Phantom Limbs

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Phantom Limbs

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

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Preface: Eliot, Jung, Confessionalism, and the Abyss

abyss

[uh-bis]

noun

1. a deep, immeasurable space, gulf, or cavity; vast chasm.
2. anything profound, unfathomable, or infinite: the abyss of time.
3. a) the primal chaos before Creation, b) the infernal regions; hell or c) a subterranean ocean.

It is difficult to write about poetry, especially one’s own poetry.

I say this as I sit at my old dining room table, where the detritus of writing covers the wood’s flaws and stains: dictionaries, notebooks filled with scraps of conversation overheard and recorded, old essays, Post-It notes, used-up pens. (I rely on these things so heavily for my artistic work, but I need different tools for metacognition.) I am flipping through my favorite piece of criticism for perhaps the hundredth time, though it is so heavily highlighted and underlined I can’t tell which parts are the most relevant to me anymore.

The essay, Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” talks about writing in the context of literature, that the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a [poet] to write not merely with [her] own generation in [her] bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [her] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the
timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (Italics added.)

No pressure, in other words.

Still, I look to Eliot when I think about this collection, because in many ways I consider myself a very “traditional” poet. I read the masters (or most of them, anyway); I think about the power of meter, that ear in the mind, in almost every poem I write. The persistent forms of the past touch even my most experimental work. For example, several of the poems in this collection are contemporary sonnets, which I write for their formal simplicity and neat diagramming of argument as much as for their nod to the history of poetry in English. I placed the first poem in this collection specifically because of my pride in its formal achievement; I value both the sonic and structural traditions of what we normally think of as poetry. When I write a poem in couplets or tercets, I feel a firm scaffolding upon which to experiment, and the resilience of certain poetic devices (particularly of consonance, assonance and meter) helps anchor the modern and strange.

But all that is the timeless. What about the temporal? This manuscript concerned with some of the most ephemeral elements of human existence: an individual’s thoughts and memories, and the larger idea of dreams and the subconscious. For instance, the poem “Known Knowns And Known Unknowns” was inspired by a dream I personally experienced, but as you read, you might sense it contains elements of anyone’s nightmares in our contemporary era: fragments of the news, ongoing wars, terror. When I juxtapose the fleeting and elusive with the
conventions of poetry, as in the piece “Notes On The Exclusion Zone, Belarus,” the timeless and the temporal dance together.

*

Carl Jung famously theorized about the “collective unconscious,” that morass of ideas, emotions and archetypes he claimed all humans drew on to describe and participate in their experience. Even ignoring another Intro to Psych lecture during my undergrad years, I eavesdropped on this discussion, the idea that we all share a common body of knowledge without being aware of it, the history (there’s Eliot again) of the human race vibrating on some weird wavelength we’re all tapped into. Even more interesting to me is the subjective unconscious (or even consciousness)—how I can never know, really, what it feels like to be another person, or the famous philosophical argument that I can’t be sure that what I perceive to be red is the same shade as others perceive; it’s simply not possible. How fascinating and paradoxical that we as a species can be both separate and together in this way. Each individual views our shared reference points through radically different lenses.¹

In this manuscript, I’ve tried to explore these concepts by writing poems where I can imagine myself as part of someone else’s mind. I began my graduate studies writing dramatic monologues, though I quickly realized that wasn’t quite what I wanted to do. I wanted to write through the interior monologue of someone else, to depict unspoken thoughts and memories that I had no access to (except, perhaps, through some Jungian mysticism.) Poems like “Extraordinary Means” and “Interior Conversation,” are, for me, the most obvious examples of

¹ I always think writing might be part of the answer to this problem.
this work, one could even say that the traveler who reappears throughout the manuscript is another crack at writing through someone else’s mind rather than through her voice; the traveler is a displaced figure, loosed from her normal (and formal), and so she creates an independent persona in settings which offer no familiar cues.

I realize that this is complex, and abstract, and perhaps doesn’t make sense to you; perhaps I haven’t completely figured it out yet. But for me, poems such as “Corrosion”—a sonnet which dissipates before your eyes—are another way of blending of the temporal and the traditional, the ultimately temporal thought presented through the mechanics of enduring form.

*  

Recently I gave a reading at a literary salon, in which we were allotted ten minutes to read and ten minutes to field questions. I had never had the opportunity to answer questions like that “live” before, and if I thought it was difficult to write about my own poetry, I had no idea how hard it would be to speak about it—in front of an audience who seemed to take me so seriously, which comes as a surprise the first time it happens to any artist, no doubt.

