

An Orchard of Skin

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Statement on Poetics

At the start of my poetic career, I became interested in the ways that language can express the trauma of personal loss, injury or physical pain, and mental distress. As I have developed my craft, my focus has sharpened into an investigation of the physical body and how it manifests traumatic experiences. This has involved observation of the people I interact with, the spaces I inhabit, and the living and non-living components of my daily life. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, my work has involved self-examination regarding the effects of the material world on my physical and emotional state. Through the process of experimenting with new forms, images, and words, I have learned to express these effects in distinct ways.

During the past several years, my work has undergone significant formal changes. My early poems, for instance, often extended over several pages. However, at the time of writing this manuscript, my poems are relatively short with condensed lines. There is no single reason for this. In some ways, it is the outcome of having been inspired by the works of poets renowned for their brevity, such as Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In other ways, it is the result of a personal fascination with precise language. How might certain words maximize the emotional impact of a poem in the shortest possible space? In the second stanza of my poem *simulacrum*, for example, I puzzled over the wording for weeks. In my first draft, it read “thickets / of plastic / elm trees / grow taller.” However, in poem about the liminal space between the real and the representational, the word “plastic” leaned too far toward the latter. By my second draft, it became “lacquered.” Unfortunately, this presented a similar problem; the “elm trees” became too concrete. After much experimentation, I finally arrived at the word “stippled.” Like the “silver mice” in this poem’s last stanza, which could be living animals just as easily as they could be buttons or broaches, “stippled / elm trees” may refer to textured plants, the subject of an elaborate drawing, or both.

How, one might ask, do shortened forms and attention to word choice relate to my wider body of work, and to my ultimate goal of exploring and conveying trauma? Although traumatic experiences can have profound, long-term consequences, they are often situated in the fleeting moments of daily life. In my poem *ribbons*, I attempt to demonstrate this by subjecting my speaker – an extension of myself – to physical abuse at the hands of an unidentified “you.” In the fourth line, “[you] carve asterisks in me”; in the fifth, “twist my mouth”; in the seventh, “teal my wrists.” This poem’s final line, “in the periphery,” suggests that the speaker has entered a dissociative state. Although this may foreshadow wider psychological repercussions, the poem as a whole is interested in the present “static” – a crackling, hissing series of points in time. This presence, which persists throughout my work as a whole, has allowed me to examine specific traumatic moments in greater depth. Ultimately, I elected to use short forms because they convey the transitory qualities of these moments in a visual way. Since precise language is crucial to a poem’s emotional intensity, especially in limited spaces, my attention to word choice followed.

In the past two or three years, my imagery has also changed and developed. In part, this is due to the influence of acclaimed poets. The work of Paul Celan, for instance, has inspired me to experiment with strange and vibrant language. His poems, which date from the 1940s to the 1970s, address the personal and collective trauma of the Holocaust. The horrors of this era are seen in his striking images. In his poem *Darkness*, for example, “the swelter of speechless songs / chokes black” and “only dying / sparkles”; in his later poem *Late and Deep*, “we eat the apples of the mute” and “a man [comes] forth from the grave” (p. 5, 27). Although my poems explore subtler forms of trauma, Celan’s influence is present in my imagery. In my poem *theia*, for instance, I compare unique subjects in order to examine the physical body and its presence in a

destructive world: “my yellow / eyes wax / like the surface / of apples” and “silverfish / devour / my last blue / dress.” In another poem, *rain shower*, I address similar themes; “a pale spider / drowns / in my body / wash,” it begins, “i can’t see / past the clouded / bottle.” Ultimately, Celan’s influence has strengthened the way I use language to express these visceral aspects of trauma and has been vital to my manuscript as a whole.

