You Gotta Crack A Few Begs To Make An Honest

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You Gotta Crack a Few Begs to Make an Honest

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
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B.A. College of Charleston 2005
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A Dip Into The Infinite: A Preface

When I was nine, my oldest brother said he would give me twenty bucks if I promised to stay in my room. Our parents had gone out of town, and he was home from college. He was going to throw a party. Being the little brother, I obliged. As the evening went on, the noise grew louder. My Legos became less entertaining. The ruckus from downstairs swelled with handclapping, hoots, and hollers every so often. I had to satisfy my curiosity, so I snuck downstairs, peaked around the corner, and spotted my brother standing on the coffee table, waving his arms and shouting at our living room full of people. Was he preaching? Was he singing? Why? And who were those people in our house?

I only got a glimpse before I snuck back upstairs, so as not to be noticed. When I hit the top step, I heard applause erupt, but what was happening down there? ¹ Why did it mean so much to me? Why does it still?

I’m drawn to the idea that memory is a creative process. Sure, things happen, but we frame them as stories that inform our daily lives. We make meaning by interpreting events. Some might argue convincingly that memory is not a creative process, but it’s undeniably a selective one. Countless things I could have remembered from childhood evade memory, yet I chose the anecdote about my brother reciting a poem. Maybe I fell asleep while watching Dead Poet’s Society and Robin Williams’ character has seeped into my subconscious. Whatever sparked my dedication to the importance of poetry… I was hooked.

¹ I later learned my brother was reciting “She being brand” by E. E. Cummings. It became one of my favorite poems to perform and teach.
Phillip Levine’s poetry has always moved me because he shows us how the self overlaps. Consider his “You Can Have It” where a couple of strophes in particular reveal how we have many variations of the self, each vying for meaning:

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

The answer is implied. Yes, brother. You are going to make it. One of you is, and we’re all one. For Levine, poetry connects to the infinite while grounding itself in the now, the cadence and familiarity of everyday speech. It’s really impressive how Levine uses blue-collar language to discuss the high spiritual concepts. Just as the speaker in Levine’s poem learned the value of hard work from watching his brother, I learned there was essentially something mystical about the performance of poetry. Later, I became my brother. I shouted poems at people in coffee shops and music stages and, yes, even house parties.
In "Lyrical Ballads" William Wordsworth famously said, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." But to what end? Why all this reflection dedicated to strong feelings? Does poetry matter? How much does it matter? To me, yes, and to me, a lot. It means everything. I’d argue that not only the reflection, but also the sharing of that reflection, the performance of poetry mitigates existence because it helps us all feel less alone, which explains why my process as a poet is a vocal one, sort of. It’s a mix between stream of consciousness journal entries combed, over then chopped into audible phrases, then reorganized for continuity. I’m creating a mosaic out of words, then throwing every piece into the air to see how it sounds while I scribble phrases in foot-tall letters on a giant chalkboard on the wall of my living room. Then I write it all down on paper. I’ve found the medium changes the message. If you want short, tight lines, use a tiny sheet of paper. It sounds oversimplified, but it’s true. I send my work through at least three different media before I count something as a draft.

I talk to myself as I write. I want the syntax to be as natural as a conversation. I quietly resist the movement in academia to be sparse with language. Economy of language seems like an oxymoron. Writing is not accounting. As an artist, I want to make something beautiful. Not something flawless. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t shun revision. I love to revise until the final looks nothing like the original. But I do resist a finished product that comes across as mechanical and airtight.
In spoken word, you can let filler words stand. Filler words, often used to build rhythm and keep time, don't really work on the page because there is no metronome. The eye is the time. Or, to illustrate my point, the previous idea will now be conveyed as if it were included in a page poem.

Page poetry.
No metronome.
Eye is time.

The writer who imagines the final manifestation of this thought belonging on the page as a poem might stare at it and think, *How can I simplify? The “is” is implied.* *There has to be a way to make the last line tighter, more economical. Furthermore, the term “page poetry” is still clunky. I need a specific term that moves closer to the intended meaning. Let’s try something more acute.*

Prosody scanned.
No metronome.
Eye, time.

Now if a spoken word poet approached the same idea, the strophe might be written as follows:

Not to say that when you rock a stage
attention to each piece of speech
isn’t important towards or away
from the tortured way we receive meaning,

Individual syllables keep
building the sequence
until the speaker peaks and overheats
and the listener needs a purse full of sleeping pills to cope with the verse.

But even still, an abundance of utterances
can muck up the love we have for words.
Here, rhyme and rhythm are given priority over, and at the expense of, conciseness. This version is definitely too wordy, but within that verbosity lies a boisterous attempt to have fun with language.

