

Spring 5-15-2015

E to Em

Elizabeth M. Hogan
University of New Orleans, wispycloud@gmail.com

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E to Em

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by
Elizabeth Hogan
B.A. Agnes Scott College, 2004

May, 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my thesis director and mentor Carolyn Hembree for believing in me, for showing me how to let go, and for bringing me back down to earth.

Thank you to my mentor and teacher John Gery for always supporting me, for championing all poets, and for reminding us that poetry is dangerous.

Thank you to Nancy Easterlin for joining my thesis committee without knowing anything about me; it's been an honor to work with you.

To my poet friends who've survived the past three years with me—Nordette Adams, Christian Coleman, Kia Groom, Roxy Seay, and Ben Sines—thank you for your insight, humor, friendship, and invaluable feedback on my poems.

To my professor and friend Niyi Osundare, thank you for your enduring inspiration, for reminding me not to leave myself or my community behind.

Thank you to those who helped me find my way into this M.F.A. program: Clay Delery, Mary Cain, Nancy Boutilier, Wade Hymel, and Alan Craig.

Thank you to my parents and family for your love and support of my creative endeavors.

And thank you to my wife Lilli for always encouraging me to be brave, and for loving me through my three years of graduate school.

Finally, I would like to thank *Maple Leaf Rag* for publishing an earlier version of the poem, "At the Soccer Field."

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It's Not Enough To Be King: A Preface

I suppose, as a poet, among my fears can be counted the deep-seated uneasiness surrounding the possibility that one day it will be revealed that I consecrated myself to an imbecility.

—Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*

I feel most irreverent invoking these words. Unlike Mary Ruefle, a poet with eleven collections and the Iowa Poetry Prize to her name, I have yet even to complete three years as a poet in training, let alone make poetry my life's work. However, not a day passes without my contemplating poetry and its function. American ideals of material success and productivity, not to mention the growing clamor of popular culture, often lead me to question poetry's place and effectiveness. On the other hand, I stand in awe of masterful writers who achieve Emily Dickinson's mark of the true poet, to "Distill amazing sense / from Ordinary Meanings." While awestruck, I ascertain little reason to add my words to the mix, to shake dust onto the mountain. Ultimately, it is this self-consciousness as not only a poet but a person that drives my inquiry into poetry's purpose.

Before applying to an M.F.A. program, I discovered in myself a startling capacity for resignation and self-doubt. The catalyst for this discovery was a dream job offer and training in the field of wilderness therapy, an offer I promptly lost when the organization learned of my sexual orientation. After that experience, at my behest, my wife and I moved back home to small-town Louisiana, for us a stifling location: to this day, we remain the only "out" inter-racial lesbian couple I have come across. Feeling defeated, I could neither budge nor find the strength to apply to a less homophobic organization, so I slipped into a state of hopelessness. It seemed I would never find my place in the world, and I employed theories of death and impermanence

from Buddhist teachings to justify my resigned attitude. All personal, social, and monetary ambition appeared meaningless, given the guarantee of mortality. At the age of 30, having given up, I latched onto broad philosophical concepts as opposed to facing hard facts, the grit of my life.

During this time, unexpectedly, I re-discovered my inclination toward poetry, and began to write short, abstract lyrics. I found freedom in poetic line, while noticing that poetry as a medium compliments the austerities of Eastern philosophy I had come to value. Simultaneously, I began to write and perform songs, which helped me manage the emotional aftermath of my wrongful termination. My wife and I formed a small-town rock band, and while on stage, I embodied a stronger, rebellious version of myself. Indeed, I wielded multiple voices through two powerful mediums of expression: music and poetry. When I remembered that poetry could, like music, be rhythmic and emphatic, I decided to apply to an M.F.A. program to honor and explore my creative disposition.