My imagery has also been shaped by the work of Danish poet Inger Christensen. Specifically, I have been inspired by her focus on the natural world. In her book *Butterfly Valley: A Requiem*, she uses insects as metaphors for human experiences. “Perhaps I will cocoon myself and stare / at the white Harlequin,” the speaker says, “its sleights of hand / delusion for the universe’s fool” (p. 8). Christensen’s exploration of complex questions through descriptions of small, undervalued creatures is something I have attempted to mimic in my own work. In my poem *sheath*, for instance, the speaker experiences decline and renewal: “today / i shed / my steel-wool / gloves” and “tomorrow / you wrap / my hands.” This process is punctuated by a series of insectile images: “stag beetles’ / breath,” “rainbow / chitin,” and the speaker’s “larval / tongue.” My purpose in including this type of imagery, both in this poem and in others, is twofold. First, I believe that observation of grotesquely beautiful plants and animals can serve as a way to distract or soothe our distress – can, in a sense, “wrap” us in something lovely and unexpected. Second, inclusion of these images in poetry can allow us to understand painful experiences in new ways. For example, my poem *flight* compares and contrasts shrieking “mourning doves” whose nests have been destroyed with a speaker whose “feathered / shoulders / molt.” The sloughing of feathers, a symbol of trauma-induced maturation, can be seen and felt. Direct reference to “pain,” on the other hand, is abstract and impalpable; it has less

emotional impact. For this reason, I believe my focus on the natural world's minutia has strengthened my writing.

Through the process of creating my manuscript, some of my poems shifted from first- to third-person accounts of these natural phenomena. In my poem *propagation*, for instance, “kestrel eggs rupture,” “[a] mule deer / stiffens,” and “wasps / eat the organs / of pupae.” Although this may distance the reader from the text itself, I believe it has allowed me to explore trauma in unique ways. Prior to the 2020 global health crisis, I gathered themes and images from sidewalks, restaurants, and classrooms. After it began, however, it was necessary to avoid public settings as much as possible. During this period of relative isolation, I often found it difficult to connect with my inner emotional state in the way I had previously. This facilitated an exploration of the world outside of myself, specifically the trauma inflicted on non-human bodies. In my poem *rotation*, “children / decapitate / cattails” and “milkweed / sepals / weep.” Although plants are immune to physical pain, at least as far as we are aware, they are still vulnerable to destruction. I believe that my descriptions of damage to the outside world situates my broader body of work in a traumatic setting. Even when our lives are relatively calm and stable, the world itself deteriorates.

In another poem, *the neighborhood*, I move away from natural imagery but continue to explore entropic themes through the third-person: “petroleum slips / through cratered rooftops / and warps cedar / porch swings...” This narrative distance helps convey the vastness of an unfamiliar world where “cinders rouse / valleys / of chafed stucco.” Additionally, it adds variety to a manuscript that examines both the mental and physical effects of trauma: confusion, anxiety, and depression; physical harm, degradation, and transformation. The third-person allows me to extend these effects beyond the self – to connect inner turmoil to questions of existence. What

are the implications of a deer's trauma, or a dove's? How does outside trauma help us better understand ourselves?

My poem *the farm*, which is also set in the third person, asks the reader to consider “why the milk / has soured” – why something simple and nourishing has gone to waste – amid “the rust / of electric kettles” and “the slaughter / of cornish hens.” There are a multitude of conceivable explanations for this, but the question's value lies in the challenge of answering it rather than the answer itself. By searching for it, the reader may better understand their own mental or emotional state. Was the farm neglected on purpose? Were its occupants forced to leave it behind? The assumptions the reader makes about this situation may reflect their past experiences, how they view themselves and others, and so on. Any individual who has experienced the loss of a loved one, for example, might view the farm's decomposition as unfair – a theft. Alternatively, they might accept it as natural and inevitable. Either interpretation reflects the effects of personal loss or other traumas on the psyche. In this way, my third-person observations may lead the reader to their own conclusions about the nature of suffering, loss, or trauma as a whole.

Another important aspect of my work is the unnamed “you.” This is something I have included in my poetry for several years. In some instances, the “you” is an imagined reader, antagonist, or mentor; in others, an extension of the self. Ultimately, this is less important than a given poem's overarching commentary on relationships – on abuse or unity. In my previously-mentioned poem *ribbons*, for instance, the “you” acts as a placeholder for anything or anyone that might inflict physical or sexual trauma. In my poem *fabric*, on the other hand, the “you” empowers. In the first stanza, “you teach me / how to eat / limes”; in the second, “we speak / our skirts’ / eulogies.” By guiding the speaker's journey, this “you” functions as a symbol for