So which version is better? Well, they're both bad and not exactly because one is tighter and the other rhymes more. They’re both bad because there’s no heart behind the style. There’s no insight or passion. In my manuscript, I’ve worked hard to strike a balance between these two theories. I aim to be succinct without losing verbal bounce, but more importantly, I’m aiming for and coming from the heart.

I certainly don’t subscribe to the idea that all art is biographical. Art, however, can be a type of alchemy. We turn metal into (we hope) gold. Or maybe a more apt metaphor would be a prism. Events shine through our consciousness, and we split different meanings in every direction. We can then choose which beam of light means the most to us. Each streak of light is a decision, an image, a poetic device, or a narrative to follow.

The titles of the sections in this manuscript are lifted from Joseph Campbell’s concept of the hero’s journey. I’m using Campbell’s language here to frame the different sections because the collection itself aims to come full circle. I want the reader to leave the known world, go into the darkness, struggle, and return enlightened. Lofty… I know, but how we contextualize ourselves along the concept of the hero’s journey is what gives the ups and downs of life meaning.

In many ways, our identities are encapsulated within the stories we tell. I am the kid who promised to stay in his bedroom. I am my brother screaming at his
drunken friends. I am my parents who were out of town. I am the coffee table. Each of these pieces is a part of the story, and it’s my story.

For me, poetry has always been a way of making sense of the world. It’s a means of zooming in on a memory and then finding perspective in a way that mitigates our existence. My poems are answers to implied questions. "The Call to Adventure" addresses the question of what is it like to grow up. "The Belly of the Whale" means to answer how it feels to fall in and out of love. "Atonement" examines what it means to “earn a living.” "The Return" means to explore the question of to what degree it’s possible to know god.

"The Call to Adventure" is where the journey starts. All of the poems in this section have to do with some variation of childhood. "Adult Swim" tries to dig into my memory of what’s it like to be a chubby kid. As tough as it is to be different, that difference may help define us. Or not. A boy can hold onto his separateness or realize we’re all shaped a little weird. "Adult Swim" ends on the lines, “Or just get my towel and spend the afternoon/ pretending I’m older than ten.” I mean to suggest here is it’s time to move on; it’s time to finally grow up, and it’s time to get started with this manuscript.

Furthermore, "The Belly of the Whale" concerns relationships, as well as love and intimacy. Here, often, I’m exploring how opposites help create meaning. In other words, we may know something by what it is not. We know it’s night by the absence of light. We know it’s hot by the absence of cold. We know we’re inspired, by the absence of doubt. We know love by... well, this concept may be harder to define
simply, but that’s the point – to attempt to get closer to an understanding of what love is.

Yusef Komanyakaa’s poem, “Safe Subjects” helps illustrate my point. It starts, “How can love heal/ the mouth shut this way?” I’m moved by the concept of silence as a means of protection. Lovers grow apart oftentimes out of concern for the other. We don’t say what’s on our minds because we don’t want to hurt our lover’s feelings. Noble but cowardly. There’s a line in “The Architect of Heartache” that bounces off my idea of opposites and also reflects Komanyakaa’s sentiments. If “It took the death of something beautiful/ to create a sense of urgency.” is true, (and I mean in Keats’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” type of way) it’s opposite is also true, if not more. It takes the death of a sense of urgency to create something beautiful.

The collection’s third section, “Atonement” has to do with teaching. I call it that because I was never a particularly “good” student, and so teaching high school for eight years was my attempt to atone or make amends. Disruptive would be one way I could describe my young self; inquisitive would be another. I could call myself a bully, or I could say I exhibited leadership qualities at an early age. If I’m honest, though, I taught because I wanted to make it right. But what is it? It’s the systematic inequalities that exist in public schools. And, it’s me. The title of “When the teacher is ready, the student won’t appear” inverts the famous phrase from Bhudda, that poem inhabits the inescapable inadequacy that every teacher feels at some point. When you make one hundred decisions a minute, you’re bound to make some bad ones. Keeping with the theme of opposites, you’re also destined to make some amazing decisions, some so good you just might reach atonement.
Finally, “The Return” is a dip into the infinite. I’m fascinated by god and the idea of god. There’s a line in the poem “Perfect Just The Way You Are” where prayers are personified. They say “If faith without works/ is dead, how do we as prayers find work?” In this section of the manuscript I am most concerned with how we find ways to navigate through the higher stages of consciousness. How do we, through poetics, find the alchemy it takes to make such a transformation possible? How do we, like Prometheus, ascend into heaven, steal the fire, and return to tell the tale?
I. The Call to Adventure
At the Statue of Saint Jude

I.

I'm nothing more than a little kid sitting on the steps of Christopher Columbus Cathedral.

