
waiting for you to respond to me
in any way. I guess when an atom
splits, it’s a kind of response.

What I miss about the sex
are the DVD title screens
on loop in the background.
No one watches DVDs anymore.

When you're with your husband
now, do you pause before the next
episode loads? Or have you seen these all
before? At a certain point, does
Netflix ask if you're still watching.

When I met you, I cracked open
your skull and spray-painted
the sides of your cerebellum:
STOP BEING SO NICE!

I forgot to close you back up,
so it shows like a tattoo; but
you have always been the kind
of person to care more about
the aesthetics than the meaning.
I have never been able to empathize.

When I met you, you reached into
your chest, and your presentation
reminded me of the critically-
panned *DragonHeart*. I never
told you this, because I didn't
think you would understand.

I still listen to Randy Edelman's
"To the Stars" and cry. You forgot
to close yourself back up, and I don't
know what to do with this anymore.

When you checked me out,
you skipped the introduction
but—otherwise—read cover
to cover. When I checked you
out, I looked at the names and
dates on the card in the front
to see where and when you'd been.

There should be a word for the condition
that makes me blurt out words when I'm
thinking about something embarrassing.
It's never quite a full sentence or phrase,
even, and I always try to pass it off as
clearing my throat or humming a tune.
Maybe the word could be onomatopoetic—
something like Britbratwhum Syndrome.
The other day, I was thinking about our
picnic in the park—how the tea was cold
by the time we found somewhere to sit
and how I kissed you with my eyes open to
see if anyone was watching us—and I came
down with a case of the britbratwhums.

Tear up the carpet
by your wall heater.
The fabric's split

ends are still bent
down, and it's time
you find something new.

Hurry, while the stores
are still open. They say
smell is the most powerful

sense in bringing back
memories, but I dare you
to lie down there and feel.

You could bubble wrap
and mail it first class, but
standard shipping is fine.

There is a patch of floor
by the side of my bed
that needs replacing—

the first and last place
on which I stand
before I wake and sleep.

I have found the perfect leaf on which to sit
and pretend like I'm doing work, chewing loudly.
I meditate so I can feel every part of my exoskeleton.
You land opposite with two offspring, and they
begin tearing up my leaf. I blink a glossy blink
trying to tell you to get them under control,
but you twitch your wings to show them how to
fly. I'd like to join, but I keep pretending to work.

There should be a word for when friends
break up. Maybe it could change depending
on how important each friendship was.

Mike might have had an easy dent up
with Steve. Alex knew Lily a bit longer, so their
crack up was more noticeable to their families.

I wouldn't call what we went through a
shatter up, but that's only because when I
see you, you look so well put-together.

We rehearse our parting
like a stage performance

or farewell tour, where we
play all our greatest hits from

memory. We allow ourselves
one cover song but disagree

on which Radiohead closer,
because you like *Amnesiac*

more than anyone should.
Have you even listened to

the version of "Videotape"
that's on *From the Basement*?

When the show is over and
the audience congratulates us,

I play an encore in my head:
you sitting across from me with

a bottle of Mexican beer and a
hand occasionally covering a smile.

We follow one another backstage,
our teeth bouncing off each other.

When I went in for corrective nostalgia,
the nurse had me fill out forms about which
memories to target and how I wanted to feel
differently about them. I asked to
hate high school, so I could fit in with
everyone else. I made a list of every
parenting choice my mom and dad
improvised and requested that the doctor
make them all wrong in retrospect
so I would have more to write about.

For each memory of you, I wrote how I
wanted them to stay the same but with
very specific background music and a
slightly darker hue that had the added
synesthesia of smelling like recent rain.

Her birthday happened to fall on a Thursday
that year and was never able to get back up.

She spends a different day each year reaching
for some spot on her head, like a phantom limb,

the smell of wax and smoke
coming from somewhere.

Matter cannot be created or destroyed
and liquids conform to the shapes of their

containers, so I pour you into a
cup and watch you evaporate.

A procession of cars
diverted by roadwork
foots along this street
it has never seen
and is unlikely to see
ever again. I stare out
the screen door the same
way I did out tinted
car windows when I
was growing up here.
Not only can they not
see me—they cannot see
the palm fronds covering
the pavement on windy
days, they cannot feel
the lost garden snake
between their toes and
they cannot hear the
echoing bounce of the
basketball at sundown.

I know I should have lied,
claiming I woke up and saw it
between the children crying
and the man snoring next to me
to enhance the effect somehow.

But, really, it was only by chance
that I gently lifted the eye mask
long enough to see it at the window
as we flew over the last stretch
of the Atlantic: the horizon,

composed of each color of the
rainbow, sandwiched between
a carpet of clouds and a ceiling
of nighttime sky with only a few
visible stars. In those moments,

I always felt the pressure to
experience something profound—
to reach for ephemeral evidence
that explains how each layer
of color conveniently represents

a different part of me or to
consider that the red at the
bottom made part of the cloud-
line look like it was on fire and
that was meaningful. But,

truthfully, all I was thinking
about was coming home to you
and how I always found it funny
writing palindromes as a child—
mom, dad, Bob, racecar—and,

since no one taught me the word
until later, how it felt like I
discovered palindromes myself
and they were somehow mine.
Nothing to do with sunrises, really.

Mi abuela enters by bedroom
unannounced, singing "This
is the day that the Lord has made."

I am ten years old and have not
discovered coffee yet. What I *have*
discovered is my desire for the Lord

to consider remaking some of his
works. Mi abuela cooks breakfast
burritos in la cocina and calls out

to mi abuelo: "Dear! Deaaarrr!"
She calls me m'ijo. "M'ijo, don't
forget your morning prayers."

The last time I prayed was
when I was six. I was lying
flat on my bed and thought

there was something wrong
with me, because I could move
my kneecaps back and forth

a little bit when my legs weren't
tensed, so I asked God to fix me.
By not making my kneecaps

stationary, I'm beginning to wonder
if it was God who made me atheist.
I am older now, but mi abuela looks

the same. "M'ijo, don't forget
to study your bible." Abuela, I *have*
studied my bible – in every fucking

literature class. I would recite
Genesis to you if Milton hadn't
done it better. Abuela, don't *you*

forget to study your Milton.
"M'ijo, God's teachings help you
lead a good life so you can get into

Heaven." Abuela, have you seen how
split paths come together at certain
points? If God's teaching make a better

person, then I want you to know
I see all your late-night studying

written into your daughter.

What you call Heaven, I call a
childhood with that woman, and I'm
happy I had the chance to visit.

Abuela, you are an unfinished
essay I have been re-reading my
whole life, waiting for your moment

of reflection. "M'ijo, you don't want
to hear about any of that." Pero, abuela,
I do, because I never feel closer to you

than when you are thinking of David.
Grief is a color we all perceive in
different frequencies. Mine is dark auburn,

like her hair and freckles and eyes;
I imagine yours is the most divine of
whites, because you won't let yourself

see in any other way. "M'ijo, if you just
believe in God, he will make everything
okay." Abuela, you and I are not so

different – I think – but it sometimes
feels like we speak in different languages,
so I tell you: no creo en tu dios.

But I think there might be angels.
I still see them sometimes, cooking breakfast
burritos and calling out: "Dear."

Opossum

~~Possum. Opossum. (*Oh*!)~~
Opossum, I saw you
sitting on the brick wall
that separates Las
Posas ~~(Las Possums)~~ from
all those backyards.

It was night and
the last mile of
my four-mile run and
you had fear in your eyes, but
it was I who jumped
~~(*Hó-ly-shit*!)~~.

There you re-
coiled, watch-
ing me
go;

and,
ahead—not
seven strides—I saw
her.

No one taught me how
roadkill manages to
make its way onto sidewalks
before dying. ~~It wasn't fear~~
~~in your eyes, was it?~~
I could just about see them:

drivers, ~~psychopathic or~~
bored, swerving out of their
ways to get to her; drivers,
~~careless or~~ distracted, and the
shock of the bump and the too-
brief worry that she might have

been something
more important.

Did she crawl her way there?
Did she see you on the wall?

Opossum, I want you to know
~~that I covered her—~~
~~that I went home to get~~
~~a bag in which to carry her—~~
that I ran around her.

She was off to the side
and in front of me, close
to the curb, room enough
for me to go to the left—
to stay on the sidewalk.

But I went to the right,
around and down into the

street, careful to be quiet.
I know it was not enough.

The Hermit Crab Asks Grief a Question

Is it proper etiquette to invite you
over on her birthday or on her deathday?

Regardless, I don't know how you
expect us both to fit in there comfortably.

That sounds an awful lot
like avoiding the question.

That looks an awful lot
like your second shell this year.

Earlham Park

These aren't the dogs I remember,
slouching to inhale particles from yesterday.
It's hard to find a patch of grass that doesn't sting.
You wanted a picnic back then.
I didn't want anyone to see us here together.
Now, I still don't want to be seen—alone.

Where does your laughter live these days?
What Bostonian streets are warm with your friction?
Do you know how long our cells remain in one place?
Do you have picnics over there?
Have you worn the white dress that forgets to cling to your chest?
You've left imprints of yourself there. And here.

When you feel a breeze blown westward,
it's not that I'm trying to reach Camarillo.
If you lean off the edge of the boardwalk and wait,
you'll know my cells when they arrive—
sorry little things with cloudy lemonade reflections.
See? I've wrapped them all in wicker for you.

Out of the Blue

Out of the blue came one-third
of all secondary and tertiary colors.

Out of the blue came 200 terahertz,
leaving behind a blood red as if blue
had forgotten how to be blue entirely.

Into the blue went your sandy feet
long ago. That fleeting, brilliant clarity
that the blue gave them for one moment.
And, after, how the blue made them taste of tears.

We take Christmas down from the attic over
hours—hook the branches of the plastic tree
into place, dressing them with strings of lights
that I volunteer to untangle each year. Father
scolds us for hanging the ornaments on the
wires but does not tell us why this is wrong.

People think it does not get cold enough
in this state to burn wood in the fireplace—
to wrap ourselves in blankets and drink
honey mixed into echinacea tea. Tell the cat,
then, vibrating on Mother's chest in standby
mode that she is mistaken. Ask her to leave.

Christmas fits into six boxes now.
I pack away the ornaments and see
the one I made for him in third grade:
"Your the best dad in the world."
I change the "Your" to "You're". Please,
do not remember me that way, Father.

Abeulo has everyone fooled.
His hearing is perfectly fine;
he just wishes to be alone
in the garden after church.

You visit only when you
remember. *Abuela* shouts
out the screen door to him.
He is praying with the *tomates*.

Sorry for the late reply.
When I got home, I sat at the
computer but became completely
debilitated by the unadulterated
joy that oat milk exists.
Have you tasted oat milk, friend?
Had it steamed and mixed into your
cappuccinos? You will understand,
then, why I've been so long.

Sorry for the late reply.
I was reading Hart Crane's poetry.
It took a long time.
I still don't understand him.

Sorry for the late reply.
My dog ate my laptop.

Sorry for the late reply.
I find messaging you tedious.
I find *you* tedious.
Best we just address this
now. Merry Christmas.

Sorry for the late reply.
I gave up messaging altogether—
reverted to arriving at someone's
house, knocking on their door
and asking if they can
come out to play. These have been
the happiest months of my life.

Sorry for the late reply.
I decided to walk home instead.
There is something so sublime
in the creaking kind of snow—
a synaesthesia that makes it sound
warm as the first sip of coffee
and feel so loud with childhood.

Sorry for the late reply.
I stopped at the café and fell
in love with the barista again—
lived out the years of our lives
between exhales. How guilty it felt
to be that excited about our future.
I waited until she wasn't looking
to leave a too-generous
tip in repentance.

Sorry for the late reply.

Grief let itself back in—
rummaged around the kitchen,
eating all the leftovers,
dirtying all the dishes
I had just cleaned. Drank
red wine from the white wine glass,
mixed good scotch with Coke.
What was I supposed to do?
He comes and goes as he pleases.

Sorry for the late reply.
I had a thought, so I ran
with it. Chased it down the
familiar dirt paths behind
Mission Oaks. Ran with it past
the clearing where we met.
Where you didn't care that ants
joined us along the edges of the
blanket—didn't care that the
food went uneaten. Where
watching you enjoy every
moment of life with all your
body made mine feel ashamed
with barricades. It was a
silly thought. Please forgive me.

He kicked the bucket,
which his co-workers had filled with cement
as a joke. He smiles through broken toes.
Maybe this is what death is:
pretending to like your co-workers
with clenched teeth.

She has taken 'the big sleep'
out of the library—along with
'farewell, my lovely'. She doesn't
understand how her partner
can "read this shit". Maybe
this is what death is:
not being able to read
the things you want to
read, because people won't
stop giving recommendations.

He lost his life
somewhere between the fifth
and sixth pub. This is not the first time.
This is not by accident.
Maybe this is what death is:
leaving your life with the bartender
so you can go back the next day
just to talk with her.

She didn't make it.
She *started* to make it, but she
ran out of materials and Michael's
was already closed.
Maybe this is what death is:
everywhere you need to go
being closed by nine.

He croaked,
so he went to the doctor,
who said *Yeahhh, you're*
turning into a frog, I'm afraid.
He blinked and stuck out
his tongue in protest.
I don't know what else
to tell you, the doctor said.
Maybe this is what death is.

She's history.
Too short a history.
No Herodotus or Thucydides.
A slim volume,
still being edited—

one you could read
over coffee.
Maybe this
is what death is:
endnotes and
suggestions for
further reading.

He is sleeping with the fish,
and the fish have never known
what it's like to sleep with eyes
shut. A current carries them,
and the fish wonder if he
will know the way back
or if he wouldn't mind
someplace new. They nestle
into his elbows, his nape—
they watch his eyelids.
Maybe this is what death is:
the curiosity, the fear,
the excitement of not knowing.

My parents tell me stories
of when I was young—
how I would come home from
preschool with pockets full of
trash I had picked up off the
playground—collected the twist-
off caps of juice boxes like Pokémon
before Pokémon had ever existed.
How my favorite part of Christmas
was untangling the impossible ball
of lights brought down from the
attic after each Thanksgiving.

Toss your feelings onto our street,
my neighbor, like empty bottles.
I pass your house uphill at the
end of my jogging route and have begun
bringing them inside and turning them
into candles to light the flat at night.

Gift your thoughts to me so I may
unwrap them—so I may learn origami
for you—and show you how, if you just
fold them differently in certain places,
they glide across water without ever sinking.

Wrap your arms around me like a pillow
and scream your subconscious into my
bloodstream. I will show you the
irony in the word antibody.

O, neglected ruler
of my thirties. O,

shaman of vertebrae.
O, muse of muscle.

I sing
to you.

Sex is great, but have you ever
been held by Dr. Tyler Taylor?

Forgive my years of bad posture
as you press thumb below shoulder.

There you will feel
many of my demons

gathered at picnic, their blankets
stretched from pelvis to clavicle.

The back speaks its own language,
and I need you here to translate for me.

Stress and Grief toss a baseball
to each other from each side

of my ribs. Lean in and whisper
to them: the park is closed

for the winter. They are
stubborn fellows, but if

you can, guide them away just for
the night. That will be enough.

In the third grade, a grown-up
stops class and brings you outside
for a quiz.

There are nine pictures of different
objects. She points to them and asks
"What's this?"

"That's a basketball," you tell her.
You could even show her the one you
used at recess.

"No. What's this in Spanish?"
You don't remember. You don't
know the shame

of forgetting your first language
yet. That will come later. So, you
just shrug.

