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Escape Artist

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Escape Artist

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

Justin Lamb

B.S. Boston University, 2007

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For my brother Teddy and my neighbor Darryl

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Abstract

This poetry manuscript explores themes of family and addiction, education and New Orleans, and fear and escape in the span of three parts. Its preface examines the poet's background and influences, his relationship with performance and humor, and the levity he hopes to create in his work.

Keywords: Poetry, Performance, Humor, Family, New Orleans, Escape

Trying to Find the Honey: A Preface

When I first started writing poetry and reading at poetry slam competitions in high school, I approached my written work as a script, using it solely for the purpose of memorization and performance. I went out of my way to distinguish the work that I loved on HBO's Def Poetry Jam from the poetry we read in school. However, the older and more experienced I became, the more I realized that separating "stage" and "page" poetry created an unnecessary distinction. Poetry is the bridge that connects the varied voices from the poets my teachers assigned in high school to the poets I have met at shows around the country.

I decided to pursue my MFA, in part, because I felt inspired by contemporary poets who blur the lines of these media. Poets such as Eve L. Ewing, Angel Nafis, Jon Sands, Danez Smith and Clint Smith captivate audiences on stage and off. I remember watching Danez Smith deliver "Dinosaurs in the Hood," my favorite poem of the 2014 Individual World Poetry Slam in Phoenix, and being mesmerized by its humor and potent turn. In the poem, Smith follows up comedic lines such as, "I want a scene / where a cop car gets pooped on by a pterodactyl" with "but this can't be / a black movie" (10-11, 24-25). Months after the Individual World Poetry Slam, I experienced the poem again as a written text in the December 2014 issue of *Poetry Magazine*, and I could study how Smith separated the poem into a series of cinquains before breaking form in its powerful closing line, "his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there," which stands alone on the right side of the page (36).

Clint Smith's success as a National Poetry Slam champion and published author demonstrates another example of, ahem, "verse-atility." When I first encountered his poem, "what the cicada said to the brown boy," as a written text on the new media site *Seven Scribes*, its closing lines, "but every time you swarm they shoot / get you some wings, son / get you some wings,"

moved me (20-22). They moved me again when I heard him recite the poem at his New Orleans book release party. The repetition in the final two lines and the variance created by his use of “son,” effective on the page, became even more effective when combined with the urgency expressed in the poet’s voice.

Many of the poets I love began their literary careers in slam or open mic communities but later pivoted to publish their work while still championing performance. Sometimes they are labeled specifically as “performance poets” or “spoken word artists” because of their start in performance or their racial identities. In her essay “Speaking Into the World,” Eve L. Ewing writes, “Poets of color, particularly black poets, are often pigeonholed into not only the presumption of performance, but the implication that performance—as a mode of poetry—is somehow crude, somehow lesser.” Despite my start participating at poetry slams, I know that I can shed the title of “performer” more easily than some of my peers because of my identity as a white man. I *choose* to honor my connection to the spoken word while simultaneously pushing back on the false dichotomy of “stage” versus “page.”

These days, I no longer approach my poetry as a script, but I still edit by reading poems aloud, and I am still unapologetically a performer. On stage, I play with my voice, sing off-key and use gestures to punctuate words and phrases. Sometimes I even use costumes and props, both forbidden in most poetry slam competitions, in the pursuit of fun. I do not believe that my performance practices lessen the quality of my work on the page (nor does my focus on written work diminish the performance). However, I am determined not to rely solely on performances and hope that most of my poems can resonate without them. I see the “stage” and “page” as different opportunities to add layers to a poem. For example, when readers encounter my poem, “Definition of Insanity,” I hope they notice that the line breaks play up my speaker’s paranoia in the same way a listener may appreciate how I widen my eyes and adjust the volume of my voice to say, “I decide

safety pins are not safe / enough” (6-7). Additionally, I hope that the reader recognizes the framing provided by the epigraph, perhaps too subtle or quick for a listener, who may be more aware of a dramatic pause employed during my reading.

I do not deny that certain poems work more effectively in certain spaces nor that the “page” and “stage” media are in conflict at times. When it came time to create this collection of poems, I knew that I could not include my poem “Mark Morrison Diary Entry After He Recorded ‘Return of the Mack,’” a recent favorite to read in front of audiences, because it relies on my stoic reinterpretation of a jubilant song to succeed. Similarly, there are poems in this collection that I would not bring to my favorite open mics. For example, the bizarre and non-linear elements of “Cows,” which I hope might contribute to its success on the page, could become detrimental with an audience trying to follow along on the first listen.

When poet Kelly Harris-DeBerry visited the University of New Orleans a couple of years ago, she talked about the experience of returning to her Columbus open mic scene after completing her MFA and hearing friends say that they wanted “Open Mic Kelly” instead of “MFA Kelly.” As someone who has felt less audience engagement when reading certain workshopped material at the open mic, this anecdote resonated with me. Sometimes I fear that I might revise the life out of some pieces when I focus on page presentation. Still, I do not believe that “Open Mic Justin” and “MFA Justin” are mutually exclusive identities. If a poem does not work in both spaces, that could also be a sign that it needs revision. As someone who has witnessed Harris-DeBerry succeed in front of poetry slam and MFA program audiences, I know that poets with versatile skill sets can usefully trouble these distinctions.

Questions I might ask about a poem’s performative quality may also improve it on the page. For example, reciting a poem helps me understand its rhythm and sonic quality. By reading a poem as I write it, I can hear where a line or section might need to be revised. Of course, reading a poem

out loud does not necessarily make it a “performance” and this gray area exemplifies why it may not be helpful to draw such distinctions. Just as recitation and performance can aid a poem on the page, studying the poem on the page can aid the performance. I have always agonized over word choice and concision, but focusing on my work as a written entity and acknowledging that the poem may be read multiple times requires me to put more pressure on every strophe, line, phrase, word and syllable. I hope my attention to devices such as figuration, sound, rhyme, meter and tone aid the performance in addition to the written work.