I've lost my shoes. The only thing I wish I had was bread for these pigeons as they crisscross this patron saint of lost causes.

I'm hoping a magic eight ball isn't as hard to swallow as the pride I take in my fun house memory.

II.

Darling, you make an hourglass out of me. All the cars outside my house are parked crooked with their doors wide open.

It's clear whoever comes near my life gets out as fast as she can. If you leave this year, I'm going with you.

There's a train ticket with our names on it if all the old habits don't outlast us. If the magic eight ball takes all day, we'll have to shake ourselves awake.

Let's kiss our doorbells goodbye! Give the cat away! This is the year of no mistakes.
The concept of closure has become so foreign to me
I don’t even return books to the library anymore.
When the late fees tire of being themselves
and become mere bills, I take that as a metaphor
for passing the point of no return.

It’s funny how some memories
sink and others can float.
Once when I was ten
at the neighborhood pool
during the adult swim
I got a hankering
for a Cherry Coke so
I waddled over
to the vending machine
and while I fed it
my fifty cents a boy in line behind me
tapped my shoulder to ask
why I have boobs.

The thought of swimming still
makes me unhappy though most days
I forget why.

So yesterday when my friend asked me
to go to the pool, up until then, I had forgotten
where my copy of *Memoir of a Hawk* was,
but I began to wonder if I needed to find James Tate
and return him to the library
or just grab my towel and spend the afternoon
pretending I’m older than ten.
Fat Camp or Military School?

Your mother and I have decided to put you up for adoption. The paperwork isn’t final, but we are confident we’re making the right decision. It’s high time you at least try to pry yourself off that couch. We didn’t raise you to be such a wet towel. Put some pants on. Make something of yourself besides an embarrassment in front of the neighbors. Because if the neighbors tell the other neighbors, we’ll never be able to show our faces at Applebee’s again. Is that what you want? Look, we just want you to be happy. Look at me when I’m talking to you!
And How Does That Make You Feel?

Your therapist will tell you not to hate your parents. Instead, he will tell you to shave your head, then give him twenty. You'll think he's bluffing, until click, the buzz of the electric razor.

Poetry and therapists have only one thing in common: submission.

You'll tell him your most embarrassing moments. He'll cuddle and coo you. He'll assure you everybody's probably a little gay. Circle jerking is the Christopher Columbus of the prepubescent hetero.

You're discovering who you are and listen if his hot-third-cousin whom he has not seen since his grandma died promised to have that abortion, he'd probably run up in it raw too. We don't ask for these thoughts. We just have them.

You'll tell him how bright you burn, how you're not sure suicide isn't the better option. He'll scratch his chin. You'll tell him you're a sleepwalker. You'll tell him there's no real way either of you can tell if you're actually awake right now.

You'll see he's bored with his wife, his children, his life, and you'll say so. He'll deny it. He'll tell you to go home. You'll tell him this exact moment is a poem. He'll click his pen and circle something on his clipboard, then clear his throat and pretend to be disinterested, but you, after those push-ups, will have the confidence of a bee sting.
Recess Recessed

Always at the edge
of the sandbox. Never
in the middle. Slumped over
with a bucket and shovel. Let's pretend
he enjoys riding the swings all by himself.
Close his eyes and he'll pretend he's flying.
He's fine without our help.

Pretend you're the attendant
at the exit of the parking deck.
Validate him already.

Or don't. Give him tough love.
Say you won't. Say you've had enough of

this snot-nosed-boy with the toy piano.
You've got no obligation to hold his hand through
another annoying monologue
about destroying his mom, his dog,
and everybody else who has had the gall
to love him. This tantrum is a sham,
a plot, an answer to a question
no one sought.
I was born in the bed of a pick up truck
drunk driving up the buckle of the bible belt.
At every tire-melting-swerve, it felt as if
each red light burned through was a death-
defying ant under a magnifying glass in the hands
of a slobbering god. By my ninth birthday I learned
to ride a white lie like a bike.
My hopes are still as high as we got
that night we jumped the chain-link fence
to plant a granny smith apple tree
on our alma mater’s fifty yard line.
We plucked up wet blades of grass
in the end zone and made birdcalls
with our palms held in prayer.
I swore we were eleven again, soaked in sunlight,
skipping rocks across the top of Lake Hartwell.
Sorry I never wrote you back. Sometimes I still
wait for the clouds to get out of the way
so I can see the same full moon you see tonight.
I guess I wanted us to remember us before the world
so reluctantly proved we are not invincible.
Part of me will always ride my bike
down the dirt road of my adolescence, to smoke
cigarettes in the parking lot of the Methodist church
on a Friday night. My heartbeat feels like footsteps
on the other side of my chest. Not sure where
I’m walking, but I know it feels good to be outside.
You Must Be This Tall To Ride

Who knows what
the thrill ride, Peter Pan’s Flight,
was thinking at Disney World in 2011
when it fractured both legs
and one arm of that old woman.

