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Chords of Dissonance

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Chords of Dissonance

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

Shelly Rodrigue

B.A. Our Lady of Holy Cross College, 2013

May, 2019

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Abstract

In the preface, I discuss my poetry and poetics such as the free verse form and the narrative mode. I also discuss my influences such as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Sheri L. Wright. The poems in this manuscript attempt to explore the role of trauma, feminism, and memory in poetry.

Keywords: narrative, free verse, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, elegy, memory, syllabics

No Limits to Poetry: A Preface

Poetry is, in my opinion, the highest human activity. In this action is the power to create. Every human action fulfills one or more functions: stimulation (we do it because it feels good), escape (we do it to get away), access to attention (we do it for the recognition), access to tangibles (we do it for the material reward). Of the four functions of human behavior, for me, poetry fulfills two. I am drawn to writing poetry because it stimulates my senses and it allows me to escape the overwhelming pressure of existence. It is both a source of pleasure and a survival mechanism.

Born and raised just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana, I come from a family of alcoholic musicians. Writing songs came naturally to me. In the third grade, I developed a fascination with language, particularly rhyme. I often worked with my cousins, both older and younger, to write simple verses. As an only child, I also spent a lot of time alone and in that time, I was always writing. The act of creating has always been important to me and some of my early songs survive today.

The obsession with language and the power of words never left me. I spent my high school years competing at the state level in literary rallies. All four years, I was chosen as my grade's sole representative in English. Language arts clicked for me in ways other subjects simply did not. Coming to this realization in high school drove me to constantly write poetry. I was obsessed with my craft. I developed my own sonnets and wrote nearly three hundred of them. Now, I refer to these as the "Lost Poems." They allowed me room to practice my craft, but as a slightly older poet, I understand my technique then was too rigid. There was no room for experimentation and no room for growth.

This rigidity stemmed from a home life with an overprotective and abusive father. I spent my childhood and adolescence tiptoeing around his explosive anger. His house was governed by a strict set of rules and those rules were absolutes. My craft reflected that mentality. Once a rule had been established, it could not be changed. This was reinforced when he sent me to a Catholic high school. Conformity was law. Deviants were punished. As a lesbian, I learned this quickly, especially after I was forced to have a psychiatric evaluation due to my orientation. From then on, I believed challenging tradition was futile and extended that belief to my written work. I dedicated too much time to polishing poetry as the proverbial wheel and not enough time questioning in what other ways it might function. I began to question my technique when I attended Our Lady of Holy Cross College for a Bachelor of Arts in English. There, I met a man who would change my life and the way I thought about poetry.

Prof, Dr. Stephen Pearce, who taught me Latin as well as advanced literary forms, directed my undergraduate thesis. We discovered our mutual love for Emily Dickinson when he introduced her to class by reciting the opening two lines of “Because I could not stop for Death.” I stood up and continued with, “The Carriage held but just Ourselves - / And Immortality.” Prof had not expected any of us to know Dickinson. I remember him asking, “Now, how in the world did you know that?” “Because I love her,” I replied, and he said, “So do I,” stroking his magnificent beard. It was Prof who encouraged me to pursue an M.F.A. in poetry, but he has died before I could finish it.

Under Prof’s guidance, I began to write in free verse. He challenged me to emulate poets I admired as well as drastically deviate from them. In his undeniably British accent, he often said, “One never understands poetry until one has written some. Write poetry.” Those words were the permission I needed to break the habits I cherished in my craft. I discovered I was able

to write more than fourteen lines in a single poem. Then, I could write without rhyme. Just like that, there were no limits to what poetry could be—love, vengeance, tribute, or any and all of these. By removing the restrictions I had placed on my craft, I witnessed it completely devolve and resurrect.

Prof introduced me to Adrienne Rich via “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Her influence has been instrumental in the development of my craft. Like my first poems, Rich’s earliest poems adhered to strict conventions such as rhyme and meter. However, she soon abandoned these techniques and embraced free verse. By the end of her career, she was using medial caesurae and got rid of punctuation. This taught me the value of white space in a poem and how to imply a pause without printing one. Rich’s transformation still excites me and gives me hope for the future of my own work. She is the type of poet I aspire to be. “Khutulun” and “Hildegunn of Birka” are my equivalents to Rich’s “Power” and “Planetarium.” They are my feminist rewriting of historic figures.

Another poet who has influenced me is Sheri L. Wright, a queer feminist poet from Louisville, Kentucky. Her latest book, *In the Halls of Specters*, confronts childhood and adolescent trauma through narrative poems. In “Facing Down Strays,” she compares the past to an “angry dog” that tears through our lives

“until we grab brutality
by the collar with both hands,
hold firm till it calms
long enough to hear
that we understand teeth
but will not bare them anymore.”

