

Writing the Aerodynamics of Hunger

by

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ABSTRACT

Raised on card-catalogues, then expected to save the world with microchips, there is a generation that was left straddling two millennia. Often lumped in with the X'ers or Millennials, this generation didn't grow up with or without technology, technology grew up with them. The poems in *The Aerodynamics of Hunger* strike a balance between the easy-going materialism of the 90's and our current culture of instant gratification, between the tendency to treat science like a God and prescribe God like science. These poems see straight through the world of hyper-sex and click-bait, yet they admit their complicity in its creation and distribution. They watch the world become connected on a new level, but testify to the resulting struggle of place one's self in relation to something, anything. The burden is great, but journeying through it is an undeniable pleasure.

DEDICATION

For Laura Katherine Bassett: I love you to the moon and back – just like the sunshine.

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Writing The Aerodynamics of Hunger

While building my reading list for comprehensive exams last year, I had an experience I never thought I would enjoy. My wife and I were attending a concert and the opening act was a D.J. playing his set. Often House-Music is enough to make me want to stop listening to any song with a ‘remix’ appendage attached to it; the seemingly simple blend of beats, popular music, and loops has always, for me, come off as unoriginal – if not down-right thievery.

As the tone ancillary to this paragraph might lead you to believe, the guy killed it. But it wasn’t just that he was good at mixing sound; he read the crowd. He encouraged participation. He mixed together Bessie Smith’s vocals with Tupac’s beats and Led Zeppelin’s melody. He never stopped moving for 55 minutes. He made 3 mistakes and pushed on with a fuck-it embarrassment usually reserved for cable-news anchors and stand-up comedians. Watching this D.J. work, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the omnipresent notion of consuming your craft to perfect it. This D.J. was good because he was an audiophile. He didn’t hear genres of music - he just heard music. I realized then (and now), after watching that D.J., why I felt the compulsion to build such a highly ambitious reading list. In one of my first graduate-level workshops I remember the professor saying, “You don’t read poetry for inspiration. Those poems have been written. We must read other things and find the poems in them to share with the world.” Will I find a poem reading *World Order*, by Henry Kissinger? I think so. Will there be a sonnet sequence that comes from reading *Blood Meridian*? It’s already in the works. Do most poets my age want to read *The Inferno*? Probably not, but I know it’s important, and I know that if I actually study it, understand its brilliance, it will make me a better writer

and teacher of poetry. My list was long – 45 books – but I believe it was necessary. I didn't get to every single book on my list, and I suspect that many of us don't. But I believe it is the attempt, or even the intention, to read as much as possible is what allows us as writers to capture and share the moments we hold dearest.

That night at the concert, the D.J.'s equipment came in four parts: two turntables, one mixing board, and one laptop. What's even more amazing is that he was filling-in due to a last minute request, and it wasn't even his equipment. In the same way, I want to be able to walk into a room, get handed a book, and be able to relate it to ten other books that aren't in the room. I want to read a peer's poem and notice the sound and feel of what is happening in the present while still recognizing the poem's influences and intended audience. I am proud that my book-list spans centuries, continents, and cultures, because that's exactly what I want my writing to do. I did not know many of the songs the D.J. used that night, but I know that something primordial in me responded to the rhythm of the moment, and in that way, it was just like the first time I fell in love with a poem. The story of when and how I came to my synthesis my poetry in light of what I've read is just that: a story. There has been no singular epiphany for my writing, but rather a series of moments that has, and continues to, lead me to the present.

Sadly, we all know that poetry does not reach the audience it once did. Many of today's students spend a week, maybe two, on the genre. When I was in high school, I remember covering poetry for a brief span of only one of my four years there. Still, it would leave an indelible impression on me that I would not discover until much later. The first poem I remember falling in love with was Edwin Arlington Robinson's, "Richard Cory". Maybe this poem stuck with me because I volunteered to read it aloud,

