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The Sun Cuts In

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The Sun Cuts In

Madison Manns

A Senior Honors Thesis project submitted to the Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree


Bachelor of Arts

Belmont University Honors Program


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Thesis Director

 Date 4.19.20

Committee Member

 Date 4.20.20

Committee Member

Accepted for the Honors Council and Honors Program:

_____ Date _____

Dr. Bonnie Smith Whitehouse, Director
The Honors Program

Honors Thesis Proposal, Spring 2019

Introduction

My time in Belmont's Honors Program will culminate in a short collection of creative writing (30-50 pages) reconciling phenomenological and materialist traditions of thought, supported by a research essay (10-15 pages) detailing the theories and theorists that have motivated my work. The primary aim of the project is to challenge the hierarchy of objectivity and subjectivity in the teaching and learning of theory.

In coming to college, I was confronted with the reality that my perspective is limited to my experience and my education. As I am confined to my perspective and level of attentiveness, to assume the role of an objective judge—allowing no room for aberrations—is arrogant, exclusive, and too narrow-minded to be productive. I once thought that to allot space for nuance in an academic setting forsook logic out and admitted a weakness in reasoning that would prove fatal to the ultimate goal; linear progress. I had believed the lie that true knowledge occurs outside oneself; that subjective human experience can and should be avoided in the quest for knowledge in its purest form. Modernism had yet to die for me.

I now posit that linear progress does not arise from critical thinking: Critical thinking integrates theory with practice, objective knowledge with subjective context, and, more abstractly, mind with body (or soul). Intelligence in a vacuum fails to play with cultural or technical construction, allowing assumptions to remain invisible. Thus, the pursuit of pure objectivity will always be limited to the position of the object: It acts as a reactionary to the invisible constructions it fails to account for—a servant of hubris and tradition rather than integration or progress.

In my personal life—dissatisfied with this tropic cycle of posit, rebut, posit, rebut—I struggled to reconcile the moments that calculus problems made me want to sing or paint with the measured veneer I had been taught to practice. Education, as an institution, favors the formal tone; a biting, logical acumen; and a disregard for emotional impact in favor of dominance, achievement, and personal triumphs. Using the detailed traditions of philosophy, literary theory, the arts, linguistics, and general Western history afforded to me by the Honors program and my other areas of study—English, German, and Studio Art—I will produce a creative product and academic product. My collection of creative writing will serve as the creative portion of my thesis, and I will use the freedom offered by the reflective essay, required to accompany senior projects in the Artist Studio Track, to document the research and academic roots of this project's manifestation.

Artist Statement

I have been given a new language. At Belmont, gifted professors have given me the chance to return to who I was and who I have learned to be with a gentleness, an empathy, and a richer vocabulary for my experience that allows me to describe my life in new ways, ways that allow for misnomers, additions, deletions, and shifts in value.

I received an early ADD diagnosis. The oscillation between unintentional hyperfixation and hyperfocussing coupled with this strong perceptive tendency resulted in the development of cyclical perspective that almost always generated mirroring physical and emotional responses. What I mean is this: in a subject-object relationship, I stepped into the position of object. As a child with a mother who provided the clinical vocabulary of psychology whenever I asked to better understand myself, I began drawing maps to navigate and control my world. To this day, this ordering and classifying is my default response to my environment: I recognize something;

break it down into its many pieces to play with construction, delivery, and subsequent meaning; and cobble my reaction. However, in ingraining this manner of relating myself to the world, especially in moments of stress and intellectual exploration, I think I missed something: both perspective and attentiveness are sliding scales; they are dynamic, dependent environmental factors both internal and external, and malleable in relation to education and experience.

I've always sought the glory of language. True revelry in language is precipitated by the knowledge that all words are signifiers, and, as such, lend themselves to construction and manipulation. I have always loved turning the multifaceted signifier—playing. Once I began to study language structure—as early as diagramming sentences in first grade—I developed a fascination with the relationship between the subject of sentences and the receivers of action, the mover and the moved. This fixation informs my senior project. I believe that "play" and creativity should be just as integral in the teaching of theory as the writing of essays and rebuttals.