(Wright, 5-10)

I was intrigued by the idea of the past being a rabid dog that we hate to put down, but love enough to do the job ourselves. For Wright, poetry has the power to confront demons and subdue them, a feat I also hope to accomplish in my poems.

The poems in this manuscript were written for the sole purpose of survival. I wrote the things that keep me from sleeping and tried to parse them, such as my father trying to kill me or my grandfather bleeding out. In writing poetry, words give me the power to control the way memories manifest in ways I could not realistically control them in experience. The longer the poem exists, the farther away from me the trauma feels. In this way, poetry functions as a sort of filing cabinet where I can store things at a safe distance, or save them from obscurity.

Oftentimes, my poetry attempts to function as memoir. The majority of my poems are free verse in the narrative mode. I reconstruct a memory in chronological order. Frequently, my poems contain three or more strophes scaffolded as a beginning, middle, and end of a specific time frame. For example, “Daddy, You Bastard” lists a series of memories from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In addition to chronological organization, the poem is written in what I am calling “found syllabics.” The syllabics were modeled after the syllable count in the first three strophes of Plath’s “Daddy” to further pay tribute to her. This poem is also a direct address to the speaker’s father. Conversation frequently characterizes my poems, whether they are monologues or dialogues.

My favorite way to represent dialogue in a poem is through the use of italics. They feel less clunky to me than quotation marks and I hope the change in font style will signal a shift from narrative to speech. At times, I am intentionally trying to be clunky in a poem and will use quotations to signal speech, especially if that speech is something around which I want to create

distance. I feel that quotations offer a way to isolate a group of words, whereas italics show a slight movement without such blatant capsuling.

Because I want to purposefully move away from the obvious poetics of my early craft, I tend to focus on more subtle sounds in my poems rather than exact rhymes. For example, I now put more effort into consonance and assonance. In my poem, “Burnt Rice,” I play with the long “i” sound in words such as rice, survive, fried, fine, cried. My intention in repeating this sound so frequently is to have the ear meet the eye. The sentences describe scenes of a child being stubborn and self-centered. The constant hammering of the “i” will hopefully instruct the reader to interpret the child as such.

Childhood trauma is a prominent subject throughout section one of this manuscript. These poems often feature a child speaker addressing adults in her life. Also common to this section are poems highlighting the loving grandfather as antithesis to the abusive father. Women are almost entirely absent from the poems as active participants in the child’s life to imply the deep patriarchal roots in this particular family. In contrast, section two features strong female characters and experiences.

The final theme explored in this manuscript is death. There are two elegies for Prof. In the first, I reverted back to syllabics in a sonnetsque poem, which is the sort of thing I was writing when I first met him. In the second, I wrote fourteen unrhymed couplets of no particular measure. My hope in taking two different approaches in elegies for the same man is to illustrate that no matter how well practiced a craft thinks it is, words will always fall short. While poets can lament what is lost, it is impossible to say just what exactly it is. I try to use the elegy as a way to communicate with Prof, to create a final opportunity to say what cannot be said. I lifted some words from Dickinson in both poems. Dickinson brought us together and she binds us, still.

Both queer and feminist, Prof was the finest man I have ever known. Had he lived, I would have asked him to stand in my father's place at my wedding. If my thesis does nothing else, I hope it honors him.

I

Cassini

15 September 2017

Jettisoned into space by a Titan-Centaur,
you rocketed away from Cape Canaveral
fifteen days before my seventh birthday.
Mesmerized by your fiery launch, I lay
belly down in front of the TV while Dad
relived the nineteen-sixty-nine moon landing.
But you were going to moons I'd barely
heard of—Pandora, Titan, Enceladus!

Gravity-assisted trajectory later
returned you to shared elliptical orbit.
Christmas brought me a foot-long amateur
telescope. By August, a golden speck
above Easter Island, you prepared to sling-
shot through the asteroid belt. I snuck out and
blew one last goodbye kiss South, wondering
who might wish upon my plutonium star.

I cherished every postcard you ever sent—all
four hundred, fifty-three thousand, and forty
eight over four-point-nine billion miles—home.
Infrared images, a twenty-year
acquiescence in a handful of pictures.
Ice Giants revealed pristine faces to you,
you, who had seen their secrets, their hidden
bodies, and let us taste them byte by byte on Earth.