"What's this? And this? How about
this?" When she gets to the shoe, you
say "*zapato*?"

She makes a note on her clipboard
and lets you go back inside. You stare
at your feet.

The Final Girl

And there will come the final girl
to an old, abandoned house,
and she will be unafraid
of stopping for the night
and showering with the
bathroom door ajar.

When the final girl steps out,
she will go to the sink—
open the medicine cabinet behind
the mirror—and, when she
closes it back sharply, she will see
her face—how there is a new
wrinkle in her forehead
and peach fuzz above her lip,
which she will get to tomorrow.

The final girl will get dressed
by the window, and no one from
outside will see her—not behind
the cover of a tree nor a mask.

The final girl will hear the kitchen
window shutters creak, so she will go
downstairs, but—for the first time—
it will be only the wind that greets her.

The final girl will sleep—soundly—
and wake up wondering if she has been
miscast in a sci-fi film by accident,
so she will ask herself
existential questions, like
Without an antagonist,
can I even be a final girl?

And the final girl has never liked sci-fi,
so she will spend the coming months
writing a sequel that will bring her back
just to kill her off in the first act.

And when she cannot find
the final director, she will sit
patiently in the woods by the lake,
listening to the tree roots,
watching the stillness of the water,
waiting—hoping—for the credits to roll.

You run piano fingers
down my back and start
naming each of my moles
after famous actors.

You have never been
a good casting director.

I wrote the script of my spine
with Edward Norton in mind,
but when you kiss Michael B.
Jordan into me, just below the T2
vertebrae, I second-guess myself
and wonder if Linda Hamilton
would make a better co-star.

I never used to understand
why screenwriters would give
away control of their work
so willingly, but when you
glide across the curvature
of my third act, I realize
it's because they're giving
themselves over into
more capable hands.

Circle IV

Now you can see, my son, how brief's the sport
of all those goods that are in Fortune's care,
for which the tribe of men contend and brawl;
for all the gold that is or ever was
beneath the moon could never offer rest
to even one of these exhausted spirits.

Canto VII: 60-65

Letters to a Young Lana Del Rey

Perhaps it will turn out that you are called to be an artist. Then take that destiny upon yourself and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking what recompense might come from outside.

R. M. R.

I moved to California
But it's just a state of mind
It turns out everywhere you go
You take yourself

L. D. R.

Birmingham, UK
April 9th, 2012

Dear Elizabeth,

Firstly, my most genuine apologies for only now responding to your letter from January 27th. It takes some time for correspondence to be forwarded from that Camarillo address. Add to this the amount needed to weigh your words carefully enough so that what I aim to send in return is of the same stuff—hospitable, loving and, above all else, sincere. At the risk of already dispelling, perhaps, some of your preconceptions of me from my writings (which may suggest a less chaotic, if not linear, expression of thought), I might pause a moment on that last quality: *sincerity*. (What is not lost on me: the ability of the letter, as a medium that does not require the same instantaneousness of conversation, to be designed in a way that could easily avoid so many tangents; let this be an early introduction, then, to both my deep-seeded belief that we ought not to try to make ourselves look any prettier than we are in either our minds or hearts, especially in writing, and to my manner of interaction that *parenthetical* sometimes falls too short in describing accurately.)

Poetry—at least here in Britain—has rapidly and earnestly begun fleeing from *sincerity*. Scholars are better equipped to say whether or not popular poetry's mode cycles in the same way fashion does, but the strongest poets in our language that have survived sustained scrutiny across generations look and sound nothing like what I see and hear in magazines and well-reviewed collections now—as if sincerity were the man on the train in well-worn clothes, happily talking with himself, and the poets nervous and less-than-willing onlookers finding as many reasons as they are able to check the time on their phones or

count the number of stops in their heads so loudly that you can almost hear it coming out of their ears. Wilde said *all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling*, but I find nothing in the current alternative to *genuine feeling* that has any of the craft of Wilde to keep the ironic distance from coming across as anything but, well, *distant*. If it is this week's special, let it be; if it is the permanent menu now, let us all seek out other ways to escape becoming malnourished.

Your sincerity, then (to get back to the thought), gave me such energy and sustenance that I have not been able to taste anything since. You do me honor, Elizabeth, in sending me these dozen poems under the assumption that I might flick the switch that alights those parts you have carefully laid out somewhere in your memory but are struggling to find at present. My own books of poetry, after all, are also filled with bad poems—bad in different ways to these others I cannot bear to read anymore—so I would have politely declined and passed you on to a finer eye except for that there are people all over this world who carry pieces of us in them, and we meet them too rarely. So, while my authority will not derive from technical example, you will trust that we share something essential and that there is, in me, a capacity to see you get to the *best* you (or close to) more quickly and painlessly than you might have otherwise done in the solitude and loneliness that characterize what we do as artists. This is all critical commentary can really hope to do, anyway; anything else is ego painting itself over a used canvas.

Were you ever to attend a poetry writing course at a university—something I would urge you to do under absolutely no possible circumstances, since it is the most efficient way to lose both one's multitude of selves and one's orientation to the purpose of writing—you would come across all sorts of supposedly successful approaches to the workshop. One *teacher* (I use the term loosely) of mine demanded everyone in the room begin by saying something positive about the piece at hand, as if a constructed kindness might make the ground on which the poet fell, ass-first, more like downy pillows and less like the pavement. You must fall often and painfully, Elizabeth. If the soreness is too much, then you should give up writing altogether; there is no short cut or gentler path. I have a theory that the best poets all preferred spicy foods to sweet, since they trained their bodies as well as their minds to take pleasure from things difficult and rewarding.

Your "Dark Paradise" fails for lacking this difficulty, even though it *is* rewarding. (My observations will not be chronological, as there does not appear to be much thought put into the ordering of these poems beyond the top-heavy ways we often try to put our best feet forward; think more on this if you ever intend to

publish, because the progression of a collection is as important to its success as it is with an album.) Even writing to you as someone who can, thankfully, not empathize with the specificity of pain through grief, you evoke the strangeness of loss that consciousness, or lack thereof, causes (*but there's no* you / *except in my dreams*). Why, then, tether these thoughtful words to such a lifeless meter and rinse rhymes out of them? We are American, and no American poet should nor can be far from Whitman. Look to him. You say *I'm lying in the ocean / singing your song*. Is this not the same ocean with which Whitman ebbed? It is not his song, too? And mine? And every American's? All poets must imitate before they can truly write, but imitation is not a fill-in-the-blank exercise. Read him again. Memorize him. You say you are in Southern California now? That most facetious and stifling of places? Leave the city. Take a bus—do not drive—up PCH, past Neptune's Net. Walk the rest of the way. Find a spot all to yourself. Sit on the sand or wade a few meters in. Recite the lines. If you do not hear both songs—Whitman's and your lost one's—comingling, harmonious, then none has ever written and I can offer you nothing. At least there will be the sun to enjoy.

You have that within which takes much time for others to cultivate. There are those—more now than ever—that believe anyone can *be* a poet. The belief has certainly made a lot of people a lot of money, but none of these people are the ones writing. If you take anything away from my words, let it be, then, that *not* anyone can be a poet. Anyone can write a poem; there is a difference. You undoubtedly have people around you that have supported your efforts and reassured you of your talent. Good. Now, leave them behind and never listen to them again. Do not perform for anyone, Elizabeth. If you have any chance to sing alongside Whitman (or Dickinson, our American mother), it will be because *you* found the way, down some godforsaken alley hardly seen through such a tremendous crowd of people patting one another on the back.

To accompany my first most genuine apologies, I extend them once more if this letter is of no comfort. To contradict myself (the most American of practices), I will admit that I have been, in the days leading up this, returning to "Dark Paradise" and some lines in a few of the other poems you sent ("Off to the Races" and "Million Dollar Man" for their style; "Blue Jeans" and "Radio" for their substance; "Video Games" for both) and finding my days more pleasant as a result. With this letter, I am sending along three poems of my own, two of which—I think—highlight this state of contentedness and the last of which is in response to your own line. Please do not share the latter with anyone—not because I think it unpublishable in quality, but

because some words of ours are only meant for one other pair of eyes or ears.

I wish you as much happiness as you have given me this Easter. Even though I find little in California that reflects myself back to me, I still miss being away from my friends and family for certain holidays. Your words have given me a little piece of home, which—you will see from one of the poems accompanying—is no small or underappreciated feat.

Yours,
Sean Colletti

Instructions for leaving Home
after M. Stewart

Pick one thing—
and one thing only—
to feel smug about.
For the narrator,
Mexican food is his
one thing. Do not roll
your eyes when you
invite him out to a place
that calls itself *authentic* and—
when you ask him how his
enchiladas are—he says *eh*.
He has earned that *eh*.

Write down everyone's
birthdays, even if you don't
send them cards or e-mails.
Celebrate them in your head
on the night bus when they're just
waking up in their own homes.
Remind yourself that life still
happens there, even if it never
looks like it from the outside.

Leave aware that no one will
know you there—that you can become
anyone you want to be—and do not be
disappointed when you just end up
becoming yourself again. Take it as a
sign that you're doing something right.

Learn to love old things
as much as new ones.
When you go back to visit
your grandmother, who says
that she prays for you every
day, love it. Love how you've
grown into the taste it leaves
in your mouth—how it isn't
bitter from cynicism anymore—
how it tastes like *thank you*.

Grieve for home. It is okay
to mourn over losing it.
It is okay to go back and
not feel it—to step inside a
house and think *this is just
a house*. Remember it fondly,

like the dogs and cats that once
explored its rooms—that once
slept by the fire—that are
buried in the backyard.
Grieve for it, but remember
your school lessons. Remember
the Law of Conservation of Mass—
how things change but don't go away.
Do not be scared, when you drift
to sleep in a bed so far away from it,
if you can feel its arm wrap around
you. Feel it breathing—softly—
at the back of your neck. Let it.

Making yourself good

Do not act as if you had ten thousand years to live...while you have life in you, while you still can, make yourself good.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Begin from the ground up.
Make the soles of your feet rough
enough to walk barefoot as often
as you can, so you can dig your
toes into the earth's memories.

Make your knees so pliable that you might bend
down to speak with all the children without
sighing or creaking. Look at what life is like
down there. Ask them *Why is the sky blue?*
Then, bend even further down and wriggle
across the pavement with the snails after
rain and join the march of ants during summer.

Reconfigure your digestive system,
so you can choose your own sustenance.
Absorb what's good; shit out what's not.
The difference isn't always so obvious.

Consume the traffic on the motorway
and shit out all that metal so that what's
left are the people floating in their
seated positions as if meditating.

Consume the media, but shit out all the
words. Learn to understand someone by how
they move. Watch their eyes. If they extend a
fist, reach out and hold it from underneath.
If their eyes change, squeeze gently until
the fist unravels and the blood flows back.

If you're trying to make yourself good, don't do
good things so that you can feel good about
having done good things. Shit out the
satisfaction. Leave everything that remains.

Wait a week or so before you decide
what you're going to do about that thing
in your chest. Make it into a dispersive prism,
so you can break apart any love that

travels through it and see each color—
each component. Make it into a well,
so no one knows how deep it goes
and so everyone can draw from it.
Make it into a mirror, not a sponge,
because—sometimes—the most loving
thing you can do is to show someone
who they are instead of soaking them up
and carrying them around after mistakes.

When you come to the head, take a moment
to consider the significance that we were
made to have two ears but one mouth.
Hammer the point home. Give yourself four
ears and half a mouth. Use this as a
metaphor and apply it to everything.
If you are a poet, for instance, for every
verse you give, take back eight. Take back
eight hundred. Pay them forward. Around
every single strand of hair on your body,
inscribe a line that means something to you,
so when someone asks you to make a wish
with one of your eyelashes, you never wish alone.

Make the heat that your body gives off
the same heat from the fire in the
fireplace at Christmas. Make it the same
heat that transfers between you and
the person you can never tell *I love you*
each time you hug to say goodbye.
Make it the same heat inside a mug
of your favorite winter drink made by
the person who always makes it better.

Make yourself good. Do not act as if
you had ten thousand years to live. Act
as if you had ten thousand lives to live for.

Remedies for memory
after E. W. Grant

You wake up with a bad case of
memory.

You go to your doctor. You can tell
how bad it is by the way she looks

at you (that *I'm glad that ain't* me
sort of way). She asks you to open

your mouth, stick out your brain
and scream. She checks your wrists.

She hands you a prescription—says
Take one of these in the morning, one at night

and one if you feel any worse during the day.
You take one outside. It does nothing.

You go to your shaman. He could
smell you coming from a mile away.

Drink this tea, he says. *Will it help*?
you ask. *No. It's just very good tea*.

You go to your bartender. *Boy,*
have I got just the thing for you.

He mixes a bunch of liquids with
ice and some mint. You don't like mint.

I don't like mint. He frowns; *Who ever*
said medicine's s'pposed to taste good?

You leave (*that* is how much you
don't like mint). You go to your

grandmother. She is at the stove,
making *mole*. She looks busy and happy.

You go to your dog. She rolls over
and extends you her stomach.

She says *Rub here*. You do. She bites
your hand. *What the hell was that for*?

you ask. *That's not where I meant*, she says.
How was I supposed to know? How were you?

You go to your favorite tree in the park
and lean against it, listening through the

bark. A bird is making its nest high above.
A pinecone falls. You ask for guidance.

A gust of Santa Ana blows through you.
The tree contracts a little—says nothing.

You go to your copy of Emerson (he is the
creator, after all). You say a prayer before

opening the good book. Hours pass. You don't
know how many until you look up and check

after your stomach has made a rather
unpleasant noise. You fix yourself a

torta. Something feels like it's missing.
You look around. You can't remember.

Yesterday, your dog died. Today, Left Brain and Right Brain will not shut up about it. Right Brain sits in the back of your head, clutching his knees and addressing no one in particular: *why did this have to happen to* us? Left Brain walks over, puts a hand on Right Brain's shoulder and says *Look, none of this is our fault. Don't beat yourself up over it.* Right Brain stares at Left Brain for a moment and then literally starts to beat himself up. Left Brain turns to you and says *Well, hey, at least now you don't have to find someone to watch the house when you go on vacation.* You are just trying to finish your breakfast and get ready for work. Your cereal has gone soggy. When Right Brain sees this, it sends him into an even darker state of mind.

At work, you go to the bathroom and see that someone has had very poor aim. Left Brain suggests that this was likely Mark from accounting, because—let's face it—it's always Mark from Accounting. Meanwhile, Right Brain does some rewiring so that you perceive the toilet as a fire hydrant. He then pulls aggressively and ceaselessly on your heartstrings until you have to sit down. Left Brain rolls his eyes and sighs and you realize that you are likely sitting down in Mark from Accounting's piss. Right Brain also notices this and pulls even harder on those heartstrings to distract you.

After work, you go to your favorite Italian restaurant for dinner and order lobster ravioli and a glass of pinot noir. When it looks like you've finished eating, the waiter walks over and asks *Would you like a doggy bag for the rest of your food*? Left Brain has to physically hold back Right Brain from punching that stupid waiter in his stupid fucking face. You leave way more money on the table than you need to and run out of there as quickly as possible, all the while Right Brain is shouting expletives at the waiter (criticizing him on his low social status *as* a waiter) and you and Left Brain both think that Right Brain's points are not well-made, but the *way* that he says them is terrifyingly earnest.