I have decided my subjective experience is an inescapable filter, and I have stopped mourning the loss of the ability to fully strip myself of my identity in order to worship at the feet of Philosophy, Boethius-style. No one can relieve themselves of their consciousness without erasing themselves. It is no worthy goal. I am on a path of reconciliation with the being I constantly tried to escape and thwart, the one who feels too much. I am on a journey that seeks to recognize myself and my consciousness as a reality, not an enemy—an entity to be recognized, not condemned.

Influences

1. *Written on the Body* by Jeannette Winterson

Written on the body also seeks to evaluate and reconstruct the tradition of subjectivity and objectivity. Winterson challenges the use of clichés while seeking to convey their sentiments by other means. She evaluates the tradition of subject-object relationship as it applies to love and the language of love, and plays with the ability of commonly recognized symbols to become signifiers of specific, subjective experience.

While Winterson's exquisite novel has an incredible academic thrust, full of consequences for gender and literary theory, her novel focuses more on gendered language and revisioning the narrative of the lover and the beloved. My collection will deal more specifically with imagery itself and the implications of framing subjective responses in an academic conversation.

Like Winterson, I am also interested in challenging the form my subject matter has traditionally taken. Her postmodern lack of clear divisions in all but the brief section of love poems challenges the reader to read the story as it unfolds, not to pace themselves through chapters and subheadings. While I appreciate the organic, uncontrived tone that this technique lends to her novel, I plan to maintain a more structured, if conventional, flow of material, with clear breaks between each piece. However, narrative thrusts will play a large role in the poetry I write.

2. Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*

Black Unicorn is a collection of poems by Audre Lorde that I found through the recommendation of Adrienne Rich. Rich rightly lauds Lorde for her ability to refuse a simple signifier, instead, "[r]efusing to be circumscribed by any simple identity, Audre Lorde writes as a Black woman, a mother, a daughter, a Lesbian, a feminist, a visionary; poems of elemental

wildness and healing, nightmare and lucidity." The poems do guide the reader through horror and light, and my first read left me floored—physically.

Lorde's work draws from her personal experience in the style of Confessionalists, but the way she winds narratives from her environment and imagination into a tapestry of her own experience contains notes of Symbolism. As Tim O'Brien pointed out through his comments on story truth and happening truth, we tend to reveal our story while telling another. Because of my background, I tend to mask my experiences in symbolic language, and Lorde's example can help improve my ability to do so effectively. However, we have had wildly different life experiences, and I don't pretend that my work will serve as the same paradigm-shifting masterpiece she presented. While social commentary is a field we are both happy to play in, we speak from very different places in life and time.

3. *The Book of Margery Kempe* by Margery Kempe

The Book of Margery Kempe is arguably the first autobiography written in English. In it, Margery Kempe details significant moments of her life and relationship with Jesus Christ and God in the style of *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, another popular medieval text. The book achieved great popularity in its time for its narrator's ability to display great devotion to Christ.

One of the most compelling successes of Margery Kempe's life story is the saturation of each event with rhetorical appeals. She couches each episode in emotional and spiritual terms so that the actual event is obscured for its effect on Margery and, she says, hopefully a similar effect on the reader. Regardless of whether Margery succeeds in gaining the sympathies of a modern audience, her book is genius for its appeals to the values of the day. The form complies to popular religious texts of the day, despite the fact that a middle-class, non-cloistered woman of

mild economic means is telling the story (admittedly, through a scribe). She manages to subvert the boundaries on the feminine body in the name of God.

Margery attracts accusations of hysteria and drama from time to time for the way she describes events in her life. I find her willingness to conflate a moment in her life to reflect the space she feels it occupies on her psyche powerful, and I intend to let this style influence my own writing. Memory often serves the role of magical realism in creative nonfiction—especially memoir—and while I am not writing a memoir or a religious devotional, lyric or otherwise, I plan to let her relationship with her past guide my own.

