

TREE SURGEON: POEMS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education – Doctor of Philosophy

2024

ABSTRACT

In this poetry manuscript, I posit a few questions that reverberate throughout the poems: How have I formed intimacies and what are those variations? How have I come to recognize connection across persons, places, moments, and things – where does the distance grow, where does it subside? These questions are particularly important because we are still negotiating and defining topics of intimacy and distance. The variations of intimacy, the ways we come to believe we belong or connect are concepts that still falter through us, we are compiling language for these moments, reinventing the relational – how we might be with one another. This redefining is compounded when we think of how a global pandemic shattered and changed our notions of connection and intimacy. A pandemic that created circumstances for distance to prosper within us, for us to learn what technology might provide us and to in turn yearn for forms of connection we didn't think we needed as much as we know we do now. Further, this poetry manuscript borrows methodologically from poetic inquiry (Galvin & Prendergast, (2016) and arts-based research methodologies (Leavy, 2015). Particularly, it engages with *vox identitatis*, or the creation of poems exploring self and identity (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016).

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for patrick, forever

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful without measure to each person I learned with throughout this journey and to each person who listened or supported me through all the tiny moments that make up our days. I am more because of our conversations and because of each of your unique insights. I am more because of a smile you gave me passing in the hallway, a hello or nod on a bad day, a comment you wrote on a paper, or an idea you shared in class.

I am beyond grateful to my family. My mother, Antoinette Dean – for the way she notices the world and maintains an ethos of curiosity, wonder, and questioning. Always for her continued love and support, especially when I wasn't sure I could write another word. For my father, Hays Dean – who is no longer here in this world – for how he supported me into the unknown of my dreams and how he looked at the ecology of being from the perspective of trees. To my brothers, Todd Dean and Chad Miller, my aunts, uncles, cousins – who are too many to name – you each made an impact on this writing and the person I am becoming.

To Janine Certo – this work could not exist without you and your unwavering belief. I am so glad I got to meet you in this life and so happy we get to continue writing together. You inspire me.

To Vaughn W. M. Watons, Joanne Marciano, Sandro Barros, Lynn Fendler, Divya Victor, and every professor who brought all that they are into their teaching and who gave me a piece of another world through their passion and expertise – thank you. I would not have grown and would not have learned how to render my own meaning without your comfort, questioning, and curiosity.

To Lauren Elizabeth Reine Johnson, Cori McKenzie, and Mary L. Neville – I am so appreciative that I got to meet each of you, learn from you, and become your friend. Thank you for being in my life and showing me every day how to live in capacious and thoughtful ways. Also, thank you for listening to me talk *Gilmore Girls* and *The Office*.

To all the doctoral students that sat with me and listened, and for your beautiful work – keep creating and by your very presence make this world just a little better every day.

Of course, to my partner, Patrick Beymer, your belief in me is astounding. Thank you for always supporting me in finding my voice and convincing me to keep trying. You are an incredible human. I love you.

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BELIEF/LIGHT

Where is the edge of belief? Is it possible to believe something truly unbelievable? How does that begin? Is there a crack of light under the door? How do you know to see it as light?"

-- Anne Carson

THEORY OF UTTERANCE

Cup your hands. Let the edges touch.
When it rains, hold them out --water
will still falter from the makeshift

catcher -- do you understand? See
that apparition: the low humming
of track and train, that hushed fold

in the obedient skyline, the hesitation
of spring or the stuttering dandelions.
Here, you are green and grass. Feel the sift

of rain. This is what you are trying
to say. Suppose sometimes while driving
you let your hand skip wind, suspended

out of the car window -- that there
is this crack in your curtains where light goes
to play, sometimes you can make out the cavorting

of branches. Suppose you were only a ghost,
the tendrils of smoke let out in gasps
above concrete cylinders. You'd rather weave

this. You mean: you'd rather let the looming
in. There is light articulating
under the door, some syntax of streetlamp

or moon. Has origin ever really mattered?
Why hold it all in? You are telling
me language is just the derivative

of the day you leapt from a cliff. Still,
there is this: you feel the empty
swing grating the thick gusts.

ON THE EDGE OVERLOOKING THE VALLEY

You, my first crush, were so proud of that old BMW.
Remember? That time? We looked up,

leaned against the hood of your car.
The sky shattered in light residue

and you kept pointing to stars I couldn't see.
We didn't know what we weren't meant to hold.

Didn't the power plants remind you of all we'd lost?
Didn't the river look like darkness moving?

Remember. In science class, Mr. Elmer told us
to believe, to take our paper-made star charts

and find something someone had named before us.
You are still pointing up. Drawing imaginary

shapes with your fingertip. Orion's belt seemed
easy enough for me to trace. I was sure though

that one of those stars was a plane. It didn't matter.
Daybreak, and the orange dust shivers up the valley. Stilled.

Tell me you can parse the clouds from the plant fog.
I still won't believe you.

I'VE LEARNED TO SOLDER GUILT, HUMMING INTO MY HELLOS

As a kid, I was ravaged by the diffusive power of crabapples. I had the best aim of all the girls, we plucked the rotted green spheres from uncut grass, carried bunches in untucked shirts. Scattered, we hid in trees, waiting for the boys.

Sometimes, I'm ashamed of my interest in inhibition.

But there, slipping sneakers on bark, bearing my body against the weight of a branch. I have started to name grace: I fell from a crabapple tree, and a boy held his hand out to me.

Sometimes, I want to choose the moon and its stunned light.

I may always be that kid sitting alone at the kitchen table, listening. There will be nothing my child heart didn't clasp in the spaces of screen doors.

Sometimes, I still can't shake the residue: crabapple, moonlight, belief, his hand.

THIS DISTANCE

I've never known the clarity of a shadow. These ones, here, they trail the water, soft and superimposed, hazy dusts of their owner. Sometimes, I think of the unquenchable burst of the moon, how its ruins have learned to swell like snow. Or I keep thinking about the leftover leaves or the dismantling thistle and how the edge has funneled this distance into me. Or how sometimes I can't tell the difference between the blue of the sky and the blue of the lake -- we live in turned worlds -- distance and closeness may be the same thing: the firepit and the water; the ice and the glass table; the dirt and the tree trunk. Or that time my father found a praying mantis on the inside of a wooden board and told me to look at its magic but never to get close enough to touch it. Or how at a concert, a boy I thought I loved put me on his shoulders so I could see how sounds were made. I think I know the light better now. I mean I see the shadow in you. I think the tree limbs are sprawled string -- taut and reaching -- across a four-year-olds' fingers in a thread of connections only Cat's Cradle knows how to hold. Or that lamp left on, a reminder that we are alive, that we know the part from the whole, but the moon missed this, missed the difference and couldn't tell you when the night began, couldn't tell you when the glow should end. Tell me to stop reaching and I'll show you a skyline of darkened trees -- not one turned to the ground.

MY MOTHER RECOVERS FROM A HEAD INJURY

My mother has lost words she looms between tries to capture meaning in obscure pronunciation a bird clawing syllables on tree branches the gas has been left on again and there is no fire she tells me do you hear me you never listen to me no one ever listens to me her head injury has made emotion collapsible intensity shifts anger is pervasive and comes on quick my mother could out scream a bear with her sorrow the bird is back she says points to it it is her echo there is a nest outside her window which she says as widow she wishes for a return I used to be able to remember just absence the songs she loved she can only hum sifts through melody in her dreams she says she always knows what to say my mother keeps her television on the Weather Channel she needs to know she says what is to come the swirling colors of impending storms no place matters too little she always keeps the door open when it storms I remember walking along Emerald Isle after a hurricane scouring the shoreline for what could be discovered delivered anew dead baby sharks a dresser with clothes still intact driftwood shells my mother seemed to believe everything had a use we make what we can at will just imagine I've re-worn clothes from her youth a silk shirt her friend Marge bought her in Texas a velvet burgundy dress from her sister's wedding things that weren't meant to be kept found solace in her closet she kept a pair of ballet flats believing they were my pointe shoes this is what happens when you get older she says does it matter what the symbol is when we already know what it symbolizes we all hold onto things the contours of sentimentality I keep a box under my bed the door is open and a storm roams there wind brocading rain let's just stand here for a little while longer on the cusp of misremembering all the while the tv permeates the room calling for a warning it is here rotating swirls of color over our heads my mother remembers the stove is on goes to turn it off my mother carries words in her chest she says she knows but cannot say

PÈRE LACHAISE CEMETERY

Have you spent time hovering
over strangers' headstones, noting
the ways the moss dawdles? Feel it
outstretched and starched on stone.

