

5-2013

Anything Else

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ANYTHING ELSE

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of English
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, with Honors in English

by

Lauren Walter

May 2013

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Foreword

My honors senior thesis, a creative project entitled *Anything Else*, is a collection of fourteen poems that reflects on trauma, loss, interpersonal relationships, and nature. Many of the poems are dramatic monologues, allowing me to portray a range of extreme voices, including a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, a U.S. veteran of the Iraq War, and murderer Perry Smith. Although I consider myself a free verse writer, preferring to work without regular meter or rhyme, one of the poems is written in iambic pentameter. In addition, I took material from the Yahoo! Answers website and composed it as a found poem, adding to the diversity of the manuscript. A number of questions are explored across the variety of speakers, themes, and forms of poems included here, often coming back to the question of whether or not there is anything else.

Keywords: Poetry, Trauma, Loss, Interpersonal Relationships, Nature, Dramatic Monologue

Oculus Maximus

How coolly science sees jaws and lampreys,
connecting the dots between them
like constellations drawn through stars
as it dives below the sea
to the unknown midnight zone.

Here on Pompano Beach, particles
of sand drift in grainy waves
toward destinations I can't begin
to know. No one knows. The waves'
crests point me toward nothing.

Giant. Luminescent.
Blue: an eyeball without a lid
stares along the shore,
too. What must that roving eye
have seen? Almighty, what hasn't

it seen, rolling loosely
in its tidal sea cranium?
Has it also watched the lamprey
slow from its latching and sucking
as the circular mouthpart breaks

into a lumpy, hinged jaw drawn in kids'
aimless crayon lines? Are shadow
shows played in the deep sea
no matter how dark? Can this eye
dimly comprehend? Science,

a PI, investigates the eye's
anonymous background, then studies
the alibis of cetaceans' eyes,
embedded in hard tissue, and hoards
photos comparing straight-line cuts, but

never does it imagine the eye
staring into the blunt face of a shark

that glides through the water asleep,
or meeting a gam of humpback whales,
then briefly twirling alongside.

Along Paint Creek

Like the ruddy patches shading
a teenage boy's complexion,
on the sun-drenched Lake Wissota waters
a sprawl of rose petals idles.
Canoeing past husky pines that rise
along the cliffsides, two girls pull
oars beside the wake of petals
as though a lover had laid their trail.

On this insouciant summer day,
the petals pucker like soaked
swim trunks slick with water.
A Northern Shoveler spies them, a snack
floating by, then snaps up
a few for himself.

Near a popular jumping-
off spot, a rope swing on the cliff,
red flecks of petals dot the surface
of Paint Creek the way,
only a few days before,
beads of blood marked this water.
Though mourners think these flowers
a tribute to Justin, many forget
Zachary, the sixteen-year-old who drowned
last summer just north of here,
swallowed by the Chippewa River.

Wild Walk

1

We name it with cinder block words
such as “field” or “meadow” in my house.
So I whisper to myself, *Wild Walk, Wild Walk*, words that slink through the air
and buzz against my ear.

2

I pry off tennis shoes and, through
the backyard, sprint into Wild Walk.
My mom’s message, *Be home by five!*,
floats after me, dandelion snow on the wind
until it melts midair. Without a watch,
five is just some number. Time
I measure by the traveling sun.

3

Schools called Pluto a planet, the ninth.
We hold everything up to Earth,
which throws its shadow
on the now tiny
Pluto, an inside-out cave,
probably, blackish blue midnight
like mist on ice and rock
with sometimes a sheen of dancing light.
Then—surprise!—Pluto loses
the title “planet,” replaced by a number,
134340. For now, at least,
it still has its moon.

4

On nights I sneak out to Wild Walk,
 rarely up there do I see planets dangling.
 They tell me that I can, at the right moment.
 But most planets look just like stars.
 Out late, when shadows widen
 into night, I pass through our solar system
 further than my teacher can—to the moon,
 white hot singeing through the sky.

5

Sundays stuck inside church,
 the Bible busies everyone else
 while I daydream myself out-
 side. I imagine my hair
 snagging on a thorn,
 wavering there until a bird weaves
 a strand of it into her nest.
 I've no dominion
 over the birds in Wild Walk,
 nor over any living thing.

6

They only say the government
 owns this land, this land
 without purpose. Nor can God
 claim it, I don't think. It's just me
 swaying along on swollen calves,
 playing tag with the butterflies
 or dogpaddling in the wind.

7

Out in Wild Walk, before you
 the world rolls in a tapestry of brush.
 Nothing holds back
 clouds. They rush past
 or just drift, sloppily as you please.

The Dreams of Someone Else

If sleep eludes, says legend, you're awake
inside the dreams of someone else. Sleepless,
I sit up in bed to watch you slumber.
As your gentle mouth ungraciously moves
in mastication, I behold the dreams
in which you slowly chew me—

But why?