At that reading, the audience asked me a lot of questions about how my work relates to confessionalism, which may well occur to any reader of this manuscript, particularly its last section. I am a great admirer of confessionalist poetry, even with all its unfashionable egocentrism and neuroticism. I read “The Dream Songs” again and again, and consider poets of that era (particularly Berryman, Lowell, the fearlessness of Plath and Olds, and the ornate language-play of Roethke) to be major influences on my work.
At the same time, I wouldn’t necessarily describe what I’m doing as straight confessional poetry. Like Lowell, I style or fictionalize the confessors in my poems, versions of a possible self. A great number of things in my confessional-style poems did not actually “happen” in “real life.” Though none of these elements preclude confessional poetry—what distinguishes my work is the self-consciousness with which I write those poems (Eliot: you cannot value [her] alone, you must set [her], for contrast and comparison, amongst the dead), and the experimentation with structure that challenges the “truth” of any confession by reflecting the fuzziness of fact. For example, the poem “The Beloved’s Interrogative Birthday” pins itself to my fascination with the idea that something can be both emotionally true and factually wrong, or vice versa, or neither. With the creeping absence of syntax, parts of speech, and coherence, I mean to reflect both the blurriness of events in the poem’s situation, and the uncertainty of where both figures in the poem stand, emotionally speaking.

I told the questioner at that reading that I think of my poems as “meta-confessional,” a statement which made me feel like a real asshole.

*

Talent and tradition. Structure and form. The real and the unreal, or the unreal’s dark sister, the surreal. In this collection, I consider all these things, but there’s one more thread (I suppose it’s one that unravels, like those of the three Fates) I should address: the idea of dissolution.

Many things in this manuscript—characters, scenarios, relationships, poems—are falling apart. You can see it in their caesuras, or their incomplete rhymes, or the poems (like “Five
Places I Had Sex with You”) that hurry through punctuation or even syntax. I am fascinated by their disintegration, and lurid things, or as one of my teachers once drily put it, “the things none of us have an appetite for.” Except, as he conceded, we do.

When I think about dissolution (or even destruction), I think about the definition at the top of these pages: the abyss. For me as a writer, mining the abyss is analogous to probing the subconscious—like listening for the sound when you throw a coin into a bottomless well. And in this way, it oddly invokes the idea of the Sublime. The abyss is something unknowable and unanswerable, but at the same time electrifying and ecstatic. It’s looking for an answer to a question you didn’t know you asked. So when I explode some of these forms, scattering words across the page like the cinders from a firework, I am really paying attention to the white space between them, and the associations which spring up unbidden between lines. As Robert Frost once wrote, “for me, the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew.”

In the following pages, you will find what I didn’t know I knew, and perhaps still don’t.

-- 2013
In Paradise, there is no distinction between beauty and ugliness.

Prelude: Is There Night And Day Underwater, Or Is It Always The Same Time?

--Palma, Mallorca

Chased a fish to the perimeter, goggles fogging in pockets of cold. My fish, boulder-like, mossy and gray, played seek and hide, coy or blasé. I never knew what hid below the surface: frantic minnows, muggy stones, chartreuse weeds like a bad toupee; the variation of light and shadow, the sand slope’s barely perceived descent.

I came up coughing. In the distance, people sat on the beach like flecks of colored paper. Sea floor six feet beneath my kicking. Bleak water out to the horizon, passive and silent.

Snorkelers look for accidents waiting to happen. Some part of me still [ ]
Poets At Large

-- for Arturo Belano & Ulises Lima

In New York, as we get ready to jump the turnstile, you holler that the gas is coming and say run! from the tunnel. And we’re off, cackling like madmen, cartwheeling onto the doorstep of a buttoned-up four-star hotel. I case its berries, a spread of Brie and forest of goblets in the lobby, and suddenly I’m in a penguin suit fake-scrubbing the glass while you scarf all the forty-dollar cheese your mouth will fit as some punk immigrant bores you with the story of how he got started. If we score enough cheese tonight, we’ll take it home to your cat, Cheeto, who in your poems is always orange, sometimes a prophet. He jumps off the ends of sentences, pouncing when I least expect it. But actually this happens after the day I, pissed off, hang you up on a coathook when you dismember my bicycle for a one-time sale in Times Square, or maybe after the fast-talking day we slip our handcuffs because stealing those jumper cables was man, totally medically necessary. Or it might even be after, though the time scape of days bleeds together like watercolors, the night you recite, standing drunk on a barstool, “Love Like a Ticking Bomb,” the same night I drew on a napkin a picture of your pulse and later you nicknamed me metronome. Remember?
A Brief History Of Triangles