Is this the way stars used to skirt
the darkness, plotted and laced
before we knew what light
felt like up close?

Have you ever noticed the flowers
curated and rootless on graves?
How odd that remembrance takes
the form of the slow death

of another live thing. It seems
like truth, like one
I'm accustomed to at least --
let it always rain in graveyards.

The sun is not with us today
and the shade has decided
to make murals. No one
really knows. We are all cloaked

in the obscure placement of mausoleums.
The rain is also tempted by the starkness
of the calm. Someone is playing the flute
near Chopin's grave. There is nothing to keep us here.

THE ORIGINS OF BELIEF

I was asked to believe in the grudges
of the moon, some form of luster
and grief: a highway lit at the edge

of prairie grass. If I choose
to remember, I think I combed
mercy in a baby doll's hair.

Watching Bambi, my knees cradled
in my chest, learning young, that practice
of succumbing to the whittling:

belief folded in the yearning
of forgiveness. I remember
I forgot to breathe in the beginning

of the movie, how forgetting
was a way to borrow sanity.
I think of that day now,

in the wake of a Michigan winter
I couldn't forgive. That all I wanted
was for everyone to be okay:
Bambi and her mother. How
naïve is hope. I think this now
in the beginnings of a pandemic.
I don't know how to be. I recite

false incantations on the resilience
of prairie grass. The highway cuts
the landscape and somehow
what's left is cradled in its sever.

THEORY OF INTIMACY

This morning, blurred and entrenched
in a whirring of rain -- it means nothing
that the trees have lost all their leaves.
The lights are on in the hospital
across the street. I have felt
all that I have harmed. Does it
dissipate? The incessant, gnawing
of loss. I have a record player,
and I never play any records. I
just collect all the songs I wish
I still listened to. When I greet
people, I don't hug them or shake
hands, we gesture with our eyes --
hello, I'm here, I see you. Connection
is a lost friend screaming
your name from across a park,
you turn to meet them and
realize that they meant it
for someone else. Actually,
you're not even sure
anyone said anything. But
you wait there
in awkward hope --
Still, look
and turn around.

HOME/RUPTURE

Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.

— Italo Calvino

THESE DAYS, I SPEND MY TIME IN THE RUPTURE,

coaxed by the prosody of steel
ground into steel. What I
mean is I anticipate the fetter
of railroad tracks and trains:
how sleep still sieves in the space
of noise. My father says I refused
sleep as a toddler unless carried,
rumbling through fields
on the tractor. Within minutes,
I yielded to the rhythmic hum
and rattle. Standing here,
near this train, I am bundled
in its pitch. I am reminded
of driving along the Ohio River,
the echoing tracks aligning the hill
and factories, how it emanates
in its scrapping and sever.
I used to place coins on the track,
watch and wait for the train
to pass over and see
how metal could swell.

GOING HOME: JULY 2021

I've heard it said that we do eventually return,
and in that returning I do not know what transfigures in us.

When I go home this time, it has been two years,
an almost divorce and a pandemic separating me
from the proximity of this place. My cousin wants
to commemorate this moment; she wants to grieve.
She brings a plastic bag of fake flowers.

We spend our morning looking over gravestones:
people my mother, aunt, cousin, and I have never
met. Yet here I am with a welling inside me, here
I am placing synthetic fuchsia blooms in turned over
vases. We hold each other, what feels like a different
form of grasping. My mother creates a prayer. We tell
the dead we are grateful for their existence.

Later, when we have nothing left to give or garner,
we drive past old homes on the hill: brick falling to the ground,
windows rotting, collapsed glass. My mother gets out of the car.
Tries to take pictures of the backyard because that's where
her and her siblings climbed trees. That's where their bodies were held.

ON THE FARM

A little girl in pink corduroy overalls,
arms clasped around the leg of a man
in a photo from 1991.

I haven't given up on this:
her forehead tilted up. Some form
of admiration or fear
in the half-light of autumn.
It is here that I am the least
of who I am to be.

I am learning
so many ways to inherit
distance. On the cool,
crunchy ground,
I would make my shirt
into a basket and gather
all the dried leaves, then,
climbing – body clasped
to the trunk – to the top. Dangling
on the branch edge, I crisped leaves
into pulverized bits – confetti of fall.

For hours, alone outside,
I remember the impossibility
of onion grass, how I would braid
consistency into it. I remember
the briars succumbed
to the horse mane. Peeling
the thorny bits slowly
as to not harm.

Here, I learned
aleness – what it means
to make of the world
what you will –
that leaving is an echo
we carry wherever we go.

JANUARY, 2021

There are few things that emit silence
in a voracity we call encompassing:
midway through a snowfall – that space
of the before, before humans coalesce
it, the landscape shivering quiet
mouthfuls. Still, all I can be is a version
of magnified silence: a freshly mopped
laminated hallway; a person who has succumbed
to their thoughts; the shocked languishing
of language, a moment when I have nothing
else to say; the expanse that follows
a teacher proposing a question to the class.
A pandemic makes us accustomed
to the reverberations of silence, how the absence
of sound creates contours around us. Soon,
even small notes become audible: the clink
of the spoon stirring the coffee, the rush
of the dishwasher, the soft hum
of streetlights, a whirring that has begun
inside me. I have become
a curious purveyor of silence – somehow,
now it feels as if there is nothing
but the layer of days. How everything blurs
into the droning of the heating vent –
the buzz that claws me in the half-second I dip
underwater, the energy of sound releasing on the surface,
just me and this shrouded noise -- how I hear it
in its labor, asking something of me, asking
if I might listen: what might I do in the silence?
What might we each make of this newly drawn
tundra, of this rare intimacy between ourselves,
between empty hallways and our pressed shoeprints,
between the tapping pencil and the teacher gazing beyond,
between clarity of words and the lacking inarticulation
of this same moment; setting in the margins of a posed question
Do we hear it? Do we listen? Are we willing to ask?
What might sustain us, now?

EMERALD ISLE, NC

I once believed in the silence
of margins, the ripeness
of baby bird flesh, the dismantling
of words, the foraging
of sea cicadas and the dust
of sighs. What I am trying to say is:

everything is wrong and I can't lift
praise on my tongue or coil
it in my collar bone. In child form:
this hunger, scanning the shore for holes
of breath and then unearthing,
with both hands, the fragile sea cicada,

holding its scampering
fear, delivering it to a bucket
where a fisherman would hook
its life to a rod.

Or this: the ways I intended to save
baby birds thrust from their nests,
my human touch exacting the absence
of foamy feathers. I believed
in the curious grace of preservation.

But even now: this thin marrow
of faith, this clawing
of a warm body, this surrender;
feather, shell, breath.

WITHOUT OUR FARM

we burned for grass,
brown or green and bit
dirt from fingernails
when our hands were clean.

I was four; I knew it was over.
Brier bush free;
oat and horse saliva gone.
My brother mourned

for mud and worm.
My father shucked
corn, tilled soil, carried on.
My mother took us,

abandoned her shovel
and gloves. We crammed
into an apartment in the projects.
I fed Cheetos to squirrels,

striving to be near. Today,
I retrace muddy footprints.
On a crooked wood fence,
I leave a note:
Land, I was yours.

WHISPERING IN THE MUSÉE DE L'ORANGERIE

Nothing of meaning exists here
anymore: I am permanent, juxtaposed
in front of a painting, mostly blues:
cerulean, azure, navy, sky. I cannot
move. The painting is heavy
in layers, when it cracks there is nothing
but tempestuous blue. You are not with me,
though I want you to be. Someone has brushed
this canvas in the ways I swoosh
peanut butter on bread,
thick as the slice. How ordinary.
I make my way upstairs, to the room of Monet.
No one is here. They tell me they are closing.
They tell me to hurry in my solace.
I squint at the corner and I only see small copies
of color moving, transcending canvas. I step back,
like they say, perspective is everything:
a wall of lilies and color. This feeling
is not Giverny. Yesterday, we were there,
traipsing along the folds of landscape.
Monet made an illusion out of the ordinary.
I keep doing that too. Keep wanting
things to mean more. But here I am
past closing, alone in a museum, whispering
to paintings that will never
hear me, never look back.