What I did not fully understand upon entering graduate school was how writing poetry affords me the opportunity to turn back toward my life, its details and flaws. It occurs to me now that I was and still am afraid of being human. I am afraid of being imperfect. My perfectionism derives from, of course, social conditioning, more specifically, my introverted nature and my ability as a child to please adults. Easily quieted and always ready to perform on cue, I learned to associate self-worth with validation from others. I still do. However, as for any people-pleaser (my Buddhist life-coach tells me I am “hell-bent” on not being a person), the need for approval never lets up, and the persistent self-neglect can create stifling internal conflicts. Pulling my head out of the clouds, out of philosophy, I began to look at the “gristle and membrane” of my life, as Adrienne Rich puts it. I explored my childhood conflicts, an exploration that surfaces in this

manuscript, in the poems, “The Days She Can’t Remember,” “At the Soccer Field,” and “Why Would a Girl Write on Her Ball?” The latter two poems not only recall debilitating social rejections I experienced in the athletic arena, but also challenge gender constructions that quash self-expression—a young girl’s self-expression—which may or may not gain her the validation she seeks from others.

Recounting my specific life experiences through poetry provides me a creative venue for exploring social politics, my previous course of study as a history undergraduate at a women’s liberal arts college. At Agnes Scott, I started to identify the impact of social categorization on individuals other than myself, but I had yet to closely scrutinize its impact on me. Writing poetry as a graduate student helped me pick up where I had left off. For a young, middle-class, female, white American such as me, the tasks to gain validation are nearly impossible to achieve: marry a man, not a woman; bear children; support the power structure that perpetuates racism, patriarchy, and materialism; make something of your life, but nothing that risks financial security and results in burdening someone else. No apparent weaknesses. However, a woman’s job is to be weak, resulting in a conundrum, rendering ultimate success impossible. Though not under the same degree of social pressure as people of color, or even earlier white female poets such as Dickinson and Rich, I am angered by racism and white privilege, angered by sexism and homophobia, and angered by myself. Even as a perfectionistic people-pleaser, I will ultimately fail. After years of passivity, I more recently have uncovered my fiery flip-side, a desire to shirk limiting, narrow, and ultimately self-destructive social expectations.

The poems in this manuscript often embody this extreme of my personality’s polarity—the angry and resistant poet. In the poem, “The Bible,” I reject the Bible because I want to demonstrate how growing up Catholic did not inspire me to believe in God. Furthermore, I

remember a friend once telling me how radical it would be if students never read Shakespeare (incendiary words!), and her notion inspired my incendiary poem. In “Me Wild,” I mean to rebuke my perfectionism, which can become tiresome, not to mention manipulative in its own right. Rhythmic inflection and rhyme guide this poem as I seek to challenge the academic or poetic expectation for the perfectly rendered poem, Flaubert’s *le mot juste*. Though “Me Wild” surges with assertiveness, it stems directly from a dearth of self-confidence and, as I see it, becomes a prayer for primordial essence to rise and fill me as I compose.

Although I have touched upon poetry’s transformative power as an M.F.A. candidate, I have often also halted in the face of my self-doubt, telling myself, “If you’re going to dedicate yourself to an ‘imbecility,’ then you’d better be damned good at it.” Of course, this only complicates matters: I resist writing, even though I know that writing good poetry requires utmost time and courage—facing the page day in and day out. Burdened with unrealistic expectations of myself, I have produced strained poetry that tries too hard, and this unnatural strain is never lost on my teachers or classmates. I have had to learn to let go, or in Rilke’s words, “to grow and ripen like a tree which does not hurry the flow of its sap.” Frustration still lingers, often inspiring me only to ransack my office and flip the paper-strewn desk. In the wake of this frustration, however, two forms appeared: Emily Dickinson and the epistolary prose poem. Writing to Dickinson, a poet who resisted conformity at the expense of notoriety, has removed the pressure of audience. Essentially, Dickinson is my apostrophic figure, an imagined listener who cannot answer. Therefore, I can choose to reveal myself without her judgment and challenge her without being challenged back; of course, the scope of her work poses an enormous challenge. Though irreverent at times, perhaps to resist her influence, as in the poems “(i don’t feel well)” and “(kung-fu),” I have, nonetheless, the utmost respect for Dickinson. She

did not turn away from her humanity, but rather embraced her self-described “barefoot rank” as opposed to becoming a more prominent member of Amherst society; she honored her voice with time and dedication. I challenge her to make sure she is real (ironic, yes), and not as easily crumpled as I am when someone questions my ability.

