

Carpal Tunnel

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Stephen Lewis, MFA Department of English

Carpal Tunnel

Thesis directed by Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher

This collection of poems is meant to serve as an example of the temporal and cultural contexts that surround it. The sections contain a single gust of focus in order to reflect the way attention is given to a piece of art, as opposed to a wide focus spread across a book-length or career-length project. The use of “I” and “you” force engagement with the poems, as the “you” slips around in avoidance of identity. Both identity and a shortened attention span are born from the culture surrounding the poems, but voice and formal elements are meant to tie the sections together and give the book identity regardless of its cultural context.

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Dream Prayer

Like a chest cavity
that contains
two dancers
full of salty snow

build a field full of empty pews
pray to the patron saints
you know by name

I'm afraid if you look closely at my face
you will find all the ugly and all the ghost-parts

when I look into the mirror too long I know
I will eventually die

time feels like a fishing reel with no river
all the rivers
have become dirt paths

I packed the salt earth with my sleeping body
I put the wheatfields behind me and
faced a flat expanse

all that to say
I came a long distance to ache with you

and I promise
I will lick your hands no matter what you've done
whether you cut your fingernails or not

to die is to escape time, finally
pray hard to the saints of time and death

in our time, we did the right thing
we held hands while standing very far apart

please remember
distance means
forgetting
you forget people are only
bags of flesh representing
all the sad thoughts

please remember that

you will be okay
remember that and we will agree that love won't
always be mutual

but it would be better that way

this is the part
where I stop talking about you
because at the hospice there is no metaphor
I just want to cup the head of my entire family and
float into the fireworks of the sky

oh nighttime
this hospice is way too many kitchen utensils in my chest
it is the longest funeral for which
we hold hands in the shape of a church

we shall line the walls with our candles
we shall stain the glass with our fingerprints

you've lived another year, The Year of New Nurses
I'm freezing outside the medical center

I will not come quietly inside
where you will hold my hands and ask
why your body persists like selfish metal
where you will grip my hands until I can't breathe

and this is the part where the sky turns to rain
oh god what will I do
there is laughter in the other room I saved
so much distance in my body I could be anywhere

where fields yield their dirt to water where
I sink slowly at first then quickly
deep into the water until pressure catapults me to heaven
where my name means nothing
we say it out loud

where if you love me then you love me
smile into nighttime and slam
all the doors and windows

that is love, I'm freezing
outside the apartment

I whisper your name in my mouth
until there is nothing to whisper in my mouth

what will I do I am
all out of fire

this is the part
in a church parking lot
in a sweat-soaked suit
I finally didn't crave you

I felt like knives banged against the cutting board and left to rust

everyone knelt on the pews but I knelt on the ground
everyone cried and prayed but
I could only watch
could only stare until the priest shrank into space

I line the body with candles
wax under my fingernails

when you die
you meet all the people who ever existed

it takes so long you die again
it takes so long you die out loud and louder and louder

this is the part where I never leave you
though I make you cry all the time

you say you love me and I pray
I die before you stop
if you stop what will I do where
will I find my fangs

pray to the saint of apocalypse dreams
the dreams that tremble, barely audible

when I kiss your neck
the dreams like teeth I try to keep away from your throat

this is the part where I've done something wrong
I failed to love all the people
though I have tried

I have allowed
your soft hair to fill my hands
one day too long

I've failed to become winter with you
the dirt trembling back and
forth

we should have fallen
through sediment
until nothing
the earth is nothing
but a grave for us

I built the church
I want my ashes spread across your tongue

my body shakes for warmth
all those people I watch as they
sink like anchors, settle into sand

this is done from space
this is done without oxygen

this is the moment I love you
like it is snowing outside
it doesn't last

The Way to Keep Going in Antarctica
-after Bernadette Mayer

Be full of food or the clear
nobody will ever come
I know that but
perhaps a house of trees, warmth
of cloudcover if worn like a blanket
do not think of the absence of blankets
look at the ground at your feet
and it is not endless
nothing is outside
there are ways to alter definitions of house
you can also alter definitions of shame
perhaps you like no one but like the noise they make
perhaps
you should consider the trombone
until you panic brass instruments
and your finger splits in the cold
and you want no more no more
not only a bed which to rest but no
more of the back and forth of each day
southern small thing
small things and the cracked southern hemisphere
something we have to fight about
and I'll never be fluent in body language but in
our ideas of food I am sure
there's nothing unknown
I know
and I panic hard and think I could in fact panic hard enough
if I do will so much snow then fall off the trees

Bowling Alley

We disowned our voices with our louder
voices. We disowned each other's
voices. That heartfelt connection two people feel
in their bloody organs,
we felt that. We built
a bowling alley.

Inside the bowling alley our mothers were
drinking juice and smoking big time. They were
tossing strikes and getting turkeys.
I knew who I was and how I arrived--a loud
suction-sound as a ball falls into the gutter.

When we
hold hands I agree with you and agree
with myself about acquiescence. You drink some pop
eat some popcorn. I eat peanut butter stuck
to a plastic knife. Of course my mouth remains shut for years.

Cold Color Paints

Goldilocks

In this pawnshop: an assortment of rusted machetes. A chemically treated jar of human skin. Turning the jar reveals that the specimen is male. The scrotum is folded next to the eyeholes.

Goldilocks

If a large knife or a floating epidermis is not to your taste, sometimes you find discarded home videos. Weddings and birthday parties.

As teenagers we came to this pawn shop to buy rolling papers and the man behind the counter always said "you kids making some newspapers with that there," and laughed until he coughed.

Palette Lessons

In the interest of polarization, we all thought there was college or children. Children (the creation of) is (though not always considered during the act) directly related to sex. While the idea of children/family was distant at this time (of buying rolling papers), sex was not a distant thought. Why we polarized the idea of college (which then represented adulthood) and children/family (which really represents adulthood) makes little sense since they are not exclusive. Yet the differences in our eventual circumstances were influenced by that initial polarization. Neither has proven to be better than the other; there is no such thing as good or bad.