It is late before you decide to drive home. You come to the last stoplight before your neighborhood and run a red light, because who's going to stop you? Then you pull over, because the police have stopped you. *Do you know why I pulled you* over, the officer asks. You look for help, but Right Brain is peering over your shoulder, trying to see if the officer is part of the K-9 unit, so Left Brain tells you to play dumb. *No*, you say. *You ran a red light*, he says. *I'm colorblind*, you say. *But surely you can tell when the top light is lit*, he says. *Everything is upside down right now*, you say. The officer gives you a strange look and a ticket and sends you on your way.

When you finally arrive home and go to lie down in bed, Right Brain points out that you have left the bedroom door ajar and Left Brain points out that this doesn't matter anymore. Right Brain stares off into space for a minute before sinking back into the pillows and you want to say something to him, but all you can do is replay videos of walks in the park on the ceiling as the three of you fall asleep with the faint-but-distinct feeling that you are not alone. There is no lapping of water at the bowl in the hallway. There is no scratching at the front door. There is no shifting at the foot of the bed. But you are not alone.

We are connected

We are connected. I am a tomato [toe-mah-toe], you are a tomato [toe-may-toe] and the space between us is a vine. Ripen with me. We may not outlast the winter, but if our vine *does* freeze, I will be the only one who will have to worry about a crisis of cannibalism, because you hate tomatoes. You hate *all* foods that are good for you. And though I don't, my tomato skin has hardened after so many winters here, apart from you. So, ripen with me, because—

We are connected. I am *Pokemon Blue*, you are *Pokemon Red* and the space between us is a Game Link Cable. Trade with me. My Vulpix has been sitting by the window, watching the cycles of the sun as her flame slowly starts to die out. It is no wonder that the only thing on her Christmas list this year was a Growlithe pup to play with—to grow old and evolve with. So, trade with me, because—

We are connected. I am a bank account, you are a historically larger bank account and the space between us is a wire. Send me money. You have already sent me so much money, but I need to buy things that I don't need to buy. You have always been better at this. So, send me money, because—

We are connected. I am here, you are somewhere and the space between us is long. Tell me that you love me. Brothers like us do not always say that in those words. We say it in TV and movie quotes recited while we're out drinking, in rides to high school before I could drive and in the pictures of our cats that you send me to make me feel like I'm there. We say it in poems to you. So, in whatever way you can, tell me that you love me, because we are connected.

Mom and Dad are here for you

Mom and Dad are here for you. Mom and Dad are not here for themselves. You are the sun. Mom and Dad are Venus and Mars. Mom and Dad orbit around you. You know this because Dad does your science projects for you and tells you what to say. Pluto is still a planet until Dad says otherwise.

Mom and Dad are here for you. Mom and Dad are an ATM. Your pin number is actually your pin word, which you have memorized by the age of 6, because you use it so much: P-L-E-A-S-E. You need new shoes: P-L-E-A-S-E. You need a Super Nintendo: P-L-E-A-S-E. You need to buy Christmas presents for Mom and Dad: P-L-E-A-S-E.

Mom and Dad are here for you. Mom and Dad are here for your friends. Mom and Dad are also your friends' Mom and Dad. You ask your friends if they want to have a sleepover and play *Counter-Strike* all night. You tell Mom and Dad that your friends are coming for a sleepover and will play *Counter-Strike* all night. You and your friends need pizza: P-L-E-A-S-E. Mom and Dad drive your friends home the next afternoon.

Mom and Dad are *not* here for you. Mom and Dad are your enemies. Mom and Dad say that you can't stay out past midnight, because you have a cold. Mom and Dad say you can't have a car until your grades are better. Fuck Mom and Dad.

Mom and Dad are here for you again. Mom and Dad are interesting. You go to college. You tell Mom and Dad about the things you learn in college. Mom and Dad are able to talk about those things. Mom and Dad are therapists. You feel sad. Mom and Dad find things to say to make you feel happy again. You want to leave. Mom and Dad want you to stay, but they like seeing you happy, so they lie and say that you should leave if you want to and that they support you.

Mom and Dad are here for you. But Mom and Dad are not Mom and Dad anymore. Mom and Dad are Diana and Paul. Diana and Paul gave you everything, but Diana and Paul expect nothing from you in return, because giving you everything was what Diana and Paul signed up for. You owe Diana and Paul nothing, but you want to give Diana and Paul everything. When people ask, you say Diana and Paul are friends of yours, because they are. Diana and Paul are here for you. And you, finally, are here for Diana and Paul.

On sleep

You start having nightmares on a
Saturday, which is inconvenient,
because you like things to start on
Sundays. How are you supposed to
respond to your therapist when she
asks, next month, "So, how long have
you been having these nightmares?"
You'll have to say "X number of weeks...
and one day." You grind your teeth.

You come up with stories to tell
your partner to explain why you
wake up screaming: "I had a dream
that I poured a bowl of cereal, but
there was no milk" or "I had a dream
that I was on *Millionaire* and the last
question was about Scandinavian
black metal, so I won, of course" or
"I love you so much, babe, that it
scares me". You grin. She turns over
and covers her ears with a pillow.

You wait until 2:00 a.m. before you
put on a horror film as a form of protest.
If you're going to have nightmares,
you will have them your way, okay?

You feel sleep coming in advance
like a Jehovah's Witness to your door.
You breathe in for three seconds and
hold for three seconds. One: you haven't
taken your socks off yet, but you've
resigned yourself to the fact you won't.
Two: is your heart beating faster than
it should be? Remind yourself to look up
average heart rate tomorrow. Three:
maybe tonight will be different.

You breathe out for three seconds.
Maybe tonight will be different.

Vanishing Act

Ja-c-lyn and Se-an sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes lust, then comes sex, then comes the understanding that you already have two babies in a carriage, fathered by a husband who is still very much your husband and I am supposedly in the honeymoon phase of my relationship with someone else.

But when I see you sitting across from me, I am made a marionette, worked by the ligaments in your smile and you snap at me, like you do with your students. *Hey! Are you present? Are you here?* And the answer is no. I am somewhere twenty years from now, opening Christmas presents with you and our kids and his kids.

When I turn back to face you, you count the days we have left and I count your blinking, waiting for tears I know are there. *Hey! Are you present? Are you here?* And the answer is still no. I am somewhere one year ago, deciding not to take this job so I never have to meet you.

I notice that you have never taken your bra off around me, and when I point this out, you say your breasts are lop-sided from feeding, like this somehow matters. So, the next week, when we're together for the last time, you take off my shirt and *boom*— I'm wearing a bra, too.

And you laugh. And I smile. But you still don't take off yours. And I need a lighthouse to navigate this distance. And now, I still think about the thing I said I wouldn't do and try to count the months since I last spoke to you. And you are somewhere teaching, snapping with one hand. And though I won't listen, teach me, if you can.

Teach me how easy it is to send a message, just to say *I miss you*, and I will show you everything my fingers can find to keep me from replying. Teach me what two-way communication is supposed to look like, and I will show you twelve states, an ocean

and eight time zones spread out between us,
like blankets we used to sleep under. Teach me
how to be present—how to be here—and I will
show you how to disappear.

Circle V

And these, our adversaries, slammed the gates
in my lord's face; and he remained outside,
then, with slow steps, turned back again to me.
His eyes turned to the ground, his brows deprived
of every confidence, he said with sighs:
"See who has kept me from the house of sorrow!"

Canto VIII: 115-120

I see all my past selves gathered around coffee tables, not quite talking—more like singing

Regret,
do not grant us
any serenity...
That is the hymn they gurgle in
their throats.

What you all say to me, thinking that it's helpful, but you should really just let me be sad

Do not
try to tell me
But there was nothing you
could have done. You've never seen what
I can.

When I get annoyed from mudslinging, so I write about people you hate like they're my friends

A true
conservative
party would be one with
Tupac on the playlist but no
Kendrick.

Life is a constant dick-measuring contest with you; you've already broken three rulers

When I
say *I'm busy*,
I'm not inviting you
to tell me how much busier
you are.

When you are proud because you helped someone, that pride tells me you do things for others for you

You're such
a good friend. I
know, because you've told me.
I wonder what it feels like to
be you.

Why I cheated on you as a means of giving myself permission to break up with you

Because
I didn't know
how to tell you what it's
like being around someone so
angry.

When you read for the sake of completion, you miss that all these titles are also cinquains

I can't
tell you a thing
about *Dorian Gray*—
only that it is crossed off on
my list.

Never did I hate you more than when you took out your phone while I was trying to reach you

Since when
did you put up
these buffers like prison
glass? I don't know, now, how to talk
with you.

It was poets who made me feel like *depression* was the password for getting in the club

It's so
insidious,
this visibility.
Never have I wanted less to
be seen.

Circle VIII

She came to sin with him by falsely taking
another's shape upon herself, just as
the other phantom who goes there had done,
that he might gain the lady of the herd,
when he disguised himself as Buoso Donati,
making a will as if most properly.

Canto XXX: 40-45

Coffee Cup Hand

Sometimes, when you're holding your coffee cup with two hands
in your lap, you take a sip when I'm responding to your question
about favorite movies by saying something like "Well, there's a
big difference between *favorite* and what you think is *best*" as a way
to buy time to come up with the perfect one to impress you, but when
your drinking hand takes the cup away from your non-drinking hand,
your non-drinking hand remains in that half-grip shape in your lap—
like you could shift gears or start a thumb war I would willingly lose.

Red Rock

When you text me things like "You're *such* a cancer," I *know* what you're saying, but I still want to text back that you need to capitalize the *C*, unless you're trying to tell me I'm a rapidly uncontrollable reproduction of cells. Instead, I text back "Ha, ha, ha. What do you mean?" and the gap before your response tells me that you've taken the full stop after the third *ha* the wrong way, like I'm mad at you or something, so I quickly start drafting another message that begins with "I'm so sorry," which is *such* a Cancer thing to do, but your next message of "I don't really know" interrupts me like that first big wave as the tide comes in before you've managed to pick up your beach towel and move backwards. And I don't know either, so I want to google *Cancer characteristics*, but I know it's just going to piss me off, because it's already pissing me off. No one substitutes birthstones for signs, so I text you "You're such a sapphire" and google *sapphire characteristics* and find that *sapphire can be found in every color except red, which are considered rubies* and, of course, I am a ruby, as if I needed another metaphor to remind me how good I am at finding ways to derail our conversations just as you're getting close to telling me you love me—not because I don't want to say it back. Because I *really* want to say it back.

Dear Denis Villeneuve

Ever since I read the plot synopsis of your 2013 film, *Enemy*, and watched a clip of the final scene on YouTube, I've been trying to find the right words to tell you how much I hate you as a director and as a person. For two months, I've been coming home worried that my partner has mutated into a room-sized tarantula, but maybe part of arachnophobia has to do with the size of the spider, and there are diminishing returns, like any spider bigger than a fist will elicit the same response, more or less, like "Holy fuck, I'm going to get the broom" rather than "Holy fuck, I'm going to move to another planet just in case spiders learn how to book trains or flights." The last time I didn't mind seeing a spider was on the back porch of my parents' house, after it had just caught a fly in its web at the base of a pipe. Three other flies swarmed in on the spider and fought it back into the pipe long enough to help the caught fly break free. If you had directed a film like this, maybe I would have watched it. Instead, I now have to bite my tongue when my friend mentions how he's too worried about the psychological ramifications of watching a David Lynch film. I used to tell him "No, but *The Elephant Man* and *The Straight Story* aren't even Lynchian. They're just good." But I don't want you writing back to me, saying things like "You should check out *Incendies* or *Prisoners*; those were back before I put room-sized tarantulas in my movies." The fact that you even need to identify a period of your filmography as the period *before* room-sized tarantulas says it all, Denis. Yours, etc.

The Butterfrees

How do you, you know, watch the *Pokemon* episode, "Bye Bye Butterfree", without crying? It's like twenty-one episodes in is the perfect period of metamorphosis, getting to know someone or something just to let them go. Imagine, my love, all those Butterfrees got lost along the way and half flew into my stomach, half into yours. Whenever I'm near you, I think I'm hungry, but it's just the Butterfrees trying to find their ways back to their partners. Whenever we're apart, I fear the joy I take in small things, like reading them all the poems I know about birds. Most of them are about death, but I've taught my flock to find beauty in dead things, even though Pokemon don't die—they just faint. I've tried telling you so many things without using Pokemon as a referencing point, but I can't find a nicer way to explain the abdominal pain loving you brings. The other day, I wanted to tell you a story while we were in public, but it felt like everyone in the café was listening, waiting for me to ruin the moment by saying the wrong thing. The right thing would have just been to kiss you and say bye-bye, but that wasn't the story that came from my mouth. Did I say the wrong thing? Tell me.

Good Reality Testing

When we come to the end of a film, I don't want you
to ask me things like "So, what did you think?" I want
you watch my face like a reaction video or a DVD
commentary track of the same film we just saw.
You should be able to tell, from my eyebrows furrowing,
that I didn't think the characters were very believable
but that I'm tired of people always expecting characters
to *be* believable. There is nothing believable about you,
but I would revisit you every day, if I could, because I'm
always finding little things I've missed—how your
anachronistic soundtrack matches your wardrobe,
how the blocking in your scenes always gives primary
place of importance to the people you're with and how
your hand finding mine under the table is less like an
inciting incident and more like a resolution.

Pretend

When you disappeared, the detective asked me for any information that might help him locate you. I didn't know what was relevant, so I told him how you spent a night in prison in Fresno, which didn't surprise him, because most people from Fresno spend at least one night of their lives in prison. I looked for you on message boards, in chat rooms like this one and in the hundreds of e-mails we exchanged. Until I met you, I didn't know Google capped e-mail threads at 100 before starting new ones with the same subject but with "Re:" in front of it. When I found the thread called "Re: Re: Re: Awake now", I thought I saw you there, in the final message, which was just a link to one of many videos I never watched, because we were past that phase of trying to impress each other with our respective music tastes. How was I to know how you split yourself into three parts, like any good story? The detective found the first part at the bottom of a laundry basket in a scent that managed to cling to a T-shirt I still picture you in. I found the second in Winterbourne, dangling off a piece of moss under the bridge over a lake covered with so many petals that it looked like you could stand on it. We never found the third, but I keep looking, expecting to find it at the beginning of a Saturnus album, hidden in a sad piano line before the bass kicks in.

The house that Emily Dickinson built

I heard a Phone buzz—when she died—
Despite the Clamor in the Room
A Sound I heard Instinctively—
To which my Ears had been Attuned—

The Hands around—all lifting drinks—
A Whiskey here or there
It Might have been—a Toast for her
Had any—been Aware—

They sang to Me—and cut the Cake
In slices twenty-five
Enough—to feed a mouth
For every year she was Alive—

Vibrating—once again, the Phone—
But nowhere—to be found—
Instead, I asked the Silence—*Yes*?
I didn't hear a sound—

The house that Christina Rossetti built

Awake at last, the seduction of dreams now over,
Awake at last, the complacency of *what-if*-s past,
A cup of coffee, the window, this pencil, some paper,
Awake at last.

No more reasons to leave off the labor,
No more planting of seedlings below,
Awake at last in a garden that must grow.

Wide awake. The vibrating pixels and metal
Cannot lull him, distract him with alternatives fast
As he sits at his desk with that look in his eye
Awake at last.

I first saw the cheetah sitting in front of a Greyhound station. "Excuse me," I began to say to her, but she bit me in the leg. One of her teeth broke off in a bone. "Why would you do that?"

"I thought you were going to ask me for money," she said. "Well, now I have a tooth in my leg." "Sorry. You can keep it as a memento." I did. "Why are you waiting out here?" I asked.