Composing prose poems, in condensed paragraphs, has removed the pressure of line, which I had come to equate with delivery of something pristine and meaningful—an expression of perfection that I could not accomplish. Additionally, the epistolary form, as an exchange between two individuals, provides me with ground to explore gender identity and its trappings on a more personal level. In the poem, “(sometimes death),” I refer to Dickinson’s gender as her greatest limit, a stopper in her mind. Admittedly, I have to engage with the possibility of self-projection onto Dickinson, for even as a woman of the twenty-first century, I find myself thinking that if I had not been born a woman, I would be more successful, stronger, and less easily influenced by others (of course, I would have a host of other problems). Insecurity inherited by virtue of being born female is the “resurrecting doubt” I refer to in the first poem of the manuscript (also written to Dickinson) entitled “(pearl).” In the same poem, I posit that “it’s not enough to be king.” As a child, I was a tomboy, more often than not playing with boys and aspiring to the stereotypically masculine traits of strength and stoicism. Whatever strength I showed, however, was not enough to be perceived as strong—I was still female. More importantly, I did not feel strong; I felt weaker than boys and, later, men.

Call it a strange twist of fate that women now can quite literally choose their gender and physically alter their bodies. I can become a man, but becoming a man feels empty to me. While studying gender, I softened towards men and masculinity, accepting the fact that men are not the enemy. They also suffer due to gender expectations and hierarchy. “(the poem when born)”

considers the socialization and damage done to young people deemed “boys” who must become “men.” A perfect human being in American society would need to be white, rich, smart, successful, heterosexual, and male—the kingly ideal. Ultimately, however, being a king is *not* enough for a fully embodied life, because it too results in suffering and ostracism. Moreover, it’s completely fabricated, fake.

For me, becoming king would enact a self-betrayal. I have not granted myself, this body as it stands, due credit. I have cast patriarchal eyes on it and internalized sexism. Yes, I am still working on accepting myself as a woman. Fortunately in my studies, I also discovered the poet Laura (Riding) Jackson. (Riding) Jackson’s *The Word Woman*, published posthumously in 1998, describes “women as strangers in the country of man,” and considers female identity (truly) unknown, since it has been defined by man and exploited to uplift, if not foil, man. On reading her words, “Exactly I and exactly the world / Fail to meet by a moment, and a word,” I felt a great release. I understand (Riding) Jackson, along with Dickinson and Rich, to be striving through her poetry to understand the world beyond separation and dualities, including the gender binary. This discovery challenges me to believe in possibilities for myself as a woman, which I explore in “Do Not Compare Me,” while continuing to try to expose the social misconstruction of woman, as in “For Example.” In one of my final poems to Dickinson, “(war of attrition),” I want to express that I accept womanhood not simply as a strength, but as an invitation to explore the unknown, “the darkness,” thus connecting dualities of light and dark, man and woman to limitations of the mind.

Still, I can’t dismiss the question, “why write poetry?” Can poetry change people? W. H. Auden’s inflammatory words, “poetry makes nothing happen,” frequently come to mind. Posed to Dickinson, this question for me often invokes violence, the counterpoint to language, because

violence—quite noticeably—*makes* things happen (even as it also makes them fall apart).

Defined in terms of gender, language equals femininity as non-violent self-expression, while war equals masculinity. A poem can reverse this binary, as for example, when the women hold the guns, as in “(bayonet)” “(gun)” and “(dressed in black),” in order to overthrow the stereotype of the passive female, test whether she can stand it, and show her strength in terms a patriarchal society can understand. Ours is still a nation at war. Violence still equals power. Though commensurate with my own self-doubt, my testing of woman through poems to Dickinson has reminded me of two notions: women are strong, and violence is inevitably limited or worse. Similarly, Dickinson’s own “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” expresses these two notions by establishing an internal conflict within a speaker as gun who both boasts, “Non stir the second time - / On whom I lay a Yellow Eye – ,” and laments “I have but the power to kill, / Without – the power to die – .” In a patriarchal society, the weightiest words would be likened to a gun, as, for that matter, the pen has been likened to the sword; however, Dickinson, in claiming that power, also undermines it, revealing its limitations.