Palette Lessons

There was a time when we all wanted to draw. We tried to do our own versions of Rand Al'thor from the *Wheel of Time* series. One of us was good, well since there is no good or bad, one of us was able to form lines that reflected those that existed in his head. At first, arts are all immediacy. The stimulation happens quickly with shapes and colors, though knowledge or communication comes slowly. One must be thankful for the depth of things that comes slowly. Barrages are only useful during war.

Rule of Thirds

The linearity of the story doesn't matter. This is the difference between building a house and building emotion. Imitations of nature are built ground-up, but nature itself is built like a response to a cycle, well, more like a ball with a web of interactions occurring within that ball, nature being the ball.

Rule of Thirds

All lectures should be given in dark rooms, not closets, but rooms with overhead projectors displaying images. There will be something to hold the view of the audience (immediate stimulation) while depth can be carved out as the initial synapses slow. This might make the image feel used if the image had feelings. Luckily this isn't the case; images are meant to be used.

Rule of Thirds

How can everything boring be made beautiful, everything beautiful made simple. Example: pine cones. How about prizes for accomplishments.

There's this fable of the goat whose tail devoured half its body. I heard that fable was about building a house. Also, about staying quiet while the grown-ups eat.

Even scare tactics become tender. One opinion is kids stay cribbed their whole lives. It is better when kids remain still. No one moves and the wind will become, for once, calm.

Palette Lessons

So then painting is this: the depth. The depth, the hole that we can crawl into and sleep. It isn't that the hole is interesting. It's that the sky is more interesting from the perspective of the hole.

Palette Lessons

Okay, painting is this: the type of canvas, the brush used, the set of paints, the chosen colors, the strokes, the place depicted in the work, the place the artist resides while creating the work, the economic situation of that particular place, the time period, the brain of the artist, and all that brain has perceived (trees, rocks, cardinals, Cardinals, baseball bats). This does not mean painting is everything. Painting is perception. Painting is filtered through perception and then is perceived by another. Perception is not good or bad. Perception influences style. Perception is a large part of style, but it's hard to be sure what constitutes style and anyways I'm not talking about style I'm talking about perception.

Goldilocks

I'd like to take you, the perceiver, back to the pawnshop so this feels circular, an imitation of nature. But there is nothing left of that pawnshop to tell. It may still be there, downtown, rotting underneath dust; I don't know. Why go back to the pawnshop, the novelty worn bare. The idea of heading to the local *A-1*, *Goldilocks*, or *Pawn Store* disappears and you forget why you brought it up in the first place. It was probably the framed paintings that hung along the back wall on sale, dirt cheap. Although those things weren't of interest at the time, you now realize they were probably stolen from the walls of various hotel rooms and traded for packs of cigarettes.

Bed

I guess I should mention

someone bought my uncle's farm and I rented a room
for purposes of nostalgia. I thought I'd set
up some barn lights. My amateur wiring

killed two cows, I'm not happy about it either.
I tried writing love letters and here I am, in a rented room
with two dead cows. I've no oven.

I have thought how far
a parade might stretch, can it make it to my teeth?
Can nightmares never be frightening since they are always in the past?

In need of a new atmosphere, I place both
cows on the bed. The floor is thick and smells newer
than it really is. All day the landlords have me digging holes,

I imagine planting body parts and a new person shoots
a hand from the soil. A body sometimes malformed but
sometimes perfect. Then I think of you

probably because the sun is hot. Probably because
something else is imminent, and you're pulling your body
from the ground and your calf is stuck. By the time

you're walking, I'm halfway bruised along a dirt road.
I've fielded the questions and concluded it doesn't matter
where I sleep, just that I know how to do it.

First Fires

The air, thin enough,
carries the sitcom sounds into the bedroom.
Laughtracks reverberate my head.
I'm not listening
to what is said. Somehow I'm with an axe
chopping the legs from under your home.

What if instead of growing old
we stay the same but fade into dull colors.

And I will not hear the sound
as the film reel changes. When I finish chopping your home
gravity will force you into the river. Sound becomes much different
in the river.

Last Donut of the Night

Like summer stayed around, garden hose busted,
dirt covers our chairs. We stuff
futures in paper envelopes without success. We proceed,
make our heads real drunk. Trudge along the street with nothing
to talk about. Eventually we count sins.
I correct you then quiet down for
the grind of my skin, the click
of your bones.

Earlier the television turned high, what the hell did I do
to you, I ask everyone. I evolved some,
took the boat to where the water smelled then
I came back; I will evolve some more. I'm not
praying yet. I'm building, still. Let's tell our fathers
we wear our Sunday Sonnets. We aren't as bad as we actually are.
Let's get our hands full of wheat and ask where to lower our confession letters.
Where to begin, again.

Love Poem 4 and Other Love Poems

Love Poem 13 (You Will Like Me)

You may decide to grow cold with me
as I fill your body with dead werewolves

which is to say, imagine your terrible life more terrible

someone wants to know you, really know you
to sleep in your bed
to not just bake you a cake on your birthday
but deep-fry you a cake
happy birthday

don't worry about me
I don't even
have a dining room table yet

Love Poem 15 (Waves)

Came over late
stayed later
nothing good

I shattered
a bottle against
the sky and it rained

your expectations
better luck tomorrow
wells of
watered-down coffee

I paused
an hour on the restaurant
counter
someone on a bike
rode by three times
looked just like you

you told me if
a dolphin were your pet
you'd move to Iowa
build an igloo

there was no good shit in the sky
I confessed my obsession of dirt

of you

I thought
really cold coffee
and repeated

all subsequent afternoons

Love Poem 3 (Sleep Inside Your Air Mattress)

1.