resilience and resistance – as a force against the trauma inflicted by life’s bitter fruits, so to speak, and by discriminatory systems from which gendered dress codes stem. In another poem, *lamina*, the “you” combines with the speaker to become “we.” In an unspecified desert setting, “we sleep / in feral / scrub-grass,” “listen / to the thrum / of termites,” and allow “our retinas / [to] align.” These images are meant to express a unified effort against a range of circumstances, both harsh and beautiful. The use of “we,” which helps demonstrate this, functions in a similar way to the “you” in *fabric*; it shows the reader that unity – either within or between – can distract us from past and present difficulty, even if momentarily. Ultimately, I believe the use of “you” and “we” has been critical to my exploration of what trauma is and does; although some people may harm us, others help us overcome.

After completing my manuscript, I organized my work in ways that express particular ideas to the reader. My first section, *Pulp*, contains poems that reflect interiority – the qualities of the home or the mind. I arranged these poems in a way that echoes the non-static nature of trauma and mental illness. For instance, the first poem takes place in the bedroom; the next, in the shower; the next, in a vehicle; and so on. In life, traumatic experiences can haunt us anywhere, at any time, which is what I want this ordering to convey.

My next section, *Peel*, contains poems that take place outdoors – by a river, in a desert, or on the sea – and tend to be more narratively distanced from the reader. Many of these poems, like several I mentioned previously, contain series of third-person observations. Some, which are less distanced, portray a unified “we.” I arranged these poems in a way that takes the reader on a journey through entropic settings, as seen in *strings* and *the neighborhood*, then through ones that convey hope and unity, like *lamina* and *zenith*. Although this section contains many

dark themes, its conclusion is brighter. Even if traumatic experiences bring undeniable grief and hardship, these poems say, hope of recovery exists.

In my final section, *Pith*, I examine liminal spaces. Any of the poems it contains could conceivably take place indoors or outdoors; in the mind or in reality. It asks the reader to consider questions about trauma and life itself, such as in *the farm*: Why has the milk soured? I organized this section's poems in a way that takes the reader on a journey through dark and light; hardship and resilience; misery and hope. My poem *sheath*, which concludes the manuscript, leaves speaker and reader on a high note: "let my larval / tongue / amplify" – let me speak or sing through life's hardships.

Through the process of writing this manuscript, and of developing my use of short forms, precise language, unexpected imagery, and varying perspectives, I have had many chances to examine the effects of traumatic experiences. Some of the included poems more deeply reflect my emotional state, while others are merely observations that acknowledge the existence of trauma outside of myself. Ultimately, I hope my reader will be able to relate to my ideas and experiences on some level. Additionally, I hope my poetry encourages them to reflect on their own emotional state in regard to any hardship or trauma they currently face, or have faced in the past. Although my work is unlikely to facilitate complete recovery, I hope my shared experiences and perspectives can shed light on the nature of trauma and open my reader to the possibility of growth – of letting our "feathered / shoulders / molt."

I. Pulp

tuesday

i swallow my upper lip

yellowish

when i eat

mundane cantaloupes

in the dark

my tongue a cadaver

laughs tangle

purpled ribs

in the back of my closet

rain shower

a pale spider

drowns

in my body

wash

i can't see

past the clouded

bottle

the lavender

steam

stings

when I breathe

my lungs

rattle

when I sing

ribbons

you watch me masturbate

with toothpaste

in the rearview mirror

carve asterisks in me

then twist my mouth and *static*

dial it higher

teal my wrists

knot my ankles

in the periphery

sandlines

i eat blue cactuses

on mondays

and smile eggshells

when i ~brackish~

tremblestill

on the inner side

of my curtained window

dampen

on saturday

a chef

boils live frogs

on-air

in this hour

i learn

how to swamp

my kitchen –

how to follow

cricket-song

to its source

and eat it

peaches

windows shudder red
sewn to the wall
under trash heap pink fleece
an orchard of skin
bitten down to the muscle
of eye-bulge refrigerated
mice in egg cartons
zip into tented sinews
and bury rotten pulp
in the splintered drawer
of a midnight dresser