"I've just moved in from back east. I wanted to try my hand at acting." I looked at her paws. "You realize how ridiculous that sounds coming from you?" "So they say. So they say."

"Why do you want to act?" I asked after minutes of silence, staring at her coat, the spots of which were oddly shaped and disproportionate. "I think it would be a good way of

finding myself." I closed my umbrella and beat her over the head with it. "Thousands of people come here every year saying the same thing. What makes you

so special?" The cheetah growled at me. "I happen to be classically trained and fluent in thirty different languages." "*Bullshit*. I can spot a liar when I see one.

What talents do you *actually* possess?" She shrunk back and said "I can run fast." "We'll see just how fast you can run." I called my lawyer and had him bring over a contract

stating that if the cheetah beat me in a race, I would get her an audition, but if *I* won, she was mine. The cheetah signed, confident of herself. But, like most cheetahs, she neglected

the fine print, which stipulated that the distance of the race be thirteen miles. She ran out of breath after one minute and, when I passed her, she said that I had tricked her.

"Are you calling me a cheat-ah?" "I suppose you think that's terribly clever." After the race, I brought her home, my first companion in years. She urinated on the carpet.

That night, I heard her growling in the backyard. She was sitting on the grass, head pointed up at the moon. I sat beside her for an hour, listening.

"What are you doing?" I finally asked. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm embracing my cultural background by barking at the moon."

"Wolves bark at the moon," I said. "Exactly." The cheetah was so sure of herself that I didn't want to say anything else, but it was against my

nature not to. "Cheetahs descend from cats, not dogs." She growled a few more times, half-heartedly, and lay down. "I thought if I really

tried and believed it, it could be true." "Well, now you know how deists feel." I scratched her head and the two of us stayed there all

night, telling jokes whose punch-lines were the names of people we knew. "Do you think we'll ever walk on the moon?" she asked me.

"That happened over forty years ago." "No, I mean you and I. Do you think *we'll* ever walk on the moon?" I told her I didn't know.

"I'd like to live on the moon." We stopped making jokes and listed off everything we wanted to do before we died, knowing

that we wouldn't do most of them. "That's just how things go," she said. "But if I could do just one thing..." I waited for her to finish

the thought, but she had fallen asleep. I sat there until sunrise, watching her stomach, trying to synchronize my breaths with hers.

The cheetah stood on the table, looking at me after the doctor left. "What did he say?" she asked. "He said to count backwards from ten, and that would be it." "But I don't know how to count to ten at all,

much less backwards." "I know." We waited. "Did I ever tell you about The Alchemist?" "I don't remember you mentioning it," I said. "The Alchemist. That is how cheetahs understand dreams. There is

an Alchemist in your head who crafts dream potions. Sometimes, they're good potions. Sometimes, they're bad. I just hope this one is good." The doctor came back in and stuck the needle in the back

of her neck. I started counting backwards, but when I reached zero, she was still looking sideways into my eyes. She was trying hard to say something, but she could barely breathe. I held her paw

until she fell over. As I walked back to the car, I tried picturing her visiting The Alchemist's shop. She bought a potion, drank it and fell asleep smiling. I sat in the car and cried for three hours.

Years later, I went to the spot in the backyard where she was buried, carrying pliers in one hand. "I know you said I should keep it as a memento, but if I can't remember you without it, then I don't

want to remember at all." I bent down and pulled the tooth out of my leg. "I can't carry you with me everywhere I go." It fell without making a sound, and I kicked dirt over it. That night,

I dreamt. The cheetah and I were walking through the snow. She said how the fact she wasn't cold was testament to her being descended from wolves. We laughed, but when I reached down

to pet her, she was gone. And I was no longer walking. I was in mid-sprint, on all fours, black spots covering my forearms. I could spring forever without getting tired, I realized. When I

woke up, I had shin splints, and there was a black spot where I had pulled the tooth from my leg. I spent the rest of the day smiling, knowing that her last potion had been a good one.

Influence Hunger: A Manifesto

Meditations I

I

June 10th, 2004. KCRW's *Bookworm* podcast.

> Michael Silverblatt: "Can you help me? I've been having an ongoing, silent argument with you for many years, and it's because I tend to turn to poetry because it prizes, it seems to me, weakness or memorializes terror or speaks of the vulnerable states memorably. And I find, in the criticism ongoing, a call to speak of the 'best', 'genius', the 'strong' poem as if you were part, imaginatively, of the militarized sensibility that wants to win as opposed to what I seem to cherish in poetry: the desire to be strong in one's loss."

> Harold Bloom: "I think, Michael, I am much closer to you than you realize. The wanting to win is only what, from the ancient Greeks onward—. You know, Nietzsche makes the point, as did Jacob Burckhardt before him, that the difference between the ancient Greeks and the ancient Hebrews is that the Hebrews said, primarily, you must honor your father and your mother and the Greeks said it is necessary to have the agon—the contest—in which you win the foremost place, even if be over, against your father and your mother. There is that element, I think, in almost all great poetry—that in some sense, like Pindar, the poet writes a kind of victory ode. But that does not celebrate happiness. That only celebrates, perhaps, a greater capacity for loss."

II

Poetry, more than the other forms of Creative Writing (prose fiction, prose non-fiction, drama, screenwriting), has *earned* a reputation for being elitist (more in VI). Creative Writing differs from creative writing in that the latter is descriptive and the former is an area of study in higher education.

III

Poetry that is not in a hybrid form (the prose poem) occupies a comparatively smaller portion of the page than other kinds of writing, such as prose fiction or prose non-fiction. Whether or not it is justified or proven in the act of reading, this smaller occupancy creates a kind of heightened pressure for each line—each word—to pull more intellectual weight and warrant a more sustained meditation than, say, even the most "literary" of prose fiction (what non-French speakers can take away from Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in translation, the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* and the Pynchon of *Mason & Dixon*, all of which may as well be considered prose poems passed off as novels due to their density of language and intricacy of metaphor). The "strong" poem can survive this pressure and be a difficult pleasure for the dedicated reader in the best-case scenario; its survival is achieved and perpetuated by its ability to allow the reader inside of it once both care and work are given. More casual readers, though, may become frustrated by challenging poetry (Edmund Spenser, Fernando Pessoa in translation and Hart Crane; I have been what I would consider a dedicated reader of poetry and poetics for fifteen years and still occasionally find myself struggling to move beyond basic comprehension with some of the poems by these poets). This frustration can lead to giving up on poems, poets and poetry altogether.

IV

Poetry is more akin to film; long-form prose is more akin to television (here and going forward, where there is no citation, assume an implied "I believe that…", many previous instances and variations of which have been removed through drafting for the sake of avoiding repetition; context is always given for statements that are not my own and of which I do not possess expertise). A researched and extended study on these relationships is necessary now in an age of visual and digital media and shrinking attention spans brought on by the consumption of smaller forms of reading in articles and instant messages that are often accompanied by distractions in the form of advertisements. Readers might give up on poetry (a form that can often be boiled down to a moment or a feeling) and turn to commercial fiction (a form that rewards a longer investment over time and can be approached in bite-sized chunks, with certain genre writers seemingly having chapter length down to a science). Viewers might choose not to watch a 90-minute film (a form that can often be boiled down to a moment or a feeling, especially with European directors such as Jean-Luc Goddard and Andrei Tarkovsky) but be willing to watch a dozen episodes of a 22-minute sitcom (a form that rewards a longer investment over time and can be approached in bite-sized chunks, with certain screenwriters seemingly having writing towards commercial breaks down to a science).

V

I think there are difficult and non-difficult pleasures alike to be found in poetry, long-form prose, film and television. Each medium, however, has a reputation and a history of conventions. Poetry, the least measurably popular (and no metric, including sales, is especially perfect) of these forms of art, has a reputation that is less kind among outsiders, since it is not something with which most people engage and understand—the average person will see more

films and episodes of television and read more novels in a year than they will read collections of poetry.

VI

Elitism brings with it connotations of class—the wealthier can afford better educations. While this literal understanding certainly applies to literature in that the upper classes are more likely to have better access to books and more free time to read them, the implication that poetry is elitist tends to mean more that it is exclusionary; it is a sort of society that requires a sort of initiation (wide reading, mainly) for all practitioners and appreciators, and it is not meant for a universal audience, as evidenced by its style and diction, which are often far removed from common forms of speech and, thus, require more effort in understanding. I think when accusations of elitism are made, "exclusivity" is often a better substitute. Consider a university free of tuition (difficult, I know). This institution would necessarily have to be exclusionary if only for the sake of practicality. A seminar cannot function well—or at all—with thousands of students worldwide who are interested in taking the module, and there cannot be hundreds of seminars for every module to accommodate those thousands of students. A university free of tuition must then exclude many people through an admissions process. Poetry, similarly, cannot function well—or at all—if it is meant for literally anyone to be able to understand and enjoy. Such a poem would be so basic in enterprise, so devoid of imaginative language that it would hardly resemble poetry. A computer program would be able to make poems of equal or better merit.

VII

If the poetry *community*, however, is still exclusionary, you could hardly tell. There are more periodicals, magazines, journals, publishing houses, university courses, workshops, reading series, festivals, contests, awards, podcasts and video channels dedicated to poetry than ever before. The *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* in the United Kingdom and *Poet's Market* (part of the wider, multi-volume *Writer's Market* series) in America have to be updated yearly not out of sheer greed on the publisher's behalf but because there is so much turnover in the world of published writing—new journals that spring up, old journals that become defunct—that information becomes outdated too quickly; seasonal releases of these sources would sell because they would be practical, which speaks to the continued existence of America's bimonthly *Poets & Writers* magazine (which includes regular updates on deadlines for various kinds of submissions and grants).

If not any person could do poetry *well*, I have seen it proven that any person can at least *do* poetry—or, at least, a failed form of it. The numbers of students I have spoken with who chose Creative Writing as a degree for some variation of "Because it sounded easy" and the numbers who passed those degrees are equal. Less frustrating and pessimistic, the numbers of attendees at open, monthly readings who are friends of poets but have no background in poetry whatsoever and the numbers who end up writing something out of inspiration for performance which receives a warm reaction from a crowd of poets are also equal (granted, seeing some poetry in performance beforehand negates having no background in poetry whatsoever, technically, but the inspiration comes from a place of having seen something and assuming that they can also do that thing).

VIII

Poetry *should* be exclusionary (more in XII).

IX

October 20th, 2011. KCRW's *Bookworm* podcast.

Michael Silverblatt: "You know, Harold, when we first met, you were very patient with me when I told you that I didn't like the idea of poets at war with one another. And now I'm older, fifteen years later, and I understand that you can't win without a fight."

Harold Bloom: "All literature in the world—western and eastern—is essentially agonistic. It was Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche who brought back the truthful knowledge that ancient Greek literature, culture, society, thought, life was founded upon the agon—that, after all, Pindar competes against Bacchylides; Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Agathon compete against one another for winning the prize. Poetry—high literature—is essentially agonistic. Of course, here we go again, all too often I have been assured—and I'll put it as gently as possible—by certain...persons, critics or supposed poets or writers, that women writers are not like that; they're sort of having a quilting session together, which is—what can I say? The idea of Miss Dickinson of Amherst participating as a writer in a quilting thing is preposterous. Well, it's not even preposterous, it's hilarious. Or Emily Brontë. Or, these days, [the] wonderful Canadian poet, Anne Carson, who is very much in the tradition of Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë and certainly one of the great poets alive today."

X

I rely on Michael Silverblatt, host of *Bookworm*, and the late critic Harold Bloom in the same way that my grandmother relies on her bible: I come back to them for spiritual guidance and to help teach me how to be a better version of myself. For all of Bloom's faults (Silverblatt, as far as I can tell, has none), these two men lead more convincingly by example than anyone else I have encountered in person or in writing that one must have a deep passion for reading to find any kind of value in living a life that is not passive. I do not agree with everything either of them has said (and a decade of listening to them has helped me locate and reflexively identify their biases), but everything they have said matters to me because literature matters to me more than anything else and literature matters to them more than anything else.

XI

Here is Bloom, from the 2004 interview, in a nutshell:

> I only know three criteria for judging a poem, ultimately. One is cognitive power. Another is the achievement of some kind of aesthetic splendor or beauty. And the third is wisdom. Now, I know that all of these are debatable notions. What seems wise to one will not seem wise to another. What seems aesthetically splendid to one will not necessarily seem so to another reader. What seems to have cognitive force and originality to one will not strike another in that way, but it is a question of experience. If you spend a lifetime reading Shakespeare and teaching him—if you spend a lifetime reading Wallace Stevens and teaching him—then I think it does make a difference. I don't necessarily think it makes you a better human being, but I think it does make you a better teacher.

XII

Poetry should be exclusionary, because the joys that come from reading and writing it are ones that I think are earned. Not every person is going to have an interest in earning them; not every person is going to be capable of earning them, depending on the poet being read or the poem being attempted in writing. For me, the nature of all those joys can be traced to Bloom's notions of literary influence (formally introduced in 1973's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* and expanded upon and, I think, perfected, in 2011's *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*). A poet will achieve a success or what Bloom might have called a "permanent" poem after grappling with and struggling against their literary influences, classical and contemporary. He also refers to this as a creative "misreading" in *The Anxiety of Influence*, meaning that a later poet will look to a former poet—one who has influenced them—and write against them by correcting a flaw they (the later poet) see in the older poet's work where the older poet has come up short; this flaw is entirely subjective and sometimes imagined, but it is this misreading that allows the later poet to find their own voice by zigging where their predecessor zagged. Falstaff is Shakespeare fighting through the influence of Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Amy Lowell experiences sibling rivalry with Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, the poets who give "The Sisters" its title. And, as above in Bloom's quote, Anne Carson defines herself and achieves originality through relationships including ones with Dickinson and Emily Brontë (indeed, it is hard to find an English-speaking, North American poet who does *not* experience an anxiety of influence in relation to Dickinson; Hart Crane writes "To Emily Dickinson" and Billy Collins writes to "Hart Crane", one degree of influence removed from Dickinson, but he also writes directly to her in "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes"). Carson is, perhaps, too good an example of the influence principle, herself a classicist who has recreated Sappho for a modern audience in 2002's *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* while also living true to the competitiveness of her ancient Greek forbears—

Homer, Hesiod, Nonnus, Apollonius—in interpretations of the epic, such as in 1998's *Autobiography of Red*.

XIII

I encountered—and despised—this idea of influence before I knew anything about it. While I was taking my first poetry writing class at university in California, my professor told me that Gary Snyder and Sherman Alexie were reading at the Ojai Poetry Festival and that I should go see them. Neither name meant anything to me, and I had no idea that there *were* festivals for poetry. The only poets I knew and cared deeply for were Donne, Keats and Christina Rossetti, and they would not be making any appearances at poetry festivals.

What I remember most about the experience was not Snyder's ability to command the stage while still seeming so subdued or Alexie's humor and naturalness as a storyteller, during or between poems. What I remember most was the open reading for attendees and a specific poet introducing both of her pieces by saying something similar to "Let me know if you can spot the Yeats influence in this one" and "You'll have to guess which line of these I stole from Shelley". Was this necessary? Why did she have to rely on other writers to be able to write her own poems? Could she not just be herself? I wrote a mean-spirited exaggeration of the experience of listening to that in the form of a (very bad) poem in-between performers and nearly signed up to read it (which would have been my first reading in front of an audience), but I could not find the person who was in charge of letting people onto the stage. I often think about some of the small miracles like this that have occurred in my life.