I, too, explored uncharted starscape, learned to love
not gods, titans, or giants, but a woman.
Awed by lifting an ice veil, Cassini,
we dipped into those rings a journey from
which no man nor machine could ever return.
Our lucky peanuts have run out. The grave pull,
Saturn's embrace, will melt you, Voyager,
into a display of light, destined to be an anomaly.
Take the dive.

Love is always a suicide mission
of radioactive cosmic dust.

Whiskey Canal

For my great-grandfather, Paul “Whiskey” Rodrigue, after whom the Louisiana canal connecting Bayou Segnette to Lake Cataouatche was named

Cataouatche meets Canal
where I drink whiskey
dark as ponderosa pine bark.

I sit on all that’s left,
camp pilings my grandsires shored,
our legacy eroded.

Where the marsh recedes quicker
than the old man’s hairline—
I summon the ghost of Paul.

Come and glide now this thin, black sheet
of glass, O phantom, reaching
through my limbs,
hands trembling.

I speak this into being
with buried tongues,
whisper him a gris gris.

Whiskey, Whiskey, c’est mon seul ami:
my inheritance—the bayou, the body made
of water I tell my stories to.

Dinosaur Dreams

Jurassic Park premiered in 1993, with the word JURASSIC across posters bigger than I was. My family owned the movie on VHS. I'd wipe fingerprints off its slick, black box, polishing the iconic *T. Rex* bones as a paleontologist might chisel and acid-wash rocky imperfections. At 5, I could name all 7 species and had acquired every action figure. I worshipped Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), the paleobotanist, top mind in her field. She knew the consequences of resurrecting a dead world. Ellie warned the men:

These are aggressive living things that have no idea what century they're in.

Days, I dug river-rock mulch from beneath our azaleas. Mosquitoes sawed my skin, but I emerged with fossils. Ten of them. I kept secret. Scales. Shells. Bird skull.

Nights, I dreamt of dinosaurs. Cows behind my grandmother's house grew horns and bony frill that thrilled *Triceratops* on my tongue. Like Ellie, in tears, I marveled at those magnificent herbivores. I knew these creatures were all female! *Woman inherits the Earth.*

I ran the two blocks to my father's house to tell him I'd seen a dinosaur, and it wasn't him. But the Tyrant Lizard had already knocked the door clean off its hinges. His house half-smashed, brick dust and glass glitter littered the floor. I scurried through the rubble into my closet and lay still. I knew then I could not save him from extinction.

Painted Bunting

Guided through childhood fields
by *Birds of North America*,
I searched always
for the Painted Bunting—
his horizon-fire belly and ocean hat,
his wings yellow and green
blending like watercolor into his back.
Curiosity ablaze like his feathers
against hardblue hardback,
I sought for years
Mr. Rainbow Bird.

You found him once
caught in the Cajun
twine-stick trap you'd set,
trick-stick snapped.
Under a touch of gravity,
the net closed tender
upon its captive. Removed
to your homemade aviary,
he outshone the Goldfinch,
Strawberry Summer Tanager,
even his own Indigo brother.
I marched, book in hand,
pointing to his page, 211,
called "Nonpareil"
for unbelievable colors.
Dark red shaded the map
of Louisiana, proof
we shared a home.
Paw Paw, can I see?

Your calloused huntsman's hand
cupped soft the coveted songbird.
Between your thumb-finger burrow,
he peeked at me. Heart thumping
in my ears, I never told you
how I envied that gentleness.

Electra c. 1970s

I carry my father's love in a long, black case.
Inside, his Les Paul replica rests its outlawed head.
He bought this guitar when he was a teen,
before Gibson sued the Japanese.

His cream yellow axe is irreplaceable, yet
he loans it to me for dive bar gigs in New Orleans.
Its tarnished pickups scream through my amp
despite water damage and years of neglect.

Fingering frets that felt like silk,
I struck the chords of dissonance.

Sobbing on his couch at nineteen years old,
I had neither explained nor defended myself.
"Did you kiss her? Freak."
His grip tightened around my neck.

I learned from the banjo broken things
are meant to be thrown out with the trash.
And my father has called me *that*.
I answered with a soft reverberating:

*What does it matter who plucks our strings
if they aren't broken in the end?*
Now, I carry his love in this long, black case.
Too afraid to press my fingers into its neck.

The Gris-Gris Man

Grandpa Rodrigue said he was a Coonass,
but really he was a shaman, stirring
the great boiling pot, chanting songs
from the fais do-do, sung
to enhance a roux or a brew.
And mudbugs he transformed into meals.