In the cab of a red truck traveling down Highway One, or maybe somewhere lesser-known, near the glimmering corn on the horizon of 90 in Illinois, or the 10 in Texas where they’d see billboard abortions and the dead grass land and marsh it seems no one could ever own,

two men and a woman sit on the hard bench seat looking for all the world like tripolar opposites or archetypes—one man dark and hirsute, heavily muscled and distant, the other light and slender, inoffensive intellectual, and the woman without features caught between them.

Or she could have dark hair and eyes like the dark man, marked by the Mediterranean, and when the three travel together sometimes she and the dark man get asked, Are you brother and sister? They say no and the question, for everyone, is more embarrassing than it should be.

But right now the woman is thinking about geometry and the relationship of math to the body (all its inanities), the foot that fits perfectly the length of the forearm, the mathematical rhythm intuited by heartbeats and music theorists, how a triangle’s model swings round a point like a hipbone stuck in a socket. It’s summer. Maybe they’re coming back from the canyon, driving for six or eight hours, or from the fly fishing everyone does in Hemingway stories to feel whole again, the lure silhouetted against the sky like a last gambit for salvation.

In the cab everyone tired and sunburned—they talk probably about novels like Murakami’s that predict the impossible, wondering who might be Toru or Midori or Kizuki, or something earlier in time like Fitzgerald (Gatsby would be perfect). An old problem, this—assigning values to letters. A growing awareness that in triangles, A equals B, B equals C, but not in every situation, so switching positions isn’t easy. A small truck where everyone touches, elbow to elbow, arm hair standing on end in the static of the cross-flow. Do you see an innocent happiness
or a secret? A hesitance to be left alone with each other?
Do they rely too much on the classics, the established,
to maintain stability? See the woman meditate
on the meaning of words: *acute, obtuse, right*. What is
right. Answer before the car drives out of the image.
“His Mouth, Suddenly Deep With Teeth”

You imagined a dramatic transformation—
out of that eighties movie, maybe, or the shirt-
tearing theatrics of a Stephen King story.

But it comes more gradually, unobtrusively,
like an afternoon spent with a good book,
until you look out the window and suddenly

see streetlights in the darkness. Yes:
yellowing fingernails, a spine lengthening
sinewy into tail, hair curling so chaotically

his chest’s like the floor of a barbershop.
But he has a sense of humor: buys you lupines
for Valentine’s, jokes he understands

your periods more than any other boyfriend,
shares your hairbrush, takes you camping—
even if he disappears some evenings.

Those nights, you sleep uneasy. You get up
and put on his furry sweater, stir twigs
into the embers. The moon, like a thumbprint,

sticks to the sky. If you hear howling, a cry,
you try to think nothing of it. In the distance,

something heavy falls through the brush.
You wonder what, exactly, is coming home.
Prose Poem For The Day I Quit Smoking

Nine hundred pieces of gum / mashed fused bubbled / into thick tongue-wads the ball / with impressions of her molars / policework quality good enough / to identify a body with / decisive incisors reducing the rubber / to bits like a Clydesdale obliterating / an apple gum-stuffed she is muted / choked / filling / the lungs with saliva / mucosa to keep from drowning in thin air drowning / in the figurative / but who knows about the literal the trembling / fingers / (flightless and futile) birds unconsciously / probing pockets / for lighters and remnants or a reason / she sweats breathing into flannel / for the smell of something / denied / then more fervently / desired / Vonnegut says every smoker has a death wish a logic / that can’t tell me what to do with her hands
Red Logic

Look: someone painted the church red, a square near the stained-glass window, left of the middle. Yet no one seems to notice, tucked in their October coats and hats under a gray sky that reflects the river. I’d put my toe in, but I know I know it’s full of hammerheads; is that crazy? It’s like that San Francisco tunnel where sharks swim overhead oblivious, or their curious noses’ nudging as I dive down and look for something, shells, my partner—am I supposed to be married? Maybe in another life, or else I forgot—still wearing the red dress of Chinese brides for luck, not for the devil or evil of the miscarriage I suffered through, twin mice still nestled in the ultrasound; I don’t know who took them but I have to find them, I’m a seeker, looking for a clue in Wednesday’s obituaries for a body of work that can never get cancer, the letters scattering like minnows while my fingers, drenched in stains, turn the page—do you think that’s blood, or paint?
Extraordinary Means

i.