I'm going to be perfect for you
a piece of the sun in my mouth
so it stays bright

I'll be quiet
unless you absolutely
hate it then I'll be less quiet

if you ever develop a burning building in your chest
I'll bring you water, I'll bring so much
I'll empty out my abdominal cavity
and bring you a hand-made lake

I have so many stories about floating across the ocean
like such a shellfish person

2.

There is quiet like you
and there is quiet like a carnivore

you said I was
a wall collapsing all accordion-like
you said, that's the thing with you

what thing

3.

there are moons glowing through your limbs
crickets sound off beneath your pores

Love Poem 21 (Street Sweeper Morning)

A whole narrative for you

based on the excitement

clawing through your chest

a couch full of pressing

cuticles

Love Poem 10 (Bedtime Prayer)

It is very dry and we
are very close to the fire.
I'm, at the moment, very willing which
is weird I know. So please don't contemplate
anywhere near me, not even in the same state.

A gun is hidden in the basement and I won't stop talking
until nobody knows about it. I force myself
to persist at your expense.

Everything was to henceforth be about you but
there is more in the world than you which is
too bad, really fucking terrible really, I would have
taped the door shut with both of us on the same side
but that wouldn't work because I've tried that
and we both died of starvation. The problem became
less you being mad at me but more how mad
you would have possibly been. Now we are in heaven
and it still sucks; I'm still
an asshole and the oceans aren't infinite. They're just
oceans. Inside them live whales the size
of whales. I'm getting closer

to doing the dishes at the end of each day. I'm getting closer
to becoming an unrestricted
free agent. But man, maybe I fucked up real bad.
Maybe becoming an adult has a lot to do with never changing
except now you apologize. You must say I'm sorry out loud
every chance you get. I'm sorry,
but I haven't set my skin on fire yet.

So I must hope that every time I see you now the plan goes
according to god's plan. Let us pray. It smells like a bunch
of pillows in here which is good. I'm sorry,
but I tried to love all the people; I tried with intent
even while I spent entire days deep-frying chicken.

We are already in heaven each time we shove our way
through a cloud and each time I'm in bed
where it is good, where I forget about you in increments,
where sometimes it is a little too warm.

Love Poem 2 (Disquiet)

So what if I spend my adult life in contemplation of bagels
I feel full of exclamation marks

like all the people who have never cleaned their teeth
in the grainy reflection of a bullet casing
like a hunter who has never repacked shotgun shells

we sat close allowing our legs to touch at the knee
at this moment we thought the same thing

but we don't always think the same thing
e.g. I thought
of gutting fish today and I thought
all the farms are rotating into the sun until we rotate beyond
and are only then safe

yes I thought these things
which were not at the time related to you
so please get over yourself
but only if you want to

I think forever
about the film of possibilities
that what is possible is never the case of the actual

the note stating that sleep
was the meaning of everything held no
quantitative truth because it was just a thought
albeit a nice thought
but thoughts are only restraint
from saying something stupid

pizza is the meaning of everything
I told you I am no longer holding back

my kitchen, now full of bagels like the bakery
you probably dream of
most likely I'm not good enough to eat any of it

Love Poem 20 (St. Joe, MO)

I did, in fact, ask you to marry me
in the Year of Ironing
All My Clothes

but I was so tired of driving to Missouri
so clear so flat so many lines

in the hotel room you forgot I had a nice dress
you ate near the sink as usual, prepared for nausea

I asked your mouth
how imperfect it could be

night was quiet
but gigantic in the way
you don't remember

I spat a constellation on the ground and named it after its apparent form

the sky is a selective color
I say with confidence the sky
is chipped paint

Love Poem 14 (Mouth Monument)

Nothing to do with a lawn of dead grass
it was you throwing every possession
into the sun
watching it spiral back toward your body

I think you've put a whole diction in my mouth
nothing to do with me

don't say you were imbued
from the start with
two tones, two media
color on silk
oil on canvas

I'm not biting anything from you

why have I asked you to walk home
so many times
why am I saying it again

Love Poem 11 (Long Love Poem With Descriptive Title)

Remember last week
with the words and walls like
always

how nothing is good

unless we break the legs from
the dining table
unless we crawl on our stomachs

I have a book for you
called "long love poem
with descriptive title"

gifts become cold gestures

art as anything
hung from a wall

with largely soft hand I carved
words out of myself
but it wasn't words it was just noise

Love Poem 12 (Feral Prayer)

I'm the person who wants to
strain you through a couch

I'll be that or
I'll be the next coldest thing

it is too much
the world is too small

Love Poem 6 (Distance and Time Prayer)

No one will promise anything

I am 13 miles into my penance
the beautiful part where
flesh becomes inconsequential
I am a big bucket of water

did you have a nice night

I just want to be a long stretch of
distance for you

I want to tell you
I'm coming over then
I come over
we can give the television our full attention
it will go without saying
that I'll never ask you for anything again

Love Poem 7 (Qin Dynasty Afterlife Prayer)

Do not look at me
talking to you
all encaustic

I propose all cities be
built downward
the earth shakes slightly
I stand very still

I know that
isn't enough
for you
but were we
sculptors think
of all the chisels

I pull up my carpet and etch a universe into the concrete
I staple the carpet back down and watch Netflix

I didn't imagine we could create perspective by staring longingly
or staring at each other for a long time

Love Poem 4

I might then hold your hand
for a week straight so we get carpal tunnel together.

I really want to spread your body across the table
and cook dinner myself. The kitchen is too small,
too small they say. But I am safe, in a refrigerator with my head
held high.

The sun is way underground but the temperature
has continued to crawl upward. I was born in the Year of
Acting Appalled

but it wore into my skin
it felt like a beach full of dead sharks. I'm all veins and shit now.