Project Description/Synopsis

My work seeks to tear down the privileging of the objective at the expense of the subjective—the universal truth at the expense of the knowledge in the body, in the being—in order to restore the fruitful dialogue between the subjective observer as the object of perceived stimuli that become the mover. As a high-achieving individual encouraged in academic endeavors—one intimately acquainted with the language of prestige and intellect—I am seeking a new way to address theory through a return to material language; language connected to, informed by, and describing the world in the *way* that we know, rather than *what* we know: through the body and that mind which is situated *within* the body.

Informed by phenomenological and materialist philosophical inquiry, I will enter into a conversation with prominent theories and theorists—compiled from my exposure through classes at Belmont and from recommendations by faculty—to integrate the intellectual challenges of my undergraduate career in a more holistic way that addresses the role of subjective experience in critical thinking and the application of theory. Specifically, I will be influenced by post-modern, psychoanalytic, linguistic, and feminist inquiry.

The project will involve the translation of German texts, the application of literary theory from my English classes, and the evaluation of great artistic traditions. My handling of the art and artistic techniques will be largely informed by the theory I learned in my Advances Studio class with Dr. Corvette and my experience crafting visual art. I will work with my German professor Dr. Regine Schwarzmeier to examine the nuances of the German texts I use for this project. My chair, Dr. McDowell, will oversee the form of the project; the two of us will work to ensure that the quality of the creative writing is prioritized over the quantity of pieces within the collection. We have already established that we will begin weekly meetings to begin editing content while I am studying abroad in Scotland for Fall 2019.

This project entails writing creative responses to the work of theorists and artists who will help better situate me as I pursue my graduate degree in Social Anthropology, a discipline that combines my interests in art, culture, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. In compiling the list of influential individuals with whom I will enter into a dialogue, I seek to highlight lines of inquiry over genre or tradition.

Writing Samples

Sample 1

Sublime

light falls from a streetlamp. it shreds on the blacktop;

breaks on the concrete like a cottontail
in the dog's mouth. the bouncing dance between rabbit
and molars begins to break down. the kiss of light

and cement is a melting and swelling thing. my
cousins used to shove their tongues in electric
sockets—i don't recommend it: the sparks, the
snapping, the self

clenched around a small body like that dog—
not swelling with water, not melting.

i don't want to be poured out
like a jug over the forest, consecrating
the woods and splitting nature open, shredding
the trees between my teeth. maybe
i am just afraid of giving birth.

these thoughts are thick between my
canines: i worry with my tongue in the back. i
have never been quick to leave.
light drips from the streetlamp.

all at once:

the sun breaks over silver hills; the
streetlamps concede like trampled snow,
and i stumble over the wild remains of the rabbit
marinating in the living room carpet.

i see a ripple pass through the trees behind my house,
and the dog smiles up at me. where did my heart
learn to thrash like a ferret stuck in a bush? it has indeed
come to this: go on, take the rest of my teeth.

Description

Arising from a discussion of the concept of the sublime in one of my theory classes, we were asked to find a moment in which we experienced the sublime, be it in a moment of joy, peace, fear, etc. A few experiences came to mind, but it took time for them to coalesce into a poem with a broader theme. Initially, the striking moments that came to mind were a streetlamp blinking on my walk home at night, my dog eating a mole he found in the backyard, and my cousins telling me about their favorite pastime whenever that were sentenced to time-out (can you guess what it was?). In each of these instances, I was yanked out of my body, and I then yanked myself back out to a healthy disassociation from the alienating state of mine I had entered. The most personal line of the poem entered on my tenth draft (substantive draft, not

lineation or edit, mind you): *this is what I've been talking about*. Writing that confession was itself a sublime moment for me.