To spit me out? To taste my flavor? Or
to perch above my half-digested frame?
Mashed, trapped, I await my release, my turn
to eat—or dream.

Deep Freeze

Looking down, I see I'm swollen
as if with child. I'm without.
Usually, menorrhea promises
enough to avoid fondling
the Woman of Willendorf;
but the heavy blood floods
my insides even now, richly
bathing the uterus and ovaries,
meat that ices over, damaged
and useless, abandoned at the bottom
of a deep freeze.

My stomach is still distended, they
say; some spots, black and small,
grew there. A brood of pups
nursing, they could be seen
nestled safely against me,
soothed like lips melting
ice chips. I provided
for those cells.
I shared my body
with them, played host
to those disrespectful
squatters. While they flourished
I put myself on bed rest until,
clenching my teeth
and asshole together, I sweat
out my prayers,
crying for the end of it.

But doctors have had to kill them,
the only life I can count on to fill me.
Maybe it's for the best.
Those dirty little cells cheated,
taking out the competition—
so I can't let them
reap rewards. I can't.

On the toilet, I start
pushing, pushing. I remember
my breathing and try to squeeze
anything, any type of thing
from me; I fight through the anesthesia,
scraping thick ice sheets off a window
with my body's edges so the light just
might break through, and I struggle
to release a single golden stream.
But it doesn't come.

Twenty-Year-Old Male Virgin Seeks Any Christian

A found poem from Yahoo! Answers

Twenty-year-old male virgin, why not just
pretend? What would a cashier think
about a dude, an angry hippy whose eyes half
hide behind shades, an ice cream cone
on his head, buying non-
lubricated condoms? At parties the girls—
apes with breasts carrying shopping bags,
pregnant Tinkerbells bumping
bellies—always rub my chest.
Do I have the right to be naughty
or to be nice? Or both?

What does it mean to be
crusty—a bat with fat wings,
two gnomes giving each other
a high five then banging
the stumps of their amputated legs
together? A monk with a head
split and big wings?

On my carpet
a white crown image appeared,
thunder
very close to me, then
on the ceiling a bubble landed
and when it burst,
a star shape
suddenly rimmed the top
of my shower. Wow!

What is sexuality? Please
answer. Was it really sent from His holiness,
Jesus? Was it really difficult
for Him to create banana-shaped objects
made of wood
or fur-lined stocks or

hanging chairs that turn?
Two seahorses

dissolving, an alien mouse about to
dive off a dismembered
vagina, thirteen angels whose coronas
fluff out their heads
tearing a young man
apart—twenty-year-old male
virgin, why not just pretend?

Cut Short

Missing you is like long hair
cut short: squeezing out
too much shampoo
when I lather now with only
half, hands plunging past
ends where I expect more

but stroke only empty air.
I ruminate on whether,
grown out, I'd have achieved
a lustrous mane or if nothing
ever could have halted my split
ends—I'll never know
what could have been,
a month lost

for every half
inch, a year
total. I could shave
these hairs
down
to no-
thing but still
it wouldn't, could-
n't clip
you.

Touch

Without the pressure
of your hand pressing
mine, warming things
we once held between
our palms, kissing—
without the support
your chest cushions
under my head,
or the promise
of bronzing you like baby shoes
that never walk away,

I regress, deserted
in a Romanian orphanage
crowded with mint condition
babies: periodically wiped gleaming
clean but never surprised by
peek-a-boo, hardly
touched—great quality,
in theory.

The days pass. No sky
inside to show it and no outside
for us wards. Workers only deliver
scheduled meals, salt that rolls off
my dry tongue. Waiting,

my vacant eyes rove
the walls as if they're TV sets
that tuned to static ever since
my mind retired
from screenwriting. Silence
blots every child's gaping mouth
and soon renders me tender-
throated. Without squeaking,
my body squats low and makes
a rocking chair that tips stiffly forward
and back.

Yet, I'm too much a child here
with my stunted limbs.
They reach no longer
for the cure a mother's lips create
—not in her breast,
but in mine.

Now touch stings shut my eyes
as if a brief, sharp wave
climbs from the ocean, slamming me
full in the face and,
knocked to the ground, I strain to recall
the gentle wash of waters
I once knew.

It Isn't about Skin

I want you to understand,
although most of our classmates
wouldn't. Most people wouldn't.
So, please, let me buy you a drink.

Don't get me wrong. I'm
no racist. I mean, Omar? I love Omar,
or I loved Omar. Whatever happened to him
I don't know. An Afghan Security Guard
at our FOB, he was good:
he smoked and smiled,
posed with us men for photos.
At the end of the jig I taught him
he would, *could*, pirouette
but his eyes, the eyes of an ex-
mujahideen, they would stare at you
like cold stones from some lake bottom,
a bottom hard to reach
even with your toes.