but when Mrs. Coker explained how it followed iambic pentameter, when she pointed out how the poem alternated rhyming every other line, I knew that something about this medium of art was going to be lodged inside of me for a long time. Up until that point I had always been proud of my ability to write. I remember many nights at the kitchen table, my father going over an essay or book report with his heavy, red fountain pen. The privilege of having an attorney as a father was two-fold to my future decision to be a poet, and writer in general. The first was the insistence on the connection of opinions and observations to the facts you presenting. Simply asking myself the question, “What makes you say that,” quickly became a mantra that weaved itself into my writing. The second advantage was the inherent obligation to consider the alternative possibilities of any given statement or situation. Now I can think back on these instances and see a purely logical exercise in word play, but I also know that they helped me to understand that tense, tone, and timing were skills to be harnessed as well as scrutinized. It also helped that my father used to sneak the likes of Metallica and The Rolling Stones records into my brother and I’s listening regimen. Music and literature were the two things my parents never filtered and always seemed happy to acquire for us. Even before “Richard Cory”, I somehow sensed my mind was ready to absorb the fantastic, sometimes ludicrous, assertions of the written word. Some of my favorite books as a child were Shel Silverstein’s collections of poetry, and later, anything considered *banned* or controversial. Having a brother that seemed to inhale literature became a great motivation to succeed in my own writing, and the sense of competition is one I still thrive on.

As a teenager, I wrote plenty of angst-ridden, ungodly cryptic poetry. I attribute a large amount of this work to the music I was listening to at the time. Known as ‘Emo’,

the sounds of my youth seemed intent on exorcising the demons of puberty in anyway possible, but they mostly stuck to over-the-top lyrics and broken-hearted guitars. Once I moved way from home, my creative energy began to lay dormant. In my undergraduate years, I changed majors five times; on an endless quest to discover exactly what it was that would stir me to action, I continually reflected on my father's advice: "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life." I started college as a Photojournalism major, moved to Journalism, and then Electronic-Media & Communications quickly followed by History. All of these majors involved some form of reportage that I would enjoy for a short period of time, but I always found myself dissatisfied with limitations presented by each of them. AP Style was one of the most un-creative forms of writing I had ever encountered. History required a certain austere decorum that, at times, I felt was too serious for it's own good and left little room for speculation without massive amounts of previously mediated material.

Finally, my advisor asked me to take some time and reflect on what all of these different paths might have in common that kept drawing me to them. Around that same time, I picked up an old book I had bought when I was about 14-years-old: *The Collected Works of Emily Dickinson*. It was one of those Barnes & Nobel special editions, leather-bound with gilded edges, that attempted to look as if had been printed when Ms. Dickinson was still alive – I would later realize just how highly ironic this was. The attached ribbon bookmark was still holding a place about halfway through the section titled, of course, "Love". The poem that awaited me is still one of my favorites: "If you were coming in the fall..." Here, unlike with "Richard Cory", I saw rhythm and rhyme subverted, if only slightly. I remember counting out the meter out on my dorm-room desk

like I was relearning my basic percussion exercises on a drum-pad. Though I didn't know it, I discovered slant rhyme by reading the poem aloud, annunciating with what I can only imagine were some very ridiculous twists of the tongue. Try and make "year" and "drawer" sound the same and you'll see what I mean. But it was not just the form that enamored me, and landing on this specific poem still seems akin to what some of my evangelical friends used to call Bible-Roulette – the idea that you can open to any page and find exactly what it was you were looking for. The apprehension of the poem spoke to me in a way no school counselor could, and dramatic as it sounds, in that moment I knew that my fear was rooting in being "ignorant of the length / of time's uncertain wing" (Dickinson 86). I had no idea what my future was going to hold because I felt inept with my ability to choose a path to follow. Yet somehow it had been staring me in the face all along. Then and there I realized that I found the most pleasure in doing what I was doing at that very moment. Reading, analyzing, and being inspired by a text were the reasons I continued to switch my majors over and over again. It wasn't that I didn't have the patience for one specific thing; it was that I had an insatiable appetite to take in as much as possible and then share it. I changed my major one last time.

At first, I fell in love with the idea of Creative Non-Fiction. Part of me still wanted to be a journalist, and here was field that was wide open for experimentation – unlike the restrictive AP style of my earlier days. But I ran out of material rather quickly. It seemed that my life was not yet interesting enough for memoir. Then, during the summer of 2010, in an effort to get my fiction courses out of the way quickly, I attended a mini-semester course on Short Stories & Flash Fiction in the Texas hill-country. The professor teaching that course has since done more for me as a writer and mentor than I

could have ever predicted all those years ago. John Poch is the reason I can now even consider myself a poet. He noticed that I reveled in the challenge of writing flash-fiction and encourage me take a poetry course with him the following fall semester. Exhilarated by this attention, that day I wrote two of my very first, and very bad poems. One was about a girl I was taking the class with who wouldn't give me the time of day; the other was about being drunk in the hill-country. Dr. Poch humored me that evening, and I can still remember his cigar smoke overtaking our small cloud of second hand cigarette smoke as he asked to see what I had been writing. I showed him my poems. He laughed and said to give up on the girl, and to make sure I registered for Introduction to Poetry.