Into the woods, curl of vine and hickory, covered ground mixed with decaying symbols—what? The trail quiet, grass threshing bare ankles leaving red welts. These trees I know like skin, scaly and abrasive (oh, hello), looking for the path or maybe not. A stray bush, a branch, the rustling sound of something stepping away quickly, a tangle of thorns. Finding a red dress on the ground in shreds—is it mine? I’m not wearing a face, so how can I tell? A sliver of sky the blue of a bird’s egg; the flicker effect of the yellow evening light. In the distance smell of a motionless body of water languishing. Suddenly I know I am not lost.

Honestly, ma’am, we won’t know anything until she wakes up. The only thing we can do now is wait.
In this part I step into the water, deep-kneed in silt-sand-and the tenuous tendrils of kelp below. The experience of lake, pushing the lilies out of the way to create a path—can there be paths in lakes?—Alone I swim, breast-stroke, breath-stroke, dipping under. A dazzle of lights over the surface. An island on the horizon ruled by egrets. Désjá vu: a photograph of my past self, who climbed to the top of a scenic panorama to see the lake opening wide like a rusty mouth. For now in the shallows, I struggle forward. The sense of something nibbling. The gentle swells.

Sweetheart? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me.

Mom, she can’t hear you, don’t be ridiculous.

I’m not being ridiculous—I read somewhere that it helps to hear the voices of family members, even when...
I found the barn burned (I spent childhood hours, dust-motes and graffiti, the place I took Matt’s virginity unknowingly.) What is a natural death? But now I were staggering out of the water naked, covered in seaweed. Almost funny waiting for someone to ask me to pay the sin tax for the crossing. Misfire. Surrounded by yellow grass of the seasons changing and step on a dead fish on the shoreline that died a natural death probably, but no one can be sure. I came into this room for something. The formula for slope is Y=MX+B, but what are the names of the five major Chinese dynasties? We’re waiting, Miss Stromquist. Arms raised in a V. Uncertainty, drip dry onto the cattails, sit in an open patch of field, wait. There’s a ragged t-shirt that says Metallica so I pull it on over my skeleton. What I forgot for a lightning rod.

In cases of extreme trauma like this, the chances of serious neurological damage are high. Again, we won’t know until she’s stable enough for another operation, which we hope to perform tonight.

I see. Can we stay with her until then?

Of course. I have some forms, actually, I need you to initial in case there’s an opportunity for organ donation.
iv.

[monitor emitting continuous tone]

The sky a tangle of thorns a thousand stars supernova.

[monitor emitting continuous tone]
In Lisbon,

the nameless city of Saramago novels I
found women in evening wear lined up
cheek-kissed outside marisqueiras’ windows
(full of crabs like sci-fi scorpions) while cabs
rounded corners at high-sport speeds faster
than you said try not to hit any pedestrians
(tall from Senegal crossing crosswalks arms
akimbo or children jumping jacks in the plaza)

where pigeons bickered on a statue of Pessoa
and hustlers sang hashish marijuana to hand-
holding hookers on greenblown avenidas
under a bruise cream rose impressionist sky—

but when I tried to get out of the alleys
at twilight I misplaced the sound of the sea
Intermezzo: Love Letters

Dear David

In the emotional countries of my life
my memories of you are like Russia
or China—powerful and omnipresent

I wrote this in a letter once

But lately when I think of you

I think of Siberia

(exiled forest that made Brodsky a poet)
Dear David

I’m sorry about everyone I slept with

from “Casual Encounters” those young

financial analysts national guardsmen
cell phone sales reps Ph.D candidates

It was stupid

(a bar an ankle rubbing another ankle)

When I came home with the hiccups,
I’m sorry I let you rub my shoulders
Dear David

You’re the rhyme I can’t complete
the shrugged-off subject I leave
out of my biography

Besides

it’s the interior *personal* narrative
that stings with bracing clarity—

Like that poem I wrote when we first met

*A clean intense acuity, things magnified*
Corrosion

-- Ait-Baaza, Morocco

In the picture an empty road like
Arizona I never bothered to
imagine red ground cactus
hills disappearing foxes

Ben’s dog with a hoof in its mouth
he says he remembers a collision
a car totaled I thought of the shriveled
parts disembodied in museums

disappearing memories: how tanneries
smell like batteries shoulder burn unmarked
alleys couscous served from a wrinkled palm
it’s an honor strange names for stars

Mind’s eye moon
blurry black white negative
Notes On The “Exclusion Zone,” Belarus

...has become a nature sanctuary of sorts, home to wild boars and eagles and bears and to pine trees that grow like bushes and other such mutations.  