You gotta crack a few begs to make an honest,
especially, when the track before you never changes,
and you get that nagging itch
you’re meant for something better than strangers
pretending they love you
depending how the weather changes.

Everything fun is designed to kill you
but who doesn’t want the sweet release
from redundancy? Purple Slurpees
could have the same plan. You think
that giant pretzel or sweaty hot dog
has your best interest in mind?
Diabetes will take with it a couple of toes,
the ability to see, or a whole leg if you let it.

How else would you put your foot down?
Especially if you had no foot to put?
II. The Belly of the Whale
The Night You Told Me To Stop Sending You Poems

The night you told me to
stop sending you poems
I turned blue with green
beneath the lightning.

I desperately wanted
to break even.
I read Larry Levis
hoping he would save me.

I shattered a wine glass
on my kitchen floor,
then tried to glue it
together again

with peanut butter.
I did the same
with a dozen eggs.
All the clocks stopped.

I ripped a picture of you
in two. The one I took
at an RJD2 concert.
It wasn’t the first time

I’ve run out of Band-Aids
and used electrical tape.
I put my ear to my cat
to figure out how purring works.
If Bukowski Gave Dating Advice

*a woman must be nursed into subsistence
by love where a man can
become stronger by being hated.*

Charles Bukowski

There’s a minimum level of showmanship required when informing the woman you won’t fuck her.

Tell her it’s the herpes acting up again even if it’s not. Let her know it’s not her fault, and so on and so forth. Let her down easy. Assure her she’s pretty. Blame it on the placement of the stars. Don’t make her suffer. Say, it’s the way things are, just the way things had been, before she arrived.

Or, you can take the heavy-handed approach:

Tell her you’re not a whore, and you’re insulted she would insinuate anything of the sort.

Tell her she’s barking up the wrong penis, and no matter how much she shakes a peach tree, ain’t no bananas falling out.

Tell her you’ve taken a vow of celibacy.

Or use the old it’s-not-you-it’s-me trope. See how far that gets you.
Variations on the Theme of Loud

The fear of singing the wrong song
or the right song the wrong way belongs
near the thoughts, Why not? And, Who’s got next?

The right questions can shock you
back into your body, and a soul
without a body can often be

a messy idea
about to be forgotten. See,
function needs the form to exist.

Paint becomes a painting only on canvas
and only with trusting hands
committed to becoming a meaning

beyond themselves. Thus the phrase,
Why are you so stingy with yourself?
actually sounds the same as

I want you to be happy and wish you the best
to the listener who hasn’t figured out
the difference.

A blind dog beaten can’t clearly distinguish
between a hand reaching out to slap
and one that wants to play.

Wind and rain
see an enemy and friend
exactly the same.
For Pizza

Maybe instead of saying I’ll love you forever you could say I’ll love you for pizza.

I will love you even through the mushrooms. I hate mushrooms and compromise, but for you

I will swallow them both until I am full, about three slices, one pitcher of High Life, and one awful argument.
I Tell You What

You’re as juicy as a creole tomato that had a watermelon for a momma. You said you were thirty-three but you don’t look a day over thirsty. See that burgundy dress was made for slithering out of.

You’re so pretty over there I want to lie to you, tell you I’m a pilot or a college professor with not great credit, but good credit. Impressed yet? I can install solar panels with one hand. My middle name is God-Damn-It. I was raised by frogs. See watch. I can hold my breath for thirty seconds. My nephew says I’m the tallest man on the planet.
A Zombie’s Posts on OKcupid

1. I’d want to take it slow. Snuggle on the couch and watch snuff films, then see where things go. Who knows?

2. Seeking someone who is willing to understand me for me. Not just exoticize my connection to evil or treat me like I don’t have a heart just because my blood has congealed. I’m tired of trying to fix people.

3. The first thing people notice about me is my jaundiced eyes.

4. If this sounds like something you might be interested in, inbox me a photo and I will promise to haunt you in your sleep.

5. I don’t like long walks on the beach because seagulls tend to eat my decomposing flesh.

6. FML. It’s complicated. LOL.

7. I’m just getting over a bad break up. Long story but the short version: my fiancé of 400 years cheated on me. I wanted to kill but because I’m a zombie, the desire to kill only made my love for her stronger. She didn’t understand why I couldn’t see her infidelity as a cry for help or a dove of peace to eat.

8. Disclaimer alert: my breath wilts sunflowers. The good news? If you have a pest problem, I could breathe on your roaches and termites and poof! Sorry, but I don’t know what to do about the maggots eating their way out of my flesh, rotting. I’ve tried everything: raid, lice shampoo, fire.
9. But hey, everybody has baggage.
   Let’s check ours at the pearly gates and fly away for never.