I would be lying if I did not disclose that my expectations for what a poetry class would look like lay somewhere between Dead Poets Society and the more earnest moments Good Will Hunting. In reality, Dr. Poch stressed formalism over free verse. We wrote villanelles and sestinas before we wrote about the people who broke our heart. Much more recently, a friend of mine made the observation that writing in forms is like weightlifting, writing free verse is like playing the sport. I see now that I was lucky to have been forced to learn the formal techniques at such an early stage in my poetry. Scanning lines revealed another level of complexity that I had never even knew existed, and suddenly the art of writing a poem was as much an act of sharing an aesthetic as it was literal craft. This point was made clear during a lesson on W.B. Yeats's poem, "Adam's Curse". Dr. Poch show us how when you scanned the line, "Our stitching and unstitching has been naught", you could tangibly see how Yeats's had sonically teased apart the iambic pentameter (Yeats 84). But at the same time, the ars-poetical argument being made by the speaker of the poem is one that struck me as necessary, if not at first

confusing. The best language in a poem is often both surprising and somehow obvious, like the first time you see a church steeple among skyscrapers: of course there are churches, you just never pictured one in this setting, and now that you see it, it makes total sense. And yet if anything were to replace that church it wouldn't fit. Yes, we could try and replace it with a structure that's even more initially startling, say a large carnival ride, but then that would become the focal-point instead of the skyline itself. Many of my early poems neglected this lesson and I often tried to capture images in a way that was unique but obvious only to me. The result became workshops where the group became so enamored with an image and not in a good way) that the larger context I thought I was getting across got lost. This all changed on the day I began reading Matthew Roth's collection, *Bird Silence*.

Dr. Poch had assigned the book because of how Roth bends the rules on a number of formal structures while still maintaining their integrity. But what drew me in was discovering poems like "Kansas" and "The Fall" were actually formal and I had been completely unable to recognize that they were a villanelle and sonnet respectively. Roth's use of colloquial language startled me out of an unconscious pattern of making my formal poems sound like they were actually written in the 19th century. Where or how I acquired that notion, I still don't know, but breaking from it was one of the most important moments in my poetry. When we were given the assignment to write a sonnet, I wrote what would be my first ever published poems, "Why It's Easier to Be an Atheist (In the Dark)". It was heavily inspired by both "Adam's Curse" and "The Fall", each of which meditates on the repercussions of original-sin, weighing them against the benefits of gaining a consciousness of the self, i.e. knowledge. Yeats had written that, "To be born

woman is to know— / Although they do not talk of it at school— / That we must labour to be beautiful.” while Roth writes of a time, “before the scent of sin, / before his own body began to rise, / when we were all naked, merely waders in / the unconsummated waters of paradise.” (Yeats 84; Roth 36). This led me to ask the question, how could God exist before the creation story, which of course begins in with the creation of light. The more I puzzled this thought out, I began to create a set of images of things that typically manifest themselves at night: crickets chirping, lightning bugs, bad behavior, etc. I wanted to marry these images with religious symbols from my upbringing and landed on words like incense or tablet, and phrases like, “the meek shall inherit the earth”. The making of a list, what I have affectionately come to refer to as a brain-dump, allowed me to see the map of my poems in a way that had been lacking. Simultaneously, having to follow the sonnet form helped me to plug in the various pieces of what I had written into a proven structure. The more and more I played with the order of stanzas and lines, the more I came to see the truth behind Yeats’s statement that “to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these, and yet / Be thought an idler.” (Yeats 84). This was the first time I had multiple drafts of a singular work, and I couldn’t believe how much my opinion changed each time I rewrote poem. “Why It’s Easier to Be an Atheist (In the Dark)” didn’t make it into my first manuscript, and yet I know now that this is ok. It is seven years old at this point, and very little of what I was writing then ever made it past the scribblings of a yellow legal pad. However, this is not to say that I can’t still see elements of *Bird Silence* in the poetry I write today. And while we studied Roth for his formal technique, I came to treasure this book because of how some many of the

seemingly unrelated trains of thought painted a bigger picture of the poet's vision of the world.