Was there ever love before the earth burned to death and we
rose from the molten elevator? Like what if I had eight computer screens
in order to watch people cry at night? I don't but
I'm just saying. I'm praying a lot now

no one talks to me and I like it. But it's time for
utmost honesty. I want the happy sort of winter
where we are nothing more than giant padded coats
smashed together. There will be a season

where you
become perfect syntax and I will repeat it until every person dies.

The world really is what you ask of it and we
ask nothing. It's strenuous
not like our nerve endings are stitched together

but like we're sweating inside our bodies. Maybe that's blood. Maybe
I'm only cartilage and I will live until
I enact the more beautiful definition of arrest.

I'm sorry to talk about graves all the time but I'm haunted--
once we forklifted the family's horse into a dirt hole and no one watched.
I haven't slept in the years since. I think it means
someone will love me, will think of me at least as a calm bed
in a windowless room. I'm alive and motionless,
I'm at odds. Love is selling my authentic bear hands
to the highest bidder. Love might be
setting myself on fire so I don't ruin anything good

or filling my closet with fertilizer until sweaters grow
through the ceiling. Maybe you are spread
across the bed like too many extra limbs but
I'm part of it; I'm a little buried underneath. If anything
crushes us tonight, it will be you first
and then me.

Love Poem 1

I think of you all the time and I hope
you think of me like a kitchen knife shoved into a forest
like a field of pizzas slightly burning

how the Russian people burned their crops in retreat
could be you and me in an ice cream shop
the same place I scream into your mouth until it
seeps from your pores

think of me forever as the ground you sleep on
I mean what is one long morning spent with candy corn
if mornings can't remain
the hopeful part of the day

the two best things about you are subterranean

but neither involves a painting technique

the bible states that god arranged the clouds like a bulls-eye
but stopped because people aimed arrows straight to heaven
increasing death via gravity

and yes I know I shouldn't have said that
but please realize some people will give
everything to others

those same people write other people songs
until everyone realizes that lyrics are just
the sort of dreams that sink bodies into the soft milk of the earth

you can dream of ice cream cones becoming soggy in your hand
please do it until the sun implodes

Love Poem 24 (Eating in the Shower Prayer)

The drain filled with hair
the rings ring around
the brown tub inches thick
with water
we can barely stand inside

but if you want
I will lick vanilla off your legs
make you a
salad in the sink
with carrot skins
with safety blades

in all seriousness
should I comb my hair forward or back?
the way I seem in a button-up
you would never guess my absence of organs

your body feels new
I want to sing happy birthday
so we can remember that once I sang it in the bathroom
but you say we can't bake a cake
with all this steam in the air

Love Poem 17 (Etcetera)

1.

I once stole all these yard decorations
from the good people of Oklahoma

2.

I have Jawbreaker playing
so loud in my house

the roof is two-tiered
the rafters
radiate from a central point

3.

how do I create a metaphor
of your nails in my bedding
how do I

4.

you know the horizon is a hungry mouth
we slowly glide toward
please tell me
that changes something in your stomach

5.

I am a moon under your shirt
I am a neon sign directing you into the building
I think separate beds are poison and I sleep on the floor
I am level with you and your legs and your feet

I know who you are and my head
barely vibrates

6.

I steal measuring tape so we can stand
certain distances apart

your voice just isn't loud enough
where are you stalled

what person are you with

actually that's right
we shouldn't talk about it because

the blanket over your mouth

well
is it cold outside or what
do we now have plenty of reasons to shake

Love Poem 19

Woke up today thinking you might backhand me
through the graves and groundholes
out the other side of the earth into a whole different sky

it's natural to be cold at night but

if you ask for
clouds in your chest cavity you should also realize
nothing is dealt with cleanly

we both stare at the carpet for a year
hopefully that's enough

a harvest of all our spit is more beautiful than
watching Friday night from a window,
than our culmination of discarded plains
more than you floating feet first into Sunday morning

I'm forced to describe all the words you say as
all the words you say
and I'm serious although you look awesome right now

more awesome than the air this morning which was red
I breathed all that air
my lungs glowed
like insects

I stood on the bridge and stated that this was all about me
don't you know, I mean you do know don't you

I want to describe you
deep into the field in which I was born
to send thank you cards to your family until my hands ache

what is really cold due to poor circulation can you say that
can you say that louder

I know
it's pretty and quiet and the cars have almost stopped
I know, blue is the best temperature

it's time to go to sleep you say
you mouth dreams into the bed
and mostly

I can't pretend to care about it
my hands stay very clasped, very tight, very blue

Love Poem 8

There's no way I have
any bad caramel left
in my soul

I never took time off
but became a repetition a
satellite of mud gurgling a stomach

can beginning again consist of
a high five in outer space
where the failure of gravity
causes our hands to collide forever

I broke into your car and
redrew all your maps
my lack of respect is
mine and mine alone

my hands right now are
water drying across your back
I hope imagination fails you
I hope cascading is, to you,
a very technical term

fall comes and the plants die
let us celebrate with
a plethora of batteries
surgically placed
under our skin

in Seattle we tried to meet Chris at
the wrong restaurant
there was an obvious lack of support
between us

we visited the dock where The Real World took place
but it was bald
wiped clean
shoved into water

no one cared anyway, you said that
then you said it louder
You really screamed that at me

the wind picked up
I no longer heard you

now we should just refer to the list of
frequently asked questions
with regards to posture
with regards to skeleton shape
with regards to possible heart failure
I deem myself excluded we are not perfect for each other

I would like to destroy your avoidance
how does that work
like when I googled how big I must become
before my organs are crushed under the weight before they
fester and eventually explode

is it anything like that

let us repeat each other for real
that's where all the hand holding leads
I wrote each word I've said today
so we can practice over dinner

and I will always ask the same of you
and ask you to always ask the same of me

Love Poem 9 (Haunted Houses)

1.