10. Serious replies only.
Nice To Meet You

It’s taken me forever to say
I don’t believe we met yesterday
but it seems that way, in fact,
whenever we reintroduce ourselves
after coming together-

*Hey, you.* Hey, darlin.
*How are you?* Amazing.
*Yeah, you are.*

--As if we haven’t seen each other
for weeks, while our insides
flutter up against our outsides, begging
to shout through our skin as though our skin
is a candy wrapper, barely holding us in

from melting through the mouth of the bed
and into the bamboo bones of the bed frame,
away and into a new life where we already met,

where our perceptions are no longer our own,
where hours pass by like lines on a highway,
where we’re not afraid to get lost,
proud to not want
to wander back home.
Offensive Defense Mechanism

Thank you for being such a porcupine.
I learned so much:
when to shut up, and not ask for shit,
when to buck up, believe in the fantastic,
what not to put up with,
how not to get stuck,
when to forgive,
and when to give up.

I wish I could say I'm over you,
but I think I'm just farther away.
Too hard to say. For a while there I definitely stood
next to you or behind you. Select the prickliest
prepositional phrase that best fits
the few times we didn't argue.

What do you say? I'll bring
my desperate; you bring your plan B.
I'll show my teeth; you'll wonder
what's gotten into me.

We wobble indiscreetly
between awkward intimacy
and the plot turning
from a not-worth-it defeat
to the not-so-great
afterthought, the mirage of victory,
between fuck you and fuck me.
Unreliable Narrator

I don’t know about you, but I’m currently taken advantage of by the continental breakfast. So far I’ve had a smattering of raisin bran, a thimble full of apple juice, two cups of Pepto-Bismol-pink yogurt, three sausage patties, a Belgium-waffle, and four cups of coffee. But it’s not enough. It’s never enough.

I thought people ate their feelings in sequential order, but instead of lowering the calories count on this yogurt, they just shrank the container.

My ex’s doppelganger just surfaced from within a Christmas tree. It’s past Easter; she’s popping out like a pimple, or a dick in a box, or a zit on a dick in a box, or an unwrapped Pop Tart self-conscious about his own frosting.

I don’t kiss and tell but I don’t care if you do. Yes. I know my t-shirt is inside out. I wore it yesterday. I swear you’re looking at me as if you want to ride me like I’m a Zonkey. Or is it called a Deebra?

I know I could make better choices but fuck it. Let’s skip the sheets of linen and make it a night to forget. Let’s run through the streets singing the chorus of Tiny Dancer while looking for the ghost of Jeffrey Dahmer. I’ll bet you think about last night and feel strange two years ago because I look at this morning with a pirate smile and you would too, were it not for the fact that we have never met.

None of this is true, but it’s not the opposite either. Not yet.
The Architect of Heartache

stays up late at his drafting table
manufacturing sketch after sketch of regret.
It took a straight edge, a bone stencil,
and a year and half to fashion pastels
from the powder of Monarch’s wings.
It took the death of something beautiful
to create a sense of urgency.
But it only takes one word to get free
so he made that word, love,
as if it were a thing.

He named his buildings after lovers
who could never love him as hard
as concrete pilings or steel girders do.
His phone never rang as it never rang before.
Patricia would tell you herself, “I’m a brick house.”
Shannon, a matchstick mansion.
Elizabeth was marble monument to forgiveness.
His life’s work was a good lie, the kind
that can withstand the fire
of being retold again and again. A boulder
rolled across the sky. Slowly,

he learned people
don’t endure as his work does.
*The world rushed in a circle
and turned on its axis
and time was busy
burning the years
and the people away.*
Lover Go Colorstay

I wish I was your lipstick. I want you
to put me on like that. I want you
to leave me on cigarettes.
I want you to take me out
in bathrooms at swanky hotels.
and press me to your lips
then drop me in your purse
like nothing happened and pretend.
I want you to feel taller
how I made you. Wherever you walk
eyes follow. I want you to hold me
like you own me. I want you
to toss me aside when
I am used up.
III… Atonement
When The Teacher Is Ready, The Student Won’t Appear

1. False Start

It breaks my heart in a thousand brittle places to watch educators lower their fickle expectations. I don’t want to paint all teachers in a negative light. I taught for eight years. I gave it my life.

One of the most awkward moments teaching is when you give a test and half the class finishes, while the other half tries to concentrate but there are five minutes left before the lunch bell rings.

It’s basically nap time then for the ones who didn’t sleep last night And it’s... I don’t know how to act right for the ones who can’t sit still. That’s fine.