In the poem, "Lucky Day", Roth produces a series of alternating thoughts, putting the reader of the poem in the mindset of a domestic house cat and its human owner. "There is a cat who picks stocks / with this part of terrible forethought. / Or you're perfectly human // and can't stop thinking / like a cat." (Roth 6). While a reader can follow the instructions, the otherworldly sense they create swings the mind at the stanza break for a refreshing twist of logic. In my poem, "Unspeakable Mouthful", I borrow from Roth the abrupt, yet somehow feasible, transition of realities. The poem is about the experience of the visceral envy of an underclass protagonist who is trying to reconcile his desire for success with his hatred of greed. "I poll the corners of passing mouths / discovering an upward trend / fueled by prayer-small flames for a crash: // ...but secretly we all want / to be the market barely blinking / when _____ & Sons acquires / another everything." But while "Lucky Day" draws the reader along with a set of ludicrously wonderful instructions, the other poem I most admire from *Bird Silence* is "How Memory Works". The opening of the poem uses simple, yet startling images to draw the reader in to what will become a wholly bizarre narrative. "One giant slab of morning light / crashes down the narrow street / like a whale struck in a shipping lane." (Roth 11). Notice the simplicity of these first three lines. There is no word that is more than eight letters long or that contains more than two syllables, yet you can't help but feel the weight of light crashing on the pavement. This time, Roth is able to heighten the moment not by changing realities, but by furthering the image throughout the rest of the poem. The light itself actually becomes like a dead whale and is dissected in front of the speaker of the

poem. We find it contains, “the white tablecloth / bruised with wine, the two a.m. feeding, / the knife and gun, brown nut of sleep.” (Roth 11). Light itself becomes memory, both of which affect our ability to recognize and see the world we inhabit. Without either of these things, Roth argues, we would not be able to draw the parallelisms that poetry relies on so fundamentally.

And yet Roth understands that memory is a fleeting thing. The poem concludes once the light has been examined and carted away. “So I go, without / thinking even to touch its dim remainders /lying there on the concrete like twilight - / not thinking until now, two weeks hence, / standing here in the predawn rain, / I look down and spy something / glinting off my black boots / like a tiny flower of daylight, / which it is.” (Roth 11). The tiny fragment reveals itself to be a portion of the whole, and like the wine-bruised table cloth, opens the door to part of a larger narrative. A wonderful example of surreal imagery used to articulate on the reliability of human memory, or lack there of, “How Memory Works” became a template for what I would consider one of my most ‘out-there’ poems. “Your Son Cursed at the Troop Meeting – Knife Revoked” started as an effort to see my own childhood through the eyes of my father, but it eventually became an exploration of the way the most mundane language can actually make all the difference for given situation. The poem opens by implicating the reader has made similar mistakes. “You’ve done this before, but finished only / so you might double check your speech. Was at the dishwasher or the washing machine”. Then the word choices escalate: “spayed or neutered... dancer or *dancer*?” and the reader is reminded, “Many items perform similar occupations on different objects.” A series of frustrating and violent moments follow this reminder, all of which have roots in a series of peculiar

events from my childhood where the consequences of an action and my good intentions intention butted heads. I chose to end the poem with profanity for two reasons. The first is simply the humor of the obvious. “Intentions // Can be a real mother-fucker” is the heart of what the poem is trying to get at, and yet it resists it until the very end. Second, I think the turning point for the way many parents talk to their children, mine included, occurs when a child uses profanity in the proper context for the first time. There is a fresh sense of there being a danger regarding the language that can be used, and it becomes exposed on newly personal level.

By the time I finished my second poetry workshop, I was confident that an MFA was the next step I wanted to take in my academic career. Dr. Poch offered me the chance to design an independent study for myself, and began to include me in the sorting manuscripts for various contests and the organizing of letterpress lab Texas Tech had recently founded. I would later learn that these experiences were as important as the books I’ve read and the poet’s I’ve studied and met. My final year as an undergraduate showed me how the generation of literature in all its forms was never a solitary craft. It taught me that writing was an eco-system, a communal act that both served and relied on its audience. In my independent study Dr. Poch introduced me to Philip Larkin and Carl Sandburg, not because they were his favorite poets, but because he had taken the time to consider the direction of my writing and poets most likely to inspire me to continue to find my own voice. Poems like, “This Be the Verse”, helped me emulate Larkin’s irreverent and grumpy tone, his cynically optimistic and playful language. “High Windows” helped to understand it was ok to write about the personal and upsetting observations I was making in the world around me as long as pushed past the temptation

to pose them as rhetoric. Larkin was also an inspiration because of his evolution from strict formal rhyme and verse to a more open and flexible slant-rhyme style that would help to lessen the heavy-handed gestures I was often making. In the ending of “High Windows”, Larkin’s choice to exit on a literal, pastoral image of the sun reflecting off the glass, “And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.” pulls the reader back from the anger expressed early on in the poem (Larkin 146). In my own poem, “Blind Rage”, I use the same tactic throughout the entirety of the poem, alternating between two lines that begin, “When I am angry...” and then pulling back to break the expectation of a list poem, and like Larkin, the final image is one that transports the speaker and the reader into a broader history that seems comforting in its ability to continue with or without us.