There was a lot of flailing in New Mexico
a house with wood ceilings
a tiered backyard, stacked against the mountainside

I wrote the love poem everyone loved:
"I could be happy as a donut right now / you could cry about men later"

now I am happy as a donut
we redecorated the bathrooms and bought a new front door

I heard you moved back to this state, this blackhole in the brain
did all the flailing follow you back from New Mexico
your son said
 the police came
 when the car was stolen

they came again when you woke:
a man asleep in the blue morning
propped on a bean bag

a different house
the definition for starting over:
"A new tampline and no / kitchen table"

did you ever think jumping off the roof would kill you?

2.

To haunt every person I've made home
to love every bedspread I've been under

getting older:
having been inside all day
sleeping with the girl
with the black hair

waiting for
conversation about the sandwich thrown on the roof
which never fell down

falling in love with anyone

was once possible if you adapted well

getting older:

some sort of sex in a Vegas hotel bathtub
you're accustomed to getting drunk with clothes on
you have to fly back tomorrow
 cook dinner
 get the kid ready for school

you buy a new car
more and more strangers say
they do not like you

3.

Eyesight soon blurs into a thin space
Memories of how your father feels at the penny arcade and it's deserted

his child running in and out of buildings like
a man with a gun
a handkerchief tied around his face

The penny arcade floated on a small lake
each entryway covered by tarp

the wood smelled new
the lakewater just smelled

your father prayed you'd grow up to be a carpenter
he knew the world was build on dirt, not prayer

4.

I thought I was doing a favor
heaven could be just a matter of elevation
but then again, other things will kill you just as quickly

Love Poem 18 (The Condition of Perspective
-For Hideko Tamura Snider)

Since the 1970s an effort to reduce
elevated levels of hydrogen ions
has hindered all efforts to stall
the demise of you prefecture

I'm thinking of you a lot how you said
the walls wavered into the others

the pottery spread pieces across the rooms

two primary forces of a dropped bomb are
gravity and air drag

and you riding an abandoned bike
away from a panicked city

terminal velocity of a dropped object
is achieved
when the gravity equals the drag
when acceleration ceases

restoration was dead skin melting into the river
mingling with sediment

barriers like I woke up early and stared at photos
overexposed or with shadows burned into buildings
waiting for the sun to halt the rain and it never does

I think of trees standing bare of color
you think of a field where trees will never grow

I think of my dad not in his suit but a robe
with a coffee mug
the tv playing live footage

and your dad
with a refusal to leave his pile of a home
refusing to leave his collapsed, lungless factory
the parallels between us are equal to
zero

and well
by the time the second fire started

I felt all the past and all the ghosts

the energy exerted by the force
of a newton to move an object through
a distance of one meter multiplied by
fifty-eight trillion

immediately I wondered if you thought the same thing once
half lit by the refrigerator's light
rain pouring outside but maybe not
if you thought about ghosts the same as I do now

but that isn't right
there is a principle natural phenomenon we both took part of
all ghosts couldn't be considered natural
all people aren't ghosts but
all people can be

Love Poem 30 (The Empire Gone Mad)

In a memory of a dream I meant to have

your glasses are the glasses
my father wore until 1993
before time got all confused
all the people in it

before I climbed into your mouth before I

exited into the same year
into a room of people
I'm sure you are all very nice people

Renaissance Lines

1.

What is midnight light during good
times I forgot. Length of time armies its way
forward. Think (propellant) but never say
the p-word. Even better, lock your jaw tight.
Get wild in a birdbath. Don't wear a t-shirt, find something
with buttons. Get a tie then get a job. Your parents
may not respect you but at least
you are an above average cook.
At least years have passed since you've stolen anything.

I don't know. Why
the guns? No prairie dogs to shoot
not in the city. The trees are plastic.
What color is the sun when its guts reverse, don't say
black. Say something better. Say your prayers before bed
so I know what bothers you. Don't ask for anything
other than help, because you need help and God
isn't a genie. He has lamps but not magic. Well, he has magic
but he calls them clouds.

The gutters curve into the grass
mowed each Sunday. Matt found a twenty dollar bill
and a grip of leaves once. He bought a little
pot and some gas station burritos. If I found gutter money,
I'd spend it too;
I already spent it. Can we talk about
likelihood? Like who has been alive longer, and why people
call other people sheep. Or we can not talk about that.
We can carpool as long as everyone dabbles in silence.

Make a mountain. Climb it and cackle. Stumble into the bear cave,
see the bear bed and get the hell out. When someone
loves your bones it will be painful. So sift through the sandbox,
find something good. If nothing is good, enjoy your bad time.
Don't bury your head in the sand. Breath comes difficult through rocks
and also through tiny rocks. If you bend your fingers back the crack
of rotting bones permeates. Even that is something.

2.

Long walk or car ride. Our feet alliterate on earth or
we hover perpetually. So what sounds nice and doesn't last
forever. Let's buy a bucket of love and bob for hearts,
except the iron and texture, except our metal mouths. A scream
doesn't get us back to the river. Hold hands
in a tent, we form sweaty and yuck. A new game: endearing
not endearing. So build a boat or find a house?
Just go home you decide. We both know the way.

In the bible belt we make food,
we get fat. The belt tightens its metaphor and we
don't buy new clothes. We send our kids
to school. The elementary brick wants decrepitude but
teachers have it. Moods like spray-paint tans,
and shirts which smell like sperm pantries.
The good news regarding the future

we have to ignore, it stays distant. I say don't
be dumb, but think hard. Make your brain
sputter-stop then listen. Listen. You probably can't.
I'm not angry but I ordered pancakes and you
brought waffles, you know? It's like the air smells
of boiled blood but you talk about steaks. Also,
you smell like something I won't put my finger on.
The signs all over town explicitly state
no touching and no fingering.

3.