XIV

I cannot write a single poem now without using another poet and their work, as a way to define myself either alongside or against them. This is not to say that each poem I write is full of allusions, explicit or hidden, and the writing of poetry is some kind of game of connecting the literary dots. It is to say that reading other poets' work helps me find my own voice, style and content. It helps me, I hope, exercise cognitive power, aim for aesthetic splendor and seek a kind of wisdom. It is how *Inferno* gets its name—being of Italian heritage, I am always haunted and entranced by Dante. It explains the existence of each of my poems, explicit in the borrowings of titles (Catullus, Keats and Crane as "The Brothers" to match Lowell's sisters or signaling Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Lana Del Rey*), the borrowings of form (the section of *tanka*, inspired by the great women poets of Japan's classical period who are present in spirit if not by name: Ono no Komachi, Lady Ise, Izumi Shikibu, Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon) and the continuations of themes (grief, isolation or suicide through Rossetti, Crane, Donne, Dickinson and Sara Teasdale).

My poetry is better (but still not very good, in my opinion) because of this.

XV

One of the by-products of the growth of poetry and its accessibility—its move away from exclusivity—is a loss of the understanding of the importance of the influence principle. If writers feel like poetry is something they can simply do, why should they bother themselves with reading what has already been written or paying much attention to what is being written around them? Why engage with classic writers and classic forms? Why engage with contemporary writers and contemporary forms? An amateur poet with no or little background in the reading of poetry could look at a contemporary sonnet and know almost nothing about the sonnet. When writers engage with and challenge the form of the sonnet, they are doing so

by following the wisdom of the saying "You have to know the rules in order to break them." The sonnet, more than any other classical form used by English-language poets, has been most modified throughout the centuries: Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard translated Petrarch; the sonnet cycles of Elizabethan poets made a competition and spectacle of the form; Milton repurposed it for political engagement; the Romantics repurposed it for the nostalgic and sentimental; Gerard Manley Hopkins cut it all up and remade it in rhythmically and sonically innovative ways. The more people who come to an entirely *inclusive* kind of poetry will not have any of that foregrounding and will likely end up writing a sonnet that falls entirely flat due to its complete ordinariness.

And, unfortunately, this avoidance of influence is being reflected in the poetry that is being published and praised today—mostly by younger poets, mostly bad poetry (more in "Another close reading, by way of some more relevant tangents").

XVI

These are the poets with whom I have felt the strongest anxiety of influence, grappled and tried to misread and internalize in my own poetry, most of which finding their way into *Inferno* in some form: Sappho, Pindar, Homer, Horace, Catullus, Dante Alighieri, Gaspara Stampa, Ludovico Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, Eugenio Montale, Ono no Komachi, Izumi Shikibu, "The Gawain Poet", "The Beowulf Poet", Geoffrey Chaucer, Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, Sir Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, Samuel Johnson, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, John Clare, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Brontë, Thomas Hardy, William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden, A. E. Housman, Seamus Heaney,

Denise Riley, Alice Oswald, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Jones Very, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emma Lazarus, Amy Lowell, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Marianne Moore, e. e. cummings, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, May Swenson, James Merrill, W. S. Merwin, A. R. Ammons, John Ashbery, Langston Hughes, Sara Teasdale, Edith Wharton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Billy Collins, Rita Dove, Henri Cole, Mary Oliver, Anne Carson, Thylias Moss, Amy Clampitt, Sherman Alexie, Gary Synder, Luis de Camoes, Fernando Pessoa, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Federico Garcia Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, Octavio Paz, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine, Paul Valery, Francois Villon, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Holderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, Alexander Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova and C. P. Cavafy.

Shakespeare, Bloom's god and idol, is notably absent due to separating drama (of which he is not only the best composer but the best writer in any genre in English altogether) from "lyric" poetry. I prefer the sonnet cycles of Spenser, Sidney and Daniel. Sue me.

XVII

How is it possible to know when a poet is engaging a tradition in the work if it is not made explicit through allusiveness or other signposting? It is *not* possible—for the most part. The poet may even have drawn from a predecessor or battled a form without realizing it; good poets often read so much and so widely that they develop an ability to internalize things they encounter that look and sound so much like themselves that, when written, end up looking and sounding *exactly* like themselves. For all the flimsiness of being able to identify and

describe aesthetic splendor, however, anyone versed in verse—especially professors of Creative Writing—will be able to tell you that good poetry exists and bad poetry exists; I have absolutely no interest in ever engaging someone in conversation or in writing who disagrees with that compound statement. How we distinguish between the two, good and bad, is rarely as easy as being asked to consider what's sublime in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" versus what's repulsive to the senses and the mind in "The Tay Bridge Disaster" of William McGonagall, to use two extremes.

It is easier to recognize when a classical form is being used, since each form has its tradition and since each poet using the form is likely to have encountered the form in something close to its original state and felt some inspiration powerful enough to want to respond to it in some way, even if the result is a very well-disguised version of the form. Metered verse that is not in a recognizable, fixed form is, by nature, of a tradition. No one speaks in metered verse (please provide evidence to the contrary if it exists, though), so no beginning poets will end up writing in metered verse unless they have read older verse that *is* metered and assume that *that* is what poetry is.

Rather than actively looking for the influence principle at work in contemporary poetry, it is easier—through practiced and informed elimination—to see how it is *not* at work effectively in many poets being published (again, more in "Another close reading, by way of some more relevant tangents").

XVIII

Reading, though, is always a subjective experience. As Bloom suggests, what one may find "strong" poetry, another may find banal; what one may find exciting and full of life, the other may run from in disgust. This is not some sort of blanket fallback statement; it is just reality.

What I choose to read is informed by subjective experience, so if I say "From the classical material I have read," there is an unacknowledged implication that there exists many other classical texts I have *not* read and that might contradict my way of thinking about influence. I try to avoid bias when I can, especially in close readings, but there are also values I have developed since practicing the writing of poetry and not just the reading of it. It is important that those values come from a place of bias, or else there would be no other biases with which to contend.

A close reading, by way of some relevant tangents

Here is Hart Crane's sonnet, "To Emily Dickinson", written in 1924 before his first published collection (*White Buildings*, 1926) and not included in it or the other collection (*The Bridge*, 1930) he published during his lifetime:

> You who desired so much—in vain to ask—
> Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,
> Dared dignify the labor, bless the quest—
> Achieved that stillness ultimately best,
>
> Being, of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!
> O sweet, dead Silencer, most suddenly clear,
> When singing that Eternity possessed
> And plundered momently in every breast;
>
> —Truly no flower yet withers in your hand.
> The harvest you descried and understand
> Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind.
> Some reconcilement of remotest mind—
>
> Leaves Ormus rubyless, and Ophir chill.
> Else tears heap all within one clay-cold hill.

And here is Billy Collins' "Hart Crane", included in his first collection (*The Apple That Astonished Paris*, 1988):

> This time when I think of his leap
> from the railing of a ship
> which sailed on, a scale model of the world,
>
> I weigh only the moments when he was caught
> first in the wake,
> lifted and dropped in its artificial rhythm,
>
> then must have felt the timing change
> as the sea's own beat resumed
> and made him part of the cadence of its waves,
> dark turquoise with rolling white tops.

The Collins poem somewhat belies the poet's style, which is not known for being as erudite as is evidenced here. Here is a more representative poem, "Putting Down the Cat", from the same collection (and one I enjoy even more and which finds its way into the final poem in *Inferno*'s eighth section):

> The assistant holds her on the table,
> the fur hanging limp from her tiny skeleton,
> and the veterinarian raises the needle of fluid
> which will put the line through her ninth life.
>
> "Painless," he reassures me, "like counting
> backwards from a hundred," but I want to tell him
> that our poor cat cannot count at all,
> much less to a hundred, much less backwards.

Collins is a poet of whom Harold Bloom would never have approved, though no significant words about Collins find their way into any of Bloom's books. Even if *The Western Canon* (1994) had been published much later—after Collins' appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States in 2001 and after some of his other strong collections, like 1998's *Picnic, Lightning*, had made him as widely read as he is now (*The Apple That Astonished Paris* was the only full-length collection from Collins in print at the time of the publication of Bloom's book)—it would not have made a difference for Bloom. Or, worse, there *would* be documentation of a one-sided public feud in the literary newspapers, because Bloom would have jumped at a chance to lament the loss of any seriousness as far as the American laureateship was concerned. One of Bloom's more admirable characteristics was that he learned to let go of these kinds of battles later in his life and preferred to let his harsh criticism and disapproval be inferred by omissions of names in conversations and his many lists of poets he loved (I sent my own pamphlet to Bloom in Connecticut after asking if he would be willing to read it—just for a reaction, not for

a quote—and his lack of response was, I think, an example of this attempt to avoid saying negative things about a work he did not like at all; if I received my own pamphlet now, I probably would do the same). One of Bloom's less admirable characteristics was that he never learned to detach from his bias in ways that allowed him to see his influence principle at work in poets he did not consider worth his time. Just as he claimed to have read David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* but essentially reduced his commentary about it to being offended that Wallace would have borrowed from *Hamlet* for the title (Bloom thought *Hamlet* was *the* individual achievement in western literature), he certainly would have taken offence to Collins—the unworthy (simple, populist, lacking in aesthetic splendor)—writing to his favorite of all poets in Crane if he had ever been asked about it directly in an interview (he cared extremely little for Robert Lowell, also a former Poet Laureate, and I honestly suspect that it was because Lowell also dared to write to Crane in one of his own poems, "Words for Hart Crane", and Bloom felt it inadequate as a celebration).

In these poems, though, both Crane and Collins prove the influence principle and elucidate one of its more interesting characteristics—namely, what role is played by the experience of the poet (how far they are into their careers *as* poets). I think it is important that "To Emily Dickinson" was not included in *White Buildings* and that "Hart Crane" is from Collins' debut collection. One thing that many of my Creative Writing professors have encouraged their students to do which I think is absolutely essential to the development of a poet is to imitate. Paradoxically or ironically, it is so difficult to find one's own voice as a poet until writing in the voices of many others. While this imitation does not simply go away (or, rather, *should* not go away) the longer a poet writes, they become better at concealing it. In these early poems from poets still figuring out how to effectively imitate, we see influence and the learning of what to do with influence taking place. This is why "Hart Crane" is so unlike the rest of the poems in *The Apple That Astonished Paris*—Collins had yet to figure out how to write a Hart

Crane-like poem in his own style. Collins would, in *Picnic, Lightning*, complete the circle by writing to Dickinson in "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" in a style that makes no compromises and is entirely Collins' after learning how to internalize Dickinson without losing his own identity as a poet. In "Hart Crane", we see only the beginnings of this process. The opening stanza, "This time when I think of his leap / from the railing of a ship / which sailed on, a scale model of the world," is very much Collins in his own mode. This kind of deployment of synecdoche is everywhere in his work, most notably in the title poem of 1999's *Questions About Angels* and its own first stanza, which creates a kind of scale model of a world that it develops as the poem continues: "Of all the questions you might want to ask / about angels, the only one you ever hear / is how many can dance on the head of a pin." The rest of "Hart Crane", however, is all Crane by way of Collins rather than the reverse. Collins' poems often express humor (sometimes dark, as in "Putting Down the Cat") or operate Proust-like in the eyes of their cameras or else take a mundane scene and elevate it briefly to a weighty meditation on life and death in the conclusion. There is rarely humor in Hart Crane's poetry, which is so focused on the task—or "the labor", as he puts it in "To Emily Dickinson"—and is almost always in that mode of heightened observation and existence. I cannot remember reading a single poem by Crane (and I have read them all multiple times) in which it did not feel like the poet was aiming for and tirelessly working towards something sublime, eschewing ordinary diction and syntax as much as possible for fear of being considered exactly that—ordinary. "Hart Crane" is, I think, a much easier poem to understand than an average Crane poem, but it is still operating differently than an average Collins poem. When it ends, there is no witty observation that has been communicated and no feeling of having been entertained; there is even a diction that extends beyond what Collins uses throughout the rest of the collection (few nouns like the "wake" of a proceeding boat that ask us to consider its "artificial rhythm"). I can imagine a recent Collins fanatic working backwards through his collections,

coming across this poem and thinking it among the least remarkable. They would gravitate, instead, to the playfulness of "Schoolsville" or "The Rival Poet" or to the more serene meditations like "Walking Across the Atlantic" or "Cancer"; this was almost exactly my experience with Collins when I first read his work, before I had ever read a Crane poem.

"To Emily Dickinson" is, similarly, a Dickinson poem by way of Crane. He learned how to imitate and internalize influence quickly, too. *White Buildings* contains "At Melville's Tomb", another love poem of sorts for one of Crane's poetic heroes (despite the eminence of *Moby-Dick* and how Melville has been taught in the universities historically, he was as strong a poet as he was a prose fiction writer and nearly deserves to be the third in the company of Whitman and Dickinson for the nineteenth-century American poets). The poem to Melville is all Crane—challenging in its own diction with phrases like "the calyx of death's bounty" (6) and "The portent wound in corridors of shells" (8). In it, Crane retains himself in style; in "To Emily Dickinson", the great predecessor is channeled through the capitalization of nouns not normally capitalized in standard English, the generous use of em-dashes and a rhythm worthy of the master. There is little Crane to observe or of which to speak; the most Crane asks of his reader is to know the allusions to Ormus and Ophir. Notably, the two great American poets—Dickinson and Whitman—never wrote a sonnet. This is the only major sonnet of Crane's (though, technically, an imperfect one). I would say, then, that this is the closest Crane comes to finding himself by way of Dickinson—not in the use of the form itself but in his way of recontextualizing the familiar into the unfamiliar and his use of contradiction. Dickinson (like Collins) is, on first glance, accessible and doing little to obstruct basic apprehension; this is also true of "To Emily Dickinson". Crane, though, would develop his style (certainly a difficult pleasure) of defamiliarization as soon as *White Buildings*, which features "Chaplinesque" and invites the reader to consider just what exactly *is* Chaplinesque about the poem. By the time he had become satisfied with his command of poetry to have enough pages for a full collection,

Crane had already learned how to utilize another's voice for his own ends, conquering it to the point of making it invisible.

Another close reading, by way of some more relevant tangents

When I first moved to England, I fell in love with an unintentional school of poetry—poets like Jack Underwood, Emily Berry, Joe Dunthorne, Heather Phillipson and Sam Riviere, continued by Sophie Collins and Hera Lindsay Bird (the latter of which is not British).

Now, I hate nearly everything about nearly all of these poets' work. I call it an unintentional school, because there are plenty of textual similarities (and some biographical ones; most are highly educated beyond the undergraduate level, which seems to be a through line and staple in the biography of a majority of poets being published from the larger publishers) but no intent on any of the poets' parts, seemingly, to define a poetics. As far as I can tell, apart from knowing one another—and considering how geographically small the country is, this is not uncommon or surprising—and occasionally collaborating on projects, these poets do their individual work and continue to develop in the same level of isolation as the average poet; this has always been the case with the writing of poetry, which must ultimately be done in isolation, and is why I am naturally sceptical about schools of poetry entirely. These poets are, however, linked in their deployments of techniques and the way they engage with influence.

The poet with which they engage, intentionally or otherwise, is Luke Kennard, whose second collection (*The Harbour Beyond the Movie*, 2007) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection, causing a ripple effect in other, younger poets. Kennard's style and diction and frames of reference are understandably alluring and enjoyable to imitate; his poetry is unapologetically funny while being whip-smart and formally interesting. Here is "Bedazzled Crow" from the Popular Cults of the First Millennium section of *The Harbour Beyond the Movie*:

> The butterflies tick like metronomes over
> The music college's dry ice sculpture:

Amorphous No. 14 under which I am publicly
Clipping my nails on the off-beat.