“Open Letter to Laura Numeroff, Author of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*,” included in this collection, was my first poem that open mic audiences and MFA workshop participants seemed to appreciate almost equally. This epistle’s humor and second person address make it possible, I hope, for an audience member to understand and enjoy it upon the first listen. Beyond these two prominent qualities, it possesses layers that a reader can discover. For example, a listener may not fully experience the symmetry of the poem and how line fourteen, “Especially those close to addiction,” splits the piece in half. Also, the listener does not have the privilege of seeing which sentences I emphasize by setting off inside sparser strophes. For example, I wanted to highlight the fragment “How we feel like enablers or monsters,” so I placed it at the end of a shorter strophe. I hope that the humor present in this poem and others in my collection can play to readers and audiences alike (16-17).

My pursuit of humor started as a play for acceptance and morphed into something deeper. I make people laugh so that I can tell them my truth or make my truths more palatable. I insert jokes into explorations of my brother’s addiction to add levity, probably more for myself than for my readers. I wouldn’t call this an avoidance tactic. If anything, humor provides an access point to take on topics that I may not otherwise address. During my creative process, humor is often my starting point. I write down what amuses me and discover bigger ideas and connections after the initial draft.

“Open Letter to Laura Numeroff” began because I thought it would be fun to write from the perspective of an adult who did not understand the concept of children’s literature. Later, when I wanted to write about my relationship with my family and addiction, I returned to my first draft, added this personal element, and the poem began to shift from a comic bit to, I hope, a more multi-dimensional piece.

Hearing approval in the form of laughter gives me permission to explore insecurities and deeper fears that I might otherwise not. When I incorporate humor, these explorations feel more artful and less like journal entries because humor represents an artistic technique that I am attempting to employ. In the poem, “The Definitive Case for Why Humans Are Better Than Ants,” I use the absurd premise of a speaker trying to convince himself that humans are “better” than ants to attempt to reflect on existence. Jokes such as the speaker accusing ants of plagiarizing their bodies from snowmen enable me to deliver more serious thoughts later in the poem: “Does our capacity to wonder give us a false sense of importance? Is it human centric to assume a bug’s life is meaningless?” (19-20). These lines may strike some readers as heavy handed, but I believe that I earn this moment by supplying what I hope to be humorous elements earlier in the poem.

When I started performing in New Orleans, my poetry would put humor above everything else. I wrote poems such as “The Sweaty Teacher,” a string of jokes about my penchant for sweating inside the classroom. However, I noticed a shift in my work when I started participating in Slam New Orleans poetry slam competitions. At these slams, I found myself competing against powerful poets such as Kataalyst Alcindor, Tarriona “Tank” Ball, Akeem Olaj Martin, Michael “Quess?” Moore and Sha’Condria “iCon” Sibley. In order to feel like I belonged on stage with poets exploring heavy topics such as trauma or systemic societal issues, I knew that I had to create poems that provide more substance than several sweat jokes strung together. I began incorporating messages into my work. Some poems would celebrate life, human interconnectedness and everyday

delights. My poem about “the friend zone” explored a magical Friend Zone, “like AutoZone but for friends,” while eviscerating the self-proclaimed “nice guys” who complain when their kindness is not rewarded with sex. A poem titled “FML,” which my Slam New Orleans teammates and I used to clinch our 2013 National Poetry Slam championship in Boston, celebrates the sacred simplicity of life by exploring the strange practice of people who express “fuck my life” online after encountering miniscule problems.

As I have grown as a poet, my approach to serious matters has become less prescribed. I am no longer concerned with providing a message. Instead, I ask, “Where is the heart?” or, to borrow a phrase from our guest workshop leader Laura Mullen in 2016, “Where is the honey?” If I were to write a poem like “FML” today, I would focus less on the general magic of humanity and more on the magic of what I have experienced and the stories that I feel empowered to tell. This is the heart of my collection, and I suppose the “honey” is the hope still present amid addiction, insecurity, and dread. Despite the speaker’s fixations and failures, I mean for moments of light to shine through: the persistent sound of a trumpet, students hosting a poetry show, an ant carrying another ant to its grave. Okay, maybe that last one is a little depressing.

Just as I attempt to “find the honey” in my poetry, my proximity to poetry has helped me “find the honey” in my life. I have seen people from eight to eighty light up at the sight or the sound of a well-executed poem. I have listened to champagne-soaked, post-poetry slam tournament speeches where victors wax poetic about how poetry has taken them places they could not have imagined. At the New Orleans Youth Open Mic I co-organize, I have watched middle and high schoolers hold phones or notebooks in shaky hands and deliver their truths every month. I do not believe poetry has the power to change the world, but I do believe in its power to change people.

When I was an undergraduate, I remember hearing about poets such as slam champ Buddy Wakefield who traveled the world performing poems. I remember thinking that a life like that

sounded both wonderful and impossible. Yet ten years later, I left my job and tried it out for a few months. Because of poetry, I have slept on a stranger's couch in Oklahoma City, delivered a workshop for a dozen people on Easter morning in Ottawa, and sat across from Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets at a sports bar in Little Rock on the eve of the 2015 Southern Fried Poetry Slam. I have lost touch with most of my friends from college, but I remain connected with multiple members of my old poetry club, Speak For Yourself, and we still send each other our first drafts. Without poetry, I would not know so many people whom I love. I would not know New Orleans the way I know it now. Sometimes, poetry feels like the most important part of my identity. I feel the most hopeful after drafting a poem that I will share with others. I feel the most on fire after a poetry performance goes well. Poetry is a deflated beach ball. Into it, I breathe all of my fears, joys, neuroses, strangest dreams and most precious memories until I am out of breath.