BEAVER COUNTY, PA

Steel factories. River. Black shells on the shore. Spiked and towering cylinders along the skyline. Clouds. Or smoke. We walked around foggy-eyed and smoldering. Bridge. Another Bridge. Railroad. Freight cars lining the bank. Grief. Nuclear plants. The river vibrates down the valley. We were only made of hills. Sometimes things move like green. Fracking. The cows next door. A bowling alley of smoke. Brick. The bridge is blue, actually. We made the smog into shapes. We imagined: a unicorn, a hat, a sword, a tornado, or, maybe something else. The local bar. We lived in a shabby apartment at the top of a windy, mile hill. Little distances.

I remember the phrase, *I want to go home*. I would move it under and over my tongue while at friends' houses or forced family gatherings. *Please let me leave* was my hand wrapped on my mother's dress, lightly tugging. And all of this, I remember happening too in my own bed. I would be curled in my blanket, rocking as if in a nightmare, fiercely wishing again I could go home. This questioning has gone on for years. I whisper this phrase to myself, as if I could make it appear. Maybe the resuscitation is enough. Home is a suspicious thing to conjure. St. Pierre says attachment is risky. Or Deleuze might say signifier and signified are not reducible. Or there is no word for home.

PARENTS' SEPARATION: APARTMENT 11

I can't tell you the true story of how things came to be, how it all shook out: wet sheets clothes-pinned to the line choreographing dissent in the wind. I could begin here in the small apartment we clutched our lives to like pebbles I found on the banks of the Ohio River tucked in a matchbox. I remember when we lost power for weeks. Some storm, whose name doesn't exist to me, had broken tree lines, branches and trunks arresting wires: a similar collapse erupted in my mother. During the night, she kept that door open, leaned into the crux of arm resting on the frame. There is something about watching a storm through a screen. So much violence sweeping past you: a knife blade shuttering onion. A sudden grace.

LANSING, MI

Today, on the bus, there was a couple in the seats in front of me. I could feel that hunger or sometimes we call it yearning or maybe with a softness, longing. I could tell that one of them wanted to be loved and not in the way that we pretend we want to be loved but in the way we feel certain. The woman had turned to the man and placed her head on his shoulder. Somehow they had gotten on the topic of tattoos and wanting to get one today. She said you wouldn't get a tattoo of my name would you? He said he hadn't thought about it. She said I had never thought about it either until I met you -- maybe you could get my initials. The man peered over her shoulder out the window at something -- I think a sorority house event. He made some comment about it. Then, he said, look at that church. His eyes continued to follow the buildings. She said, yeah, they have beautiful weddings there. Somewhere here -- this yearning -- between her attempts to solidify his love and his attempts to conjure freedom in the landscape.

We talk about this wanting often. Even when we believe we didn't know we were. Howe tells her brother, who died: that yearning, what you finally gave up. Is there a choice in it? Nelson says we don't get to choose what or whom we love...we just don't get to choose. This is what we leave unspoken and call it unsayable; we don't have language for it or maybe we don't know how to name it. So we leave it. Leave it like the crumbs on the kitchen countertop, or the animal wounded on the side of the road lingering with enough breath to fog up a compact mirror.

WHEN A FRIENDSHIP ENDS

Threadbare silences permit
a form of yearning. I have always
thought you would be in my life.
Naivete and hope sometimes seem
interchangeable. At the coffee shop,
I order a Matcha tea latte; it is the same
as always. Tomorrow will be this way too.
At the record shop, I pull vinyl with
pings of desire: Fleetwood, The National,
and a little bit of Bruce. We all have things
we wish for. The vinyl pinches under my arm.
Tiny jags of loss we carry in our sleeves,
we carry in the crevices of our wrists. The same
wrist that once wore a friendship
bracelet for months after the friend
had stopped calling. It took me awhile
to stop noticing things in remembrance. I like
to go back to the time before.
When I was a child, I was a flower girl
in a wedding. how silly and light it was to pull
fistfuls of petals from my basket –
the forced fall of clumps. Think
if each loss could be strewn
like beauty in a pile behind
your footfalls. Maybe that
is what the experts call *letting go*.
I have generations of practice
on collapsing myself, habits of quiet
resentment. Would you trust
that the same flower girl ran tumbling
into a mud puddle outside. Look,
she is jumping, she is laughing --
she has no concept of destruction.

MADISON, WI

After a month of cold walks, of standing
in front of the sharpness
of lake, unexpectedly, a realization.
Here, shuttering tents and reverent fishermen.
There is a dog -- all hurried paws -- savoring
slickness in the middle of the lake.
The sun is lowering its luminosity, composing
a horizon that highlights the cracking lines. Or
what I perceive to be the beginnings of a break.
I linger at the shallow edge, glittering fear under
my footsteps. Everyone is okay. Lately, I've been projecting
a lot. There is a narrow calm across the proximity
of these built domains, an intimacy even:
how, beyond, they watch for each other,
listening in solace. What I want to recognize as closeness
is not permanence. This whole spectacle will be gone
in a few months. All that I believe I have seen
will vanish.

THE BODY KNOWS GRATITUDE

The lakes here crowd
with blue-green algae
on the edges;
shorelines expanding
fluorescence –
I paddled into it once
unsure, unknowing how
to shift my presence
on the board.
I sank close to the gooiness,
pondered touch and wondered
at the crispness of my fear.

This is the same hand that reached
for a flower drizzling
with bees, that dipped
fingers in candle wax
while it was still hot,
the hands attached
to the body that followed,
barefoot, the hissing
of the wasp nest
that hung on the pole
of our clothesline.
The same person
who, when the boy
next door again said
I couldn't reach
the highest point
of the swing,
couldn't touch the sky
with the top of my head
couldn't do a front flip
from the tip of the seat –
how many times did I try
to make it so, how many
times my body landed slightly
broken. My mother always, asking
in the E.R. "Was it worth it?"

I love most what it means
to believe in something,
what acrobatic tricks the act of
trying performs in the heart.

What I meant to say about

the lake – I like to paddle
to the middle and sit
with that moment before
I jump in the water –
what could I find in my sinking,
in the waiting, before we begin
struggling to breathe again
we are reminded of all
we could let go of --
the swift shutter of air,
the exasperated water
making room and then
howling itself around my body --
that space before the air rises in me,
before I rush, open mouthed to the sky;
My eyes exhausting trembles of the
surface blue, grasping every bit
of the world I left for a moment.

MONACA, PA: ON THE HILL

Gallagher's, the corner store filled with penny candy and Slush Puppie slushes; Swedish Fish melting in my palm – I pull at the gooeyness while sitting on the curb, want of devour in my eyes. I've been begging my body to take me here for years. What is this resistance to joy? Handfuls of blueberry Frooties and peach rings. My mother is there shuffling me to the car – some gesture of constraint. *Let's go*, she says, *We have to go*. Memories move thick with distance. I can almost remember the layout of the store and the glass case of cardboard boxes of candy. I can almost remember the smell: musty and sweet. And then, there. It is gone. Collapsed into me again. I drive along the street to my old house, along Brodhead Road. Gallagher's used to be one street over. Or maybe it's still there.

MY AUNT ASKS ME IF I DISLIKE BEAVER COUNTY

Here. I have left you. Carved & rudimentary: the river hinges thick pollution. A precarious hum of tires snatching steel bridges dwells inside of me. Please understand. Escape can sometimes become a synonym to return. Wait, wait for me. Bare feet licking rocks along Raccoon Creek. Dew devouring sleeping bags and grass: skin of mist. Again. How do I say this is not the question of distance you mean to ask. Pause, please. Please. I don't have a choice. I've heaved my body across the county line too many times for it to be a passive occurrence. What I'm trying to say is: this was never a binary. Either/or. Like/Dislike. The distal shadows are surveying the Evergreens hunched along the valley: a false map, an etch-a-sketch of performed boundaries. There is more. More. There in the burnt afternoon. There. Along the jaw of a hill, pressed and remade like pizzelles growing towers on the table. I have returned. I never left. Wait. Wait.