Overheard in the teachers lounge last week... "He was as cute as a puppy dog, but you can’t teach a puppy dog to read."

2. The Grades We Earn

Who am I to cast the first stoned student an F?

What have I taught if the kid I caught cheating on the final is already failing and I fail him again?

When he drops out, if he goes to jail, we both get to say, I told you so.

But who failed whom?

Sometimes I get a handful of pupils amped-up
to be made examples
of and truthfully
I’m in a mood
to prove myself
the alpha above
the bully,

but then
I lose my temper
and I say,

_Nobody, but you,
believes your excuses,
nobody. If you_
_really hate school,
why not try_
to pass this class
_before you have_
to repeat_
tenth grade again._

But as soon
as those words
accidentally slip
I can immediately
see the damage they did.

So I’m sorry, kid.
Here’s your grade,
a cinderblock
tied to the ankle of your GPA.

Maybe next semester
we’ll both do better.

We receive the grades we earn.
So here: The F we both deserve.
Awkward Teacher Moment Poem #71

In light of my students being mandated to take the ACT in two weeks with my job security hinging on the results

I told them

Today instead of the usual fun we have, we have to work on test prep.

They got sad.

So I said one day your best friend will lie to your face and it will be worse than this.

Nothing.

So I said one day the person who has defined what love means for you will look you dead in the eyes and tell you he or she doesn’t love you anymore and it will be worse than this.

A few smiles.

So I said one day one of your parents will definitely die and that day will be much worse than today at which point the girl whose dad had just died started to cry.
Poems are bullshit unless they are…
Amiri Baraka

Poems are bullshit if they have more math than song, if they are to be solved not sung. They don’t mean a thing, not a damn thang, if they don’t bang in the trunk.

Poems afraid to get off the page have shit to say about the way poems are meant to be spit.

Poems commanding a line for CD sales instead of a line on a CV fail in measuring up because the measuring stick is stuck up in a fucking writing workshop in Iowa where sound poetry has nothing to do with sound and line breaks and break beats act like ex-lovers right after awkward sex in the coat closet at their high school reunion.

Donald Hall might think your whole life led you here but we both know you woke up regretful, set to pull a Norton off the shelf to wed another dead sonnet to your consciousness.

But we, the people, want poems who won’t apologize for how wild they are. We want poems to say all the wrong things right. We want poems who swing for the neck and know how to connect.
Taking the ACT on the Chin

Fill in the bubble that indicates your value as a human being. Sleeping will not be tolerated. Neither will swallowing. Spit out all food immediately.

All unverified noises such as sneezing or breathing will be considered a testing violation. Even minor infractions, such as outward expressions of extreme depression will be captured on videotape and sent to The State Department for analysis. Mark a response for each question even if you are uncertain about the answer.

Lay your pencil down immediately when time is called at the end of each test. Do not fold or tear the pages of your test booklet.

You may not for any reason fill in or alter ovals for a test after time is called. To do so will disqualify you.

In twenty-four minutes one of these four doors will open. After our representative from The State Department emerges to rip out your heart he or she will place it in this secure, climate-controlled cooler for transport.

You will be notified via subpoena as soon as we have made a decision regarding your heart’s whereabouts. The nurse will be with you in a moment to draw blood. Are you allergic to any medications?

If you are caught daydreaming during the test, your results will be subject to review due to impulsive thought-swapping. Calls may be recorded.

Once we’ve started, a facsimile of your score will be sketched by a composite artist unless you feel insulted, in which case, your dispute
will be settled by a groupthink consensus in order to determine which target market best suits your life path and worldview.

Your feelings towards this test and others like it are property of ETS and its parent company.

You may begin.
I Don’t Know, the Title Could Use Some Work

Right when the poem starts, the language is very muscular, very construction worker. It makes me want to wear a hard hat, spit and swing a pick ax or grab my nuts and direct traffic.

Right off the bat, clearly there is a journey in the heart of this poem not only in the heart, but in the liver and pancreas too. I have a strong feeling the journey wants to trickle into other body parts as well.

But the poem really loses me in the third stanza. I don’t know, maybe I’m just being picky and anal but the line, “Gentrification is the new whitey diaspora” really confuses me, although I like the way it looks on the page. The spacing invokes textures of colonizer flesh and overpriced apartments.

Your language is so fluid and flowing. Maybe in revision you could cut out a picture of a waterfall and glue it on top of this poem.

I never knew Styrofoam could be spiritual until your metaphor about never decomposing gave me a new perspective on eternal life.

For me, the thread feels the strongest when the quilt is sewn. I love quilts. My grandma had a tree farm in Southern Georgia. She had many cats. Cats roamed her farm like teeth in a mouth.