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I.

Waterways

I.

My brother is five years old when he tries to walk
across the half-frozen nature pool at Mom's school.
Caution spills from my lips too late. He crashes
two feet into the frigid liquid. I pull him out
by his armpits. He weeps. Soaked jeans
stick to his legs. We bring him home to change.

II.

Water will ruin your picnic,
wash away your home, pull you
under. Water doesn't give a shit
about your potato salad. Doesn't give a damn
about your dams. Even when captured
inside a bowl, water always finds
a way out, escapes into clouds
only to storm back down,
Drip. Drop. Drip.
How you like me now?

We build pipelines, construct pools, redirect
rivers. Say, *Over here, water.* Say, *Stay,*
water. As if its pressure won't build.
As though water won't go where it wants.

III.

My brother takes chances over advice,
is never one to avoid thin ice. As a boy,
his tantrums rippled through our house.
We braced for his teens like a family
stocking up on minestrone before a storm.

I evacuated to college.
Left my parents behind
to plug holes, fill buckets, tread the sea
of lies about how the liquor evaporated
or the contents of someone's wallet
floated away.

The first time my brother went to jail,
I tried to get him to change course.
The second time, I went with the flow.
The sixth time, I fantasize
about the nature pool, about lifting him
out of the cold water by his armpits.
I want to see my brother cry again.
I want to offer him a pair of dry pants.
I want him home.

IV.

They say humans are 60 percent water,
but my brother, I swear, is at least 95.
Sometimes he is a glass of tap water.
Sometimes he is a rapid river.
He always goes where he wants.

Café on Black Friday

We dap and hug. His hands shake.
I ask my brother what he wants.

He says a large coffee.
Says he's not hungry.
Says he ate five or six Thanksgiving dinners.
Says he's sober.
Says he's serious this time.
Says he didn't hit his girlfriend.
Someone else did.
He tried to hit *him*.
It was dark.
He didn't mean it.
He broke his hand.
The cast got wet, so he ditched it.
Says she's not pressing charges.
He lost his ID.
He's been trying to get a job for months.
Interviews with McDonald's tomorrow.
No, he still can't find his ID.
Says it's good he can't find it.
Keeps him from going to the bar.

A flyer for an open mic reads,
Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes.

He says it's hard.
Says he hasn't done anything hard since he got out.
He just wants Mom and Dad to know he's trying.
It gets cold.
Sometimes the shelter runs out of space.
Sometimes he has people to call.
Says he's ready for winter to end.
Says he ate pork and rice and beans for Thanksgiving dinner.

I hand him the paper bag Mom filled with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing and her turkey cookies
with the rainbow sprinkles.
He says it's OK I forgot the fork.

He keeps extra in his backpack.

Others inside sip and stare as he answers his phone.

Who's this?

Stop calling me. I'm with my brother.

He says it was his girlfriend.

Says he didn't recognize her number.

No, the man on the line was their friend.

On the other side of the glass,
three people with sunken eyes
stand in the cold. A shaking
hand clutches a phone.

I told you to leave me alone.

Can't you see I'm with my brother?

Open Letter to Laura Numeroff, Author of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*

Dear Laura,

I used to love your book: the story of a mouse who is given a cookie and uses this act of kindness as an opening to make outrageous demands. After a recent re-reading, however, I've begun to notice some flaws.

You open your cautionary tale with *If you give a mouse cookie*, as if we were already considering this option. No further set up necessary.

Worse than your premise are your characters, both detestable beyond measure. First, there's the mouse who, in the course of 13 pages, asks for a cookie, milk, a straw, a napkin, a mirror, nail scissors, a broom, a bed, a story, paper, crayons, a pen, scotch tape, another glass of milk, another cookie. All without once saying thank you.

Next, we have the boy, incapable of saying no to the most unreasonable requests. He gives in to a creature a fraction of his size again and again until we are right back where we started, and who didn't see that coming, Laura?

Especially those close to addiction.

We read one sentence and know how the story will end. Or how it won't. Maybe this is the real reason I hate your book. Not its premise or its characters, but its predictability.

I know your mouse, your boy, how we agonize over acts of kindness. How we feel like enablers or monsters.

I talked to my mom on the phone yesterday. She said my brother asked if he could recycle her bottles and cans. When she dropped them off, he mentioned he was hungry, so she took him to lunch. Knowing Mom, she probably gave him a plate of cookies and a folded bill when they finished. Laura, have you ever resented your mother's generous spirit? Your brother's sickness?

For Christmas, I buy him warm clothes. Because I fear he will pawn electronics. Because I know I am leaving him out in the cold. What happens when you don't give a mouse a cookie? Does the story ever end? Are we happy?

Knives: A Timeline

Today

The knives in my apartment are falling apart.
The rubber handles have split.
I can't get a grip.

November 1994

The night you move in, we have pizza and salad.
You are four and sport a rattail.
I threaten to cut it off.

June 1997

The worst weapon in GoldenEye 007 is the knife.
Mom and Dad won't let me buy the game,
so we borrow it from the neighbors.
We play so often I see James Bond
when I close my eyes.

September 1999

Unable to grow a mustache, you borrow my razor to shave
and emerge from our bathroom missing half of each eyebrow.

May 2004

You could cut the tension
with a knife. I could not
because you hold the knife.
Wave it. Curse. Threaten to stab me.

I do not react.
Something in my gut says you won't stick it.

March 2005

Mom says you were upset I wasn't more upset.

April 2016

Our first contact after this release is a text.
You've found a legit job selling knives
and ask to set up a call in two days.