FEBRUARY 2022: LAKE MONONA

I started to stare in that way that you no longer
look at anything, it all becomes a bright blur.
Today, walking, I thought of the dense nature
of nothingness – how absence has a weight to it.
At the edge of the lake, I have collapsed into the banality
of the day. A mere passerby of the many walking along.
It is winter and people still go outside.

Below the surface of the ice, hushed fish,
I rest along the peripheral.
The ice is turning to craters of water,
like potholes puncturing pavement.
I have been afraid for a while now,
but I watch – absorbed like honey into tea –
the people fishing are dismantling their tents.

And nearby, someone is bringing in bags of groceries,
celery stalks popping from the paper bag.
A man is on the phone beside me. He says,
“Congratulations” loudly. *Are we living again?*
What had I noticed in my state of isolation, what had I begun
to divulge only to myself – we all move on, I suppose.

Someone throws a ball to their dog onto the ice,
it tumbles falling into a crater, the dog stops short, aware
of his possible nonexistence. The ball belongs to the fishes
who up until this point remained quiet.

POMPEII

If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it.

-- Anne Carson

And from there I can only think of Pompeii, and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius -- how in Herculaneum, a town nearby, it was recently discovered that a man's brain was turned to glass. There are theories about the air, about the heat and how this was 968 degrees of hot and then a swift change to something we don't know. We can't name. Those in on the discovery are saying we will never truly know how death occurred -- how a brain may be coaxed into becoming glass, melted and reanimated, neurons intact. This is not a metaphor for anything except for how air moves. Was the air the man running quite fast, or was the air the man who hid in the stone caves by the water seeking asylum from an unknown force. If we believe in the movement, do we believe in the arms reaching towards something; do we believe in the ash that covered a city; do we believe it was the culprit we look for?

CONNECTION/DISTANCE

You existed to me. You were a theory.

- Tracy K. Smith

CULLING LINES

I've noticed the dismantling of winter,
how birds descend on my street calling out
to one another. My body splinters into chills, want
of warmth in the air.

I find my friend, near the bright patio chairs,
acquiesced to the lawn. Diffused of promise,
he bends grass petals in his palms, says he has learned
the contours of disconnection as I sit beside him.

We spend all our time traipsing under suns
from one place to another, and I don't know
about you, reader, but I can't pull my soul through
my throat when I'm near you. I depart from myself daily.

Tree shadows swell the river. We devour
the soft collapse of birds -- how the silence
feels like leaves falling, their curation resounding
in the wind around us. Sometimes a voice
calls out like loss, like two hands unclasping.

SURPRISING CONNECTIONS

Sometimes, we / talk about Foucault. We / write our names on chalkboards. We / practice introductions. We / have been waiting. We / speak of reverence; the cordial silence of an audience at a poetry reading. We / discussed this in the beige halls, outside, the trees – permanent and thirsty: a branch stammered in the creases of its shadow. We / considered the birds that day. I mean, we/ looked up. We / deemed it inconsequential / it cracked with silence through the tall glass windows. We/ sat in a circle. We / used to believe in the surplus. But only the red and pink Starburst sufficed. We / didn't have anything better to do. / Tell me / again / how proximity doesn't mean connection. Tell me / the shape of loss doesn't resemble feverish shoulders. We / stood amongst our / selves. Teachers always sit at the front, a staggering representation of their values. We / never returned home. We/ believed in the fragments. We / thought Wittgenstein was truth but learned it was only poetry. We / won't heap nostalgia on this anymore. We / 've lost appeal / anyway. Savor / this – the coffee and the glittering students / the birds will reveal themselves – a silky luminosity / look at that sewn sunrise / the bright wind satiating skin as we/ sit in the quad / go on / we didn't know. We / lost the prosody the day sincerity interrupted us. Without / each other / we are narrow versions of ourselves. We / have no desire to become / anything / else.

NOTES ON THE DISSOLUTION OF A FRIENDSHIP

I can't tell you anything
you don't already believe you know.
Nearby, on the margins
of Lake Michigan, kites slip through sky,
patterns of sharp disappearance.

The audacity of belief hunkers
under rocks, dissolving in wave ash.
I wanted to be near you. Never enough.

Even though there are these embroidered
scars that look like spurned
shorelines and some of them shiver
up my knees, others burst
in my palms -- they are all crumbling
in a piercing spectacle of grief.

Even though celestial clouds
meander like residues of intimacies,
I've sewn it shut -- the dissonance
of waking every morning.

Even though we refuse to remember,
refuse to stitch rock, sand, water, and green.
Even though there is an arrival of a plane
overhead, spinning noise like magic,
the jolt of sound captivating, the initial
realization of fear and then quick
-- dislodged sensitivity -- I'm so tired
of walking around parks.

Even though the thirst
of an empty parking lot is unpoetic
in every way. Even though
I believed in you.

I still believed in the capacity
of the wind soothing shoreline folds
at the edges of a park. I've been exhaling
memories all afternoon -- asterisks
of thought, never enough.

MIDWAY THROUGH A PANDEMIC, I REALIZE THINGS ABOUT MYSELF

I let everyone who entered my life enter through me.
-- Jenny Xie

I have inherited a propensity
for the quiet. Something akin to the corrosion
of wax compiled around a flame. We all have our cautions.
I have hoarded cigarettes, sincerity, and seashells.
But we've all devoured the mottle
in that memory. Instructed those
to place conch shells to their ears. Dissolved
belief. Here, we say, you can hold
the sound of the ocean. The swift throat
of the unseen sits there as a sleeping dog. Not to mention
we'd been drawing heat all day, been sprouting
cold coffee on tabletops. My bedroom is my office is my gym.
The stainless snow profligating
over mud. I've retraced icy patches
for the better part of an hour. Tell me the thrill of the slip.
Once, I demanded tadpoles show
themselves in puddles, so that I may bring
them to my palm. So that I may cradle
their beginning. I have always had intentions
of closeness. I let everyone make a doorway
out of my sorrow, needlepoint lingering.
Where is my refusal? Stirring desire, leaves
like mist. The sediment of unfolded
clothes is on the table, again. All day
you have been transporting
bundles of branches to the wood chipper.

PUBLIC INTIMACIES

Across the street from my apartment is a hospital and all day a family has been sitting outside in lawn chairs and they sit together in their waiting with a cooler filled and above them a nurse tapes a sign to the window that reads GIRL and fierce cheering and picture taking erupts and everyone is hugged but at the beginning of the pandemic only empty shelves and there was no toilet paper or hand sanitizer and I remember my professor telling me kindness is going to look different now and then she recounted telling someone at the grocery store please cover your mouth with your arm when sneezing or coughing please protect others and I remember crossing the street and then yelling hello to neighbors and riding my bike past a church adorned in multicolored ribbons with names and dates written on them in Sharpie and that a ribbon was for each person lost and how overwhelmed we are by death and I wish I learned better how to love from a distance as my mother and brothers were sick and I was ten hours away and people keep going and I wonder who has the privilege to invoke hopelessness and I smile at others under my mask and at work and we joke that no one would know that we've curved our faces in celebration of seeing another so we practice the crinkle by our eyes that comes with a smile hoping others see that we are welcoming that we are here with you and yesterday at the ice cream shop we could taste samples again and it had been a year or so since I tried all of the flavors key lime and almond joy and birthday cake and outside the store a woman introduces her baby to a puppy and they were nose-to-nose curious of each other's presence and we crowd around this ordinariness we crowd now in open spaces and we begin to hold each other's proximity and sometimes it's as if nothing ever happened and often it feels like so much change like broken bones that never healed properly and the ribbons are still up at the church and we write our wounds on multicolored fabric and we grieve in the streets and I still wave at the person across the street walking her dog.