In the wake of Larkin, the poetry of Carl Sandburg became like a deep-breath for my soul. “Fog” was the first poem of Sandburg’s that stopped me in my tracks. Only spanning six short lines, it seemed to capture both the minimalism that I was trying bring to my own work, while holding on to a broader experience that any reader may have in the course of their life. When reflecting on my poem, “Progression is a Gift”, the influence is uncanny. Sandburg wrote, “The fog comes / on little cat feet. // It sits looking / over harbor and city / on silent haunches / and then moves on.” (Sandburg 39). But it wasn’t until my wife and I actually adopted a cat years later that the movement of the cat compared to the movement of the fog would actually sink in. I witnessed first hand the irritating and immovable nature of a cat once it has found a spot to claim, and at the same time I understood how Sandburg’s choice to have the fog dissipate as quickly as it came was the perfect conflation of distinctly different, yet nearly inexplicably similar

experiences. “Progression is a Gift” uses the exact same strategy when it opens, “Somewhere night is always dying like a rabbit, / Nameless and full of promise the color of concrete stain.” The rabbit becomes both the moon and road kill, so that when the reader arrives at the closing couplet, “You wake up, / can still see the moon.” they’re given the glimpse of how it feels to comfortably surrender to the consequences of life’s uncontrollable elements. At the end of my independent study I felt that I had come further as a poet in that short time than in all the years leading up to it. As a final gift, Dr. Poch gave me a copy of Austin Hummell’s collection, *Poppy*, and I like so many things in the life of a writer, the small gesture contained a larger lesson.

“Obsession for the Ocelots” could be the funniest poem you’ve never read. It begins with the epigraph, “Dallas Zoo researchers, looking for ways to save the ocelot by encouraging the endangered cats to breed, have found a scent that drives them wild — Calvin Klein’s Obsession for Men. (CNN)” (Hummell 17). By presenting us with this fact before we even get to the poem, Hummell and the poem itself must now latch on to it for dear life. The language and message of the poem suddenly hinges upon what was presented before it even began. The decision to plot the contextual lens through which a poem should be read is not one we should take lightly, and while I admire Hummell’s strategy, it is something I have only recently been able to emulate with confidence. Last month I was listening to an NPR Report on concerning the state of race relations in America. Highlighting the Civil Rights struggle in the state of Alabama during the 1960’s, the reporter closed with an image that both announced the intention of progress while encapsulating the irony of the current state of the American South. The epigraph reads, “The State of Mississippi erected a historical marker where Emmett Till’s body

was discovered in the Tallahatchie River. Today the marker is riddled with bullet holes.” The poem that follows, entitled “American Tourniquets”, is wholly dependent on the unspoken hypocrisy presented in the epigraph. Just like Hummell’s ocelots shouldn’t be attracted to the most manufactured and commercial of scents, neither should the Bible-Belt be the well-spring of hatred that it all too often pigeon-holes itself into. And yet here was that image, and I couldn’t deny it. So when I write the closing of the poem with the notion that, “the Bible / Belt keeps getting tighter and tighter, / Which makes sense when you’re trying to stop the bleeding.” I am tying the overarching message to a fact that only vaguely presents itself in the poem. The strategy of allowing the title or epigraph to carry the weight of a poem was not a novelty, but I knew it was still just one of the many tricks I was to learn as I moved forward in my art.

Three weeks after I graduated from Texas Tech, I married my wife and best friend. I decided to delay my applications to MFA programs and focus on providing a stable foundation for the first years of my marriage. What would amount to one-year sabbatical from my poetry became one of the most positively transformative experiences for the future of my writing. I kept my contacts with Dr. Poch and continued to read, though the books weren’t often poetry. That year I began working as a garage-door repairman, a huge change from the seven years I’d spent as a barista at the local Starbucks. My new job forced me to learn an entirely different craft, jargon, and mind-set than I had been used to for so many years. I saw a side of the world I had never seen before, and it wasn’t always pretty. Spending the better part of a year inside other peoples garages also gave me a lot of time to reflect on what we choose to keep and why, and I am now convinced that state of a person’s garage is a hidden portal into the human

psyche. But garage doors are far from glamorous, and this dirty work also served to remind me just how much of a privilege it is to be in the world of academia. When I received a call from ASU letting me know I have been accepted to the MFA program, I knew the only thing I was going to miss was the ability to justify having a giant pick up truck.