Ultimately, I know that poetry itself has nothing to do with *my* self-consciousness; it seems unfair to call poetry’s value into question time and again. Yet what it provides me is invaluable: a path for exorcising self-doubt and understanding myself as a citizen of the world. Moreover, after exploring the details of my life, I returned to Eastern philosophy and the austere nature of poetry that attracted me to the form in the first place. Lao Tzu intimates that “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao / The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” I know that the words are not what I’m seeking and realize that what I think of poetry has changed very little over time: a poem presents a snapshot of something eternal, a snippet of consciousness, which in turn reveals something about the fundamental essence of life. I meditate

on this connection in the *ars poetica*, “Margins,” and also in “The Wrecking,” which invokes the poet as vessel for primordial, clashing elements (not stationary), and responds to Rich’s poem, “Diving into the Wreck.” It seems those masters, poets or otherwise, who spend their lives looking closely at existence agree that the truth expands, moves, vibrates, and can only be experienced, neither summed up nor pinned down.

However, for any individual struggling with the social limitations and the violence of race, gender, sexuality, religion, or ability, grandiose proclamations about truth and poetry can feel distant. Graciously, poets throughout history have sought to bring opposing forces together: individual and community, human and universe, poet and reader. While I often think I have a duty to impact the world, I am growing to understand that my own inclination toward lyric self-reflection is not a weakness but an acceptable place to start. It’s enough to be human, it’s enough to be myself. Whether by poetry, another art form, or day-to-day interactions with other human beings, I have to put myself out there, to “raise it up,” as Rich writes, imperfect as it is:

it will hang by the flying buttresses you gave it
—hulk of mist, rafter of air, suspension bridge of mica
helm of sweat and dew—
but you have to raise it up there, you
have a brutal thing to do.

And, in contemplating Ruefle’s fear, poetry as imbecility, not to mention my own self-doubt, I am—surprisingly—uncovering a source of strength: concern. Underneath doubt lies concern, and I have great concern for people and poetry. I want them not only to persist, but to get along, to inform and understand one another, and, occasionally, to perform alchemy. Toward this goal I aim, and for this I continue to write.

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar.
—Maxine Hong Kingston

I.

(pearl)

dear Em. it's not enough to be king, to shuck the jewels and their names for queen. i want out of this resurrecting doubt, our inheritance—time to heat the sword and scar the line—Em, i want to be terrible. to fling gender from my mind. an itch worse than sand, yet nursed in nacre because oysters can't see. help me dig it out before i cave, become another's thing. or worse—king. in hubris, i'd cleave to a woman's neck, then she'd dissolve froth-like into the sea. please, Em. no one cares if we vanish until we've disappeared. you know this. it ends now—here.

Do Not Compare Me

Do not compare me to your weakest strand.
I am hole, not hand—neither finger nor
man—nor exception to the rules of your
clan, even when you think (maybe) I am.
How to measure this terrible space? Ram
a cannon in its face! First, sponge bore
and muzzle-load, then grip helm and starboard
turn from dust's spark, let igneous waste and

BOOM! Listen for an answer—croon or cry—
quiet mutinous thoughts in mind; for though
death would surely do it, the void defined,
you'd rather see the thing itself—up close,
chiseled, like a boy's stone thrown at the sky
(while your comparing only makes things worse).

For Example

I've never seen a woman hanging from a cross
only rarely from a noose,

more often from a pole or trapeze—
a swing!—or those invisible strings

that make it seem she's flying
safely

above ground,
where I've seen her carried,

pinned, rather,
to a man's lapel, lacquered,

then shelved with his trophies and stuffed
animals: he plays as he likes

but she turns up tattered, split-
lipped in a ditch somewhere they take pictures

then hang them in the air where
they tell me not to go

wandering alone.