INTIMACY

I didn't think it would turn out this way
-- Lauren Berlant

It was for a time
a silent fury of discontent:
a house with cold window edges,
wailing floorboards, a dismissing
vent behind the television. We had loved
each other once before. Now, bone-clouds
of disappearance leavened above and knives
with peanut butter residue sat on the sink edge,
counters with a layer of last meal dust,
bare walls – we never did
put any pictures up. The grapevine clasped
to the fence had begun its slow death,
cracking into dry brown straws, some
falling to the yard. We were so unaware
of the desiccation. All the residues of apathy,
cold brush along the fence line. We didn't notice
in our permanent distance. Someone was calling out
at the top of the stairs, the other
was on the first floor deciding if she should run.

THESE ARE MY FEARS

spiders, centipedes, E.T.
dark roads through deep woods,
drinking beer before liquor,
drowning, my shadow,
Freddy Krueger,
being alone,
that feeling of restlessness,
werewolves but not Teen Wolf,
hair in my food,
god but really the opposite of god,
that space between love and in love
where dust settles
and someone else's skin cells
pile on your dresser.

INTIMACY

Intimacy relies heavily on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence

-- Lauren Berlant

After months of tracing some semblance of meaning, months of drawing constellations on your back as you fell asleep. There is something here. In the mornings, you prepare the coffee beans, curating the French press. We have this. It's weeks later when I find a centipede in the bathtub. I am a vessel of fear. You kill it. You admit you saw a centipede in the bathroom weeks ago and killed it. You admit you did the same in our old house. There is intimacy here in the secret. The things we do for each other and never say. How it settles in us: a cleaned dish, a wiped countertop, a killed bug, a tracing of the stars on your back even after you have fallen asleep.

BAD HABITS

After Cecilia Woloch

I bite my fingernails to the nub, drink Prosecco from the bottle even though the bubbles frolic down my chin, pet every dog I see on the street, steal the covers and then tear them off in the middle of the night, say I will do things I never have the intention of doing, run in the way that is healthy for your heart and the way that keeps your heart in a small glass box, far away from any stick that might knock at it its cage, and listening to my mother, daydreaming, forgetting my keys, losing memories, plucking dandelions and popping the tops off, biting the skin on my lips, spooning tomato sauce into my mouth while it simmers, staring at the moon, not listening to my mother, saying yes when I should say no, never washing gritty, greased over pans, drinking more than one cup of coffee a day, following more than I lead, believing I am not free, staring into my dog's eyes for long periods of time, talking about things I know nothing about, trying over and over again, failing a lot, saying "I love you" first, standing too close to wasp nests, and wavering like thistle, and watching too many reality tv shows about the social experiment of love, and not saying how much you mean to me and not knowing that time is like when we used to ride our plastic sleds down that fifty foot hill behind the junkyard, quick and intoxicating,

LONGING/GRIEF

I long and seek after

-- Sappho translated by Anne Carson

TREE SURGEON

After my father left,
I climbed trees. I do not know
what it means to be safe,
but I learned how it felt to be held --

woven in limbs, brushed in bark dust,
uncoaxed by the prodding of the wind
or the lulling certainty of ground
and it was here, hovering, that I felt closest

to him. He spent hours climbing trees,
maneuvering limbs to cut out damage,
ridding the world of one entrenched
in telephone wire or lingering near a roof.

I ate Handi snacks on branch tops,
pretended the red stick was a saw
and went at it, thinking I could
break tree bones.

I would move two-handed, driving
it until skin had broken, until
something lighter appeared, a dint
the size of my pinky nail.

Then, I would stop, wipe the matted hair
from my forehead, examine what living was left
and trace sounds of clapping leaves with my eyes.
I am left wondering at the ways we sprawl

and curl -- how trees don't know what solace is
but sustain it anyway. I will never hold
a contradiction like that.
What I remember most from those days:

hollow never meant empty
and ants can't tell the difference
between skin and bark.

AFTER I LEAVE THE HOSPITAL, IT IS SNOWING

Say there is an American flag
that bellows in the wind at night.
There, outside the hospital
where we all walk to our cars.

Say the dazzling pavement is tricked
into icy terrain. Say this pandemic
was any worse. Say someone
loves someone in a hospital bed.

Say we spent hours holding
the hand of a loved
with plastic gloves on. Say
it isn't over.

Give me anything but memory.
Give me your delights, like stars cusped
on fingertips. Give me some form
of revelry in this waiting. Give me hope –
someone to recognize – standing outside,
the cold breath escaping my mouth.

Give me more than I knew to ask for.
For days now, the limbs of trees lit
with icy sweaters. It's enough
to make you believe. They always say
with any loss – there is a moment
of forgetting. You wake to a morning
like yesterday.

Say someone you love
is still alive. Say it is still snowing:
paper thin sheets draw an abyss
of light.

NEAR DEATH

The body knows. One of my brothers was buried alive when I was eight. In a ditch. Covered with dirt. No trace of finger, or top of head. Disappeared. He was so casual about it. He said this is a risk of labor work. Digging. They needed to have it done. No, they did not have the proper equipment. I wonder what he was thinking in the few seconds the dirt coaxed his body out of breath. Hospital bed. Streaks of dust and regret. My mother. His wife. Me. I remember him reaching his hand out. Quiet. My mom and his wife lunged to him. I did not move. He felt so far. What distance grows in us.

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO HANDS

Let's linger beset by the margins of our distance. I am a negation known as presence. If you reached your arm out like a man dissembling from a cliff, half-fallen, chaos descending from your brows, reaching -- with the last slip of your caught life, reaching, so someone else might distinguish the air between your palm and theirs, might raise an arm in reverence to your humanity.

But we are not at the edge of a cliff. No. And no one is reaching a hand to care for anyone. We can barely contort ourselves to offer water. Along the rise of the hill sits bodies that are buried without headstones. Everything comes back to death.

People try to comfort each other: saying, the dead are with us. Here in the unseen. But all I feel is distance. All I feel is that twisting in my chest, sinister air – you are not here and I want you to be. This realization, a sudden enfolding, a clutching like a tiny girl holding her only beloved teddy bear. So tight, the stuffing is tearing at its eyes.

I AM TRYING TO

After Ross Gay

All I can say is grief is grief. And I wish I had a better metaphor for it. A metaphor for the pain that inhabits me now: an attic mouse that has tunneled a minor darkness, resistant to leaving. I am trying to explain the ways I am ordinary; I, too, have been in the grind – coffee beans, shredded dust on the counter, the tea kettle pouring over its whistle, the intense smell of bitterness and caffeine steaming near me. I am there over the French press, coaxing tears to stay in their ducts, telling memory over and over again it is to stay put. It is to be silent in the confines of the mundane. I am trying to say the death sits behind my eyes most days. Caught semblance in the distorted reflection on the stainless steel appliances (which are in fact not stainless). I am trying. The tears, ascending: kids on swift cookie sheets carving the snowy hill. The memories, intruding: the squirrel on the edge of the yard – either taunting or lingering atop the fence – the dog uncaring as to the intention. The grief, well, like I said: grief is grief. My friend texts that her cat has died. It was sudden and unforeseen. She says she can't shake the guilt. Same, I say. She says please know I am not comparing your grief to mine. It really doesn't matter. Grief is not comparable. I couldn't explain it to you anyway. This grief. In its particularity. I am trying to tell you. I am trying. I am trying.

I SEE EVERYTHING I HAVE NOT DONE

I see everything I have not done today:
The egg skins crinkled on the sides of the pan
float in the cold soapy water, the books piled
high: meanderings on self-help and living
with grief, the dog hair making nests
at the legs of the table, leftover coffee sits
in cups, there are crumbs on the countertops
from the bagels that always fall apart. I think
it's the afternoon but I am still in my pajamas.
We continue like this. The sun melts the snow
in muddy patches. Pawprints waffle the sidewalk.
And I'm supposed to go on living. On the table,
half an orange peeled and ready to eat. Would you
believe me if I told you everything is muted like
a grey Pittsburgh day? Time is a fish I caught
with my father that one time at Moraine State Park –
it's translucent flailing. We were meant to eat this fish
but my father saw the fleck of near death
reflected in my eyes and he let me send it back. Instead,
using his long nails to break orange skin, the sticky
sourness cupped in our hands. I don't even know
how to order these memories that move in me;
a current of loss and remaking. I try to return.
coil coffee cups on the sink, stare
out a window overlooking a hospital, this is
what longing is: elucidating the remains
of every encounter; memories a catalogue
of leaves –fallen, collected, recreated.