One of the first courses I took at ASU was Alberto Ríos's Magical Realist Fiction class. As someone who had been away from writing for a generous portion of time, the odd and surprising genre was exactly what I needed to get the creative juices flowing again. I fell in love with every single thing we read, from Borges to Gogol, but the story that continues to stay with me is Gabrielle Garcia Marquez's, "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings". The lesson I learned here was not really of literary technique, but one of literary appreciation. All those years ago in the Texas hill country, Dr. Poch had a sign the exact same story for our fiction class. This was the moment that I realized there are some works that speak to all people across the vast swath of the writing world. The class also introduced me to the technique of erasure or found poetry. What seemed like such an obvious method of writing was revelatory for me. As writers we're always taking in the language of the world around us, and after a period of digestion of these facts, we unconsciously re-report what we've encountered. What this method encouraged in my writing was the move to actively filter a moment or text as I was experiencing it. This eventually led to me writing the poem, "We Watched T.V. All Day", which is based around a series of statements from different newsfeeds during the initial hours of the September 11 attacks. I think it is fitting that this poem developed out of a magical realist technique. There're still moments when I re-watch the live feed, and just like the

news anchors, I still can't believe it's actually happening. I tried to capture that incredulous train of thought in the break between the first and second stanza. "Well there's no blaming this on plain transmit— // —ors anymore Cleary that plane aimed". If you go back and watch those newsfeeds, the innocence of the anchors is truly heartbreaking. Many think it is probably just a small Cessna like aircraft, others assume pilot or navigational errors, and isn't in until they actually witness the second plane hitting the north tower that they actually begin coming to terms with what is happening. All of this is not unlike Coleridge's idea of the willful suspension of disbelief, and just like the characters of Marquez's story, we couldn't believe it until we got to see it for ourselves.

The spectrum of what I began to read once I entered the MFA program was also broadened as much by the influence of my peers as it was my professors. The two poets that were first gifted to me by upper-classmen were Mark Strand and C.K. Williams. Again, I was learning and immersing myself in the sense of community that writing always brings to the table. Strand's final collection was actually my first encounter with the poet. These densely packed, narrative, and dare I say prose poems, became a model for several of the poems in my manuscript. In the poem, "The Students of the Ineffable", the situation the speaker of the poem is placed in is there only so that the dialogue at the end of the poem can exist in the proper context. Up to this point in my own writing, I had always started poems with what I believed to be a strong line, and I would write the rest of the poem in the context of that first line. Strand's work showed me how sometimes we can know the destination of a poem before we know how we're going to get there. "We Should Measure Extinctions in Attention Spans" is a poem that I've been working on

since my first days of poetry workshop at Texas Tech. Inspired by a trip to the museum with my nephew, who at the time was just my girlfriend's nephew, I always knew I wanted the poem to end with the idea of an uncomfortable reprimand. The problems face by early drafts of the poem lay in the fact that I never felt like I had the agency to embody the voice of a parental figure. Eventually, I realized that I could gain this agency by giving it to myself via another speaker in the poem, while at the same time addressing this uncomfortable feeling firsthand. The stanza reads, "His parents asked me not to / Let him wander through the young / Scientist's store, but I can't help / Noticing the explosion of plastic / Toys promising to help explore / The universe safely." By addressing the issue head on I was able to finally close the poem with the oddly vague, yet seemingly permanent proclamation, "because it's dead / doesn't mean we get to keep it." In the same way, one of the speakers in Strand's poem declares in the final line, "we are only passing through, the stars will return." (Strand 24).

While Strand would help me to begin pinning down some of my more nebulous poems, C.K. Williams collection, *Repair*, became a guide on how to capture small moments packed with a large truth. In "Last Things", Williams tells the story of finding a photograph of a friend's dead son. The friend, a photographer, has "put a book together to commemorate his son; / near the end, there's a picture taken the day before the son died; / the caption says: "This is the last photo of Alex.""" And yet as readers we know that the other photograph exists, taken "the instant after his death, / his glasses still on, a drop of blood caught at his mouth." The sense of guilt is transferred from Williams to the reader and he uses this fact to help deepen and then distance us when he writes, "if you're reading [this], you'll know my friend pardoned me." While this is wonderful for the

speaker of the poem, we ourselves were never pardoned, even though we can't look away. As readers we become like the father at the end of the poem whose "finger, surely of its own accord, convulsed the shutter", capturing a moment that is precious and even though it's not our own (Williams 56).