I miss him.
At home, though,
whenever one of them
comes at me, comes
out of nowhere—even
the girls, like those sisters
at school, masked
under ghostly burqas
so I can't tell
what's hiding
underneath, can't see
what's in their eyes
while they look out, behind that cloth,
sophisticated flies' eyes
that don't belong here—
when they enter
into the classroom. I swear,
it's a door-kicking mission, except

I'm the one
inside.
When these people don't trickle in
softly as sand in an hourglass,
it always catches me off-guard.
It's like I'm blasted
by a sandstorm the very color of their skin.

But it isn't about skin. Once,
I'd just met my father at Catalina's Tavern,
down the road from my place, you know, over on Rt. 2,
and in walked this black guy, just
some black guy. I didn't care about that.
We kept playing cards.
The black guy came up to me, dangling
a cigarette like dusty chalk
between his lips, asking for a light
the way no American ever has
or ever will—his fingers mimicking
a match strike
and suddenly I saw the Arabic tattooed
between his thumb and pointer finger—
so I knew he didn't belong here,

and we were both in the desert
where the slightest thing out of
place made my heart race, like the rocks
in the roads for steering traffic or, sometimes,
just for directing our Humvees over IEDs,
leaving everything broken in the streets.

My throat ran dry. I swallowed sand, drowning
in a lake, sinking to the bottom. From there I glowered
up at the black man in the bar
through cold stone eyes while I dropped lower,
lower. I couldn't breathe.
I tell you, I couldn't even
open my mouth to cry out. Just had to
leave. Ever since, I've been trying—
trying to get back home.

In the Exam Room

Ten thousand or more came. They carried
 some of them on their backs. You're a hibakusha,
 so you already know. With all the blood
 and the burns, I shut down save for the
 swab, the daub, the bind.

Through glassless windows I saw them—ants
 dotting the streets, courtyard,
 driveway, growing larger, crowding
 the front steps, every staircase, every hall,
 swarming the rooms of the hospital,
 crawling all over me howling,
 “Doctor Sasaki!”
 “Sensei!”
 “Doctor!”

You and I will always remember
 that August day, the flash—
 burning incandescent white, momentarily
 blinding before showing us
 horror we can never
 unsee—the flash that pulled my shoes
 from beneath my standing feet, the same flash
 that decimated the Red Cross.
 Windows blew in, blood flew out,
 ceilings trapped patients under doctors
 under beds, everything flung everywhere,
 the tetchy patient I was testing for syphilis
 suddenly dead. The coworker I left in the lab a minute before
 dead. Dead, the young morning
 nurse, Hiroko, with her bright hair.

Swab, daub, bind. Swab, daub, bind.
 Still, after all these years, that thoughtless mantra
 pushes my nimble fingers again to numbness
 over the skull-shaped keloid I find
 jutting out now in profile
 from your right shoulder blade.

But your wound is nothing new, as again
I find my fingers in the exam room,
shaking themselves of the memory burned
into this flesh—rekindled now.

I say, *Try to forget. No longer can we wage wars
on keloid scars.* Before, I cut them down
only to watch their ghosts return, full-bodied,
lying on the level ground where they fell
like burial mounds. No longer
can we call for those who dropped the bomb

to hang. *Keloids usually shrink
up if you don't
retaliate, if
you find peace.*

Final Words of Perry Smith

It's a hell of a dirty thing to kill someone
the way you're about to kill me.
With inmates' photos I've replicated
mummified relics in paint: six-year-old
smiles, or baby blues
before genetics and UV light
make their scheduled appearances.
I've had time to think, too, and I want to say
that Dick and I don't—not even Andrews—
deserve such a death.

I watched each of you follow me
up these steps with nothing
but your eyes. Sickening. Real sickening.
Full of bloodlust but your feet
stationary, grounded, ready to cut out
over the dirt floor of this dank prison
warehouse, out into the rising sun.
My father and sister had already left,
before the trial even started.

I'd like to tell someone, anyone,
I'm sorry but no apology can soften
fired clay
and now you want to lock me
in the kiln. See, you're all tribal boys
under your three-piece suits, burning
for a warrior's scalp—a war trophy,
manly—to slip in peacock plumage.
A head
for four Clutter heads.

Thought I was too sour for Twelve Steps
on a Peruvian lily-lined path?
For its productive ethics, apologies, higher
power? They're not enough, you said.
Ice it. So finally you sentenced me

to the thirteen steps, to these gallows.

Someone has to pay for what's done.
But remember, Roman soldiers,
when you drive your nails into me,
fixing me to the beams; when my feet,
like bananas, dangle and bend,
just beginning to yellow and sweeten
before you yank them down,
remember maybe—just maybe—
I had something to offer.