the jar

i submerge my tonsils

in glass

with the amber ring

you never gave me

on my cellar's

pallid shelf –

they dissolve

like winter

in brine

understory

persimmons grow
through the soles
of my sandals
and asters droop
at my bathtub's edge

at its center
i steep
in steel-cut oats

and when mayflies die
by my window
reextend my arms
through poison
oak sleeves

germination

i unzip

my neck –

spill

sunflower seeds

in my arid

bedroom

in baseboards

underneath

blonde petals

unfold

then atrophy

november

we eat cinnamon rolls and charcoal
horse meat
at the tomato-wood dining room table

mop stains with hand sanitizer
(or urine)

and read pamphlets that

tell us how to stop
drinking beer
on wednesdays

through pink-eyed evenings
we try to remember
the names

we have forgotten

II. Peel

strings

i throw mandolins

in the river

while lost snow geese

follow northern trajectories

a quartet of paper

boats shivers

on the bank

and bitter grass

pricks my feet –

a tremolo

homestead

russet

doorways

splinter

*

fireflied

pupils

constrict

*

the barn

brims

with mold

the neighborhood

petroleum slips

through cratered rooftops

and warps cedar

porch swings

a wrinkled woman

stands nude

on her scabbed

bottom step

beyond

cinders rouse

valleys

of chafed stucco

rotation

children

decapitate

cattails

*

milkweed

sepals

weep

*

subfossil

fig-stamen

disintegrate

decompression

when i swim

at depths –

the opaline

bodies

of bobbit worms

float

from sand

to surface

coral polyps

detach

from crimson

limbs

and rip

through my hair

the cells

of blobfish

burst

in my chaliced

hands

propagation

kestrel eggs rupture

at the base

of powerlines

*

a stillborn

mule deer

stiffens

*

wasps

eat the organs

of pupae

citrus

our lovely lungs are
orange trees sown
in deserts

in branches
 hung
to dry

futile scent
of citrus comes
in gasps

are we broken breath
or peel that's left
behind

the aqueduct

when carline thistle
dwindles

on travertine
cliffs

and sand
singes
my cilia

i follow roadmaps
of ancient rome

to water

lamina

before the caliche

wastes

we sleep

in feral

scrub-grass

when yucca

leaves swell

we listen

to the thrum

of termites

as our retinas

align

my sunbaked

blisters

pulsate

zenith

satellites pass

above/below

your pleasure

boat

algae glistens

red

in molared

waves

your starboard/

arms drip

in summer's

ebb

III. Pith

the farm

two moons

over burnt hickory

the rust

of electric kettles

and the slaughter

of cornish hens

ask

why the milk

has soured

the orchard

my silhouette

butterflies lemons

picked to the beat

of sex

between pinworms

under lamplight

that scatters

in the dark

of my throat

roadkill

my veins are

[stronger synonym

for scream]

swallow sertraline

stones my core choke

breasts engorge

drip tar not girl

but drunken bottle of

roadside organs

feverish music eviscerates

vile my hands mouth

set fire

simulacrum

a flush

of tap water

spirals

from wrist

to elbow

*

thickets

of stippled

elm trees

grow taller

*

silver mice

in spring-

traps begin

to ovulate

flight

to be:

when mourning

doves

drop

from bracken

and shriek

from yolk-mired

nests

to break:

when sunday

peaks

in silence –

when my feathered

shoulders

molt

exhibit

i tobacco my breath –

a greasefire moth flattened

and pinned in a dark-lit back room

rectangled behind sheets

and sheets of pus

and hardened caramel

flux

my fingers

shift

like the salt

in my cabinet

~

a drill bit

punctures

the cup

of my cheek

~

gauze

unravels

on the lichen

staircase

theia

lunarphilia:

when my yellow
eyes wax
like the surface
of apples

lunarphobia:

when silverfish
devour
my last blue
dress

fabric

you measure
my ribcage
with boot-lace
and teach me
how to eat
limes

at sundown
we burn
brioche
and speak
our skirts'
eulogies

sheath

today

i shed
my steel-wool
gloves
and whisper
about stag beetles'
breath

tomorrow

you wrap
my hands
in rainbow
chitin –
let my larval
tongue
amplify

Annotated Bibliography

Armantrout, Rae. *Versed*. Wesleyan University Press, 2009.