These knives come with a lifetime guarantee.
Not wanting our first words in two years to be
about Cutco products, I sign up anyway.
You could use the help.
I could use the knives.

April 2016

At 5 PM, you don't call.

April 2016

At noon, you don't call.

April 2016

The next day, I text *forget it*.

December 2016

I don't write you when you go back.

January 2017

You don't text when you get out.

July 2017

I don't write you when you go back.

funny / not funny

*my cousin's red eyes thru the peephole at 4 in the morning
asking for gas money & he don't even own no car...*

funny

not funny

-A Scribe Called Quess?

i saw two movies / in the last two days / i thought about you fourteen times / our home videos /
you dressed as villain / black sunglasses and a pope hat that used to be a panda's arm / a foam
facade from my eighth grade dance / i wonder if they let you watch movies / i should ask / in the
next letter / i don't write / i've been meaning to / about how i haven't / i swear / i watched you /
on the streetcar / he wasn't you / but he was / a white boy / eyes red / with a fade and a faded
backpack / who snuck on without paying / who knows / what he had in that bag / maybe
sunglasses / a foam hat / gas money / ha

Family Greetings

Your 91-year-old grandmother pulls out into oncoming traffic
and survives the crash. A month later, you still haven't written.
You pace the card aisle of your neighborhood Winn Dixie.
The whole "Get Well" section predicts
recipients will become *stronger than ever* or at worst *good
as new*. By the time you send your card, Grandma's elbow has healed,
but she can no longer lift her right hand to her face.

When Mom texts, *Call me*, you call her.
Chris overdosed. You have not seen Chris since Grandma's 75th,
when she noticed 60 dollars missing from her purse.
You remember his smile and his pet crow, Sam. That time
when his younger brother fed the crow gum and Chris screamed:
*If gum stays in a human stomach for seven years,
what the fuck do you think it does to a crow, Travis?*
Years later, you don't know what happened to the crow.

Buying a birthday card for your little brother,
you resist the urge to pick up something ironic
(*Happy Birthday, Baby!* or *80 YEARS YOUNG!*)
You do not understand prison humor
or what gatekeepers allow, so you skip
the singing cards, the 3D ones too.
Settle on a cartoon dog and a neutered joke.

Your brother writes back in less than a week.
He wishes he wasn't writing from "here again,"
but he can't blame "nobody" but himself.
He's the one who got into that fight with the cop
and that nurse. By the way, it was a "shit birthday."
News about Grandma and Chris got him down.
Got him thinking how life is so short.

It's been a month. You haven't replied.
Grandma still can't wash her face.

II.

Retention

You cannot remember the types of clouds or the Spanish word for *purple*.

You remember Schemitzun 1994, when every elementary school in Connecticut descended upon the Hartford Civic Center for the Mashantucket Pequot festival and the bus your dad set out to find left him behind.

Ocean Beach. How your class got to use the pool for free because of the sewage leak. Being too scared to stand at the edge of the diving board. Your dad's warning about hitting your head. The splash of the lifeguard who saved Michael Cerrano.

The silence when you sat cross-legged on Mrs. Avery's carpet after she announced that "someone" had broken her pencil sharpener and she was "disappointed" that no one had confessed. The burn of your ears when Michael C. looked at you and smirked.

The facts go first. Some fade moments after the test.

A grown man buying groceries for the after school cooking class in your program, you are unable to recall how many ounces in a cup, but you remember the Mansfield Middle School Mall. You and Dave Salorio sold so much cookie dough, Mr. Fulton banned it the following year. Four kids got sick that day, but each one said it was worth it.

As Zach stands next to Leslie at the altar, you remember how on the cover of his geometry report, he superimposed his winking face onto a cartoon seal. How Mr. Robertson, a mouse of a man who drew perfect circles, looked at Zach's cover and did not blink.

That time your Reggie Miller jersey got stuck in your braces and Mrs. Shliker sent you to the nurse. Preparing all weekend for your 30-minute Spanish presentation, but none of the content. You do not remember how you learned to read in Mrs. Kegler's class, only how she kept a Tattle Tail that she threatened to pin on tattletales.

Some of it dissipates and, like cumulus clouds, comes back. Some of it sticks to you like a faux raccoon tail pinned to the back of your jeans.

The sun sets as you grade tests. Que hermosa, that purple.

Sixth Grade Sestina

While our bored sixth grade peers stay back
to multiply fractions, six of us board a van and converse
the three miles to Southeast Elementary. A break
from preteen and pre-algebraic problems at Mansfield Middle. Will we stop
at McDonald's after we read to our kindergarten partners?
I want to devour a Quarter Pounder the way our partners will devour our books.

I clutch a Ziploc bag full of classic picture books
like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Quiet, I sit in the back
of the bus where minimum maturity partners
with minimum supervision. Someone cracks on my Converse.
Mark T. and Heather F. discuss crushes, including their own. *Stooooop*,
says Mark T. We laugh. *If I slept with her, the bed would break.*

I don't know what he means but laugh anyway. The van brakes
to silence. We exit, enter Southeast with our bags of books.
I read *The Very Quiet Cricket*, stopping
dramatically before flipping to the book's back
where that cricket, quiet until now, finally converses.
Chirp, chirp. This impresses my three little partners,

almost as much as the Western accent (*Howdy partner!*)
I use to read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* before break,
before their teacher asks us to reflect and converse.
Says us sixth graders are so smart she's booked
us to visit again. We close with *Goodnight Moon*. Our backs
leave imprints in our colorful bean bag chairs. I feel big. *Stop*,

whispers one kid. The other flicks his ear. *I told you to stop!*
The teacher tells the class to thank their big partners.
Goodbye. My chest puffs like a caterpillar full of cupcakes. Back
to the van we walk until someone shouts, *No same seats!* and we break
in a panic, swinging our translucent bags of books.
I huff, puff, finish sixth. Trip over my Converse.