Snow not always a sign of anger.
Weather is contained by science,
but is science a sign of anger? I hope
someone brought champagne. February never
warrants celebration, sure, but we must
manifest into a bunch of bodies anyway.
Yes, so shove the buns in the oven and begin
churning the butter. Say a prayer, and say it loud.

Sometimes the parade passes through town. It tosses candy
and handfuls of wheat. Messes are made. Damnation
confirmed. Damnations constantly though. Austin
spent six months painting sky upon sky. Sometimes
we all got sad with the gray, sometimes we drank
like vacation in Hawaii. The sky forms a metaphor
which we follow devoutly. Personally, I still get all
submissive near a palate knife.

Land-locks, prone to
violent arms of wind, ask
what do tornados want? This is my
daily conundrum. It's like the sky came
to eat us, but isn't that a constant state of sky?
Here it stretches to the horizon yet
wants more, wants the ground and our homes.
I want a promise, but I don't know why.
Maybe it resembles exercise then your body
builds trust. But who says trust no one. I trust
no one. I don't trust a stanza to save any lives.
All lives saved mean no one dies right? Our fat
world would be stuffed full and if you think that means
happy, you don't know happy.

4.

We dug our school into the side of a mountain,
a perpetual complex. Two levels, stone stairs
but architecture gets dull. We need
a party with a pillow fight. We need mud wrestling rings,
sure like hell I'm not entering them. Cameras
are good if you're feeling good. I'm forever sick.
I float in a boat of tissue on a sea of handsoap and snot.

Live long enough, you see architecture fail. Everyone
you know. Two things exist: surface and below surface,
architecture is all surface. The thought makes me
want to live in a warm shower. To crawl in bed
while the sun gets low. To wear nothing,
when I ought to get my pants tailored. Pins in a leg,

that's forever. That's right. When the sky fails
I'll yank the bottom. We'll watch it roll itself
like a projection screen. To thank me
you'll say Thank You. We will float in the white void,
someone will die. Let me explain: the earth is flat.
The man who died walked to the edge
then walked some more. He died.

This is when your grandfather tells the story about
the princess and the cartilage. Or the hero and
the bone marrow transplant. The sword and sheath.

You tell the story about the video game and the television,
ask why no one is listening to anyone, why
words solder our teeth.

5.

Everyone has the poem about their dad
and the pogo stick. It's time to let the past stink.
Time to let the carpenters in the house, you can't
fix anything. The two of you it takes to screw
a light bulb, could've cooked the ham already.
But no one eats meat anymore. It's important

to live in a forest. Fall your own trees, befriend
your own squirrels. Pass time with a whiff of the bat,
America. Were the big wars really lived out in greyscale?
Grandfathers say Picasso's skills dulled hearts. Look
at the faces of the saltimbanques. Those faces are not blank.
I'll show you blank, but
you have to wait until snow. You have to wear
a ski mask. We won't ski, I promise.

The smell is like a perfect person
with no teeth. Or a comedy club without alcohol, anything
without alcohol. Get drunk and put on a vest.
Some counteraction is better than plain old action, especially
when you spew your life story but nothing
happened. Also nothing happens, except technically
morning came. Is that not power? The galaxy spinning
around us while we spin around the galaxy? No, let us not
be idiots. Buy a television so we can say, exactly: power is
ripping phone books in half. Power is bench pressing a car.
Fiction is so made up.
Now I'm angry. Going to stomp my foot hard. Only
because I quit punching holes
in walls. Quit gnawing apples cores.

6.

I burned a dam then the water caught fire. Mistakes
are permanent okay. Don't try to fix them like you haven't seen
the damage a hammer creates. Like the story about the dirt
and the rib, we need soft hands. We don't need sexier bones.

We the people poured cement in a hole, it filled
with snow. What can we say in winter
without damning ourselves further. It was forever
that we talked about, now the increments
are weeks. John never made it down south, but he learned
important lessons about time. He also
bought a drumset and became a fine musician; drums
were always too loud for me. Rooms
always too small no matter how large.

We laid carpet for a year.
Worked restaurants for a year,
cashed checks and sold baseball cards.
Someone said good and meant well and I thought a hole in the ground.
Explications out loud were never
well-ended. Kind of like kind-hearted versus
candy-hearted, one just sounds so much more
pink. We quit the restaurant, put on our cleats,

realized the game was in a parking lot. I've no love
anymore. I've emptied my well. I stopped kissing good-bye,
stopped good-byes. I say so long, they say
where. Sometimes we just exchange pennies for jokes.
We tried hugs but people are rarely the exact same
height, and if they are, their eyes are the same color.
Problems are problems, but let's not
talk about them.

7.

I've ripped every muscle according to the Book of the Christ
again again again, until the ground became adorable. Nothing
says I don't belong here more than my open mouth
and everything I've said anytime, anyplace, anywhere, ever
ever. A fever lives inside my bones which means a fever
travels through my body which means
my skin should be a happy happy blanket, which means my skin
needs to practice doing what it is told. A twenty-four hour
calamity of fuck you, a job
that has me thinking about permits and guns. A slow song,
too slow to dance. There comes a time when one must stand
on the timeline of life and tie a knot,
then explode into confetti cupcakes that make grief
of the mouths of those usually silent. I want more than anything
a moment of silence followed by
a room of goofy smiles, but I'm afraid
we are all in the act of murdering a person with our fists
while our best friends pummel rocks in the background.

8.

My mom told me
she was my heart
and soul and
until she wrote that
I didn't know my imagined organs
were vacant. When you learn something
you feel like
a princess in a dress, a ghost
under a sheet. The longer
you stand at the street sign
with torn suitcases under your arms
to more you realize
you want to see your family
but are so much like you family
your body might never make it back home

Annotated Bibliography

Bailey, Daniel. *Hallelujah Giant Space Wolf*. Portland, OR: Mammoth Editions, 2012. Print.