(automobile)

dear Em. i envy you your peace. may i introduce the automobile? a wild brood of machine—rail car run off its tracks, wagon sans horse—carrying humans and their ignorance across territories. all this while smearing its scent—its noise—like peanut butter into the quietest cracks of the forest. injury to insult, if you ask me. but don't ask, and never mind that peanut butter makes eating stickier. Em—mere practicality? and now woods churned into houses, oceans pricked for black water. if only you could see it lap the miles, and our speedy faces to boot, vacillating between sneers and jeers: *i've gone further, i'm much faster*. truly, the ability to adapt ensures tragic survival.

Me Wild

Give me *me wild*—not just
le mot juste—give me fists
to crack swollen pen over stiff

cloth, relieve myth of blank
page; give me fingers to descend
unbeguiled into the dampness

and craze, lifting sheet to hang-
dry against blanched desert wind,
to billow then drag a ship
across graveled sand.

Give me *me wild*
—not
the stillborn voice, not
the furtive hiss

of air—give me cloud's breath, nimbus,
the outer wail of atmosphere;
surrender lightning-thunder gestalt,

the bellowing blaze; explode
all fear-hinged molecules of
thought; let the tongue spit

“we are here,
wrought.”

Give me
me wild.

The Bible

I do not read the Bible:
I am beyond charming snakes
and not so imprudent
as to keep one for a pet;
the green mamba may be docile, so I'm told,
but I would not have it rest on my nightstand.

I would not open Medusa's eyes
dead or alive—I am not Perseus!
No bride chained to a rock of death,
nor Kraken to fossilize,
with or without the blessings
of gods.

I cannot compel it to cure savages,
homos, and slaves, nor employ it
to justify manners aimed at the grave.
And I would not descend into Hades
in hopes of extracting some blossom
of goodness, bastion
of light.

Simply put,
I do not read the Bible:
it is a matter of health
insurance.

(sometimes death)

all that's required. your uncommon mind, sharpened without tumbling, amethyst sprung from the southwest corners of that cave. few could glean while you lived; now, there's no end to the mining: pieces of you in hands, on shelves, in attics and museums. as for your executors, the excavators of jewels—would you call them family? or rather a grimace of rock oozing the words: for your protection. good for escaping civil war, bad for wanting a woman (a woman to love).

Sonnet

What I know: that you can rape a corpse.
Not my corpse—but a woman's. That's what I
gleaned from the picture show, that's what I saw
on the screen. Someone wrote that scene.
Others filmed, rehearsed—*who will do*
the fucking? who'll play dead? Many
apparently, pushed it through, producers wrestled
to see it through, breaking pennies and each
other's arms, the actress and actor later strolled arm-in-
arm for viewers to enjoy and enjoin their
friends to *hey, come check this out*
our vested interest in human
potential.

(lament)

fine. call me uncalled. i am, and not only from lack of winter—try lack of plagues, degradation. (i got my shorts and my shots.) but don't blow me off, Em, they still call us women. and though i'm no longer surprised, it still hurts. reminds me of all the ice skating i didn't get to do, that some ponds never freeze. down south, i weathered my youth listening to ghosts, the couriers of yellow fever and mosquitoing lynch mobs. never mastered the hard fall. hell, when I finally set skate to ice, too much slipping, not enough cutting. you can't think and fly at the same time—forget, let go, and glide. but certain thoughts won't leave me alone, slip me up from the inside.

II.

Memories of Oak Street

How small we were
when we ran through the clover,
crushed up the grass:

light, trembling for a seed,
seed opening, spilling green
for love; small

when we fell into the open
cloak of another's eyes into the day
and could no more say,

I have not been seen

than we could march
under sun—singed
or under a cloak—stifled.

We grew up
and down:

roots
digging for the germ, germ
splitting, hurtling branches
toward sky; no more asking

am I seed or light,

only growing for the chance
to return to where love
missed us—

in clover, in grass.

Why Would a Girl Write on Her Ball?