This poem uses a convention of imagery to conjure a feeling of alienation and fear in the body. I repeatedly return to common and physical descriptors like light, dog, rabbits, cousins, and teeth to pull the reader back into the humdrum, back into the clichés, back into the personal. I qualify these terms of self-identification with sharp phrasing and active verbs that imply a constant movement. For example, the lull created by "the sun breaks over silver hills; the streetlamps concede like trampled snow" is broken by the stumble "stumble over the wild remains of the rabbit marinating in the living room carpet." Even the pattern of dog and teeth is disrupted in the final stanza with the introduction of a ferret and the heart. Drawing from techniques of the Confessionalist Poets, this piece responds to the idea of the sublime and its jarring imposition on the subconscious, simultaneously describing the experience and attempting to summon it.

Sample 2

if I could've lived in the peace and wisdom of the woman before me
(a love poem)

for any longer, I would have melted to the ground and boiled in popping bubbles on the rubber-matted floor and the sun would have risen and fallen, again. The clanging bell in the old tower on Main Street would have melted right off the map and all, all, all would be a lasting rounding cling. If I didn't own a sweater made from wool I'd invest, and if I had one I'd give it to the poor and needy: You inspire a restlessness. Hopeless men sing every day for love of God, king, country, and their wardrobe; I wouldn't care for the apparel of Midas' most vital servant. Have any beetle-bearing supplicants approached you since I left the diner without finishing the milkshake I ordered? Don't let their gleaming shells deceive you— I haven't left the island, I haven't left the island, I haven't gone anywhere and haven't any plans to. I will love each year as it turns rotten and folds under the weight of its seedlings. When sprouts shoot out of my hairline and forgotten sentiment gathers around roaring golden ribbons to hoard dust and neglect like heat, I will lie down— I will sleep.

Sweet birds between my arms, roll from the harried carriers of fragmented emotions: Find the eaves where moon calves sleep and the budding colonies of busy mice build their beds in the barn. The tea will be hot when you return to our conversation about whether a cup and bowl can transcend the criteria of a container without sweeping over their essential, sublime qualities. Until then I'll pot the sprig of primrose you plucked on Tuesday; until then I'll fold fleece-lined blankets and think of you.

Description

This poem arose from a collaborative project I worked on with a friend of mine in the art department. Our discussion of language centered around the communication of consciousness. "I'm going to email you a paragraph," he told me, "and you can write whatever comes into your head. Write about how the paragraph affects the reader." I chose my favorite phrase from his confessional paragraph to be the title of this poem. "if I could've lived in the peace and wisdom of the woman before me," he wrote, and I started writing. This poem is informed by the phenomenological focus of the limits of consciousness, the tradition of the Confessionalist Poets, and the absurdist emphasis communicating a broader meaning through seemingly aimless sensory images.

Detailed Timeline

Summer 2019

May

- Continue gathering a corpus of articles and books to explore

June

- Finalize list of theorists and lines of inquiry to pursue; generate material

July

- Generate material

August

- Begin sending material to Chair (along with key themes/synopsis from theory); **August 11:** Begin weekly meetings with Chair; meet Fridays to discuss documents sent Wednesdays (optional: reassess direction of project, reevaluate divisions of themes within collection), begin finalizing the project outline

Fall 2019

September

- Weekly meetings with Chair to edit documents; meet Fridays to discuss documents sent Wednesdays; keep annotated copies of articles and books read to add to annotated bibliography

October

- Weekly meetings with Chair to edit documents; meet Fridays to discuss documents sent Wednesdays; keep annotated copies of articles and books read to add to annotated bibliography

November

- Weekly meetings with Chair to edit documents; meet Fridays to discuss documents sent Wednesdays; keep annotated copies of articles and books read to add to annotated bibliography

December

- **Dec 1-9:** Weekly meetings with Chair to edit documents; meet Fridays to discuss documents sent Wednesdays; select which pieces from larger corpus of work will be included in the final thesis; establish order of creative pieces; begin finalizing title; finalize annotated bibliography based on works included

- **Dec 9-31** Break for Finals, Travel back to the States, and Christmas

Spring 2020

January

- **Jan 8-30:** Weekly meetings with Chair to establish format of collection, including design, font, and artwork; final broad reevaluation of themes/division; final edits of pieces; begin writing reflection/research essay with an outline