On the way home, Heather F., now in my old seat, converses
with the whole bus about the butt imprint I left behind, won't stop
saying *Fat. Fat. Fat*. In front, I cover my face with books

so no one can read it. I want to sink into my seat or teleport back to my partners.
Down the road, I see golden arches. Feel my damn face, ready to break.
I tell our chaperone I'm not hungry when the van stops.

From this imprint, I still stop and think back.
Still wear Converse. Still hide inside books.
Still partner with distraction. I try not to break.

Substitutes

I.

Mr. Cianci would furrow his eye shrubs and go from zero to screaming in seconds. In science class, we hypothesized that he was fired from a gig as a used car salesman and got a job as a substitute despite his hatred for kids.

Mr. Orenstein called himself Mr. Mario because he bore a likeness to the famed plumber/video game protagonist. To relate to us, he used to draw a cartoon Mario next to his name on the whiteboard.

Following Mr. Sampson's heart attack, Mr. Anderson taught math for the rest of the year. After three seventh graders got sick at his first period end-of-the-year party, he began ours with a lecture: *There will be no chuggalugging. Absolutely no chuggalugging.*

I never had Mr. Hayward, but I cheered for him when he played ball for UConn. On his first and last day, I heard he let his English 2 students pick from a binder of DVDs and they watched *Blade*, rated R for strong, pervasive vampire violence, gore, language, and brief sexuality.

II.

After Katrina, they fired 7000 teachers and hired me out of college.

My first year, Diana handed me a folded note: *You need to get control of this classroom. I am not learning.* I still keep it buried under a pile of student work in my closet.

When someone was out, teachers covered for each other. I never missed a day, but on my way to school, I would fantasize about gliding off Canal Street and into a concrete wall. I didn't want to kill myself, just wanted to be hurt enough to be replaced. A brief coma to keep from teaching commas. My students could write me notes:

Get better. Soon.

For Those Swimming in Bayou St. John

Possessors of zero fucks
and several strains of dysentery,
not everything needs you all up in it.
If you want to betray your body,
why not just drink too much?
The human body consists of 60 percent water.
Bayou St. John? Just 40, plus
a sewage sampler, floating fish, bodies
of old cars. Let's not even focus on the alligators
who live in Bayou St. John.
Let's focus on the alligators
who say, *No thanks.*
That water's too nasty for me,
and I shit where I swim.

Every city has that one swimming hole
where people paddle against the tide of their better judgments:
the community pool that doubles as a urinal for children,
the open pond that closes twice a summer
when the rain slows and bacteria levels

rise. Not one of these spots: Bayou St. John,
where no one swims except you,
educators who pretend to know no better,
bartenders diving into lager-hued liquid,
film majors covered in thick film,
outsiders who do what you want to,
no matter how toxic.

More Birds

Along the bayou, I run. Anonymous birds
sing the greatest bird hits of the 90s and today.
The mild morning breeze greets the sun: *What's up,*
Sun? Time to give the people what they want.
Dogs on leashes stick noses into crisp air.
Soccer parents with orange-slice smiles guide
strollers. Toddlers bat at the sky. Six painters
stand in front of easels at the bayou's
bend, trying to capture this: morning.

I slow almost to a walk as I approach them,
still chugging my arms as if in full jog.
Will they notice me? Work my figure
into their paintings with a few brushstrokes?
I am willing to be a stick figure, a chunk
of elbow in the upper left corner, anything
to live here inside this scene forever. Ever
here. Instead, they just paint more birds.

Streetcar from New Line Responds to My Skepticism

You say I exist to cater
to hipsters and tourists,

that my slow rumble
will speed up gentrification

as though you are the blameless
bystander, not already on board,

as though you don't drive my route
each day to work, as though

your friends didn't start
the improv theater down the street

and I am not simply "yes and'ing."
You gumbo pot of kale

calling the kettle names.
I roll past that Banksy piece every day.

I need another anonymous artist in my life
like the Bywater needs another tall bicycle.

Hearing you complain is
to hear a hipster critique

his mustache. Ironic,
how you only call out

the neighborhoods shifting
when they start to shift away

from you, like white folks
who settle in the hood,

then hold protest marches at City Hall
against the short-term rentals

once given a taste
of their own “revitalization”

or the carpetbagger at the open mic
who rails against the city’s changes

then catches a Lyft
to his renovated apartment.

You want action?
Don’t judge me,

make like me:
roll out.

Black Line Painted on Hallway Hardwood

It stretches past
six classrooms.
A solid line.
Two feet from
a wall covered
with finger painted
galaxies, stories
written in graphite,
and a poster
that reads:
GRIT.
INTEGRITY.
RESULTS.

48 sneakers
straddle
the line.
Some tap.
The teacher,
who is white-
knuckled, grips
a clipboard,
orders children
to stay in line.
We can do
better than
this, Harvard.

Last in line, a boy
points to a world
whirled in green
and blue scribbles,
whispers to a friend,
That's mine.

The teacher
writes a check
next to his name.

*Jonathan,
you know
we don't talk
in the hall.*

State Test Composition Assessor

The prompts always start the same way: *Write a letter to a classmate...* *Create an essay for your principal...* *Compose a story for your teacher...* but they're wrong. You are composing for me, a 73-year-old who lives in a yellow house in Apple Valley, Minnesota, and gets paid \$12 an hour to read your five paragraphs.

TestMerica only gives me your identification numbers, so I give you each a name: *Mary, Jeremiah, Joseph*. I imagine you with bright faces, scribing stories just for me, tongues hanging from mouths as you write, your Number 2 pencils gripped too tight. I imagine you coming home to smiling families that tuck you in and read you stories.