ON GRIEF: EMERGENCY ROOM VISIT FOR CHEST PAIN

The thrashing never ends, I mean there is someone throwing a torrent
of kicks in the spaces between my ribcage. Like tattered edges of the Ohio River
where factories rest in weary descent. Like cigarettes lit and luminary near beer cans.

How someone loved the corner of a memory before you returned there. Before you left whatever
beginning, lapsing, in the gray sheet above. Carrying in you a smoke stack. Carrying in you a rapture
of honey bees. Carrying in you the death of Ash trees.

There is a carefully tucked sheet, a bed of loss under us. This is where attention contorts longing.

Into steel. Into mason jars tucked in boxes. Stacked irreverently in a storage unit off Route 51.

Someone used to fill them with vinegar and beets we wanted to latch our teeth into on a night
etched in snow.

All the while we'd been searching the current of the river, asking for the future to convene in us.

All the while we'd been folding hills under eyelids, been saying, on repeat, *just a little longer and
it will pass.*

And you go to the doctor. They ask *where is the pain?* And you are poor in telling others about
your heart. Someone you love is dying. In the distance, the doctor says:

there is nothing wrong with you. Like light slitting over the rusted bridge.

Like the dog digging a hole in the yard. Someone has excavated absence inside you.

THE RIGHT WHALE

is on its way out.
Not my fault.
It's those ships lacerating
their silvery skin.

I have an alibi. I am at home,
drinking coffee, reading W.S. Merwin.
Meanwhile, the 400 left pulse the waves.
They dip and swivel
The black of their bodies,
a pansy petal plunged in blue.

The dead ones float,
the ships drag them back,
tie their tails to docks.
Craters of red burst
on their bodies.
My hands are not red.

I sit. I read about the whales,
named Right because
they are the right ones to kill.
They are just a passing thought
over breakfast.
I did nothing
wrong.

PRESERVATION OF A FATHER

Even now, my memories slip; unwanted mail under a crack in the door. Banal and askew. There was a time you taught me how to dance the waltz to Frank Sinatra. Quick-hearted and grand. Rare and flawed. Even then, you kept beer in your truck, popped it as you would drive off. Sometimes when I was with you, we would play board games you kept in the chest from the farm: Clue, Mousetrap, Checkers. Elated and flimsy. This was in the trailer at the top of the hill. I remember the smell of Copenhagen chew: how I would buy ground up jerky and shove clumps under my lip too. I wanted to be like you. Even now, I see you pointing to the knots of a tree branch, saying this is where we need to cut to preserve it. So there is a chance of new growth. How before they demolished the old firehall you found a nest of baby bunnies in the basement and placed them in a bucket; their fur fine and fresh. Even then, my mother dragging me from bar to bar asking if I could spot your truck. Pulling me by my hand through the wooden door. Even now, my memories are hazy counterparts of all I have lost. After your death, your children sift through storage units scattered in different towns – in them every receipt from gas or machinery or food and every small thing I had ever drawn for you.

AFTER HIS MOTHER'S DEATH: FEBRUARY, 2011

I wrote a poem about a bird
overlooking our grief, rested
on a telephone wire – why
do birds always seem like
the dead visiting? The bird
transfixed above us
as we split to the car,
the air salty and immoveable
between us. I had only known
you six months, loved you for
four of them – said the words once.
I remember your whole family
in another room. You had no space
for tears until left alone, hunched
over her casket. I stood in the doorway,
not knowing a loss like yours, yet,
not knowing how to traverse this pain –
your uncle telling me to go
to you. I hardly knew you, really.
I didn't know you like your mother
did, like the family waiting in the foyer
of the funeral home. But I went to you
anyway, went to you in my own absence
of recognition and placed my hand
on your back. We did not talk
about her addiction. We did not ask
the question of suicide or accident.
We would not talk about this for years
and then, we would move it through
our mouths casually, a bee sting
behind the eyelids. We would move
through uncertainty
like it was fact. Only nodding
to the loss and its denounced grief,
letting it sit with us at the dinner table.

LOOKING UP AT NIGHT

This was nothing new. And yet,
we tilted our heads in soft curiosity,
a dog listening closely to an unknown
sound; how our minds try to capture
and sort. Funny, I knew you once, caught
aperture: veil of phosphenes. For a moment,
luminous and piercing. We have all been making
light of uncertainty. Yet it grinds a book spine
into us: coffee dust and sutured guilt.
Bristle at the absence of another. How do I
know you? Here, in this waiting, we have been
the sonorous car horn, the impending disjunction.
Always waiting to leave. Always a presumption of
closeness. A nascent connection roams, a horse
perked – ears drawing sharp constellations. We
were the ones that bound the stars. Dappled and absurd.
Didn't we make meaning?

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Headline: Scientists Watched a Star Explode in Real Time for the First Time Ever

Closeness is a fiery supernova located 120 million light years from earth. Even in its violent collapse, we watched. What do we make of this need to understand? We talked as if we knew each other all along. Days like small children reaching their arms to a parent. What of this desire to be held? Days, arms like scarves around the neck. There were conversations: sentences sewing distance. Say goodbye, on repeat. How did I learn to be close to someone? Looking up, a clattering of light fused into darkness. I realize later, we were all just learning how to love. Arms expanded in belief that someone might run towards them. Meanwhile, the wind is cradling shallow edges – cutting on the backs of necks. Tiny explosions. Closeness is laced and leftover ice dissolving in the lake.

REPLICATION

Aspen trees like scaffolds
on the hill, they are reanimating
fall. Yellow leaves rivaling sunrises,
sinews of attachment.
They are waiting to let go.
Exact replicates of one another.
The roots like lace. Woven
underground systems of beginnings.
In a fire, the trees become ash. Later,
tiny sprouts pop and spread
across the forest floor. Parts still intact.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Is it some fantasy to believe
even when we are not
with those we love
that they go on living
in the happiest of ways:
each day is hot coffee,
sugary donuts, sun scalloped
on the bench at the park
they must walk through daily
admiring the trees and their
abundance of leaves. I always think
the lives of those we love must
be going on without me in
the grandest of ways. At least,
I hope that for all those
that I don't see daily anymore.
What are we to do
with these hopes
in death? How am I supposed
to continue existing in a world
where this person does not.
Sometimes I wake up and think
far off, my father is still living,
still in a field somewhere
in Industry, PA fine-tuning his truck.
The cruel part: this belief
only lasts a moment.
Then, I'm winched back
to this world, Like a dandelion
plucked from the sidewalk crack, Like a fish
pulled from the river, writhing into the
painful, brazen light.

ASH TREES

My purpose here is to tell you
all the patterns of grief.
Back in Pennsylvania,
Ash trees are dying.
Slowly. It takes 3-5 years.
My father tells me,
the Emerald Ash Borer
has borrowed S-shaped
pathways all over the trees;
a child's finger-painting
of swirls. Narrow channels
of obtuse death. See, the way
they begin is by devouring
the tree's layer of nutrients.
They do this over weeks,
starving the tree like a lightning
bug in an empty jar. Did you know
their lives are only days long?
Back to the trees: The woodpeckers,
nuthatches, moths, butterflies,
and squirrels are looking for new
sources of sustenance. The advice
the newspaper gives: if a tree dies,
plant a new one, maybe two.

A COUPLE MONTHS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, I READ ABOUT SONGBIRDS
MYSTERIOUSLY DYING IN PENNSYLVANIA

What does this life
require of me. A constellation
of sharp caution empties: embers
crackle in a nearby firepit. Textured
branches seduce the night, consider
this was all you ever thought desire
could be: planted calm and the arrival
of darkness. Always someone running
the hills. Always a creek, yearning. What
scrapes the inside of my wrist, what thorn
bush caught in the understory rises,
what is left -- my father taught me
to trust in the attempt: wake up, begin,
follow some semblance of caught joy:
eggs over-medium, a horse gasping oats
from your flat palm, driving across a bridge, suspended,
tasting air, a pronounced grin to anyone
who will look in the service
of a second; I'll ask again: what does this life require
of me. In the imprint of the landscape
Sycamore trees raise the question to a slotted
sky with absent blues: how long can a body
search for what has been taken; this loss
I wish to escape makes a nest in my chest:
above me, Goldfinches are threading
what little they could unearth: pine needles,
bark, bits of trash, discarded feathers.