This book asks the reader to think about the nature of existence, fear, and truth. Most of its poems are divided into three or more sections that seem thematically disconnected from one another. However, in the context of each poem, one begins to see the relationships between them. Armantrout's work has greatly influenced my own, especially in regard to titling, form, and imagery.

Blake, William, and Andrew Lincoln. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Princeton University Press, 1999.

Blake's mythos explores youth, maturity, and the nature of the human soul. His ideas regarding suffering and hardship have encouraged me to think more deeply about trauma and its ability to destroy or empower.

Celan, Paul. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Translated by John Felstiner, W.W. Norton, 2001.

Celan uses jarring imagery to address the personal and collective trauma experienced before, during, and after World War II. These poems were originally written in Celan's native German, and this book contains both the original and translated versions. Overall, his work has helped shape my use of unexpected word combinations and encouraged my focus on the bodily aspects of trauma.

Christensen, Inger. *Alphabet*. Translated by Susanna Nied, New Directions, 2001.

This book addresses violence and the possibility of nuclear destruction in a world replete with natural beauty. Christensen's rich imagery and material focus have inspired me to explore the differences between humans and the environments we inhabit.

Christensen, Inger. *Butterfly Valley: A Requiem*. Translated by Susanna Nied. New Directions, 2004.

In many ways, this book is reminiscent of Christensen's earlier work, *Alphabet*.

However, it is set apart by an intense focus on loneliness and questions of mortality. In the first of this book's four sections, insects act as metaphors for human experiences.

This has inspired me to explore similar types of figurative language.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Ralph William Franklin, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Dickinson's combinations of familiar imagery, unsettling themes, and short forms challenge her reader to think deeply about the meanings behind her poetry. This book has inspired my condensed writing style and attention to word choice.

Foster, Tonya M. *A Swarm of Bees in High Court*. Belladonna Collaborative, 2015.

This book examines various racial and gendered aspects of trauma using unique language structures and shifting forms. Foster's sexual themes have encouraged me to think about how different kinds of trauma manifest in the physical body.

Gizzi, Peter. *Threshold Songs*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

This intensely personal collection of poems addresses loss, confusion, and purpose.

Gizzi's rhythmic lines and unexpected use of language have encouraged me to pay close attention to sound devices and word choice in my own work.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges, Digireads Publishing, 2018.

Hopkins' poetry focuses on loss, transition, and spiritual rebirth. His work, like Dickinson's, has inspired my appreciation for short forms.

Levertov, Denise. *The Sorrow Dance*. New Directions, 1966.

This book addresses many themes: the poet's interpersonal relationships; cycles, transition, and maturity; attitudes about men and women; war and violence. Levartov's feminist perspectives have inspired me to explore gender in my own work.

Philip, Marlene Nourbese, and Setaey Adamu Boateng. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Philip explores the collective racial trauma tied to the 1781 Zong Massacre. During this tragic historical event, enslaved peoples on the British ship "Zong" were murdered by their captors after a navigational error led to resource scarcity. Although I explore different themes in my own writing, I believe this book's condemnation of race-based violence is critically important to collective poetic discourse about trauma.

Robertson, Lisa. *R's Boat*. University of California Press, 2010.

Through the use of vibrant, shifting imagery and philosophical themes, Robertson reflects on the writing process and examines the multi-faceted nature of language. Although this poetry is stylistically different from my own, the beauty and sincerity of each line has helped foster my appreciation for the power of confessional poetry.

Schomburg, Zachary. *The Man Suit*. Black Ocean, 2007.

This book explores life's absurdities through a series of shocking images. Schomburg's work has inspired me to experiment with strange imagery in own work.

Smith, Danez. *[insert] boy*. YesYes Books, 2014.

Smith's powerful and highly-personal poetry addresses themes related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. This book's focus on bodily trauma has inspired me to explore similar themes.

Vallejo, César. *Trilce*. Luces De Gálíbo, 2019.

This book was originally written in Spanish and contains both the original and translated versions. Through the use of shocking themes and images, Vallejo addresses imprisonment, love and desire, and more. His challenging language has encouraged me to think more carefully about how symbolism functions in poetry, and about how I use figurative language in my own work.

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