A crow stands, implacable, eyeing me sideways.
(He is questioning my right to exist).

Now I am working on my *Sonata for Eight Toilets*.
But I'm tired of it. I want something beautiful to exist,

Or a battering-ram. My next project will be
Sonata for Beautiful Battering-Ram

And it will show them. My t-shirt reads:
FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, TRUST YOURSELF

The sunlight flashes off a sequin and the bedazzled crow,
He takes off like a black umbrella and flies into a tree.

This entire section of the collection (and much of his 2007 debut, *The Solex Brothers*) is a series of sonnets, though no attention has been drawn to that fact and the form has been altered to fit Kennard's style, which cannot be limited to the two movements of the Italian form (octave and sestet) or even the four of the English form (three quatrains and one couplet); these sonnets must be seven couplets (and, ideally, might have been fourteen one-line stanzas, would that not have been typographically unseemly), because the narrators in Kennard's poetry are trying to operate too many trains of thought at once to the point of collapsing. Form and literary context are never side-lined in Kennard's poetry, even if they are never as strict as they would be in Hopkins, another intense formalist and religious poet (which Kennard is also, though not always in the traditional sense): *Cain* (2017) takes on *The Bible* in tightly constructed anagram poems that rework passages from the original text, and a forthcoming series of poems takes on Shakespeare's sonnets.

"Bedazzled Crow", though, is further representational of Kennard's style and what the other, younger poets misread poorly. Many of the poets listed above, including Kennard, have grown up during the shift in the worldwide consciousness towards visual media; film and

television references are pervasive and, more importantly, the *forms* of film and television writing are translated and repurposed into the poetry. A visual component has never been absent from poetry, going back to Homer's striking set pieces in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. A different kind of visual language, though, has developed in the wake of the technology boom, and much of Kennard's poetry is proof of that. "Bedazzled Crow" is stripped down in its description in similar ways to screenwriting, which omits authorial intervention and free indirect speech by necessity (since it is not the screenwriter's job to interpret the text for the director). "(He is questioning my right to exist)." is one of the only moments in "Bedazzled Crow" that feels poetically interior. So much of the rest of it is exterior, distanced observation: "The butterflies tick like metronomes", "A crow stands, implacable, eyeing me sideways" and "The sunlight flashes off a sequin". Filmmakers are familiar with interpreting this kind of language, because it lends itself to the camera. So many of Kennard's poems juxtapose handfuls of images, sometimes one after the other without any kind of interiority separating them. What this often does is create (or recreate) the Absurdity of televisual media and its own uses of juxtaposition in imagery: the films of the Coen brothers or Charlie Kaufman; television series such as *Fleabag* or *Community*. This use of Absurdity ("Now I am working on my *Sonata for Eight Toilets*.") is, I think, inherently entertaining in its strangeness; we gravitate, as readers or as viewers, to things that are unusual, and our first response is often to laugh out of confusion at how else to react.

Strangeness is a part of all great poetry; total familiarity would make the poem redundant, otherwise. Dante is a model for this to the point that travelling through *Divina Commedia* with him and Virgil (and then Beatrice) makes the constant strangeness achieve its own normalcy. This is also how strangeness in televisual media works: you watch *Fargo* or *A Serious Man* and give yourself over to the strangeness of their worlds or else you tune out because of frustration. This is also how Kennard's poetry functions, but he is also constantly

challenging that functionality. Nothing—no source of influence, no form—is enough: "But I'm tired of it. I want something beautiful to exist". This line is significantly metatextual, like there is a realization that the poem has failed despite Kennard's best efforts to make something beautiful. Here is the key difference, then, between Kennard's poetry and those of the other aforementioned poets: an ultimate dissatisfaction in televisual models for poetry and a pursuit of something more, perhaps unattainable.

Here, for comparison, is Jack Underwood in his Faber New Poets pamphlet with "Migration":

> In the centre of her nation's flag
> is a big, milky, onion, *God is sustenance!*
> on a ribbon round its middle.
>
> She tells me it is customary
> for the guest to provide meat for the pot.
> All her brothers nod.
>
> Tonight her American boyfriend
> has brought his hunk of steak.
> I will try the border again tomorrow,
>
> but not before it's my turn
> and I must break the neck of a bird
> that has flown here for the winter.

Again, juxtaposition of imagery and a strangeness act as the poem's compound raison d'être. Where Kennard challenges the style by intervening almost didactically ("FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, TRUST YOURSELF") and out of a distrust in poetry's ability to accurately communicate his thoughts, Underwood is content to let the strangeness be. The result is a sort of snapshot with interesting description ("a big, milky, onion") in an Absurd situation akin to a series of a scenes from a short film. There is nothing especially poetic about it that is not poetic about David Lynch or Luis Buñuel; and, to be clear, the works of these artists *are* poetic,

but they are not—literally—poetry. Underwood's cribbing of televisual forms of writing in his poetry never shows a resistance towards its influence or an acknowledgement of its limitations. It is entertaining because it is weird, but my takeaway from so many of his poems (and those of other young poets) is feeling like I have been told "Here—*you* make something of this, because I don't have to; it's not my job."

There is a very specific aspect of Absurdity in poetry that I now find distasteful and insincere. Because so many young poets have been influenced by film and especially television, they have also begun using those forms' patterns of cheap emotional manipulation through use of contrast in tone. An emotionally distant series like *Fleabag* will arrive at moments of pathos by pulling the rug out from under the viewer who has otherwise just been bombarded by ironic comedy and pessimism, feigned or earnest. This shows up in poetry when an otherwise completely Absurd poem pivots in its final lines to turn that Absurdity into a moment of empathy and connection. This use of contrast is, I think, one of the clearest signs of a weak poet; it is the poetic equivalent of having one's cake and eating it. Here is "Your horse" from the same Underwood pamphlet:

> has arrived and is bending himself into the room,
> refolding his legs. I knuckle his nose,
> which reminds me of the arm of a chair.
>
> He is talking low and steady,
> rolling back an eye towards his chestnut brain.
> Man-words are climbing his long throat.
>
> I show him to the bathroom
> and he is embarrassed. Next he is hoofing
> through your photo album.
>
> There are more of me, than of him.
> We are crunching on polo mints together
> and remembering the way your body used to move.

Clearly, we have a contrast in tone when we reach "remembering the way your body used to move" after spending time with the narrator and titular horse in Absurd situations ("I show him to the bathroom / and he is embarrassed"). What I find repulsive is the kind of poetry that considers achieving pathos in this way a success. It is easy—incredibly easy. The problem for the writer is that it is also just as addictive. I, too, have had periods of writing in this way, admittedly and unapologetically influenced by Kennard. There is a section in *Inferno* that contains poems using filmmaking as a model that were written as part of a collaborative project *with* Kennard, and part of the goal of that was a synthesis of voice. I could have written hundreds more poems like that because of how genuinely fun it was. But what Kennard is good at and I (and so many other poets) am not is being able to avoid that cheapened pathos. Absurdity in Kennard is a sort of framing device, but sincerity and sentimentality are at the heart of each one of his poems; this is an unbelievably difficult feat to achieve. In my favorite of his publications, the pamphlet *Planet-Shaped Horse* (2011), that sincerity and sentimentality are everywhere. In "More Sad News From Your Stupid Planet", there is a microcosmic example of that in two lines from the first half of the poem:

> Everything has been so, so wonderful today
> I think I will drink some poison and not be killed by it,

Planet-Shaped Horse is a narrative sequence of poems set in a halfway house, and all the characters and situations may as well have come out of Lynch (the final lines of this poem are "Unconsciousness like an apple falling into a bowl of soup. / An apple thrown out of a mirror and caught, off-screen"). But we are never without access to someone's interiority, and even as they keep the reader at arm's length, they are also desperately seeking a connection and trying to be noticed—not out of weirdness but out of pity.

At the risk of picking on Underwood too extensively, here is a poem of his from the February 2020 issue of *Poetry* (the same magazine which published Crane's "At Melville's Tomb"), "Poem Beginning with Lines by Elizabeth Barrett Browning":

But I could not hide

My quickening inner life from those at watch.

They saw a light at a window now and then,

They had not set there. Who had set it there?

Not me. I'm just a slug on the wet inner-face
of the discourse, chirpsing the wind;
I've no idea what drags the chair, bruises
the fruit, leads a child toward a dead rabbit
and bid them not weep, nor laugh, but sing.
My childhood neighbor recalled how I rode
my bike down the hill beside our house
and practiced my dying; arranging my body
in the bushes, lying still. All summer I did it,
repeating the drama, which is how a song
is made—you make a phrase and turn it
over and over like a dead rabbit, finding on
the other side, o look, this rabbit, dead too.

This is an otherwise great poem ruined, in the final line, by a fear of being thought of sincere or sentimental. There are no games being played to try to impress the reader with a strangeness or comedic tone, but it is almost like Underwood cannot help himself, ultimately, from a

practiced cynicism ("o look, this rabbit, dead too"). Is it because the rest of the poem so totally wears its heart on its sleeve (lines 7-9) and this is something that makes the poet uncomfortable? Is it because the "*quickening inner life*" of Barrett Browning is embarrassing or shameful when out in the open? I honestly do not know, but I find it so frustrating to see Underwood come *this* close to escaping the cynicism and irony that have dominated the televisual arts and end on a familiar, coy tone.

Emily Berry, of the aforementioned poets in this unintentional school, has completely grown out of that influence and is a truly interesting poet by the arrival of *Stranger, Baby* (2017). It is telling and sublimely illuminating that her poetry was included in a Penguin Modern Poets anthology with Anne Carson and Sophie Collins. With Berry between those two, I see the natural progression from the weakly influenced poet to perhaps the most strongly influenced poet writing in English today. Collins' *Who is Mary Sue?* (2018) is a posterchild for the empty Absurdism—alluring and entertaining but poorly crafted and reliant on its unusualness to be a substitute for an earned emotional depth—that has become so popular. Berry is several steps removed and has matured greatly since 2013's *Dear Boy*, informed by wide and strong readings of classical poetry and finding a wonderfully sympathetic voice by writing against those other poets; I suspect she will end up being the central poet in England before too long, having already arrived at the understanding of and appreciation for influence that is in Kennard's poetry. Carson is the end goal—a modern poet who has conquered her influences and achieves a kind of real originality. What is also interesting about some of these poets is how many of them have been published by Faber, which brings into question the publisher's complicity in understanding and acting upon readers' and critics' interest in the stylistic similarities of their poets. A publisher having an in-house style is nothing new or noteworthy—it is part and parcel with the business and the subjectivity of an editor. But the most interesting poets in England, to me, are not being published by Faber. Liverpool

University Press leads the way, with extraordinary collections like Nuar Alsadir's *Fourth Person Singular* (2017) (a technical and formal triumph worthy of Carson), Mona Arshi's *Small Hands* (2015) and Ruby Robinson's *Every Little Sound* (2016); Sophie Collins also proves a great translator for the press with Lieke Marsman's *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* (2019). The willingness to engage with non-English language poets is encouraging and expands the capacity for dealing with poetic influence.

Where *Inferno* fails (and succeeds)

I

I have said, half-jokingly and half-seriously, that the poems in *Inferno* (and my other poems) are not very good. Nietzsche claimed "That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking." I would never submit a poem for publication or even just for a face-value reaction from a friend if I did not think there was something worthwhile in it. Part of the anxiety of influence, though, is dealing with the various losses in battle with a predecessor. If I had no standards for myself (or, at least, less lofty ones), I would be generally happier with my poetry. But the way it exists in my head compared with the way it finds itself onto the page shows a real need to figure out how to address my influences better, because nearly everything feels disappointing to me—something to which many other poets can likely relate.

Where *Inferno* succeeds, I think, is in its structural design. It is not simply that the circles of hell correspond to Dante's (with three omitted for the sakes of brevity and not having reached thematic patterns in my poetry that serve as useful parallels); every section contains a number of poems *and* a number of pages divisible by three, excluding the title pages. Each section, I hope, also finds the correct poems to fill it. Circle VIII, for example, specifically evokes the impersonators from Dante to show my poetic impersonations of Kennard in the poems that were part of our collaborative project. The three final impersonations are written much earlier, ironically, and I see a development in how I have been able to creatively impersonate better as my craft has progressed. The first six poems in Circle VIII feel like they have a lot of myself in them and are more my voice by way of Kennard's rather than the reverse, which I think is the case with the cheetah poems—poor imitations of Kennard's early wolf

poems, which are strong imitations of Hughes' crow poems (Hughes is also evoked in *Planet-Shaped Horse*, which does not include a wolf poem). Similarly, Circle II (which contains the *tanka* and is paralleling Dante's lustful sinners), tries to look at lust in different ways and handpicks an idea from Dante ("it has not left me yet") to explore it not as the carnal sin of lusting over another's body but the sin of being unable to expunge the feelings that come as a by-product of lust once the object of lust has been removed; the *tanka* are not sexual, but I think they *are* lustful and among the better poems in the whole submission.

One of my goals, though, in working on and compiling *Inferno* was to try to trace my anxiety of influence across multiple phases in the last few years, because I feel that my ability to assimilate rather than simply imitate has improved. Some battles are still too difficult; "The House That Emily Dickinson Built" is an exercise in futility, because it is inevitably too much of Dickinson and not enough of me. "The Brothers", though, perhaps because it benefits from not focusing on one poet in particular, is a better internalization of some of the poets I write against. It is no surprise to me that "The Brothers" was written much later than "The House That Emily Dickinson Built", though both deserve to be in the circle that represents the virtuous heathen, since an attempt to assimilate influence is more virtuous by my standards than an attempt to avoid influence altogether.

Where *Inferno* fails is in just about every other facet of its execution. The larger my vocabulary grows, the more it seems I can never find the right words. There are times, especially in the selections from *Saeculum*, where I find it hard to distinguish how I would have written parts of a poem any differently in prose. I am not of the belief that conversational poetry should be as simple as everyday speech; there would be little point in writing this kind of poetry. Conversational poetry gives off the illusion that it is everyday speech and often uses syntactical inversions or carefully crafted rhythm through punctuation and line breaks that make the poem much more interesting and engaging than everyday speech, even if the diction

is entirely accessible. This is another technique I have yet to develop in a way that makes me feel satisfied (and it may be that being satisfied with one's own poetry, though admirable, is an ultimately unattainable goal; I could buy that).

There is also the failure to move beyond a few recurring patterns of theme and content, most revolving around isolation, grief and lost love, which is its own kind of grief. Some poets—and artists working in other forms and genres—can make a career out of rewriting the same poem and rereleasing the same collection. In music, this phenomenon is more acceptable; fans of a band gravitate to a certain kind of sound that they enjoy. AC/DC, for example, has retained the same style throughout their career and have built a fanbase upon that style. A band like Radiohead, however, constantly reinvents itself, and the pattern in their sound ends up being a turning away from patterning. There are poets whose collections are the equivalent of AC/DC albums, rehashed versions of the same one note (Charles Bukowski is an extreme example of this). This kind of approach to writing, though, does not interest me, and I have been trying (and failing) to write my way out of certain modes. My most insightful reflection on this process is that a poet must finally achieve the comprehensive poem for their subject in order to be able to move on from that subject; it can be pushed to the side in favor of attempts at newer subject matter and styles, but it will be an itch that will not go away until the poet believes they have done justice to it. Much of *Inferno* is evidence of that—a series of attempts at a comprehensive grief poem. For years, I felt very little progress being made in that endeavor, but since taking my reading more seriously and meditating more on patterns of influence, I finally notice myself breaking ground here or there (being able to write a certain kind of poem in second- or third-person, when it felt impossible to do that poem in anything but first-person before or generating character and imposing a contrived narrative as an exercise in distancing myself from autobiographical material). It is not so bewildering why poets like Keats, Rossetti, Hopkins, Crane and Dickinson are ones that I return to in my own reading; they tackle these themes throughout their work in what I would consider comprehensive poems (Keats' great

odes and *Endymion* and Crane's *The Bridge*). At first, it seemed counterintuitive to use these poets as models if my goal was to write myself out of thematic corners, but now it makes much more sense to me figure out how they wrote themselves out of those corners and to apply what I can learn for myself.