B-52

You don't stir, you don't
shake, you build a B-52, a layered
shooter served neat: one part Kahlúa,
one part Irish Cream, one part
Grand Marnier, each twenty milliliters,
these ingredients' relative densities maintain
three defined layers.

*One part friend, maybe
it's the teasing elbow but that curves
to another part, to his hand—the one
that, heat-seeking, dragged
itself over my hand only to fly back
as if burned, the one that
playfully slapped my leg until it stung
with an itch. My tingling thigh he
scratched, hungrily clawing—there,
his hand lay palm down,
twitching. Was I still itching,
too?*

You pour the Kahlúa first,
spilling it into the lonely bottom
of the shot glass. This layer
looks rich, muddy enough
to support the whole stack of the
cocktail, burdening
its back.

*I'll stay with you tonight,
I said, if we sleep
in separate
spaces. You can't
expect me to keep
crawling into
your silk cover
cocoon, spinning
in warmth and growth.*

*I have to emerge,
escape, before
we do any real
damage. The world
judges, says I am ugly
inside there.*

Next comes the Irish Cream
you trickle over a cold spoon, flowing faster,
more steadily, than a leaky faucet's dribble,
yet gently so it rests on the Kahlúa
without upsetting the lower layer.
It tastes milky, sweet,
but its sting is strong.

*He said he was touching
me too much. I didn't say
anything.*

Topping the shot glass as it slopes off
the spoon, the Grand Marnier
comes last, concluding
the segregated shot.
It glows
orange topaz, flavored
from bitter orange.

*We didn't sip, we drank
the layers apart quickly
'til they tangled
in our bodies. Shaken,
we felt stirred.*

Earl Reborn

His sleeping face, a lotion
savory when applied before,
commingled his father
and me. Only alive back then,
roaming in my thoughts,
he concluded the way curtains
shut to leave rooms tight,
leaden in darkness, so you're left
crushed like empty cans.

Five hundred years,
a full phoenix lifespan,
I gave him in my dreams
and as many lives to live there,
becoming slick-
skinned one day, then sprouting
scraggly down that tickled
my nose when I pressed it
to his head. Other days
I'd find him
sour-colored,
only knowing surroundings
planate and shadeless
as a desert when I'd return
from hunting mirages for dinner.
And the next he'd be robust,
fed on fruits, nuts, and what,
in faith, I swore was ambrosia,
though none of it enough.

Poor Earl ended before he began.
I couldn't composite his face
without his father. I heard his cries,
his phoenix song, somber
as I searched for its beauty.
But the sound deluged my ears.

Then from his nest he flamed, *higher*,

higher, the blaze matching his tail,
mingling scarlet and gold.
With Earl gone,
his fertile ashes will hold this
space until the new one
takes his place. And whenever
that one comes, it will be as though
no other could have been, not ever.

Origin

Can I help you he said when I my face
 bloodless my hands palsied eyes
 flicking to the side only half
 committed to stay stepped into
 his office I've got questions I said so
 I certainly

hope so the wooden legs of
 his chair my jumpy legs welcomed it's
 about coordinate planes I said and
 he relaxed I said I don't understand how to plot the
 origin I said how can zero zero be somewhere
 anywhere where everything else
 starts this void intersecting nothing
 and nothing where shiny and thick we place
 a graphite dot to make it like a real place a
 village practically on a map infinity's lines
 crisscrossing
 drawn precisely like on a narrow
 dirt road you can even go
 there passing women with berry-stained
 fingers men angling crooked
 spears crouching low the path stretching
 ever onward either direction off
 the page the same
 way distant mountains lose
 stippled treetops smoothing over their
 toothed sides brushstroked blue while
 blurring into sky

have you tried talking to a priest
 he said no I said I don't want
 a priest I want
 answers no I want numbers I want
 calculations

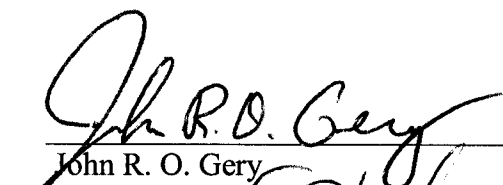
we waited we watched each other
 until I sank lower under the crippling shift

in gravity into his chair where
I saw nothing left
he could tell me no one
had anything left to tell me
he said is there anything else

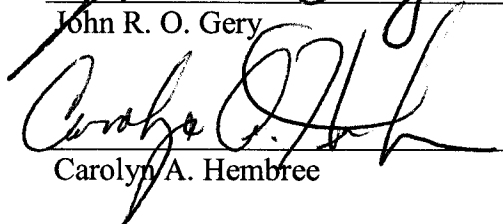
APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Lauren Walter has successfully completed her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:


Anything Else



John R. O. Gery Director of Thesis



Carolyn A. Hembree for the Department



Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar for the University
Honors Program

April 25, 2013
Date