In my poem, "Bouquet of Parenthesis", I use a similar narrative strategy to lead the reader to a moment of discovering a picture that I wish I hadn't. But unlike Williams, instead of trying to rectify my own guilt I attempt to give it to the reader of the poem directly when I write, "for now, reader, it's yours. // Cherish it, / Because I don't / Want to." But just like the epigraph, a quote from Salinger gifting his readers with a "bouquet of early-blooming parentheses", the intention is entertaining but ultimately fruitless. The experience is mine alone, and while I can share it there is no way to actually rid myself of it.

During the summer of my first year in the MFA program, I was lucky enough to be awarded a spot at the Centrum conference in Port Townsend. While I was there I would be introduced to two poets who would change the course of my writing – one in person, and one on the page. The first poet was the teacher leading our workshop, Erin Belieu. Her passion for poetry seemed to be rooted in something different than I had experienced up to that point, and her writing seemed to fly in the face of what I had been taught was or wasn't acceptable to do in my own poetry. From her newest collection, *Slant Six*, I have taken the most inspiration from her two poems, "Ars Poetica for the Future" and "Poem of Philosophical and Parental Conundrums Written in an Election Year". "Ars Poetica for the Future" broke the rule of not addressing the idea poetry and poems themselves inside your writing. There still part of me that understands how doing

this can cheapen the intent of a poem by reminding the reader that they're merely reading a poem and not actually a part of the experience, and yet I also know that my own struggles with poetry have been some of the most defining moments of my own life. When it's done well, the reminder of the art within the artwork itself can be a powerful experience in which the audience in the artist can, in a sense, switch places. When Belieu writes, "art is still our only flying car" or "I imagine digging a series of small / holes, burying poems and Ziploc // baggies. I imagine them as baby teeth / knocked from the present's mouth", she places us amidst her own hopes and fears for the future of poetry itself (Belieu 1). If that is not a moment that deserves sharing, I don't know what is. The second poem, "Poem of Philosophical and Parental Conundrums Written in an Election Year", confronted an even bigger taboo, the idea of poetry as rhetoric. One of the earliest poems I ever wrote sparked a discussion I will never forget. The poem was about the invasion of Iraq, and in my early years as a writer, I was not altogether deft at hiding my anger. The lead to the conclusions that the main issue with the poem was that it prescribed a specific and unimaginative solution to the problem. I realize now that this is what was meant by the idea of poetry not being rhetoric, but for a long time I strayed away from confronting political issues for fear that I would betray the trust of the reader. Belieu's poem helped me to understand that you if expose the reader to your train of thought, and like any good rhetorician, give a fair shake to the other side, that you can impart your view without prescribing it. While studying in Port Townsend and I wrote my poem, "Two Push Notifications" about moving beyond this struggle in my own writing. The date was July 18th, 2014, and the only two alerts I received on my phone where got a Malaysian airlines flight had been shot down over Ukraine, and that Israel

had decided to moving to Gaza yet again. The combination of purely horrific surprise and disappointment at the maddening familiar became the perfect foil for poem dealing with political issues. I am not abandoning the advice of my mentors, nor am I using anyone of misleading me. I don't know if there is away that I could've learned this lesson without the fear that turned into respect, and the respect that somehow turned into understanding.

Erin introduced me to the poet who would become one of my spirit animals, Mark Bibbins. Fresh off the heels of my poetry as rhetoric revelation, Bibbins' collections, *They Don't Kill You Because They're Hungry*, *The Kill You Because They're Full*, and *The Dance of No Hard Feelings*, quickly became the new gospel for my writing. His poem, "I Can Explain", explores the hypocrisy of the American zeitgeist's attitude post-9/11. The poem opens, "We were upset /after the demons crashed our planes into us / we started hearing a lot about how they do things /in Afghanistan because that was one / of the places we were supposed to want to kill". The poem refuses punctuation and yet all of the lines still flow in to one another in a way that makes perfect syntactical sense as you move along the poem. But the choice not to use punctuation also has another function in the poem. Bibbins uses the body of the poem to talk about a grotesque game of polo played with the head of a goat in parts of Afghanistan, and contrast it with the fact that football is played using an object made from the skin of a pig. He writes, "and then of course here we like football // !pigskin!", and this becomes the only instance of punctuation in the poem (Bibbins, "They Don't Kill" 29). Not only does pigskin look like it's going between the uprights of a football field - a very nice visual moment and the poem - it serves to emphasize our own double standards when it comes to what is and isn't grotesque. In my own poem, "I Promise, We Would Have Broken the Internet", I