All my perceived shortcomings in *Inferno*, however, are reassuring to me. In my understanding of the influence principle, the battle is only stopped—never concluded—upon one's death. If one manages to conquer one's predecessor (which Carson does with her Greek influences), then the next stage in poetic development comes from influencing one's self, which happened with Shakespeare after he had surpassed Marlowe, Chaucer and Ovid and had no influences with which to contend aside from his own. The reassurance comes from not *feeling* defeated. I think that if I was happy with my poetry and had settled into a repeatable style of writing, it would be an indicator that I had lost my drive to challenge myself—to read more, to write in new forms and in new styles. Complacency is another sign of a weak poet, which is why it is encouraging to see how Emily Berry's poetry has developed and why I feel no shyness in being critical of her earlier poetry. Hopefully, I can have the same or similar opinions towards my own poems eventually. The more multifaceted a poet—the more sources from which they draw, the more influences from which they imitate—the likelier they are to write something of permanent value. I have to believe in that.

II

Here is one of the selections from *Saeculum*, which I think fails in significant ways:

> I was never good at giving presents,
> so I built you a model of an atom
> and said "This is how I picture us."
> I think you took that to mean we

were the protons and neutrons in
the nucleus, which would have been
the kind of premise to a film
we never would have watched.
But what I actually meant was you
were the proton and I was the
electron, pacing back and forth—
waiting for you to respond to me
in any way. I guess when an atom
splits, it's a kind of response.

The part of this poem that makes me cringe most severely is "which would have been / the kind of premise to a film / we never would have watched." It is, at best, superfluous; at worst (which it is in its deployment here), it is a weak sidestepping or aside which detracts from an otherwise serious poem. The premise is interesting: consider the relationship between two people as if they were reduced to subatomic particles and find the parallels between the personalities and the specific particles. This is a stronger poem (or a less weak poem) than it would have been without my battling against a previous version of this poem. The poem as it is in *Saeculum* is not a rewrite, but it is a sort of continuation or reimagining of a poem I had written for a friend and former partner, which used the same premise but explored differently (since we were still together at the time, I was, indeed, the neutron instead of the electron; it was a soppy, bad poem written and given out of my total weakness towards this person and my wanting to impress them).

What I can recommend in this poem is that the ending is not surprising. It fits with the sentiment, which is one dressed in painful nostalgia (it begins in past tense and notably has its first stressed syllable in "never"). How, then, does erroneous, mild comedy fit in? It does not. That is being won over by the easiness of some of the poets I had been reading and almost writing in an apology for the poem existing altogether. When I look at this poem now, I ask questions about its form. Why is it a one-block stanza when it addresses divided subatomic particles and has so much movement and action? How can that same painful nostalgia be

evoked in different line lengths with different line breaks? Is there a better way to say "But what I actually meant", for which Microsoft Word told me off ("Consider using concise language"; yeah, okay, and how many poems have *you* written, Microsoft Word?). The shortcomings here are not so severe that the poem fails in its entirety, but this is such an obvious example—to me—of a poet not challenging himself to see the better, more interesting poem within the poem.

III

Here is one of the nine *tanka* from Circle II:

> You have left me
> running alongside the line of
> eucalyptus trees on Central Avenue—
> the people in cars look at me
> with sad eyes, too, and drive away.

This is one of the greatest successes in all of *Inferno* from my perspective, because it does exactly what I want it to do. With many of the *tanka*, I deviated from the thirty-one syllables of the form (5/7/5/7/7), since my Japanese is too basic to be able to compose poetry at the moment, leaving me feeling less pressure to honor the strictness of the form in English. Several of the *tanka* are, indeed, thirty-one syllables, but where I changed that was for the sake of the quality of the poem. "You have left me" is such a sad line in exactly those four syllables that any addition would detract from it. There is something to be said for having a line break at "running / alongside" to have some typographical representation of the running (as in running over the line), but because the running is linear, down one long stretch of road, forcing the poem into that form felt like a worse option. The eucalyptus tree is one of those instances of

an image that has cropped up in previous poems of mine but never really found a proper home. I am sure most poets have those words or phrases or lines that they know belong somewhere in some poem, so they keep testing them out, but nothing feels right. Here, finally, the eucalyptus tree feels placed exactly where it needs to be, no doubt helped by the *tanka*'s use of natural imagery historically. But where I am most proud of the poem is in its bookending of the addressee without having to rely on another pronoun. The "too" in "the people in cars look at me / with sad eyes, too, and drive away" is the same "You" who begins the poem, and the reader is invited to see the addressee's sad eyes just as they are seeing those of the people in the cars.

Why these *tanka* (and especially "You have left me") work so well for me is because of my battling with the form and its practitioners. I read a couple hundred *tanka* from the Heian period before composing my own, some of which had direct influences (this one was not a response to any *tanka* in particular), and they completely swept me off my feet in the familiar way of wanting to try to do it myself but even better. Whether or not any of my own *tanka* are on par with translations of an incredible writer like Ono no Komachi is not a question I can answer. But I spent more time writing them, pouring over every option in word choice and line break, than I did in any of the longer poems in *Inferno*. The beauty of the form is in its deceptive simplicity. In aiming for that goal, this is one of the only recent instances of poetic satisfaction for me.

Meditations II

I

I can understand any poet's resistance towards acceptance of the influence principle. It leaves out, for the most part, the possibility of originality—that one's poem can come from pure inspiration. But I think inspiration is a reaction to something and there is the paradox of poetic influence allowing the space for something like originality in the same way that working with a restrictive form like the sonnet creates its own kind of poetic freedom.

II

If you look through the various anthologies of world poetry from the beginnings of literature to the present, it is hard not to see influence at work once your eye has been trained to look out for it. Even without editorial footnotes that give the reader the context which shows how one poet is grappling with a previous poet, poems will often make direct allusions or use epigraphs that signal what influences worked as catalysts for the poet. This signposting happens less often in the many journals and magazines of poetry that are currently being published, but the poetry that gets remembered or canonized in the anthologies is, one must remember, a very small percentage of the poetry published at any one time in history.

Poets trying to evade this influence or who, without any context, write and somehow get published without the influence are, almost certainly, more likely to be the ones who do not end up in anthologies, because there is something immediate about a poem without context—that it is meant for the era in which it was written and may end up feeling irrelevant to a future reader.

III

Not all poets and poems aim to be canonical, of course, and there is also the question of how the canon is being formed. I know many poets who write as a hobby and have no interest in publishing. I know more poets who write to be part of a community of likeminded people and are content to share their poems only with that community. Poetry can offer these things. But when a poet actively makes the choice to send out poems for publication, that suggests to me that the poet is somewhat serious about poetry (or else they want name recognition; poetry is just about the last place in which anyone should venture to seek name recognition, because no one except for poets knows other poets). If a poet is serious about poetry, should they not eventually be aiming for something beyond the immediate? Should their poems not avoid being reduced to period pieces by achieving a timelessness that comes with being a continuation of a centuries-long (or millennia-long) conversation?

IV

Apart from learning about the importance of poetic influence through experience and wide reading, poets would benefit from better reference guides. Fiction writers have the incredible *How Fiction Works* (2008) by James Wood, which is never a how-to guide for fiction writing but, instead, explains the technicalities and craftwork that go into fiction writing and might be underappreciated or go unnoticed by the reader. Most of the poet's non-fiction resources are, unfortunately, how-to guides. Some of them are exceptionally good. Kim Addonizio's *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within* (2009) is the stronger follow-up to her already-indispensable *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (1997), co-written with Dorianne Laux. There is also the late, great Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) and its

companion book, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998). All of these have been assigned textbooks in at least one of my poetry writing classes, and I have yet to find another that functions better for undergraduate students. These, though, do not provide the same service of Wood's book on fiction. They do not illuminate the intricacies of poetics for a contemporary reader and poet in ways that will best equip them to truly devote oneself to a life lived in poetry. Robert Pinsky, another former Poet Laureate of the United States, comes closer with *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1999) and *Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters* (2013), but the former is, alas, too brief to be of much use to anyone but the beginning poet and the latter feels like it was written out of frustration with lazy poets and is mostly an anthology that asks the reader to learn from reading without much more guidance in-between selections.

V

It feels extremely arrogant to admit that I want to eventually be remembered as a poet, but that is why I care so much about trying to understand influence and how it works. Here, much to my embarrassment but for the sake of relevance, is an excerpt from a recent letter of mine to a poet friend in Australia:

> I find myself hating everything I write. Not outright in ways in which I feel completely defeated. In ways that are challenging me to become a stronger writer. I have tunnel vision as far as that goes. So much of the poetry in the world seems so inadequate to me, including my own, so I'm doing everything that I can to figure out what I think of as good poetry and how I might be able to write it. The university was useless for this. It was essential for so many things, but the education itself was not one of them. And

I've always hated doing things for the sake of doing them or for a similarly empty cause—a degree for a job, a certain line or style for a high mark, a submission for a publication. None of that interests me. What interests me is becoming the best poet alive, and it's hard to defend that without seeming egotistical (maybe it's impossible). The first poetry class I ever took, where I met Jes (which is why I can never be free of grief—as the first person who saw something in me and believed in and supported my work, she will constantly be there on my shoulder every day that I write, which will be all my days), the professor asked all of us what we wanted to do as far as poetry went, and 19-year-old me said, quite unapologetically and not knowing what it really meant, "I want to be the poet laureate." There is Sean Colletti in a nutshell: meeting something for the first time, falling madly in love and setting the expectations far too high to lead to an almost inevitable disappointment. I don't want any of this for the recognition or anything that comes with that, though. I want it for me. Poetry means the world. It is what keeps the dead alive in my heart, for better *and* for worse. It is one of the only things I think I have real talent for, even if it's unrealized. And it's also a means to an end: being able to meet and talk with those people for whom poetry is also the world. I am constantly disappointed—and Anne and I have recent conversations in which she's felt the same about her coursemates—in people who have no interest in the thing they're supposedly doing. People who don't read what they've been asked to read, people who show up for feedback when it's convenient, *poets* with whom I wouldn't be able to talk about Chaucer or Dickinson or Neruda. There are people out there who have sold their souls to reading and writing, but so many of them already have the recognition and are likely in their homes now, doing the work or talking about it with others. That's the end I want—to be able to be in that group of people so that the world is less lonely.

I am still trying to understand what it is I want to do with poetry, but 19-year-old me is someone with whom I empathize. Achieving those goals has something to do with answering many of the questions I currently find unanswerable.

VI

If I could have come at poetry a different way, I would have. It feels like, after all this time spent formally studying it, I am back at square one.

Not a solution

In a hypothetical, perfect world, I might be able to speak with some authority about what the development of a poet from novice to intermediary to expert might look like outside of the context of academia and higher education. Unfortunately, my path with poetry began in academia and has been sustained throughout my degrees, culminating with this project. I might have *ideas* about how best to facilitate the development of a young poet who has no interest in attending a university course in Creative Writing, but those ideas would just be conjecture.

I can, however, speak to the shortcomings of academia as far as preparing a poet for dealing with these issues of influence. The first is that Creative Writing courses are rarely entirely Creative Writing courses; they are almost always a combination of Creative Writing and Literature. Even with postgraduate degrees that focus on a specific genre of Creative Writing, such as the MA I did at the University of East Anglia in Prose, some taught modules rely on the participation of staff from outside of the Creative Writing department (if a university is lucky enough to even have a dedicated Creative Writing department instead of it, too, being in a combination with another, related discipline). Without the same brains behind every strand and every module of a degree, students are left fractured in their reading practices—some texts are read from the perspective of writers (usually those assigned by Creative Writing staff and usually skewing on the contemporary side of literature) and some texts are read from the perspective of academics (usually those assigned by Literature staff and usually skewing on the classical side). Coming to a text as a writer and coming to the same text as a reader create entirely different experiences. The assumption on behalf of Creative Writing staff must be that their students simply being exposed to classical writing in their Literature modules is enough and that the right *kind* of exposure to those texts will help make

them better writers; this is a false assumption. By dividing studies in this way and not having more cross-talk between the designs of modules on a Creative Writing course, the studying of classical poets that might otherwise hugely benefit the development of an aspiring poet is not done with that aspiring poet's development in mind. The aim of most Literature modules is exposure to text for the purposes of one of the many frameworks of literary studies and literary theories. In the eleven years of my university life in two different countries, attending and auditing as many modules as I reasonably could, I never *once* encountered a Literature professor who at *any* point in a single discussion talked about the execution of a poetic technique in the context of Creative Writing. The things I have learned from classical poets have been the result of applying Creative Writing practices to those texts in my free time and separate from what was being asked of me in the Literature modules; few students have the motivation to make that time, and I was only able to do so because of having firmly decided to take my poetic development seriously and at the expense of some of the social benefits and events that come with being a student.

This is not to say that Creative Writing courses ought to be dictatorial in their designs, one person micromanaging each module to make sure poetry is being taught in the right way to best facilitate the poet's craft. But better cross-talk is needed or else Creative Writing faculties should be twice as large so that practicing writers are teaching Literature modules for Creative Writing students as well, providing guidance in how to look at classical texts as not just a contemporary reader but also a contemporary writer. There are, of course, more practical barriers to this than I can possibly imagine, since universities are businesses that cannot prioritize each student's education in that way, even if the staff would be in favor of it. But, were those barriers not in place and more thought, funds and experts were thrown at Creative Writing courses, I think different kinds of poetry—and better poetry—would be being published right now.

By not having the resources to allow for more modules taught by Creative Writing staff for the benefit of Creative Writing students, there is more of an emphasis placed on reading around contemporary writing. And, given the choice between skewing classical or contemporary, I think skewing classical is the lesser of two evils. With a focus on contemporary creative writing, there is not as much room for establishing literary context. I had the benefit and genuine joy to be able to run seminars for a Contemporary Creative Writing module while completing this degree. The module's texts were the shortlists for the year's major literary prizes, such as the Booker and T. S. Eliot. This is an absolutely fantastic module in terms of design, because it is exposing students to the most celebrated and immediate of contemporary writing (some of the shortlists had yet to be announced when the module began, making it the most immediate module in which I have ever taken part). But without any context for those collections and novels, how is a student supposed to understand what makes them interesting or effective? What makes them original, more importantly? Reading ten collections of poetry in isolation, a young Creative Writing student might gravitate to champion a collection for this or that reason, but what if that collection is full of clichés that are not identifiable to a reader who has no literary context? Again, the assumption is that the student will have read other collections of poetry, but the question of *how* they have read those poems is rarely given enough thought. It is entirely possible that the most recent poetry a student in that first-year module would have read would be Yeats or Lawrence or Auden, which is about where most pre-university survey courses in literature end; but that will likely have been an encounter with poetry not as a writer but as a reader, considering issues of history and biography and not necessarily poetic craft and editing.