CODA

A few years ago in the before, before the pandemic and before I had known the contours of grief in the ways I do now, I met my advisor, Janine, in her office. It was a bleak, grey day in Michigan. The sun slotting lingered moments of brightness through her office window. We sat at the table together discussing our recent lives as we usually did. Janine had brought me a breakfast bar she thought I would like. I bring us here to this moment because it was one of many times that I was resistant. What I mean is I did not believe yet that poetry could become a dissertation. I was scared. Mostly scared that I would not fit well enough into the box of this PhD program in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education. I had been running towards poetry my whole life, but had become accustomed to the notion that I was just someone who wrote poems sometimes and what I did would not and could not count towards anything remarkable or substantial. Like I said, this was in the before. One of many moments Janine believed -- more than I knew how to -- in the idea of poetry and its held, tangible form. I remember saying, "but it doesn't feel like education. I don't feel like I am saying anything directly about education." Janine, sat back in her chair, paused and using her hands along with her whole body, asked, "Well, can you tell me what is not education?" This moment mirroring for me a story my High School English teacher used to tell about a philosophy student in college:

The entire semester the students had read, researched, and memorized as much as they could about philosophy. The students studied the texts and notes from class, prepared for an intense final exam. When they came to the classroom there was only one question on the board; it read "Why?" Baffled and quite unsure what was meant, the students stared with bits of disbelief and horror. Their grade depended on this exam. After a few moments, one student wrote something down, folded the piece of paper, put it on the professor's desk and left. My high school English teacher leaned forward in his seat, "and do you know what it said? He leaned back in his chair, "why not?"

Now, we can debate this anecdote and how it is caught in the binary of the idea which is exactly where I would like us to sit in understanding this manuscript and the endeavor of writing it. When we elucidate the binary, the exacting opposition – then, perhaps, we illuminate all that sits between and around. Of course, philosophy is more than just an opposing supposition, but in this questioning we offer the correlation of a more, a beyond. What matters here is the question, how we answer that question, and the questions that arise and then enumerate around us. The way we think may in fact be the most interesting part, the way belief moves in us. Reorienting ourselves and others may be the most disruptive and thought-provoking thing we can do. So, I begin here because the question is not: is this dissertation about education or educational enough which is the question that prompted my fear of writing. The question is really about parameters of thought: why have we

decided that some things are and are not education? To be more precise: I have been educated my entire life, mostly in what might be called informal settings i.e. living.

I think of this notion, in particular, when I remember the stories my family would tell. I have always noticed how as we each grow older we tend to grasp onto particular stories and tell them over and over, like an ode to a life well lived. My father had a particular story he would love to tell about me. When we lived on our farm and I was around three years-old I had an affinity and reverence for animals: either spending my time curled up with our farm dog or attempting to climb the fence to feed oats to the horses. One of the hogs and I seemed quite taken with one another, relishing a rebellious streak in each other. Often, this 300-pound hog would find some ingenious way to break from his pen. I, too, did not like being placed in a cage of any sort and would climb out of my crib often. I would usually make my way to the front porch where the hog would meet me on the front stairs and we would sit together. I would pet his snout and rest by his side. My father was often in awe of this as it seemed there was some unspoken bond between the hog and me. My mother was not amused, often screaming from the top floor window for someone to grab me before the hog tried to eat me. My father told this story almost every chance we saw each other and would let out his usual muffled chuckle that meant it was humorous and shocking. He would always say near the end some version of: you just weren't afraid of anything and the animals just knew you in some way I can't explain. I highlight this moment because it is a particularity of my life: a learning of sorts about who I was and a tracing of how I came to hold a reverence for animals and the natural world. In writing this poetry manuscript, I made a choice to move towards elucidating self-awareness and endeavoring to answer the question who am I right now. I think about this because I think of how understanding who we are and our particular histories remakes in us possibilities of how we educate ourselves and others. More importantly, how we create and hold space for the multiple unfoldings of self and identity in educational spaces and beyond.

Why Poetry?

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory....Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.

-- Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

Poetry is a gesture of how I might name astonishment -- how I might begin to transcend my daily living and my lack of adequate language into a form of immense and felt complexity. Even so, I can't tell you what a poem wants, seeks to be, or where the meaning of it may or may not arise. It is

a malleable melody of sorts with suggestions of strange syntax and crucial reckonings. The poem offers revised textures of belief, exhausted by the outlines of spaces and the resilience of readers. It is an attunement, an awareness of the tracings that might thread together a semblance of a contextually riveted moment. Poetry sits at the crux of the contradiction. That is, in the interstices of the binary -- the world unravels. For me, metaphor provides a rendering of this notion in form. I attempt the model of combining two unrecognized sources together ($a + b = c$). This is foundational and approximate in theory, but when I call upon it in poetry, it becomes unattainable and untenable. A disruption of its assumptive and perceived way of knowing. It has to move beyond itself. As Wittgenstein (1996) discussed, "The same -- and yet not the same." (para. 174).

In my work, I call upon this as the symmetry of difference which is not opposition, but a call to name the in-betweens, the particularities, the affective resistances and resonances. My poetry is an enactment of distance and a conjuring of closeness. It is about the self, the beholden *I* and the corresponding *you*. The connective tissue and the collapsible nature of pronouns and relationalities. The intimacies and the intimations of intensities and the lackluster. The everyday, the mundanity of our noticing and the peripheral pinings of what continues to go unnoticed, undisclosed, undelivered.

In a more general sense, I see this as the fragments of my selfhood and my own introspective attempts at wondering and acknowledging relationality and connection - how I might create the impossible inventory. An example: suggesting a movie to a friend believing they will love it, only to find they hated it. Small disagreements of misaligned selves: I like tomato sauce but I hate tomatoes. These are banal and general epiphanic layerings, but they move towards an interstice I am interested in: what is a theory of intimacies beset on when we feel distance sitting with the ones we are closest to? How do I account for the felt illusion of connection with a stranger -- a person across from me in a coffee shop? These are remnants of other relationships I have left unturned, unscathed, unquestioned. My poetry is a move towards a shaping of that attunement, self, other, and the dismantling -- a move from commonality and towards capacities of difference. Here, maybe, the disruption of our embodied forms, a tracing of abstraction and the loss -- the grieving of belief while in the process of conjuring it.

In this poetry manuscript, I posit a few questions that reverberate throughout the poems: How have I formed intimacies and what are those variations? How have I come to recognize connection across persons, places, moments, and things -- where does the distance grow, where does it subside? These questions are particularly important because we are still negotiating and

defining topics of intimacy and distance. The variations of intimacy, the ways we come to believe we belong or connect are concepts that still falter through us, we are compiling language for these moments, reinventing the relational -- how we might be with one another. This redefining is compounded when we think of how a global pandemic shattered and changed our notions of connection and intimacy. A pandemic that created circumstances for distance to prosper within us, for us to learn what technology might provide us and to in turn yearn for forms of connection we didn't think we needed as much as we know we do now. Contemporary poets Jenny Xie, Ocean Vuong, Hanif Abdurraqib, and Major Jackson, among others, parsed concepts of identity and our distance from ourselves, of loss and divide, of intimacies, and the many ways we name relationships. My work sits in the questioning these poets propose for each of us.