Why would a girl write on her ball? She might write her name, or something else small—maybe a star, five points in all, weaving its tiers within a stitched, leathered wall—natural etchings, love for the ball. Yet something this quiet can deafen a yard; what if that love, spelled so with stars, found her unready when boys studied it hard: *who drew on this ball? Who drew on his ball? And why would a boy draw on his ball?* The silence would quicken her breathing, unsteady; forgetting that voices don't have to be deadly, sensing that what most matters seems small, squinting, she'd ask: *Am I a boy? Is that my ball?*

(kung-fu)

dear Em. the less i know about you the better. masters (kung-fu masters, notwithstanding), they all fail in the end. one of the finest! bolstered by an opium habit—it's those fucking pedestals of salt. or are they pillars, rather, and what an image—the person and the paradigm, disintegrating at once. yes, how graceful indeed, to block and kick, the solid yet supple stance primed to protect male genitalia. think of it, Em—if you have something to lose, you have a place to start. so where's our kung-fu? crouched between looking and looking back, hiding with our weaknesses even if we have none, sparing our successors our dirty secrets, instead surprising them with clean volumes of poems? we know the force of their mistakes, but won't allow for our own.

At the Soccer Field

Nothing here but the feeling
of not having arrived. Inhaling
the wide green, I can see further
than before—the trees state their boundaries;
the grass, mown over for years,
has forgotten how tall it can grow.

I picture twelve boys and myself
on our first day of camp, at attention,
eye level with the drill sergeant's pockets
hefty (with our parents' money)
while he sniffs our ranks:

“You have
ten seconds
to complete
the first task.”

He sweeps down the line, aiming,
then battering each boy's ball
into the field, their eyes stimulated
by the distance between, until
he finds me, my body unlike the others.

To which he smiles, grabs, fakes
a kick, then sloughs my
ball three feet away. And the boys laugh
with him. Until, rotating his pockets
back toward the group, he spits:

“Now go fetch.”

Without question, the boys
dash into the field. I unclasp
my legs and deliver my ball
back to the line.
Afterwards, I remember puzzling
at the sour stench
of the watering station.

And the second day,
when I cried in the car.

Now, I keep my own regimen
with the green, where depressed cleat-marks
attempt to level with the ground—
the old ritual of reintegration.

But I come alone, always,
to smell the faintness of
memory, to weigh what I know
against the whiffs. Sometimes,
I visit them in other towns—
the empty fields—to find
every empty field the same
or perhaps uncover,
snoozing beneath it all,
the lurid love of the game.

(i don't float)

i don't float around too well, seems i'm upside down. even on a boat, my balance never right: knees floppy, chest tight. the years of distraught finally gave way to testing limbs, mulling mechanics, deliberating courage—but alas, i remain tide-tossed, heaving gray. conditioned to, nonetheless, after clinging to the mast, have another go. try until trying doesn't help; know and then knowing never helps. might i as well avast—stop swimming—sink? onto the path of exhale, the long, steady drop? physics won't correct me—either i'm anchor or this is shott. yes, i'll let go to what i'm good for, past the pale blue strata to a quieter, denser dark.

Dark Moon

Few are moved by your face
to steal horses or thrills.

Dressaging across sunlight
to an unknown will, you

remain ever-stark.

“New Moon,” is uttered
with no such goodness:

a shirking inky absence,
your accomplice to the dark.

Few have the mettle
to move your piece in this game—

no moon,

Dark Moon

—to dredge up that light,
the dense night’s stain,

thick bogs of stars
awaiting
their names.

The Wrecking

Not *what*—never *what*. Not rhythmic, directive. Not looking up the word, “directive.” Participate: not in the looking, but in the wrecking. All that, written down, that’s the wreck—over. This is the wrecking. Its splitting, yours. Its sinking, yours. Its failure this failure. Consider: directive means directing. You’re afraid of *this*. The wrecking more than the wreck—*this* more than *what*. Spell the difference: *this* controls you, out of control; *what* pulls, you follow, same direction. *What* rescues from *this*. Rescues till you’re gone, no one here—no one to participate—nothing to wreck.

The Days She Can't Remember

There must have been silence
and trees
or wind.

She was not abused,
but tender:

Plentiful tears fell
to invisible hands—visible child,
stop crying.

Feelings the binding element,
she knows she
happened—

STOP
TALKING

(spell the words but do not
speak define the terms but do not
utter raise your hand but do not
answer shake to speech forever)—and

she is still
a fresh pressed bruise.