He taught me luck lived
in the rabbit's hind *foots*, as his hands
slung entrails into the sink.
He coaxed green things from
swamp-starved soils, so backyard
gardens could flourish in his footsteps.
He could charm fish out of water,
snatch hatchlings from she-gators
unscathed. No element
would not bend to him. He skinned
even the dreaded loup garou.

Rainbow birds too, he enchanted,
not for eating but for illegal trade
over Southern states' lines.
When have Cajuns obeyed
any law but their own?

Yes, it was magic dwelling in him
when he rubbed his hands together,
reciting the ritual, *Gris-gris merde sha*.
This medicine he sang over bumps and bruises
to cure a boulder, bobo, or a babin.
He watched as I wiped away my tears,
never knowing his healing
incantation was *cat shit*.

Daddy, You Bastard

after Sylvia Plath

You, first memory of pain, screaming
louder than I cried,
striking me again and again
for baby powder I'd spread.
A toddler hardly can speak.

You, face-grabbing demon, squeezing
disordered pop-and-click in
my temporal-mandibular joint.
Capillaries burst in both cheeks,
the tongue stuck in my jaw.

You, gigantic hands trying to asphyx
the gay out of me, the air
as heavy as your grip. I have always
been scared of you, but when I had to choose
survive

or strangulation, at nineteen years old,
I found my base instinct.
Animal claws
ready to rip the jugular from
your neck, Daddy.

And then, it wasn't you
who scared me anymore.

Burnt Rice

As New Orleans Cajuns,
even in the middle of the forest,
we eat red beans on Mondays.
But not me. I have filled my mouth
with nothing but objections for two days.

You don't tell me we're camping here
in the Mississippi pine-mill woods
because I don't know hunger
nor that as a poor boy you chose
to survive. You never say how many lives
my life is worth as I reject the fish
you catch and fry.

I flick black specks around my plate and protest.
Just a little burnt rice.

But burnt rice doesn't have antennae, I cry.
Paw Paw. There. Are. Bugs. In. This. Rice.
A head shake and a smile I struggle to trans-
late like the Couillon French you'll never teach me.
You'll learn to eat or die.

Yet, I could find fault in a bowl of cloud.

Owari Satsuma

For Christmas last year,
Father gave me an Owari Satsuma tree.
Six months later, I still have not planted it,
knowing what he hopes to take root—
my attachment to living things.
I'd desire to preserve this species
for seven hundred years,
as did the Japanese.
*Take care of it and it will last
forever,* he said.

Must it be in loamy soil,
clay, silt, and sand in all parts equal,
so the tree will settle down
like an obedient child?
Big winds would need buffering,
its tiny trunk so vulnerable to snapping.
I survey my yard and my options:
in the right corner, the North wind;
in the left, no fence to brace the cold.

And its name Owari—the end—
snappable now in my hands.
Sweet and juicy is the threat
to make a rootbound
prisoner of me, but powerless
in its plastic pot.
I will not plant this tree.

Cleaving

Congestive heart failure. Asbestos poisoning. Diabetes.
Stubborn, pig-headed, I-talian indifference.
Take your pick of the things that killed him.
They're all culprits. So am I. I bought the sugars,
salted his wounds with midnight crawfish runs—
just because Grandpa begged me for the mercy
God would not show him. Oxygen in tanks. Blood-
stained catheter tubes. I begged the question, *Why
the hell not?* While everybody else fed him the lie
of recovery, I fed him what he asked for:
snowballs, gumbo, beer, candy.

I was the eldest of the grandchildren who took care of him.
My younger cousins, a boy and a girl, slept on a pallet nestled
like ducklings next to our grandmother as she slumped
in the living-room recliner. I expected a fall
when the call for help rang out: *Cody, Cody!*

But the boy did not stir beneath
heaps of covers. *He's sleeping*, I half
whispered down the chilly hall. My grandfather
never said a word, never met my eyes, never looked
from the scarlet streams running down his legs.
His failed kidneys dried those legs to scales,
itching like hell unrepentant and bled Coumadin freely.
Blood coagulated between his nine toes, the tenth amputated
after a resistant staph infection one-month prior.

Those ducklings and my grandmother couldn't see this.
I scrambled quietly for the bathing pail
and turned its warm water ruby as I cleansed
his wounds. Bandage and tourniquet applied, I
scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed
that mess from the floor
until something broke in me.

Finding Sister Claire

Grandma, I found Sister Claire
resting beyond the gates of Rosaryville,
private cemetery for Dominican Sisters.
The King James Bible, engraved in gold letters,
the one she gave you when your name was still
Galloway, sits unopened on my desk.
You died when I was four, the same age
you were when she took you under wing
like a guardian angel. You never forgot.