-- *New Yorker*, December 2011

i.

hare, fir, ash, bird

a bear’s shadow darkening a fish

(liturgy of grass and nose
plants with long-forgotten names) silence

the past which accumulates or evaporates

a listless drink from a puddle

a “concrete-and-steel sarcophagus”

the sky visible in limited portions

a ring

a church of human error

a cairn
When I was ten, I saw a picture of a child born after Chernobyl. Her arm: an abbreviated nub, (cleaner than an amputation), her skin, gray-lit against some industrial wall, pallid and lifeless. Still, she smiled at the camera, at that National Geographic photographer—from the crisp texture of the image, clearly pleased with his composition and coup. They (we) who document are unaccountable, immune. Who blames photographers, writers, for capturing disasters, for the stark facts of radiation poisoning?

I’ve never forgotten that picture, though other environmental crises quickly eclipsed Chernobyl—Exxon Valdez, Fukushima, Deepwater Horizon (poetic names), or the way it made me (still makes me) feel: like I’ve done something wrong.
Dusk: Przewalski’s horses gather in clusters. They rub red muzzles, mumble their secret Slavic language; roll and extinguish imaginary fires. A nearby tree, twisted and mean, a post for scratching shaggy skin. *These fossils that flourished in the land of catastrophe.*

Is the concrete ring like a paradise or paddock? Would they recognize a paddock if they saw one?

What are their bodies thick with—grass, or...? *They don’t call it horse sense for no reason.*

Do they dream about something that’s missing?
“So, about three weeks ago, Rachel and I hung out with this guy, a young guy, all night—a friend of her husband’s. We weren’t very nice. With the husband, he got fucked up on some mystery substance, and we sure laid into them about being irresponsible. You know, whatever. Death’s soft-footed circles / a cat and a bathtub drain. Anyway, last night the guy ODs and dies. His elderly landlord finds him—his fingers probably curled like carrots in the back of the fridge drawer. He will look up at the lights...and think only: lights. A final errand for his family to take care of. Sometimes I dream about hostels in Palma and swimming pools. Sometimes I drive my car through water, just to see when it will stall. Was that in the dream too—Isn’t that awful? It made me feel, and I know this is self-absorbed and superstitious, like I shouldn’t have been mean to him. Maybe I had killed him. Thinking in perfect metrical lines. I opened House of Leaves the other day to find a phrase highlighted: “carpet like a pink corpse.” I don’t remember making that notation. All those things I left behind, names on summer-camp sunblock, half-used lipsticks, the heart-shaped box where I kept my drugs in college. Ridiculous, right? Still, how terrible for the family. She told me in a text message from the expressway.”
Charity

“If you are the last one to see me alive,” she says, huddled under the bus-stop bench, “don’t feel sorry for me.” Really? Sometimes it’s like I’m walking around in a movie, a second-rate version of Beckett, where the homeless pop up like homilies to remind me about mortality. Cliché here: give me the serenity to accept or something about the grace of god.

Eleven-forty on Friday, fifty degrees, near Christmas, lights twinkling artificial up and down Canal Street. And I hear no one freezes to death in New Orleans, but pretty much the last thing I need is a grizzled woman in the gross fuzz of her sleeping bag, with avian fingers, those teeth like incomplete archaeology—

and oh, I’m tired, and jesus, I’m lonely

but I can’t listen to her story, the last time the cops beat her husband, a “domestic disturbance,” how he went to the hospital and never came out. Assuming, of course, it’s a true story, or does it make a difference? “Do you have a cigarette?” she rasps.