By now, I can guess a score before I read. I can tell which of you have math tutors masquerading as English instructors who push formulas over imagination. You always start with a question: *Have you ever wondered what it would be like to fly?* Use the same transitions: *First... Next... In conclusion...* It's blasphemy, but enough to pass.

Blank pages get the score they deserve. I don't feel good about it, but I know I'm not the only one failing you.

I wish I could give you all comments. Tell you someone cares. I want to tell you *I needed that* or *Keep going* or *Good job*, but it's not mine to connect, so instead, I give you your number. I move on.

Kickstand

Against a lobby wall
of the school that bears his name
leans a portrait of the poet as a young man
staring out at the world.
His right elbow rests on his desk.
His right palm cradles his cheek.

Inside a classroom, a kid,
right elbow on desk,
right palm on cheek,
leans back in his plastic chair
and stares out the window.

A teacher tells him to sit in “S.L.A.N.T.”
or it’s another demerit.

The faculty handbook labels
his posture a “kickstand,”
a sign of disengagement.

The poet may have called it dreaming.

Open Mic

For Marc

Nelly and Jasmine arrived
late each day and participated
in every after school activity.
They joined the Poetry Club
as juniors. Became the Poetry Club
after the seniors graduated.

I met Nelly's mom, Shannon,
at the student showcase where
Nelly and Jasmine read their poems
and I passed plates of white cake.
After, we all stacked chairs,
and when I said thank you,
Shannon said, *That's just
what we do.*

Weeks after, when Jasmine needed
to leave home, Shannon offered hers.
It's what she does.

Months after that, inside the cold courtroom
Jasmine wore an orange jumpsuit.
I sat on a hard bench next to Shannon,
who sketched in a notebook,
which reminded me that she sculpts,
meaning she creates beauty with bare hands.
I think she must have known John,
sculptor, creator of my friend Ayo,
and when I ask if she does, she says,
John was my mentor.

I never met John,
but Ayo, painter, creator,
co-founded the open mic
where I found my voice
and friends on humid nights,

the same open mic Nelly and Jasmine
guest-hosted last semester,
the open mic named after
what Shannon calls
John's favorite phrase:
Pass it on.

The Other James Brown

Not the musician, the biology teacher who worked in our building for one year, who wore glasses and gray goatee, who always waved and greeted me by my first name though we worked for different schools. I'm not sure if I would have remembered his if it wasn't...

James Brown, the hardest working man in Room 306 during the 2016-17 school year.

James Brown, DNA Instruction Machine whom I never saw without his shirt tucked.

James Brown, he said while introducing himself and kept talking to the whole office staff until, one by one, we turned back to our laptops as he strolled out. *Welp, hope to see you around.*

I heard he still works in the city, but I have yet to see him.

The other James Brown once sang, *If you leave me, I'll go crazy*. When our James Brown left, I did not notice he was gone until November, when on my way to work, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" played after a Wyclef Jean song. As I recalled the goateed man waving back in my mind, it hit me like the stab of a trumpet from the other James's band:

Funny, how we forget what we miss,
those bit characters in our lives who enter
and exit like a song on shuffle.

I thought, *Welp,*
I hope to see him around.

For Darryl on New Year's Day

Once in New Orleans, I heard a crack
about firecrackers and gunshots,
not being able to tell the difference.

Every big game, I could hear you
behind my bedroom wall
hollering home team hallelujahs,
cursing the motherfucking refs.

In the next unit, I used to tire
of not being able to fall asleep
until I grew used to your screams,
to your TV playing all night,
Pat Robertson and the 700 Club
so loud, God could hear it.

The night you went missing,
our neighbor heard a trunk slam
and tires screech. Others, I heard,
saw and remained silent. I woke up
to the sound of your TV the next morning.

A week later, I heard a knock on my side door
where you used to deliver banana pudding
or pecan dressing blessings from work. The man said
they hadn't seen you at Langenstein's
in over a week. The TV kept blaring
until the landlord cut your power.

Tonight, dear neighbor,
the Sugar Bowl airs.
Tide versus Tigers. I am sober.
Last night I heard fireworks,
but tonight it is so silent
I cannot sleep.

III.

The Definition of Insanity

You'll figure it out. Then again, I never did.

-Grandma, 2014

Grandma said she'd take me fishing
if I used a safety pin for a hook
because Uncle Ted once hooked
himself in the leg so deep
she had to take him to the hospital.

Spooked, I decided safety pins were not safe
enough and tied worms to my line.

All afternoon I reeled
in nothing. Tried to maintain hope
as districts of fish dined and ditched.
Sometimes the worms flew off mid-cast
and skipped across the pond like stones.
Still, I persisted, even as the fish
became bolder with each new cast.
Eventually, they hopped from the water
to snatch my worms in their mouths
or between their fins like wide receivers.
Most came back for seconds, thirds,
fourths. A few came back so many times
I started calling them by their nicknames:
"Bubbles," "Big Mouth," "Gil."
One had the nerve to send his worm back
with a finwritten note: *too soggy*.

Delusional, I thought before casting
again, expecting a new result.

Open Letter to Curt Jones, Creator of Dippin' Dots

Dear Curt,

I learned that in 1987 you flash-froze homemade ice cream into small beads and created the first batch of Dippin' Dots. How a year later, you sold your car, started a business and marketed your creation as the *ice cream of the future*.

I wonder if news of your futuristic frozen flavors sent chills up competitors' spines. Did Dairy Queen fear the fall of her monarchy? Did a sullen Good Humor wonder what, if anything, people *would do for a Klondike Bar* anymore?

When you cornered markets inside theme parks, malls and zoos, we assumed Dippin' Dots would soon become the ice cream of the present. No, only in theme parks, malls, and zoos.