Grandma, I found Sister Claire
after scouring all Ponchatoula, its woods,
unmarked roads—14 minutes from our cypress
house on Lavigne. Unable to feed three
children on her own, my great-grandmother
brought you, her only daughter, Gloria, to Spirit
Life, the only convent within 100 miles of home.
But I still don't understand why she sent you away
instead of your brothers.

Grandma, I found Sister Claire
resting beyond the gates of Rosaryville,
stories of her kindness still alive in my father's
memory. He recites them almost daily: your
tiny hands burned by the giant iron press,
how she took you to the kitchen,
taught you cooking herbs could heal.
She took you away from the nun who worked hands
until they bled. And when you wet the bed,
she hid your soiled sheets, promised not
to let the other Sisters display them.

Grandma, I found Sister Claire
without an obituary, without a last name,
without anyone who could tell me where
she would be found. I have come all this way
to thank her for giving you the Bible, the one
I keep always near and always closed.

II

Fucking Emily Dickinson

A handful of that chestnut hair
and I'm gone.

No words pass between us
on our Wild Nights except
the poems we scatter across
her worn hardwood floor
toppling that tiny desk over
with a bang—new poems
fingernailed into my back
as I press her against
her flowered wall.

No, they won't find these
ever, stuffed into a bureau drawer
next to the small bed onto which
she shoves me down to climb on top.

For a moment,
her Sherry Eyes paralyze me—
a luxury, if I ever had one, but
before she can settle in, I flip her
over and travel her body's landscape
with my tongue. She bites
her lip, then moans,
Put your Poetry where your Mouth is.
And I taste what Billy Collins
only dreamed.

Epiphany

Packaging ten thousand pounds of food
worked my body's appetite. I hungered
in that warehouse, where I learned poverty

taught by a stranger's riches, my luck
of the draw for community service
for the Academy of Our Lady High School.

There she stood, nameless face of milk,
lips of honey, resplendent, red over-sized
shirt swallowing her in ways I wished

I could. My fingers wanted to fill the hole
mid-inner-thigh in her pinstriped pants
and trace the lines upward and inward.

So I left.

A light drizzle fell as I ate my lunch
from a cardboard box, in the great, wide open field
just out of sight of the warehouse. How gold!

How gold that overcast field!
At last, I could name my difference.
The Earth did not shake. I did.

So I went back in.

Rambutan

I didn't always know your name,
but I like the way it rolls oval off my tongue
Rambutan, Malay for hairy,
tropical fruit with translucent flesh,
intoxicatingly red against the white of my palms.

Let me open you to reveal that sweet
interior, the mystery under your sunset skin
guarded by thousands of spines
that soften at my touch
as did the woman who introduced us.

Juices run down my fingers
as I nibble you gently and think of her.
She left this morning sticky and alone.
By now, halfway around the world
in the desert sands she calls home,

but we still have you, Rambutan—
my *hairy grapes*, her *chom chom*,
keeping secrets we learned in the shade.
So distant the evergreen
from which we fell.

Anacoco

New Orleans, September 2005

Relocated, you said, to the plains of the Raincrow,
Louisiana, all three-point-two miles of it greener
than you had ever seen the end of our road.

My dearest and oldest friend, there is no coming back
to this desolation. *Katrina* meant, for you, *cleanse*, a new start,
a new land, a life I was not in. But sometimes,

now, when I dream of harbinger birds,
yellow-billed cuckoos, my blonde girl in Anacoco,
the levees inside me break again, irreparable.

Khutulun

Favored by the Will of the Eternal Blue Sky,
great-great-granddaughter of Genghis Khan,
she is the only woman to possess the warrior's
medallion, her name inscribed on its gold face in flowing
Mongolian script: *Khutulun, Princess of 10,000 horses*.

Hawk-like, she snatches men behind enemy lines
and brings them to bow before her father, Kaidu.
14 brothers cannot match this mounted archer
whose hand soldiers wrestle for, whose wager asks
100 horses for her time.

A final challenger presents the best offer: 1,000!
Bökh begins when she imitates the falcon, gerege and chain
swaying in elegant lifts. Her opponent circles as a tiger,
jodag and shuudag striped to mirror its power.

Arms clashing like battle steel, Khutulun measures
the strength of the stranger. She shifts her weight, hoping
this maneuver will cause the outsider to fall. Before she can
recover her balance, she's knocked over into the sand.