This book was influential because Bailey employs a voice that functions similarly to the one used in my thesis. More specifically the voice is exuberant, tends to absurdity, and yet remains colloquial. Luckily for me the book was published prior to the completion of my thesis because I was able to see how Bailey reigned in the energy and absurdity. A large part of the poetics that worked their way into my thesis were based on how to make a single poem or section a project of its own (opposed to a less polished puzzle piece that would fit into the whole text); Bailey keeps the voice in check and leads the reader to a sense of finality with each poem. The title poems begins on page 38 with the stanza “on some future night I will fold the earth / and close it like a book” which nearly begs the reader to ask for further explanation. Yet after more than 10 pages, the poem ends on page 49 with the stanza

I shine a flashlight
and signal
I signal the heart outside the body
I signal the love and love undone
I signal you in your sleep and your crushing dreams
and in all of this all of this

which remains consistent with the voice but shifts completely in tone and allows the opening metaphor to work with the voice to approach an alternative state. The voice might initially seem flashy, but ultimately justifies itself.

Dos Passos, John. *U.S.A.* New York: The Library of America, 1996. Print.

This trilogy is known for its sprawl, political commentary, and technique. The latter interests me because the trilogy’s pieces fit together despite alternating narrative modes. The differences between the poems in my thesis are not as pronounced, yet I still wanted a guide showing me how to connect pieces that I also felt could stand alone. Dos Passos trilogy contains life narrative, voyeuristic “Camera Eye” sections and stream-of-consciousness “Newsreel” sections. All are loosely tied as descriptors of the United States. Similarly (though without the sprawl and political commentary, i.e. on a much smaller realm of focus) my I attempted to tie poems with varying uses of enjambment, punctuation, appearance, and organization together under a vague umbrella. The meaning should only be apparent due to proximity.

Gay, Ross. *Bringing the Shovel Down*. Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2011. Print.

The part of the poetry world that keeps coming up in my conversations focuses on the project, usually a book as a project or, less often, a writer’s career as a project. In

interviews Gay doesn't enter this discussion, but *Bringing the Shovel Down* makes apparent that Gay views single poems as a project deserving of its own discussion. Of course, there isn't anything revelatory about that. But while these poems are distinct he also weaves them together--the best example being the title poem and then the final poem "Again," which is a redux of the title poem with different versioning applied. When the focus of a manuscript can be looked at as microcosms that slowly balloon into the whole, it becomes stunning to read as it unfolds and expands.

J Dilla. *Donuts*. Stone's Throw, 2006. CD.

Dilla's composition compared to the end product of this album caused major reconsiderations of the writing process I used for a large portion of the work in my thesis. As for the composition, it is commonly cited that most of the tracks were recorded in a hospital bed over the course of a few months.¹ The pace gives the album its most interesting characteristics; the tracks are short but bursting, the only relaxing moments come briefly but only when Dilla allows them. A sense of surprise and roughness permeate the album and ultimately this feels very natural. The overworked feeling that sometimes deadens music or poetry is not only absent here, it doesn't even enter the realm of possibility. It is easy to work on a poem's technical aspects until the whole thing falls into a dead space. As I played this album on repeat while editing my final drafts, it served as a reminder not to kill my own work.

Kaminski, Megan. *Desiring Map*. Atlanta, GA: Coconut Books, 2012. Print.

This book emphasizes its four sections more than the book as a whole. Once I pared down my thesis and realized I wanted poems to function as building blocks to sections and sections to function as building blocks to the entire manuscript, Kaminski's book served as a straightforward example. The influence of this text wasn't only structural; it also worked as a blueprint when writing the longer poems which bookend my thesis. Translating these points from her book to my thesis helped with considerations of voice and tone--Kaminski's are very different and work toward a different end and this forced me to understand how a similar structure can be used to emphasize different purposes.

Notaro, Tig. *Live*. Secretly Canadian, 2012. FLAC

The recording of this comedy event isn't actually one of Notaro's routines, and isn't necessarily classifiable as comedy. Notaro talks the audience through her recent diagnosis of breast cancer and proceeds to expand on other unfortunate events leading to the diagnosis. Art does, or can, come from a particular balance of courage and confidence; this blends perfectly in this recording. Notaro displays an apparent confidence in her craft that levels the content. The result is palatable in that the recording isn't too sentimental and isn't insensitive; it doesn't beg the audience or assume confidence in itself. This is a very impressive approach to something that ultimately has to be described as "comedy about cancer," though that isn't accurate. Instead, Notaro performs "comedy" about

¹http://coldcrush.com.au/electro_sydney/electro_funk/hip-hop-beats/dilla-liked-donuts-jay-dees-final-works/

cancer, and this forces the audience to create sympathy themselves—as if they haven’t been asked to supply it. The art is subtle.

Rankine, Claudia. *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004. Print.

This book is often talked about in terms of its construction with the same weight, if not more, than its content. Each successive time I read this book though, think less about form and more about content. More than anything this book is an excellent example of writing about the topics one wants to write about and doing so in a focused manner. Focused, Rankine shows, doesn’t equal continuity and more so she shows that a fractured composition can more fully develop a sense of a writer’s self. Instead of filling a text with considerations as to how to order things according to chronology, Rankine spends more time developing the important instances. Blank space and the depth of the instances ultimately provide context instead of the lull in between events that would be necessary for a continuous narrative. As I went back and forth between injecting more narrative into poems and wanting to erase narrative from poems, this book served as a reminder that both work well.

“Rick Ross Rape Lyrics: Talib Kweli Takes Rapper to Task Over Controversial Song”
Huffington Post Live, April 1, 2013. Imbedded web video. April 2, 2013.