Were you too ahead of your time?

When your company filed for Chapter 11 in 2011, people joked about a slogan change, but your product, created before the Internet, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, still calls itself the future.

Never have I seen a more impressive example of wishful thinking than the Frequently Asked Question on DippinDots.com that reads, *I'd Like To Buy Stock in Dippin' Dots. What Symbol Are You Traded Under?*

Oh, the audacity of hope, to imagine stockbrokers on phones right now saying, *Forget that tech company. Let's get a few more shares of Dippin' Dots.*

Curt, I too, stay frozen, holding dream jobs in my head, making the same resolutions. I have a subscription to *One Day* magazine. When my computer asks for an update, I say, *Tomorrow*. Like I don't see the dots falling through the glass.

I understand the syrupy sweetness of telling yourself the best is yet to come, but tell me, when does the future become the past?

Local News

Last week, no one got shot on my block
but I read someone pistol-whipped a man
for not taking out his wallet fast enough.

I once thought I would be a victim
whom muggers could appreciate,
that they'd praise me on Muggers Yelp!
(Melp!) for my non-heroics.

He barely put up a fight!

Easy transaction. A+++

Five stars! Would definitely mug again!

Now, I am not so certain.
I can't just worry
about being mugged.
I must worry
about my ability
to be mugged.

What if I too am too slow?
What if he thinks I stick up my hands disingenuously
or finds my debit card pin number "uninspiring?"

What scares me more
than a potential mugger
is letting him down
as he stands there, weary,
after a long night of mugging,
waiting, fidgeting, as I struggle
with my back pocket button,
wanting nothing more
than to be at home with his kids
and my library card, expired MTA pass and spare condom.

*You know, that's a pretty unsafe place
to keep a condom?* he might say,
shaking his head as he shakes me down.

What if I get robbed at gunpoint
and twenty years later I remember
not his voice or his cold barrel
pressed against my chest
but how his ski mask
could not hide his disappointment?

Cows

Cows kill 22 Americans a year. Trappings mostly. When cows feel threatened, they circle around the threat, lower their heads, and charge. Said one victim, *I fell forwards and rolled into a ball and every time I tried to get up, they jumped on me; they were rolling me along the hill with their legs trying to get me to open up. There were seven or eight cows. There were a couple leaders.*

My grandfather, the son of two Polish immigrants, ran a dairy farm in Preston, Connecticut, before he died of melanoma.

75 percent of cow attacks are deliberate. 33 percent are committed by cows who have previously demonstrated aggressive behavior. This means one-third of killer cows gave us warning signs and yet we did nothing, and the other two-thirds are complete wildcards.

On visits to Grandma, my brother Jared and I would walk up the dirt road to the family farm, where I used to believe the biggest threats were the electric fence and a white goose named Barbara who lost the top half of her beak in a bar fight and once chased Jared the quarter mile back to Grandma's, hissing the entire way.

Uncle Jerry owns the farm now. He posts pictures of new calves on Facebook. His Facebook feed is mostly cows and politics. His cow feed, mostly corn.

From 2003 to 2007, cows killed 108 Americans.
More if you factor in deaths caused by unpasteurized milk.

My uncle named a cow after me once. Eventually, they had to kill it.
In the United States, cows kill more people than terrorists do.

I don't know what's most scary, but I know I must be afraid.

With You The Future Is Less Scary

Under covers, you and I watch cell phone videos
of lanky, green, fluorescent beings exiting saucers,
their ray guns blazing. They have not come in peace.

With the destruction of Earth upon us, though our city spared
for now, we run to the grocery store for non-perishables.
Unsure how minestrone will help, we buy several cans.
Better safe than sorry, I say, imagining you
cracking an intruder across the forehead with Progresso
before informing its green corpse that this happens
when you try someone from South Lorrain, Ohio.
As we walk the aisles, I hold your hand
because I feel scared, though I play it off as a sweet gesture
by squeezing it gently. You, always the one to stay positive,
say, *If we can make it through this, we can make it through—*
A CNN update cuts you off to inform us that New York's
gone.

Back home, we start to build barricades. Staying in
together for what could be days seems
almost romantic but for this impending doom.
I still don't own a hammer or nails,
so in front of the doors we stack chapbooks
knowing deep down that poetry can't save us.
I apologize that my best skills
(comedic timing? concocting scrambles?)
offer little aid against the apocalypse.
You do not accept my apology.

Instead, you ask me to cook us eggs,
which I do, adding extra cheddar. It's how you like them.
Plus, cholesterol is the least of our problems.

After two days, no more updates from the outside.
The sirens intensify. When the electricity goes,
I turn on a battery-powered radio,
expecting to hear the Emergency Broadcast System.

Instead, we listen to Rihanna croon
something about finding love

somewhere. When we finally hear them
at our front door, I want to be brave enough
to say something an action hero might.

Looks like we've got company.

Instead, I clutch your hand tightly
and whisper, *There's no 'u' in dystopia.*

In your other hand, you lift
a can of minestrone.

The Next Round

While you buy us drinks,
chummy Craig asks,
*So when are you going
to pop the question?*
as though he knows me
beyond our two
double dates--
at Barcadia where
his now fiancée beat me
in arcade hoops with Craig
insisting I, The Loser, buy
everyone shots, then
here in this boxing gym
turned nightclub.
I don't know, I say.

We sweat in the hot club,
drunk as barracuda.

*Bro, either you're going to marry her
or you're not*, he baits me with the swagger
of corporate America. *You already know
the answer*. Before, we heard anecdotes
about their trip to Cuba. How he proposed
right there on the cobblestones. The next day,
they went spear fishing. *I knew
I wasn't going to marry my ex*,
Craig tells me. *Right thing to do
was let her go*. *Bro, if you're not
going marry her, let her go*.