See

it there, through cuttings in the page

black ink —marks

mark the spot and black hole beneath

—slits in the page

on a vast black

pupil

re-member me here—

in the hearing and the

here-ing and the

heard.

(bayonet)

yodeling blue; a far-off tree break. dear Em. sometimes i fear the cresting in my chest, the flood into daylight: soldiers flicker to bits in a dry field; pairs of us land in thickets, hiding; and the grass, swollen with heat, dares to collapse. wooden, a bayonet appears in my hands as a boy falls to it. heavier than salt. and sudden. i squint straight once he's gone, find no one survives. i fear someday the ground will remember its dusty feet and, like your wounded deer, spring at the sky.

III.

Better Any

Immeasurable
distance
everything
spurts.
Quivers
of
arrows
or
valves
of the
heart?
Brine
pools,
collected
from
the hard
wrung
fight:
everything
a terror.
What
and do I
any
better?

And if in looking, I find you are not

Sometimes we fight within—break glass,
throw chairs—our thoughts like fists, pounding,
you just don't get me; stall instead
recount disasters of the past—
a stew with too much salt, a miscue
at your mom's, or that aquarium
where algae invaded the reef;
reflect what heat and brine can do
and to a body—*nothing's*

safe, you said, not even it—the shark
—its gray slashed to gills—cuts from a
bottle? Or pane? Recall crude marks
that bear what's pink and bare; recall
we don't look closely anymore.

(i don't feel well)

dear Em. so my body's a timer, set to ring but i can't say when. or whether it'll be rung, like that woman making plum jelly—all they found was her arm. i should tell you the fly also died. found him next to my rocker. now to clarify—he a he or she—well, that's just nonsense. like myth or woman in white. right, well, you know what i prefer—pretty prideful when i say fuck jesus. (i'm sure you wanted to but he's old news, and you know his corpse hangs out in hallways.) and the parents—poaching their children with the watery wine—don't you think someone should step in, attempt to clarify?

Children of the Intentional Community

When Vajra roves the land, he calls lions
from their dens without speaking.
They'd eat him, but for the blues in his chest.
To humans he shouts, *Leave me alone*
from the throat. Startled, they peer deeper,
so he hits trees with sticks. Hard.

Demanding that her demandless mother
twist ivies into a maze about their home,
Karma sits, green-eyed and surrounded,
promising the other children they can have a go.
In a minute, she says, wielding a pocket-sized gizmo,
in which lights, noises, and flashing little people
respond to the rhythm of her thumbs.

Ratna is a tangled child. No one wants to hold him.
Whether breaking or biting, he means loss.
Only after his parents toss gold coins
into their driveway, do the baby-sitters show.
One at a time, they remember to be *softer*
than they were. And where they will always be hard.
Their dingy glass wiped clean, he swims through
as sunlight.

All grownups love Padma, who carves wood
with his father. Padma whose brown brimming eyes
disguise the flames in his mouth: *Mother, what's*
sunyatta? Six years old and they trust him
with knives and high Buddhist teachings
until, surmising he's a kid, he turns terrible
(to blend in).

Buddha watches them for money. Not much,
but a little—enough to keep her fear circled
in salt, safe from the demons.
But when the children try to eat one another,
all she can do is fall asleep on the job:

surely she's dreaming. Upon waking,
she recalls Milarepa, the poet,
who stuck his head in the demon's mouth
to look, if for nothing else, a teaching.

(gun)

knives, swords, arrows, words—give me the gun, the mighty one. i've held out till now, swinging at no one, firing at nothing; noting, of course, how less threatening when written. but call it war or call it art, lands are distant till you get there; the dirt so familiar you could stand—i can handle it. ready to join in their fighting, their dying, i'll fling a few bullets, make worlds back down. never said i could vouch for this one—our violence—hell, even flowers kill when eaten. even poets are supposed to die. no need to think it through, Em—give it up.