The newcomer, in a show of strength, rips open her own woolen
jacket to reveal legend: God was a woman all along!

Hildegunn of Birka

In 1889, Knut Hjalmar Stople unearthed a Viking from a mound, two stallions at his feet, armor-piercing arrows at his side—the model soldier, tactician, general—whose bones and burial honors Stople bagged “10th Century Man.”

In 2014, Anna Kjellström visited these bones on display in the Swedish History Museum. Leaning close, she noticed the relaxed ilium crest, a mandible too small for a man’s, so she insisted on osteological testing to extract the DNA.

Confirmed: no Y chromosome.

I am not what I am.

Broken Spanish in the D.R.

Barceló Bávaro, proclaims my wristband,
a free ticket to all the buffets.
I parade through this Punta Cana palace like a queen.
Royalty here in the Cape of the Sugarcane,
I drop \$5.00 tips on everyone who serves me.
Dominican desserts line the tables: *Dulce Frío*,
Flan, *Cocadas*, *Pudín de Pan*—the Spanish
tasty as ten years ago in high school,
yet *la lengua* has practiced everything since then
but the language it loved.

When I speak to the chef, whose English
is as broken as my Spanish, I order
dos huevos difícil because I remember
the opposite of easy, but not the word for hard.
He smiles and plates two runny eggs. I say
Gracias, never been more grateful.
Later, I try *Donde esta el pollo*, but he hears
¿why is the chicken ugly? instead.
Then, *lo siento* for being so *stúpido*.

When he speaks to me in English only,
the bellhop makes me feel better.
So does Tony, my tour guide,
and everyone else except one woman
holding a baby on the dirt road,
who mouths *Agua por favor*,
a desperation I can see
but not understand.

Chapter 13

What will you do today? booms
across these hardwood floors' good acoustics,
its echo slapping empty bookshelves.

My wife eases her departure with a cheek-peck.
I want to say, *I have failed to carry us forward*,
my three part-time jobs unequal to full pay.

Retirement savings drained twice, I've sold
everything but her engagement ring. What good
were my dreams occupying

closet space? Guitar, amplifier, phase
shifter, wah-wah pedal (all vintage, all gone).
Before, when the wells ran dry, I dug another

next to the Mississippi where we had made love
New Year's Eve, fireworks exploding overhead,
every exhale a prayer Westwego PD weren't patrolling.

Out in our backyard not two meters from the grave we dug
for the stray cat, both of us tearing into the cold, hard ground,
careful not to burst these terracotta pipes.

Behind the church where we both were baptized,
we dug the holy land so far down
even God won't dig us out of this hole.

But now, I've run out of real estate.
I have stretched my hours beyond my days,
I want to tell her, working double-triple-time,

but it is not enough just like this shack I can't maintain.
Queen, you deserve a castle I could never afford.

I want to tell her that I will cry today, foreclosure
breathing down our necks, but instead, I kiss her
back. *I will find another way.*

Marlboro Gold

Cover me in ashes, Vicky Lynn
as you used to when we'd sit
on the porch in Grandma's
two burnt umber rocking chairs.

Joe breaks, we called them,
those polluted moments
we shared words, your lies
whiter than your smoke.

I chose to name you, Godmother,
when you said, *No matter what*
I'm going through, I will always be here,
a gift of pyrite upon the altar of God.

The ashen cross smudged
on my forehead is too easily
wiped away. I want to quit you
like that last Marlboro Gold

hidden and kept unlit, the reminder
of consequences passed through our lips,
after you outed me to your brother, my dad,
and tell him lies about my woman.

You flicked me to the street
like a butt discarded with your ashes.
But dust returns to dust, Vicky Lynn.

We become what we press to our lips:
unblessed thuribles in service to death.

Virgine

Archbishop Aymond's list contains 57 "credibly accused" dating to the 1940s
Salesians of Don Bosco PAUL AVALLONE church officials determined
were "credibly accused" they housed orphans children from troubled families
as young as 6 as old as 13

the scandal cost the Archdiocese STANISLAUS CEGLAR access to vulnerable children
one of them now, a 66-year-old says he still gets a chill driving past
I thought I was the only one Louis Cantero tells *The Advocate*
JOSEPH PANKOWSKI a slap to his face

Grand Spanish Colonial buildings empty but still-imposing monuments: PAUL CSIK
the 10-acre campus ALFRED SOKOL Hope Haven and Madonna Manor
tower into the heavens cast a shadow over Marrero nearly touch
the boys Archbishop Shaw High School the girls Academy of Our Lady

attorney Frank Lamothe uncovered clear evidence high-ranking nuns were aware
one testifies sadism ERNEST FAGIONE she could hear AUGUST KITA
the screams the beatings
"credibly accused" nuns physical emotional abuse

the list does not contain the names of any nuns I never said her name *Virgine*

III

Yella Canary

No pets allowed in his house
but you, passerine king of finches,
Grandpa loved all of your thirteen
centimeters, crown to claw,
his “yella canary.”