I toss a pack of Kools at her and run.
He said, “Maybe your poetry is pornography for a heart that isn’t beating.” Mixed metaphors aside, as pornography, poems suck. Not a good sort of sucking, the kind that leads to something, 

please, a resolution, not to come but to arrive. It’s not pleasant: sucking more like a black hole, or a hand plunged in honey, enveloping and sticky. Suction for suction’s sake, dumb gravity that pulls in the susceptible: small-R romantics, literate masochists, perpetual adolescents, fetishists for assonance. They’re stuck with, 

struck by poems—images and sounds wearing down the most vulnerable minds. You don’t indulge in poetry, you bear it, like a terminal illness, an escutcheon, a roman numeral after a surname, a curse. And you continue to do this even when someone calls it pornography, even as your heart grows heavy as the dead.
Known Knowns and Known Unknowns

In the future, China shoots down six passenger jets over Lebanon. The crash kills significant Americans, and the president offers his resignation, hat in hand, to the ghost of Hu Jintao. We welcome our Chinese warlords, who immediately call for the heads of our kittens. For centuries afterward all gods are cats.

Later that year, masochism becomes the verified sexual fetish of the resistance. Everyone with brands and scars calls herself a freedom fighter or victim. The state counters with the introduction of mandatory electric collars, which the young and the reckless decorate with jingling bells. Their secret meetings sound like rain.

Things change when a great Russian columnist writes that unhappy countries are all alike. This provocation sparks a peaceful protest in New Tianamen Square, where hundreds huddle under desks for days. The protesters demand an end to the rationing of worship services and butter. State crowd control involves MREs, obscenities, and machetes.

In the end, the ground springs a leak and Chinamerica fills with river. Hardware stores experience a run on axes, and the underground sponsors night classes in treading water. The emperor weeps on TV, seeping water surrounding his ankles. He says, “We must destroy this village in order to save it.”
Narratives On Phantom Limbs

-- for K.

“I could have lost my arm,” you say, nearly asleep in sweat-rich sheets.

You’ve never told me this, before.
I imagine it: the pinned sleeve’s visible

tragedy, the glances from strangers,
your quietness with a different color.

*

I was twenty when I wrote a poem
about mutilation and disability, after

a friend was nearly killed in a car wreck.
He spent two months in a coma, unstable,

his arms and legs immobilized in traction,
the ventilator rhyming with his ribs.

*

In your favorite book, The Razor’s Edge,
the protagonist, Larry, changes

dramatically during the Great War, after
a fellow pilot goes down defending him.

Larry comes home strange, muted;
he breaks his engagement, goes to Paris.

*

We were drinking coffee in North Africa
when we saw a dog with a broken leg

half-heartedly chasing a dinged-up car.
Noticing us, it limped over, licked

your outstretched hand. I noticed
its halo of flies, your absent petting.

*

This afternoon, I trace your scars.  
The grapefruit-colored skin knots 
thick over your elbow and forearm.  
I haven’t told you that I heard about 
your accident from someone else:  
who was driving, the anguish after.

*

After my friend left the hospital,  
I came home to the city where he and I 
grew up. He tottered with a cane  
on icy driveways, stuttered, got lost 
in time and touched me in places  
that no longer felt appropriate.

*

From Paris, Larry travels to India,  
meditates, approaches transcendence. 
Probably Maugham takes liberties  
with reality—how unlikely anyone 
could recover so completely after 
losing a wife, a friend, his innocence.

*

Africa: after two seven-hour bus rides  
and cement rooms without windows, 
we finally got sick near the Sahara.  
I dreamt about being buried 
in the desert; feverish, I groped  
for your unfound hand.
You roll over, thin chest falling
up and down with silent sounds
of breath and voice. I think of your arm
swollen, or bone-sawed, what you carry
like a prosthesis. What was she like?
No one I love has ever died.
Intermezzo: Love Letters 2

Dear David

When you took me to that infamous
Intimate fondue restaurant

remember—our last anniversary

You clinked my glass with a smile

saying you had no plans to propose

How did you know I was distant
already missing

Did you know I was still disappointed
Dear David

After midnight

in Alabama on a beach
In a wet bikini I kissed a man who isn’t

the man
I eventually promised to marry

The next day guilt and shame
I wanted to call
    not my fiancé

but you, your old cell phone
still memorized

Maybe I could find you run away change

Maybe we could finally work things out
Dear David

I’m sorry that it always seems
I’m harvesting your organs for my poetry
A constant gutting in the guise
of an apology

I’m sorry that, or I know

Believe me, or not

I never wanted

to deface your memory
Hunger

--Boulemane Province, Morocco

There’s nothing to eat in Africa. You look hollow-eyed, sleep early; I joke about your African famine, which probably isn’t funny—plus, we’re full up on knock-off chocolates and what we recognize at the store. Me, I’m not hungry, just smoking L&Ms in the spaces between train compartments, thinking of the undersides of your thighs stuck to vinyl seats. Those nights I wait to be alone with you. On concrete roofs we pack it in with the lack of air conditioning, strip to slick and oily skin to dry in shallow mountain winds;

the arid landscape echoing with far-off dogs, the adhan’s call. Suddenly the last bright lights blink out: your body framed in opaque sky.
The Beloved’s Interrogative Birthday

You who never arrived
in my arms, Beloved, who were lost
from the start,
I don’t even know what songs
would please you.
-- Rilke

She puts a hand on your shoulder, swiveling
close to you on the barstool, and reminds you
how many years you’ve been friends, Isn’t it great?