The Problem

it rises
and spills
into valuable
emptiness,
submerging necessary
space—
a home, a room, a
lung

it dismantles
and sifts
knowingly, yet
unknowingly
while earth
willingly, yet
unwillingly
yields—
an embankment, a
fjord

it freezes
thaws, and
floats; we need it
falling
down our throats
despite its
emerging
from our eyes, we

need its
surging
to smother—
unmercifully—
fire, and to collect—
mercifully
—into a cup,
a basin, a

lake

it appears to stay, promising
a reflection,
swim, or drink,
while listening
without ears,
until—
ostensibly
—it dries,
and shrinks,
and
disappears

(the poem when born)

the poem when born is not a boy. but it remembers playing as a boy: *get in the game or you're coming out*. it recalls fearing as a boy: *get in the fight or lose face*. it remembers the curse of adults passed through bloody rags and cold packs over eyes wiped clear to save face: *be a man*. everyone memorized the difference. but only some of us became men. only some of us then pressed ourselves into starched coats and marched into metal rain, fine-tuned to: *get in the war or get lost*.

years later, others of us read tales of men carrying out orders from a bigger man with a quicker finger: *shoot the deserter—your friend*. and they do. the poem remembers how men become boys again. but never again, a poem.

(beneath the gale)

my hair floods the ground. i sweep it up with your flies and detect what's coming; first in the mind, then as joints and jaws pop, teeth knock and loosen, i sense always the rocks in fog, forgoing hope they've room for me. these bodies—experiments—evolving or unraveling. if i could but trust my eyes, i might cease needing to see.

an oak tree—one hundred years to mature, one hundred years to learn, to yearn—i touch, on the isle the slave ships smudged, before your birth. the time i think i wish i had. maybe more as i come to know what's happened here, what pulls, and what doesn't appear to slacken—always the sea beneath the gale:

swirling
churning
—gathering
plummeting
—flooding
engulfing
settling
then
smoothed
—cooled
to listen,
it's
listening
for you,
the wind—
i the water.

Margins

I walk my eyes out on the land and sway,
befuddle every step of marshy sea,
and still, the reed content, the water sure;
will balance lumber in to fret their peace?
While I have come alone to dip my hands
into the blue, un-piercing gray, relieved
to be apart from those who've settled in,
blithe sons and daughters race, strong-footed,
as elder tides recede, dissolve then wane,
become the sand, material of earth.

Can you imagine how we came to be
and here, on rusting paths? Can poets write
from better worlds, can letters thick with fog
resolve the stories told, and tell us why—
why suffering? I carve my name into
the ground, then press—the sinking softness holds,
remembers not to buckle, lest I pitch,
enlightened, through volcanic light, from day
to night to graze in constellation's frozen
words. Unnerving absence seeps, I breathe
into the space I have to grow; and still,
the sand is coarse, its grains refined and cool.

(war of attrition)

i get it—the need to hide, the disclosure to mute pages, to unseen beings. yes, this war of attrition separates its enemies by withholding its strike; laying jackets to the ground and lifting us up, over the mud; staving off intruders, be they flies or mice; fighting men but refusing to fight us. but take refuge: we who never meet the blow nevertheless know pain must happen at some point, somewhere—a jaw broken, tooth lost. and if not for the darkness, our bouts with ink, we'd collide with nothing, configure it's safe. so long the honest fight, and the promise of an honest death. but we can be ready.

(dressed in black)

a mythic force booms in the east. *it's a flower, blooming.* i pull off my shoes, walk in wet circles till the sun sets; falling, floundering, mirages shimmering. *who flooded the dust and named it sand?* on the cusp of sleep appears a woman in black. she lifts the shroud's edge to reveal her black boots, and—there, on her right ankle—a dark revolver. hands it—stout, austere, and chilly—to me. the metal sinks to my hand, and night's whispers fall heavy, hushed. *do this in remembrance.* she withdraws as my eyes swirl, shuddering out of time. *will you remember?* inches from my feet, a sea heather stirs.

VITA

Liz Hogan grew up in Hammond, Louisiana and earned her undergraduate degree in History at Agnes Scott College, located in Decatur, Georgia. She is currently an M.F.A. candidate at the University of New Orleans where she also teaches English composition. Her poems have appeared in *Belle Journal* and *Maple Leaf Rag*.