I move with Berlant's (1998) assertion that hidden in any form of intimacy is a version of this disbelief and wondering: "I didn't think it would turn out this way" (281). In a special issue in *Critical Inquiry*, Berlant (1998) theorized and invited others to theorize on what intimacy is and could be, asserting that "intimacy only rarely makes sense of things" and "Conventionally, in its expression through language, intimacy relies heavily on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence" (286). This shifting in register of the unspoken, the spaces in-between, the affect that permeates our connections and relationships is where I seek to pull poems into being, to recreate what became of the intimacies left sifting in the air in a singular, temporal interaction. In the poem, "Madison, WI" I meander in a mundane image -- a frozen lake and intersperse my thought-feelings and perceptions, conjuring an intimacy between selves. In "Tree Surgeon," I linger on a memory of a consistent act I did daily as a child -- climbing a tree -- and I trace the patterns of intimacy in the tiny moments -- looking up at the leaves, trying to cut branches down -- and how these are a forming of a relationship with someone who is not there physically, but who was there in my attachment to them. As I continue to write poems, I will keep in mind this question: "What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place?" (285). Where does that energy move, be, subside? I think of Sappho, and Carson's (2002) translation of Sappho's Fragments, and how Carson made a decision to let each fragment hold the space around it, so that the book is pages of blankness with one or two lines lingering. Further, Carson rarely uses punctuation so that a pause is only the blankness or the page turning -- sometimes it seems as if almost every line goes on in the registers of the unspoken. I often turn to this one line: "I long and seek after" -- the implied yearning and the unfinished movement of the text to me are an intimacy forming -- yearning is a want to be closer to something you desire. But here, Sappho never tells us, never ends the line for us -- that yearning just

moves into the air, settled there. This is the intimacy I speak of, an intimacy that may not be named but that exists in the interstices of our daily wanting, our daily longing to move towards something, anything -- to get closer, even without knowing what that closeness is or what it means or what will become of it.

Writing Poems

This poetry manuscript borrows methodologically from poetic inquiry (Galvin & Prendergast, (2016) and arts-based research methodologies (Leavy, 2015). Particularly, I engage with *vox identitatis*, or the creation of poems exploring self and identity (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016). Although this is a marginalized approach within qualitative inquiry, it has become a robust method internationally, and there is a growing community of scholars invested in thinking about the ways poetry offers multiplicity and reorientation of thought patterns. In working with this methodology, I spent time studying contemporary poetry and the many ways one may write and read it. I have been studying poetry for over ten years. Most of these poems have been written and revised over the course of years. Sometimes holding space in a drawer until I was ready to return to it. Writing poetry is an iterative endeavor that takes time, research, and self-reflection. When I set out to write this manuscript, I had anticipated reading and writing poetry daily in the mornings. Some weeks I managed this quite well, some weeks I wrote whatever I could onto the page just to practice writing. Most of this is in the trash or in some saved document I will never open. It took me a long time to believe in writing again. I did start believing though, only in kernels. When my father died, grief consumed me and I could barely muster thoughts. I resisted writing. It took me some time, but I began again. I tried writing one or two poems a day. It is difficult to write in the fog of sentimentality and longing; grief rising at the edges.

Twenty to twenty-five of these poems have been written over the past five years and revised based on feedback from committee members and workshop peers. Thirty of the poems have been written in the past year and a half, a good number of them recently. I have revised the poems, returning to them in their own ethos. I also took into account an envisioned poetic cohesion particular to the affective contours of each poem and how it fit in the manuscript. While ordering the manuscript I attempted to coordinate poems based on theme and affect. I created four sections with four epigraphs that had inspired particular awarenesses and felt expressions subtly ruminating throughout. In the first section I was interested in how we come to believe, how we come to know relationality and ourselves. I began this section then with a contemplation on how language fails and begins again and I end the section on a beginning forming of intimacy. The second section invites an

understanding of place as attachment to self and others – how we remake place and our own versions of *home* shifts understandings of who we are and who we wish to be. The third section is about relationships – the theory of how connection and disconnection occur with others. The fourth section is both the longing to connect and the realization of loss and grief across each moment; it is the understanding of self through loss and death, and also the reanimating of how I came to know and understand the people closest to me, particularly my father and as an extension the natural world. Each section is building on my attachments and intimacies with family, friends, and place. It slowly moves through the consistency of loss, layering each one. I tried to place poems near each other that resonated with the epigraph, but also continued a poetic logic of language and imagery. As words are repeated, they build out meaning across contexts of the manuscript.

These practices of writing and ordering illuminate the multitudes of distance in both the language and syntactical components as well as the many ways we have defined and continue to define intimacy and attachment conceptually. As I revised the poems in this manuscript, I noticed the nods toward the natural world and recognized our distancing from it, our continued neglect was also a theme within the poems. These poems rest in the in-between as newly awakened realizations in the mundane. The ordinary and mundane became an instrument of portraying these modes of distance from landscapes, people, and ourselves. I plan to submit this completed manuscript to several contests including: APR/Honickman First Book Prize, The Lexi Rudnitsky First Book Prize, Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, Academy of American Poets First Book Award, The Ballard Spahr Prize, and the Max Ritvo Prize.

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APPENDIX

“Where is the edge of belief? Is it possible to believe / something truly unbelievable? How does / that begin? Is there a crack of light under the door? / How do you know to see it as light?” is from *Float*, a series of small chapbooks from Anne Carson.

“Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice” is from *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino.

MY AUNT ASKS ME IF I DISLIKE BEAVER COUNTY borrows form from the poem, “Wednesday” in *The Weather* by Lisa Robertson.

POMPEII has an epigraph from an interview with Anne Carson in *The Guardian* titled, “Anne Carson: ‘I do not believe in art as therapy’” where when asked, “Do you have a personal definition of what poetry is?”, Carson answered, “If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it.”

LANSING, MI – “that yearning: what you finally gave up” is from the poem, “What the Living Do” by Marie Howe. “We don’t get to choose what or whom we love...we just don’t get to choose.” is from *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson.

“You existed to me. You were a theory” is from “Savior Machine” in the book, *Life on Mars* by Tracy K. Smith

SURPRISING CONNECTIONS is inspired by the form of the slash from Hanif Abdurraqib’s poems in *A Fortune for Your Disaster* and the repetition of “We” in Gwendolyn Brook’s “We Real Cool.”

MIDWAY THROUGH A PANDEMIC, I REALIZE THINGS ABOUT MYSELF is inspired by an epigraph from Jenny Xie’s poem, “Visible Relations” from *Eye Level*.

“I long and seek after” is from *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* which is a translation by Anne Carson of Sappho’s work.

INTIMACY and INTIMACY both have epigraphs from Lauren Berlant’s introduction to “Intimacy: A Special Issue” in *Critical Inquiry*.

AFTER I LEAVE THE HOSPITAL, IT IS SNOWING is an imitation of form borrowed from Lisa Robertson’s poem, “Residence at C___” in *The Weather*.

BAD HABITS is inspired by and a mirror of the form and content of Cecilia Woloch’s poem, “Fireflies” from *Carpathia*.

I AM TRYING TO is written in conversation with Ross Gay’s lines: “But what I do know is that I love the moment when the poet says / I am trying to do this / or I am trying to do that.

Sometimes it is a horseshit trick. But sometimes / it's a way by which the poet says / I wish I could tell you, / truly, of the little factory / in my head" from the poem, "feet" in *catalog of unabashed gratitude*.

ATTACHMENT THEORY is written in conversation with an article about scientists watching a star explode in *Live Science* called, "Scientists watched a star explode in real time for the first time ever" written in January, 2022.

A COUPLE MONTHS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, I READ ABOUT SONGBIRDS MYSTERIOUSLY DYING IN PENNSYLVANIA is written after reading an article in *Science* called, "Songbirds are mysteriously dying across the eastern U.S. Scientists are scrambling to find out why" about songbirds dying in Pennsylvania and neighboring states. Scientists were unsure what was causing their swift deaths.

Poems in this book have been published in the following places:

“Emerald Isle, NC” and “Culling Lines” in *The Inflectionist Review*

“Theory of Utterances” first appeared in *Sugar House Review* as “Let the Looming In”

“Tree Surgeon” in *Bellevue Literary Review* and was a finalist for the Marica and Jan Vilcek Prize for Poetry.

“These Days, I Spend My Time in the Rupture” in *Pittsburgh Quarterly*.

“Midway Through a Pandemic, I Realize Things About Myself” was previously titled “Distance, Lolling” and was one of the poems that won the MSU College of Education Poetry Contest.

“Beaver County, PA” and “Lansing, MI” were finalists for the The Waking Flash Prose Prize – Nonfiction in *Ruminate*.

“Madison, WI” was previously titled “The Lake Is Frozen Again” and won first place for the *The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets’ Kay Saunders Emerging Poet Award*.

“Whispering in the Musée De L’Orangerie ” won an Honorable Mention for the *The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets’ Poets’ Choice Award*.