For me, the previous stanza really broke the dream. I don’t see how it fit, although I like how the poem talks to itself as though it’s on a cell phone with an earpiece, answering a question only it can hear.

Towards the end of the poem the sensuality is so post-modernly pastoral. I can practically smell its rotten milk
in the lopsided udders
of the plastic mad cow.

I could almost touch
the cactus in the clouds.

And that word *flippant*, I love that word.
Imagine little red and black ants
doing back flips.

I think this poem could get published-
I really do- if you gave the editor
a hand job.
The Black Angel

I have a black angel fish I’ve been trying to figure out how to discipline. She nips at the other fishes’ fins. Seems to be nothing I can do about it.

I could starve her but then I’d harm the other fish. Isn’t that always the way? You paying for someone else’s sins?

As if morality had a balance or swimming in your own piss wasn’t enough already?

You know that part in your favorite song where everything crescendos and you head bang in your kitchen when no one else is around?

Maybe that part sticks in the black angel’s head and she only wants to be alone. Or maybe the other fish don’t know they’re in a mosh pit.

No matter. It’s all forgotten as soon as I walk away. I’m no fish boss.

Sure, I have to change the water. Sure, I have to feed them, watch them, and ask them questions. I can’t blame them for not answering. They can’t talk yet, but I’m teaching them to read by stacking Time magazines against the back of the glass.

I watch and wait for the sake of the others. Hopefully, reading will teach them love or patience.
IV. The Return
"Tat Tvam Asi = Thou Art That"

I.

Seeing the god light
squeaking through the grey
clouds after the rain shower

reminds me how
when you die
you lose your body
but keep your soul,
and your soul is older
than all the oak trees,
but only the acorns know
how the elegy goes.

Last night is a past life.
Thou art that.
You used to be
a blade of grass
but then a cow
moseyed in
and grazed on you
and later
in the maze of truth
you turned around
and ate a steak.

You can count how many
seeds make up an apple.
But can you count the apples
in an apple seed?

II.

We beg the infinite
to be consistent
as if time were listening.

We are made of god,
god light, light, water
and time; but time is man
and manmade. Seasons
don’t chase each other
because nature doesn’t
get impatient. But we do.

Is it C’est La Vie or Déjà vu
or neither or some
variation of the two
when whatever we focus on expands?

You go places.
Places disappear.
You’ve been the plane
and the tarmac.
You’ve been the bus boy,
the bell hop, and the bar back.
You’ve been the market crash
and the Arby’s bag. You’ve been
apart yet been a part of all that.

You’ve been thirty and twelve
and seventy years old.
You’ve been told and you’ve told
and you’ve been told again.
You’ve dictated and you’ve been awaiting
instructions from something greater
than yourself but somehow
you still feel separate
as if there was such no such thing
as everybody else.
Call Waiting (A Love Poem)

I don’t believe Charlton Heston is looking down
launching lightning bolts
from up there in his chariot. Nevertheless, yesterday

a woman, waiting in line at a grocery store
in Houma, was struck by lightning. Google

it. The inexplicable has an origin. Maybe fire ants
bite just because that’s how they show love.

Every box of macaroni and cheese in my cupboard is stoic,
... like, Go ahead! Kill me! Monsanto sounds

like the name of a horse. I love Jell-O more
than I’m willing to admit, which is strange

because I don’t know how Jell-O feels about me
besides jiggly. If a nail magically

turns to goo when submerged in Coca-Cola,
and if Adele can set fire to the rain,
I can stick this cold coffee in the microwave
while I wait for you to ring.
Perfect Just The Way You Are

\[\text{Shankara wanted to persuade people that the forms in which they had clothed God were purely for their own devotional upliftment: They were not literal realities.}\]

Swami Kriyananda

I worry that my prayers
play telephone on their way out
from my whispers
as if they had to pause
at the top of my throat to ask directions.

\[\text{Do we have to throw pants on before we leave the house? Which way to fruition? How do we, as prayers, not fade in the distance? If faith without works is dead, how can we find work?}\]

Maybe each prayer is unique and hardened
by its own eclectic proclivities. Some feel
unseen and unheard, others
as avid avatars, ardent about their ability
to adapt willingly towards any need.
All weather prayers,
you might say.

There are those who know
what to do with the clay
and those who know
how to create their own kiln.

To beg sounds more credible
when dressed to kill, as if there were
a more fitting occasion like a dressing room
maybe at Macy’s where a prayer could try
on a few pairs of jeans and assess how they move
in the mirror. \textit{See there? You see that?}\]

Even imaginary prayers looking for
imaginary pants in imaginary department stores
can’t relax anymore. Four parts or more
removed but some prayers still
feel stupid and fat.
William Butler Yeats appeared to Larry Levis in a dream and said, “Passion is the only thing that matters in poetry, and as a matter of fact, it’s the only thing that matters in life,” or at least, that’s how Levis put it. That’s as romantic as two hobos in the snow spooning under a park bench to stay warm.