The influence of this roundtable discussion is reflected less on this thesis than thoughts on process and community in a larger sense. But it is worthwhile to confront realms that seem to exist largely outside poetry, because ultimately coterie cultures are able to influence the larger culture around them, which means all the cultures under that umbrella are affected. Later in the roundtable, Kweli discusses the responsibility of artists:

“We are human beings first and we have a responsibility to our community as human beings. Our only responsibility as artists is to create honest art...Responsible human beings use their art as a platform, to change opinions...but that’s not our responsibility as artists.”

Which doesn’t mean that art should merely be reflective, but honest—after all, no one exists solely as an artist without also occupying some other life role. This point by Kweli really leads the listener to a different point though. Art is less contained than it seems. It isn’t restricted by the artist’s morals, beliefs, environment or culture; all these things can fall under “honest art” but nearly every topic outside of those can also fall under “honest art.” It is a good reminder, and fitting that as Kweli nears the end of the discussion he reminds everyone that “Artists are contradictory. People need to get over it.”²

Savoca, Matthew. *Long Love Poem with Descriptive Title*. Sacramento, CA: Scrambler Books, 2010. Print.

² The full video can be found here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/01/rick-ross-rape-lyrics-talib-kweli-controversial-song_n_2994215.html

The process of this book is not similar to my process. However, Savoca and I strive for a similar exposure of the speaker's emotions, so the alternate means to that end shaped my approach. *Long Love Poem with Descriptive Title* reads like a loosely strung collection of stream-of-consciousness sentences (he claims to have written the book this way also stating that the only form of editing was removal, which can probably be somewhat verified by comparing earlier published parts of the long poem that makes up the book). The link between this process and the outcome—the exposure of the speaker's emotional state—is fairly direct. I searched the book's pages, lines, and section to see if formal elements within the lines help achieve the outcome for Savoca; I hoped to apply these formal elements to my lines, while allowing more mobility to the overall poem/section. I found that his use of enjambment still lent surprise to subsequent lines despite retaining temporal order. For example, one section begins, "if you want to see what i look like now," which is a line that works with either for the lines that follow, "because it's been a couple of hours since you left the house / i took pictures and put them on the refrigerator." From this I took away that explanation of the speaker's thought process was important for Savoca; alternatively, that rarely is the case for the speakers used in my thesis. I gained from Savoca's book an understanding that explanation isn't imperative. Readers will do a large portion of that work on their own as long as the pieces are presented to them in a way they deem worthwhile.

Simmons, Bill. *The Book of Basketball*. New York: ESPN Books, 2009. Print.

Simmons spans the history of the NBA without following a historical template; he doesn't move from the beginning to middle to end. Instead he chooses pivotal arguments he thinks are representative of the sport and organizes his chapters in that way. The organization gives the book a personal feel. The colloquial language does also, but in a way that disarms readers and convinces them to agree with Simmons' argument regardless of their stance. It's an interesting combination of structure and voice because readers are wont to allow a person his own opinion, especially when the presentation of a stance isn't confrontational. That added to the book's readability. The allowance he gains from readers and the readability of the book were two things I hoped to transfer into a collection of poems.

Svalina, Mathias. *The Explosions*. Boulder, CO: Subito Press, 2012. Print.

I focused specifically on the nearly 70 page poem near the front of the book, "Above the Fold." While writing the long poem that eventually became the opening of my thesis, I was having trouble balancing momentum and length. I wanted the poem to be self-contained; I didn't want it to rely on the rest of the manuscript for a reader to fully realize the thrust of the themes.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Liverlight, 1993. Print.

The structure of *Cane* influenced my thoughts on organization while putting my thesis together, though using *Cane* for that purpose is obvious. Paging through my thesis I doubt anyone would mistake the genre of the work; formally and traditionally it falls into

the category of poetry. But while working it was important that I didn't feel stuck between lineation or prose, narrative or sonic quality. Influences are a mix, and if I allow myself to be influenced by many types of writing I might expect myself to funnel that those influences into a single type of writing. In *Cane*, Toomer makes apparent that I don't need to meld influences together; he keeps the prose and poetry and dramatic pieces separate yet places them all under one roof. This showed that even as I tried closing genre distinctions in order to open other pathways of writing, I may have been overlooking the reasons of existence for the distinctions.

Wallace, David Foster. *Both Flesh and Not*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2012. Print.

It seems fair to say a book cannot be important in any sense if no one cares about it. Although this book is a collection of previously published essays, like his other work he performs acts of logic that are as easy to follow as the logic is incomprehensible, only because the ease with which he links thoughts together is unfathomable to me (until, of course, he makes those links clear). Essays on tennis, a review of a poet I've never heard of, an essay on "The (As It Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*," or reviews on math melodramas shouldn't interest me. Wallace says otherwise and then proves why they do matter to me. More importantly, he doesn't will the importance of these essays on readers. He links them to a less concrete point (such as the human body or cultural consumption) and eventually we readers decide that Roger Federer is important to us or that we are part of the culture that produced and consumed *Terminator 2*, so therefore we have a stake in the movie and it becomes important.

The same is applicable to a book of poetry. Why would anyone care? In order to not be a journal, a book of poems need audience and my job becomes giving the book relevance to its imagined audience. I don't accomplish this on the level Wallace does, but this collection of essays reminds one toward what one should strive.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. Prepared by Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1992. Print.

The initial thought was to write about the use of place in *Paterson*. Instead I found myself stripping away most poems dealing with places within my experience. Partly because Williams is so imaginative in *Paterson* (as to his construction of the town) and partly because I realized that I was explaining, not constructing. I began to think of the atmosphere or general spaces the thesis conjures up, and decided (based largely on *Paterson*) that a constructed space is better than one explained; after all, explaining is just a direct, laconic way to construct—and I wanted excess. With that realization I was able to rid myself of places real to me and deal with created places. The reasoning was that, if I am constructing a space, why not start from a mostly blank slate, and therefore have more control over the outcome. Williams steered me toward that control with this book, and I think it helps balance the excessive moments in the thesis.