have attempted to highlight the same sort of disgusting observation that should be so obvious to so many people. The poem is about those people who jumped from the twin towers during the 9/11 attacks, and started as I thought that I shared with my wife several months ago, mainly that I was very thankful camera phones did not exist when 9/11 happened. As much as we like to think of ourselves as a Society of resilient and proper people, I know that we could not have helped ourselves from zooming in on the final moments of someone else's life. Just like the freakish game of polo compared to an average game of football in Bibbins' work, my poems attempt to show how the acceleration of our culture has outpaced our ability to process our place in it. Voyeurism becomes something that is not a negative trait, but an inherent part of our nature as a curious species. When I write, "The sound of flesh screaming into pavement / Would have made it to the cloud / Quicker than our thoughts and prayers." the observation is not one of judgment, rather it is a sort of surrender to the inevitable expectations I have for the conscious mind in an over-connected society.

By chance, that same summer I would purchase Michael Dickman's collection, *Flies*. I had often heard the discussion regarding the idea of bringing sentiment to a poem without being sentimental. This was another boundary I was nervous to try and bridge in my own writing, but poems like "Dead Brother Superhero" help me begin to mine some of the more delicate and troubling moments from my childhood. Later that year, I would read Valerie Bandura's, *Freak Show*, and finally gain the confidence to begin writing about my childhood experiences. Like Dickman and Bandura, I too have a sibling with a history of mental illness. There're poems allowed me to see past the embarrassment and the guilt so that I could get to the moment of honesty and heartache without feeling like I

had sold out my brother. My poem, “Things We Pop”, is heavily influenced by both of these writers. What is essentially a microcosm of my brother and I’s history, the poem attempts to mediate between a justifiable anger and my own knowledge that he is sick and away but I can’t understand. The poem ends with the admission of my inability to sympathize with him, even via a false memory. Unable to even choose the color of the memory, I close the poem, “I’m debating between my wedding colors / he walked out of, the sky after sunset / on the evening of our independence, / or the pastel shades of his daily medication / going through the garbage disposal.” I have also written several other poems dealing with the way we all perceive history of our individual childhood experiences. One is a reflection on the patience of my mother, who cared for me through years of a mysterious illness. Another is a poem about the superstitious rituals my wife used to keep in an effort to ensure her family’s safety. These poems are indicative of a new style that I’ve taken on in my writing. Over the course of my MFA program I have come to realize that there is nothing that is off limits from being written about, rather it is our own limitations as writers that either stop us or push us forward in the end.

While it is easy to hunker down in one’s own principals, writing has taught me the level of humility I think maybe reserved for liberal theologians and honest lawyers. In compiling the books for this essay, I unknowingly treated myself to a wonderful experience. As someone who is constantly finding new things to read, I leave many small but important portions of what I’ve read behind. When I take the time to go back and rediscover those books, poems, or poets who brought me to the place I currently am, an old bookmark often greets me. This weekend, as I feverishly flipped through stacks and stacks of books, I found pieces of my trip to France, a Polaroid of my wife before she

was my wife, a note of encouragement from a friend I'd almost forgotten. Every single one of these moments deserves a poem; I can only hope that I am brave enough to write them.

Recently, my mantra for writing has attached itself to a quote I recently discovered by Rilke. "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for the Creator, there is no poverty." (Rilke 254). The task of justifying my own choices, both in my work and my reading material, has shown me just how wealthy I am in terms of the literature I've been able to consume in my lifetime. There's so many books still left in a stack just to the right of my laptop, and none of them is less important do any of the books discussed above. Another way I think about this can be framed with my obsession over I grandfather's part in the D-Day invasion. I was fortunate enough to receive a grant from the Piper Center that allowed me to retrace his steps through Europe. In preparation for my journey I read a multitude of books written by authors who have experienced war first-hand. From Wilfred Owen to Günter Grass, I began to notice a pattern emerging. A pattern that I think speaks to the larger human experience: we cannot escape the devastation we create, but what we can do is frame that experience in a way that helps not just ourselves but others. This is why I write poetry. This is why we all write poetry.

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