She leans on the jukebox, drink in one hand,
cigarette in the other, , and with a flick
of her ponytail turns to ask What do you want to ?

She trips in the café, telling you
a whisper a shout that
she’s an alcoholic, and do you think?

throws up in a garbage can, birthday cake
and tequila, sludge remarkably
drain cleaner, then asks, my mascara running?

in your girlfriend’s car asking
drive covered in whipped
stumbling You alright?

She calls up to ask if she did anything
embarrassing, sorry you had to sleep at her place,
she just needed someone, and Hey, are you listening?
Five Places I Had Sex with You

You say it’s your bedroom but I know a pantry when I see one never mind the mattress on the floor but inside me you take me who is this guy anyway but rocking and stroking and I’m not ready for it to be over when you fall asleep and I shrug call up a taxi

Christmas we’re fucking in the bar bathroom panties wadded like beached floor fish somebody jittering outside probably to do coke in here but your arms distorted square of mirror sweating come on fuck never expected this a happy memory

Everything in Africa full of sand even your breath Marrakech pigeons outside prim and disapproving we’re giggling the grit and sheets balled all together beneath us if we fall asleep after we wake up the muezzin calls alien archaic perfect

Midsummer air mattress at my mother’s light streaming all golden erotic into bars on the carpet your body listening for her car surprised bang of the door oh sorry I forgot something am I twenty-six or sixteen or attention your body your body

Finally you at night TV blue luminescent at bedtime you touching my shoulder taking your cock yourself in your hand saying okay and breathe in the smell like must layers of dried sweat sour and say okay as long as I don’t have to do any work
Recurrence

1.
We always go to the same places
at lunch, you talking mostly
about inappropriate
people you slept with
this summer
I thought of you
in spite of
myself

2.
Whenever I see your body
it looks too big for the chair
like a panther even a monster
Tapping your foot, ready to leave
in the first place five minutes

3.
You read the last page
of that book by McCullers
over and over
(Some things you and I
don't have in common)

You dreaming about me?
4.
When you told me to stop drinking so much for the first five minutes, I listened.

*If you held onto that glass any tighter, you’d—*

5.
Your physical presence was overwhelming.

*panther monster*

(absence)

6.
The unattainable is invariably attractive.

*I used to say that all the time*
Intersection

--New Orleans

On Tuesday, I got off the 27 bus at St. Charles, around the corner from our first apartment. How we used to fear that corner—its drugstore derelicts and medical corridor, its bus-stop plague of indigents and pregnant teenagers. We hid in our narrow slave quarters, learning to name it home.

Notes for a confessional poem:

“Discount Zone,” the moonlit clank of the trolley, our trivial love and the minutiae of memory. The details fuzzed: oblique and unfocused.

Maybe it would sound better if this happened.

Sometimes we ate at the McDonald’s down the block, that temple of the familiar. You worked at a hardware store and I didn’t, pretending to write in the afternoons. Before we left, I was so sure. You’d come back, sweaty, affectionate; I’d be on the balcony, smoking, remote.

On writing about the personal:

I was almost thirty before I knew everyone has artifacts of tragedy, poignant tokens. Most personal drama stems from the quotidian.

I could never look at that dress (candle, blender) afterward.

When we moved out, we left our cats, hoping the next renter would take them as a furry housewarming. I went back and fed them once or twice, their slow mewling reminding me of some literary sentence, a dim disquiet... a precursor to emotion, a germinating feeling.

Thoughts about poetry as catharsis:

Fragments don’t make me feel any better. Moreover, they mean nothing to a reader, spared the associations. Spare my feelings.

If you – that is, if one – lied during a confession, could it still save you?
Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Fugue

*fugue* (n., psychiatry) – a loss of awareness of one’s identity, often coupled with flight from one’s usual environment, associated with certain forms of hysteria and epilepsy.

1. All my best stories start out, *I was so drunk that I...* Fill in anything you want after the blank. It’s mostly a blank.