The eight-by-six-foot aviary
he built from plywood and chicken
wire was a kindness, the cage
so large we could both step inside.
Flight, the illusion of freedom.

When I was five years old
you died. I believed
you flew up to whisk
away a piece of sunshine
and it made you so happy
you couldn’t stop singing:
Zee. Zee-ree. Zhe-reeo.

Under an open sky, we buried you
as the wind ruffled your feathers
a last time. I understand now
cruelty, not love, kept you confined.
All five feet of me smashed your aviary
to bird-sized pieces.

Onions

I. History from *The National Onion Association*

object of worship among Egyptians, the Onion meant eternity:

circle within

a circle within

a circle

life after life

within anatomy

onion paintings on pyramid walls

upon the altar of the gods a funeral offering

King Ramses entombed

with onions

in his eye sockets

onions to resurrect the dead

II. Relativity

Dragon-fire orange, but dappled dark,
the tiger lily lunges
I dare you to love me.

Its cousin, the pungent lily,
an onion like a too heavy cloud,
I dare you not to cry.

Can there be no passion without tears,
no *Lilium lancifolium* without *Allium cepa*?
No differences without something
the same?

III. Home Remedies from *Homeopathic Medicine*

Cure Baldness:

Rub a little onion juice on the area to be rehaired. Bask in the sun until well-baked.

Heal Burns:

Apply raw slices, salted, to flesh. Compress for several hours. The burn will disappear.

Remove Splinters:

Tape one-half onion over the embedded irritant. Wait approximately one hour. The onion will absorb the foreign object.

Repel Insects:

Cut the onion in half and rub the vegetable all over your body. If already bitten, rub the onion wherever you feel pain.

Sooth Sore Throat:

Tea made from soaked onion skins remedies sore throat. Soak the skins until the water doesn't look like water anymore.

Polish Silverware:

Restore luster to utensils by soaking them in a mixture of equal parts chopped onions and water. Rust and dirt will dissolve.

IV. Dyeing

Onions make an excellent herbal dye, according to *The New Age Herbalist*, which tells me *dyeing is not difficult*, though it requires special equipment, such as rubber gloves and alum mordant, a metallic compound, which *should be handled with care*. Onion skins create a rich, golden-brown color, but large amounts of plant material are needed. The best place to dye is a utility room or an outhouse, *so long as it has electricity*. I am not sure I want to dye in an outhouse.

No More Paper Hats

For Jon Reaux (November 7, 1990 – February 2, 2017), founder of the New Orleans comedy troupe Young Funny

Say it ain't so, Jon Reaux! Tell me all these people lying. Gone? Just to L.A., right? Your Young Funny crew still believes. Tell me this is the *Big One*, you out there hiding in the bushes. You got me good this time, friend! Tell me, comic devil, you landed a gig somewhere in the fifth dimension cracking jokes to a Black Hole asking if you can eat its ass. Somewhere in the Constellation of Pussy-punch Girl—retired now. This is your brief intermission. You stepped out to call Hannibal. Doesn't he still owe you forty bucks? Was it drinks or drugs?

Y'all don't know nothing about love.

No more Long Island iced teas, no more bars with good vegetables, no more buses missed or wrong turns taken, no more child bikes and shit cars. No more empty bottles of Skol and bags of kale torn open, no more Jokes N Jams, no more dick videos, no more retro red denim vest—you magnificent weirdo. The invincible man, vanquished. You told me you were a god. I believed. *It's all about the confidence.*

Y'all don't know nothing about love.

And in the absence of your awkward-long hugs, I finally understand what you meant— we could have brewed salvation together in a Keurig cup. *Life is weird*, isn't it? The world is darker without your smile, smaller without your big hair and even bigger heart. Comedy, the final escape. I would have stood on the bridges with you while they burned. I would have let you turn me into a criminal, breaking and entering to steal laptops because bitches don't know happy without you.

Y'all don't know nothing about love.

That Bowie knife, the one you mounted like a death trap above the doorway, passed through my heart, Jon, its compass needle confused and spinning. What the fuck is even North? I hope you finally found it. Oh, and Sallie Mae called. We just laughed and laughed and laughed.