By not having a better-defined studying of Creative Writing in higher education, developing poets attending these courses are likely to compartmentalize—contemporary poetry is useful for them as a poet, classical poetry is useful for them as a reader and for reference purposes. But I think classical poetry is an even better resource for poets looking to

understand their craft than contemporary poetry. During my undergraduate degree, I took a module called John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets. It was one of my favorite modules I have ever taken and not just because of a pre-established love of Donne. It was just taught extremely well. I learned more about the time period and the connections between poets like Henry Vaughan and Richard Crashaw than I had managed to pick up in my independent reading, and it developed in me a greater appreciation for poets I already adored by virtue of the tutor being an expert academic in the field. That same module, though, could have been taught by a published poet and been just as rewarding but in a completely different way. And if I had cared more, at the time, about specifically wanting to read classical poetry while applying Creative Writing issues and questions, I might have preferred to alternative—I might have learned how my own uses of conceits in poems were not very original or how to look at familiar, recurring themes in my work through an entirely different lens. The assumption that the Creative Writing student in that position is supposed to naturally make those connections is giving too much credit to the student, sadly.

So, if there are patterns related to the education of poets being published now—poets that might form some sort of unintentional school—some thought should be given to effects of that education. If developing poets are only being influenced by and imitating contemporary poets, because those are the only poets they are studying through the lens of writing, then it is understandable that trends arise and a move away from older influences occurs. Rather than see another contemporary poet write a sonnet that breaks all the rules of the sonnet, even it smart ways, I would be more impressed by a contemporary writer being able to pull off a traditional sonnet, because I am no longer sure that contemporary poets even know all the rules of traditional sonnets that they are, nevertheless, breaking.

As suggested, this is not a solution, because there is very little that is practical in it. This is a series of observations and potential by-products in having a fractured model for studying Creative Writing in academia. So many modules are taught in isolation from one

another that being able to understand any sort of patterns of influence must end up being accidental or the result of a tutor who has a special interest in tracing those patterns and is able to reference work from outside a module's syllabus. At worst, though, having knowledge of classical texts and authors if only for reference is better than nothing, and reading these texts and authors will hopefully inspire more reading outside of the context of the classroom.

Meditations III

I

June 3rd, 2010.

Michael Silverblatt: "Now, *The Grey Album*, you know, is something that friends tell me I've been 'sleepy' in not knowing about. But, you know, *we* wake up one day and we discover 'Oh—sampling. Is that what T. S. Eliot was doing in *The Waste Land*? Well, *sure* it is."

David Shields: "Of course. Of course. I mean, my god—Eliot said, 'Good poets borrow, great poets steal.' You know? James Joyce said, 'I'm quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man.'"

II

I'm quite content to go down, as far as this essay is concerned, as a scissors and paste man. This is David Shields in his *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010):

> An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. (What, in the last half century, has been more influential than Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of the Kennedy assassination?) Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as

> if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real. (3)

III

If I imagine literature as a kind of religion (which I do), David Shields would be a sort of redemptive figure not so far removed from Jesus Christ. To such a great extent do I believe in his work and the good that it can help foster in other writers, that I had an ongoing correspondence with him at the end of 2016 and tried (single-handedly and unsuccessfully, since I was simply a student) to secure a British publisher for his then-upcoming book; I would have paid the reading fee myself if he could have travelled to Birmingham. Throughout his work, which began as mediocre fiction, he shows an inability to settle. If a form has reached its natural end (more in IV), then there must be some way, for Shields, to look at it in a different way and reinvigorate it, usually by means of blending forms or genres. That "emotional urgency" and "openness to accident" are all things I have tried to internalize, including within my poetry. I am in obvious debt to Shields. The title of this essay borrows from him. But its form also borrows from Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*) Yoshida Kenkō, (*Tsurezuregusa*), Anne Bradstreet (*Meditations Divine and Moral*) and Guy Debord, (*La société du spectacle*), because borrowing from one place or one author is not always enough in trying to find one's own voice.

IV

James Wood in *How Fiction Works* (2008):

> Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it all begins again with him. There really is a time before Flaubert and a time after him. Flaubert decisively established what most readers and writers think of as modern realist narration, and his influence is almost too familiar to be visible. We hardly remark of good prose that it favours the telling and brilliant detail; that it privileges a high degree of visual noticing; that it maintains an unsentimental composure and knows how to withdraw, like a good valet, from superfluous commentary; that it judges good and bad neutrally; that it seeks out the truth, even at the cost of repelling us; and that the author's fingerprints on all this are, paradoxically, traceable but not visible. You can find some of this in Defoe or Austen or Balzac, but not all of it until Flaubert.

In the same way that poets do not have a reference book as useful for the art of understanding their genre as *How Fictions Works* is for prose fiction, we are also (fortunately, I would say) lacking a watershed poet whose imprint is on all successive poetry in the same way Wood makes a case for Flaubert and fiction. I would make a case for another novelist alongside—not instead of—Flaubert. There were other ways the novel could go after Flaubert; James Joyce proved that first in *Ulysses* and then again in *Finnegans Wake*. And many postmodernists have carried Joyce's torch, first through an extensive use of comedic irony (Thomas Pynchon in his masterwork, *Mason & Dixon*) and a complicated sentimentality by way of irony (David Foster Wallace in his masterwork, *Infinite Jest*). But Flaubert for realism and Joyce for modernism seem, to me, to be the end of the novel so far; everything else is some variation of routes already explored.

Walt Whitman was certainly a watershed poet. By no means did he *invent* free verse, but the specific kind of free verse that defines the poetry of Whitman in "Song of Myself" and

his great elegies—a free verse, ironically, carefully crafted and attuned to irregularities in natural rhythms, especially those of the elements and especially those of water—has left a permanent mark, at least on most poetry in English from America. This is why poets are constantly hailed as the "New Whitman" or the "Chicano Whitman" or "Black Whitman" or "Jewish Whitman" or what have you (Bloom liked to quote, as in *The Western Canon*, what he thought was the outrageousness of Maya Angelou's inauguration poem for Bill Clinton being called "a work of Whitmanian magnitude" by *The New York Times*). None of these inheritors would make those claims for themselves—the reviewers are quick to do it for them and to define writers, generally, by other writers—but Whitman's ghost (and, I would say, Dickinson's) is a pervasive one nearly on par with Flaubert and Joyce in the fiction that has come after them. *Nearly*.

Contemporary British poetry is curiously and stubbornly sceptical about Whitman, probably because of how quintessentially American he is. Even recent and major poets like Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, though, fail to be an adequate parallel for the United Kingdom. Few poets writing and publishing now with Faber, Carcanet, Bloodaxe, Picador and Cape (or with other and, to my mind, better independent publishers like Seren, Nine Arches and especially Liverpool University's Pavilion Poetry series) take on Larkin and Hughes or other, earlier poets with the same passion as Americans grappling with Whitman and Dickinson. This has left the poetries of the country largely fractured. The optimistic take on that is that it shows a search for and celebration of individuality, making room for plenty of outlets for the avant-garde, spoken word and what is problematically called mainstream poetry to coexist. But, as I have tried to prove, too much of it falls flat. The scepticism towards the influence principle and the rise in popularity of poetry more widely (helped along by the number of university courses in Creative Writing and regular poetry nights) has meant all that poetry seeking individuality does not know how or where to begin anymore. Spoken word parodies

itself unintentionally and unconsciously, not able to break out of its own echo chambers of content and style; the avant-garde goes to great lengths to be unshackled by *anything* so that what is left is what happened with *Finnegans Wake*: an aesthetically beautiful work that is unsustainable in its purest form because its webs of meaning are largely accidental and, to the author, unimportant. Are these poetries? It depends on how rigidly you define poetry. For pragmatic reasons, my definition excludes them; otherwise, forms such as song lyrics or graffiti muddy the waters to the point of needing the definition to be nearly all-inclusive. And if that is someone else's definition of poetry, I have no criticism of it—it just needs to be adhered to. But because song lyrics are not the final form of the writing and the way it is meant to be experienced (as a song) and because spoken word is designed differently from what I would call poetry, which is meant for the page (but with consideration of the ear) and does not *literally* require an audio-visual experience for it to be complete, these seem like different art forms to me—each with its admirable and enjoyable qualities, just as I love music, film, television, sculptures or video games. This is, obviously, too big a topic for occasional meditations, but the push towards individuality within this fractured identity has shown that fewer poets have been inspired to look backwards in favor of looking laterally at their peers.

V

July 18th, 2019. KCRW's *Bookworm* podcast.

Michael Silverblatt: "You've spoken about the conqueror's method of writing a novel, which is all confrontation and plot and winning this or that, and you use the word 'proximity' to describe your method. Could you tell me more about writing a novel using the idea of proximity?"

Ocean Vuong: "Yes, yes. Thank you, Michael, for having me, first of all. I've always felt that there has to be a way to create without destruction—without disintegrating—and I think that it's no coincidence that two of the sectors of our human species that are dominated historically by men, war and literature, require destruction as a means to realize its success. And I wonder now, in the moment where we have more voices from different angles, from different genders and different intersections—there's an opportunity to recast, not to participate in the decrees that came before us but to question and interrogate the methods themselves. And I felt that proximity has all the tensions required for artmaking."

VI

"Proximity" is—not "might be"—a better version of the influence principle, which is problematic in its little ways if not mostly correct in sentiment. Harold Bloom read and reread more poetry and literature than I am likely to read in my lifetime, and I consider myself a serious and devoted (bordering on devotional) reader. Harold Bloom was not a poet, however. It was a gift bestowed upon certain people for Bloom and had its threshold guarded by daemons. A critic and reader who is not a writer can only understand so much of the influence principle, which ought to be considered the proximity principle instead (and maybe a better title for this essay would have been "The Anxiety of Proximity", but I am too stubborn to change it and would rather be associated with Shields than with Bloom). My battles with my greatest adversaries—Keats, first and foremost, but also Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Rossetti, Hopkins and Donne, of those in English—are often fraught with the tension that Bloom described. It feels like an agon; it requires friction. But there are also times of serenity that the poet experiences and that the critic cannot—war and peace, as it were. On a Monday, I may be writing in competition with Keats, like many of the sonnet-writing competitions in

which he participated during his lifetime, or duelling Ono no Komachi in the *tanka*. But on the following Tuesday, I am just as likely to be sitting by the fireplace in proximity with either poet; there are two sofas, and the window that looks out onto the street with all the dogwalkers is large enough for everyone.

I do not think anyone can just become a poet. If there is not a willingness to engage with context—to read wide and deeply, to imitate, to creatively misread another poet in a sort of war against them, to sit alongside the same poet and write in proximity—the poetry fails. It remains weighed down by cliché without the writer understanding why. In one of my favorite Bloom discussions, he is sitting with Melvyn Bragg and Jacqueline Rose to talk about Shakespeare on *In Our Time*. Bloom makes a case for the divorcing of literary studies from cultural studies because of the insistence of university professors teaching what he considers lesser Romantic poets *instead of* Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Rose rightly sees the danger in this and asks that, if that canon is to be expanded, these lesser poets must be taught *alongside* the canonical poets so that new readers understand what the canon has had to leave out. Here is the proximity principle at work in the realm of literary studies. Rather than Robert Lowell and Gwendolyn Brooks (both born in 1917) battling one another for a spot on the syllabus for a hypothetical, generic American Poetry module and Lowell winning for whatever supposed aesthetic reasons and Brooks being yet another marginalized poet of color, the two must be taught alongside each other—in proximity—so that students of poetry can ask questions about canonical omissions.

Applied to the writing of poetry, poets who publish or perform pieces that are written without some sort of context end up reading like incomplete or half-poems. We do not see what it is they are writing against or alongside, because no work has been done to understand what that context is. It is poetry in a vacuum, and it exposes all of the writer's personal idiosyncrasies and fears that inevitably lead to these kinds of unintentional schools of poetry

influenced by visual media (film and especially television) that have little regard for form or diction and are, at worst, attention-seeking and repulsive and, at best, simply simple.

VII

Ocean Vuong won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection with *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2017). Here is "Telemachus" from that collection:

Like any good son, I pull my father out
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, knuckles carving a trail
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees. I kneel beside him to see how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*
Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face
not mine—but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin

the faithful work of drowning.

Vuong's poetry is anything but simply simple. His collection, Denise Riley's *Say Something Back* (2016) and Vidyan Ravinthiran's *The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here* (2019) are examples of tireless poetry written in proximity that never settles for ordinariness or predictability. They are good guides, I think, for showing how poetic influence manifests smartly and effectively in contemporary poetry. In talking with many poet friends, the ones who do not read much classical poetry have anxieties about the lack of relevance of such poetries or else worry that the process of influence will make the contemporary work feel antiquated. To the first point: nonsense. Just about any writer that has ever been interviewed by an audience has been asked for advice about becoming a better writer, and just about every response has been a variation of "Read more." Maybe if someone were to read the same thing over and over, an issue of relevance would arise because of such a limited frame of reference. But someone who reads widely and often knows the importance of reading classical work in addition to reading contemporary work. There is no further argument that should need to be made as far as that goes. To the issue of influence potentially dating a writing style, this is something that must be fought through. In my earliest imitations, the diction and syntax were entirely antiquated. I had read Donne and Keats and thought that all poetry should sound like Donne and Keats. As a poet continues to write, though, they learn how to retain their voice while still engaging with the spirit of another's work. That spirit could manifest in the form or the tone or the subject matter, but none of it will look or sound antiquated with enough practice. Ravinthiran's collection of sonnets are a testament to that. Not a single one is a sing-song-y relic from the Early Modern era; they are not slavish to rhyme, to the position of the volta or to the specific depiction of unrequited love that first made the form popular in English. But his sonnets are truly sonnets by nature and show a strong understanding of the form and its

historical permutations. Vuong and Riley, similarly sharp and well-read writers, provide strong models for how contemporary poetry that engages with its literary context (Vuong reinvents Homer and Melville; Riley evokes Greek forerunners in "Pythia" and French forerunners in "Lines Starting with La Rouchefoucauld). Even Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young* (2019), which draws on inspiration from *Super Mario World* as a structural model, never succumbs to the temptation of remaining within its televisual framework and uses strong literary knowledge to elevate its material.

This, ultimately, is what I want to see and write more of. I buy as many poetry magazines and journals as I can afford and read what is available for free online, searching for writers who show some signs of wanting to challenge themselves and are not so naturally sceptical of their classical influences—who explore those relationships instead of keeping them at a distance and using allusion without finding the right context for it. For better or worse, I cannot read or write anymore without thinking about work in relation to other work. But this is also how language and memory function. You cannot effectively communicate verbally without knowing a word's relation to another word just as a memory needs context in order to be understood. How people can come to poetry and not be interested in these things and, instead, use it as a means of social change or a simple form of entertainment or a selfish, unempathetic means of expressing oneself that they thrust upon a reader with the expectation of receiving some validation—these are things I will never understand.

VIII

My guide and I came on that hidden road
to make our way back into the bright world;
and with no care for any rest, we climbed—
he first, I following—until I saw,
through a round opening, some of those things
of beauty Heaven bears. It was from there

that we emerged, to see—once more—the stars.

Canto XXXIV, 133-139

IX

Bloom said, "I don't necessarily think [poetry] makes you a better human being, but I think it does make you a better teacher." I disagree. I think better humans are a result of better teachers and, if the poet and the reader are willing, poetry can accomplish both.

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