5. My best friend is in love with me. He stays with his girlfriend so he and I can have a friendship “without edges.”

11. “The fact that a great many people believe something is no guarantee of its truth.”

8. *dyphemism* (n.): a derogatory or unpleasant term instead of a pleasant or neutral one, such as “loony bin” for “mental hospital.”

2. I called the list of people I’ve slept with “catalogue in which certain things are left out.”

9. When my therapist heard my sexual history, she wondered aloud if I was abused. She says it’s a “red flag,” makes me doubt my memory.

6. Things with edges: ice skates, envelopes, tabletops, razorblades.

12. *derealization* (n.): a feeling that one’s surroundings are not real, especially as a symptom of mental disturbance.

10. Side effects of psychiatric medications: thoughts of suicide, emotional blunting, sexual dysfunction, bruxism, tardive dyskinesia, akathisia, weight loss or gain, hair loss or color change.

3. When someone grabbed my breast on the subway, I thought: *I shouldn’t have worn these shorts.*
7. I quit drinking knowing everyone would expect me to fail.

4. *dysphoria* (n.): a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life. From Greek *dusphoros*, “hard to bear.”

A Snapshot:

-- for J., on the eve of my marriage to someone else

Last day in New York: I’m sitting in the terminal
eating a donut, telling you I want to kill myself.
You straight-backed in the airport chair, wearing
your Sisyphean expression of patience; me, puffy,
tear-stripped. We haven’t slept. Out all night at the bar
so you could finally get emotional, had our old argument
about friendship nothing more, nothing less—still, you
aren’t angry, even lent me cash to check my baggage.

Past the frame, everything changes. We grow up, you find
schools and girls, I meet a good man, through the facts
just the facts change nothing for you. But I need you
to know—without this picture (donut, airport,
sleeplessness, your restrained yet tender
hand), I wouldn’t have been able to go on living.
L’entrée? I find the door with broken French.
Inside: these tired ruins full of gulls
and nesting cormorants; a stagnant pool
the mired bath where now-forgotten kings
once swam. A group of shy Australians
takes photographs. In dry jardins, the globes
of citrus hang like lamps in wicker deserts.
I touch the crumbling history, the wall
an ashy stone relief; a broken brick
that warms my cheek. Listen to its conch-
like purr: I once was, something demurs.
Nearby, a cat with blurry spots
licks her tumbled kittens, fast,
turns black and white to inky blots.
End Notes

3, “Poets at Large:” Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima are the main characters in “The Savage Detectives,” a novel by Roberto Bolaño about the fictitious “visceral realist” poetry movement in Latin America. “Love Like a Ticking Bomb” is a poem by Marge Piercy.

4, “X-Rated:” The introductory remark is paraphrased from a letter from an angry ex-boyfriend. Used without permission.

5, “A Brief History of Triangles:” Toru, Midori and Kizuki are the main characters in Haruki Murakami’s novel Norwegian Wood.

7, “His Mouth, Suddenly Deep With Teeth:” The eighties movie referred to is An American Werewolf In London, which is considered a landmark film in horror costuming/special effects makeup.

9, “Extraordinary Means:” Section iii includes a brief snippet of the lyrics to the Pearl Jam song “Jeremy.” The phrase “monitor emitting continuous tone” is used in closed-captioning on medical dramas.

20, “Notes On The Exclusion Zone, Belarus” was inspired by the New Yorker article quoted in the epigraph. Przewalski’s horses are a breed of endangered wild horse that, for some reason, was introduced into the exclusion zone after the Chernobyl accident. They have thrived there.

21, “Interior Conversation:” This poem includes fragments from Aimee Nezakhumatathil’s poem “Birth Geographic” and the experimental novel House of Leaves. Used, regretfully, without permission.

36, “The Beloved’s Interrogative Birthday:” The epigraph is borrowed from Rilke’s poem, “You Who Never Arrived.”


40, “Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Fugue:” The quotation in section 11 is from Somerset Maugham’s novel The Razor’s Edge.

All definitions are from the New Oxford American Dictionary, third edition. All photographs and illustrations are my own.
Kat Stromquist is a writer who lives in New Orleans. Her poetry and prose has appeared in the Gambit, NOLADefender.com, WWNO.org, the literary magazines Crescent City Review, Gambling the Aisle, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Off Channel, Espresso Ink, Mutabilis Press' Improbable Worlds anthology, and elsewhere.