Bonam Noctem, Praeceptor

For Dr. Stephen “Prof” Pearce, Esq., Ph. D

“And we may say about him that he was in his time the best of all men we ever encountered.” —Plato

I heard that a man should come to his end
in a way that calls for measured speaking—
but I am holding my grief in my teeth
as if dogged canines could gnash to goodbye
and time did not stop at your horizon.
You left a black hole centered in my life
like a sleep where the sleeper does not dream.
It has been one year since you eclipsed me.
Still, I crumble like fried Roman cookies
shaken with the violent need to disrupt
continuum, punch Earth, cause retrograde
to spin back the clock—the moment before
the horses’ heads set toward Eternity,
when all time seems no longer than one night.

The impact crater
of a single life
might never be filled.

Stephen of Laniakea

for Stephen Pearce

Etched in obsidian, *classical scholar*
sums up the life of a man, my Preceptor

condensed into a fragment
beneath Byers Green, County Durham.

Geoff showed me the picture: Prof standing
where his ashes are now blanketed in snow.

So many epitaphs would suit him better—
a Merlin, a Dumbledore, a Gandalf, a Stephen

Strange, the teacher who wanted to be an architect,
who ended up shaping beings instead of buildings.

And what did he teach his hundreds of students through
the course of his life besides Latin and Greek?

He taught me my best friend's name was not *Flay-vee-uh*
but the Roman *Flau-wee-ah* for her golden hair,

his voice, a whisper, uttering *Ecce Romani*, but I cannot answer.
A dead language does not serve a living tongue.

He taught me to treat the book with talking snakes
like a book with talking snakes and that the best way

to learn a thing is to do the damn thing:
make mistakes because no one alive cares anyway,

to love Emily Dickinson enough to write
thirty pages, not just *think* I love her—

there were so many things—a word I can't remember,
the word with no synonyms—I should have told you, Stephen.

We never talked of how we'd stop for death.
They say black holes can erase the past.

I want to be swallowed up, unscrambled like an egg,
but a hair never dissolves.

Notes

Page 7:

“Gris-Gris” is the Cajun word for magic or a magic spell. “Coonass” is a derogatory word for people of Cajun descent. “Loup garou” is a Cajun version of the werewolf, rumored to be lethal, but stupid. “Bouder” is a Cajun term used to describe making a pouty face. “Babin” is a Cajun term referring to a specific pouty face in which one’s lower lip protrudes.

Page 9: “Couillon” is a Cajun word meaning stupid.

Page 14: The penultimate line refers to Billy Collins’ “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes.”

Page 16: “Chom chom” is the Vietnamese word for rambutan.

Page 17: “Anacoco” is a small town in Vernon Parish, Louisiana.

Page 23: “Virgine” is a found poem, whose source texts are “‘Sinister forces at work’: 8 Salesians accused of abuse at Hope Haven and Madonna Manor campus” written by Matt Sledge and published in *The Advocate*, and “Hope Haven was house of horrors for troubled youth” written by Caresse Jackman and published at www.wwltv.com.

Pages 26-27: Section one’s source text is “History of Onions” from <https://www.onions-usa.org/all-about-onions/history-of-onions>. Some remedies from section three are from the book *Homeopathic Medicine: First Aid and Emergency Care* by Lyle W. Morgan, Ph.D, H.M.D. Portions of the prose in section four use language from *The New Age Herbalist* by Richard Mabey.

Page 28: The title “No More Paper Hats” as well as the refrain and some references in the prose were taken from Jon Reaux’s stand-up routines available on www.youtube.com.

Page 29: Lines 1 and 2 are from Plato’s *Phaedo*, 117b-118a. Line 7 is from Plato’s *Apology*, 40c-41c. *Sic friat crustulum*, the Latin phrase meaning “that is the way the cookie crumbles” refers to tiny cookies fried in olive oil by the Romans that crumbled easily and were discarded. It is the origin of the phrase we use today. Line 13 is a reference to Emily Dickinson’s poem #479 (Because I could not stop for Death). Line 14 is from Plato’s *Apology*, 40c-41c. The lines from Plato were chosen from readings Dr. Stephen Pearce selected to be read at his funeral.

Page 30: “Ecce Romani” translates to “look, Romans.” It is the name of the text book Dr. Stephen Pearce used to teach Latin 101 and Latin 102. The last line of the poem is taken from a letter written by Emily Dickinson to her sister-in-law, Susan.

Works Cited

“Facing Down Strays.” *In the Hall of Specters*, by Sheri L. Wright, CreateSpace, 2018, pp. 1–1.

VITA

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