In his premise, you are the hooked fish
I must devour or throw back.

Before I respond, you return.
In each fist, a Harpoon.

Open Letter to Harry Houdini, the So-Called Greatest Escape Artist of All-Time

The student's blow came without warning, and Houdini, with no time to prepare, found himself with a ruptured appendix as a result. But it was his insistence that the show must go on, as they say, that did him in.

-Taraya Galloway, "The Strange Death of Harry Houdini"

Harry,

I heard the story of your death. How you could not escape that punch to the gut.

They say you didn't know you had appendicitis, but don't true escape artists live every moment as though they have appendicitis? Do true escape artists ever let their guard down?

You escaped a maximum security prison in nothing but a loincloth, but have you ever entered and exited a coffee shop within seconds after seeing an ex-coworker inside? Not an enemy, just someone who would require a chat.

You suspended yourself upside down in a straight jacket over a Manhattan street, but how deft were you at suspending what your therapist calls "necessary conversations?" What do you know about the silence that hangs in the air?

You once buried yourself alive and made it out, but did you ever bury yourself in your work? Use the "artist" in "escape artist" as excuse? *Yeah, I'd love to do that thing, but I have this other thing that requires me to be left alone indefinitely.*

If you keep everyone at arm's length, no one gets close enough to punch you in the gut.

Like you, I am afraid of people knowing too much about me, afraid they will discover my secrets or that I don't have enough secrets.

I put on headphones without music. I don't start conversations with baristas, barbers or strangers. I arrive late, leave early, don't text back. I tell jokes: the easiest way to get people to like me without revealing who I am.

Harry, like you, I will not escape the clock or the pine box.

I wake up old and reflect on what I have missed and, right then,
it hits me like a punch to the gut.

Ode to Basketball

Oh, Basketball, I've loved you since I was six.
Loved you longer than anything except family.
Ninja Turtles, pogs, lovers, everything goes. You stay--

been here since the jump, been here
with me as I shot bricks after practice in the gym.
You'll be here, on TV, when my final buzzer rings.

Oh, Basketball, with you everything becomes better.
Dribble without slobber. Shots without violence.
Tiny orange bumps on balls? Normal.

When Uncle Pat dropped dead, I played pick-up.
When the planes flew into the twin towers,
we laced high tops and walked to the blacktop.

When depression becomes a full-court press,
and I am trapped by a defender who looks like me,
I watch the ball smack and bounce back.

Thank you for teaching me the importance of assists,
the possibility of rebound after every miss,
how precious seconds count down to the end.

The Definitive Case for Why Humans Are Better Than Ants

Yes, ant farms exist, but ants can't raise goats, let alone grow tiny peppers. Ants don't even look like farmers. When is the last time you saw an ant in overalls except your hilarious dreams?

Sure, ants can lift 60 times their own weight, but you know what else can lift 60 times an ant's weight? Me, and I don't brag about this "feat" at the insectarium.

Think ants are cool? ANT, incorrect. Ants can't chant hello like parrots. Can't shake your hand like dogs. Maybe all dogs go to heaven, but ants?

All ants can go straight to hell, I tell myself,

after I feel one march across my arm before dawn and notice the lifeless colony member in its jaws. Before letting it down I smile at the sight of an insignificant being being significant and wonder if maybe ants aren't so different from us.

Or maybe we aren't so different from them! Immediately, my brain, a disturbed anthill, stirs up ant attack slogans as a form of catharsis:

If ants are so great, why did God create the anteater?

Humans are inherently flawed, but at least we didn't plagiarize our bodies from snowmen.

I get carried away at the thought of being carried away.

When I was six, I used to mash ants into our stone wall. Now, I think about the implausibility of an ant I crushed back in 1991, somehow still floating around the cosmos, listening to crumb-sized cassette tapes on his Walkant.

Does our capacity to wonder give us a false sense of importance? Is it human centric to assume a bug's life is meaningless?

Do ants have trouble sleeping? Do they ever spend one of their sixty mornings paralyzed by a fear of what's next?

I watch the ant move from my arm to the ground, its dead friend still clutched in its jaws, its six legs marching forward.

and just then, a trumpet

and there you go again, down
Royal Street with your noise-cancelling headphones that can't the cancel noises
in your head, listening but not really listening to the womp and circumstance
of Doris Duke, Eric Clapton, ready for your blues
to graduate to full-on depression. even at full volume,
a voice cuts through to ask the same questions:
who are you? what do you want?
spoiler alert: it's your voice.
spoiler alert: you don't know. maybe in this moment
just exist. to look down at the sidewalk.
to see each contour of cement.
to watch the breeze move each hair on your arms.
to feel yourself breathing.
to sit and watch a movie and think only about that movie,
not your to-do-list, what you haven't accomplished or how
you'll never become director of your own life if you—
and just then, a trumpet
so loud your headphones can't cancel it.
so you take them off and turn around and see
the brass band, the bride, the groom
dancing, like Martha Reeves once sang, *down in New Orleans*
and your first thought isn't that the couple is married
while you are not, nor how you still need to rsvp
for your friends' wedding, nor how you never learned
how to play an instrument, just the joy of others'
joy. the sight. the sound.
how it rings so loud you hear
nothing else.

Notes

The victim's quote in "Cows" is taken from a 2013 Telegraph article titled, "Cow attacks: 'It looked like they wanted to kill him.'"

Vita

Justin Lamb is an MFA candidate at the University of New Orleans and a 2013 National Poetry Slam champion with Team Slam New Orleans. A co-founder of the New Orleans Youth Open Mic, Justin is the author of the live poetry album *However It Turns Out Is Perfect* and chapbook *Everything Has A Place*. He works as the Dean of Students at Bard Early College in New Orleans.