I want famous poets to visit me in my dreams but all I can get is Axl Rose and not even the cool version of him wearing the hell out of his black leather pants and playing piano in the video for “November Rain.” Oh no. I don’t get the rock icon chilling with Slash. I don’t get the paid spokesmen for a ménage a trois dispensing advice on how to deal with groupies.

Instead, I get the 2014 version, his face bursting with plastic surgery as he talks about dressing up as an ear of corn for Halloween. What is that even supposed to mean?
Out Through The In Door

If I were to have an out-of-body experience, I’d want to exit through my bellybutton. You know, for consistency’s sake. It would, I feel, increase my chances of finding my way back home.

If I left this world the way I found it and I could fit a pen and a little notepad, my hands and an eyeball, and an ear or three of each through my bellybutton,

I could take notes out there report back on what I hear from the other side of the great divide.

The only way through a door is out of it. So maybe, too, the only way out of the self is through it.

What if the only way to surpass the body is to be still within it?
Permanently In Medias Res

Lately I wake up outside
my body hovering
roughly six feet
above my bed, but sometimes

I’m under the bed.
One time I got stuck in the trunk of my car. Couldn’t
escape that one until I woke up.
Watching my self sleep
from the perspective
of the ceiling fan

really used to creep me out
and still does,
especially when I see
the hand
reaching towards
my face but can’t
tell whose hand
or whose face.

If you withdraw
from the skin
and everything in it,
will the residue
of time
be left
behind?

A minute-sized-dent?
Perhaps an hour
scattered throughout the suitcases
cartooned in place
for the sake of verisimilitude.
After all, we’re traveling, right?

When in a disembodied point of view
do you take everything with you?

No matter. Now I have to put myself together
for the rest
of the day. However,
there’s no
way I can do that if a third of my better faculties blur
or refuse
to mingle between the woke and the dream state.

I need to find my kneecaps,
and as soon as I do,
I'm headed to the coffee maker.
  Is there anything you
need me to bring back?

Is nothing all
or nothing?
Three Possible Homophonic Responses to the Note I Found on the Counter Which Reads as Follows:

Jonathan,
I had lots of extra thyme, so I brought some over for you. It’s wrapped in a paper towel in a Ziploc bag in the back of the fridge. Enjoy!
Sean

Dear Sean,
I remember you telling me you were lengthening your day thirty minutes by listening to Books-on-Tape while taking the train. Thanks so much for sharing your extra time with me. I used this time to scramble eggs with goat cheese and fresh basil rather than shovel my usual bowl of Cheerios down my throat while tying my shoes. Thanks again. You’re the best.

Dear Sean,
Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful. It’s just, I’m suspicious of anything leftover. I’ve heard time spoils if you leave it out. How long did it take you to wrap this time up? Is the paper towel supposed to be moist? Should I put it in the freezer How long, do you think, will it keep?

Dear Sean,
Do I have to use all this spare time at once? Can I slice time and spread it over a burnt moment of the past or future? Can I go back and put a salty slab of time over a moment of harsh judgement? Can I skip forward to the future where I might need a few minutes to think it over? Can I use the time you’ve given me then instead of now?
Seven-Year Itch

Every hotel room
I wake up in is
strange: all this air
with its a damn-it-
don’t-you-walk
-away-from-me
dampness to it.
The only thing I’m
driving is myself
crazy. Isn’t it funny
how if you don’t
scratch an itch,
it stops asking to live
and dies quietly?

In the corner of a fever
dream I met a guy
who ran a flea circus.
There were bike-riding fleas
and I know what
you’re thinking but no,
the bikes didn’t
have training wheels.
The fleas were so talented,
they could keep
their balance.
He had trapeze artist fleas.
He had fleas selling
individual strings
of pink cotton candy
at the matchbox
concession stand.

Everybody needs
something to hold onto
save the balcony’s railing.
Inside of our skin
we’re all flailing,
reaching
for something to keep us
from drowning,
to teach us how
to counterbalance
the cloud of doubt hounding us
with the value of now and thus

God knows
this wind
like a woman’s fingers.
Only now
out on this balcony
I’ve noticed
how the sky
is the color
of a dried apricot.
VITA

Jonathan Brown holds a BA in Communication from the College of Charleston, an MA in Writing and Consciousness from New College of California, and an MFA from the University of New Orleans. In 2013, he earned the John Woods Scholarship to study in Prague. His poems have been published in the *Worcester Review, Wordplaysound, The Nashville Review,* and *Indiefeed: Performance Poetry.*