February

- Weekly meetings with Chair for final review of pieces; circulate pieces among trusted readers and discuss feedback with Chair; deal with any last-minute changes; establish final version of collection; continue work on reflection/research essay with body paragraphs

March

- Finalize collection of creative work; finish rough draft of reflection/research essay; submit rough draft to committee members

April

- Prepare to submit project; final draft of reflection/research essay

The Sun Cuts In

a short collection of poetry by
Madison Manns

Winter Ritual

I take a saw and cut the ceiling.
Ribbons of electrical wire emerge
and tinsel you like yuletide pine.
Drywall pastes the sweat on your
cheek and your eyebrows; it makes
your hair tacky as it snows.

My child licks the white on you:
The dust candies your eyelashes
and powder-sugars your forehead.
On you, it looks safe and delicious.
I scrub her tongue with a paper towel.
She rests on your hip and screams
about baking cookies or becoming

a winter fairy: she fidgets at the riot
on the ceiling. This gentle wound
makes room for a light—crystals
of plastic or polymer will tap
each other and softball pink and green
on the walls, especially at night;
You will love the sound. You echo me.

Something seems bound to slide through
the slit we made in this innocent
white plain. Wires hang, insulation
oozes—she heralds, *It is born! Let's
make another hole!* She saws the ceiling
with enthusiasm and suggests one million

“hanging spiders” (to justify more holes),
but drywall is expensive. We trade
our saw for her toy wand, and you and I
enter a tandem of lift—hoist by
the cotton patchwork of her dress,
one hand under her balloon-belly
that swishes with ice cream
as she squeals, *Higher!*—

by turns, we take the ladder
into the kitchen, store the saw, brush
dust from her hands and head and
behind her ears. She summons more snow
from the hole and prods the ceiling to anger
until the heavens of our living room match
the bounty that pours from the grey winter sky.

Young Men

The music
of wild horses
tumbles
from the mouth
of a dimple-chinned
youth;
this bastard-song
enters the atmosphere
in stratified, mumbled
tufts. When mist
hides the river
and the far corner of the yard,
he waits,
expectant,
against condensation
on the windowsill.

He runs flat out
after the herd, and, soon,
they flick past perception.
His lungs push sweet
smoke—*better*
than nicotine—
into the wet spring
wind; he returns,
alone and
burning, to his place
against the glass.

Corded manes
beat a song
outside his window
in a bloated cloud
of unbroken
storms.

angsty boys are poison

His nails are given to stratification that defies any hope of length. My nails are acrylic, but I have little music in these nubby fingers, and fewer feathers under my skin. Light bows subservient in his hand; he blinks slow pauses at his audience and some of his songs take twenty-three minutes to introduce, and are terrible. All my paintings turn into snakes and harden before they're finished. He makes my face older,

but his gunmetal eyes burnish my buttoned-up flaws into the soaring resonance of guitar strings crafted by an ear attuned to the weight of counter-melody, and he tells me, 'There was always a bird in you.' His last bird left. He ties a mint green bow *en memoriam* 'round the tree by the mailbox and hums soft refrains. Inside, I pick up a paintbrush, then put it back. He outlasts the sunset by the driveway.

Bird House

...Come visit me...

My brother's sky is a soft grey crow.
He writes letters under slate rooves. Outside,

light settles on the town in a fieldgrass hue;
something that slips under his scalp

like a letter opener and tugs him home.
My hands placate the page. The sunlight

in Ohio isn't the same boxed mania,
but, when it rained last week, I saw

the world reflected beautifully in a puddle
and fell backwards into the cerulean sky—

*is this what you mean by color? Sincerely,
your sister.* We measure the space between us

by the days until his flight. The October
wind beats his coat. When my brother signs

his name, he draws his "O" from the bottom
and works his way back around to the bottom

again, like a balloon. The hinge on the metal
mailbox lid cries loudly and startles the woman

with a postcard for her daughter in Seattle.
The letter lands like a dead thing.

Our town falls apart when the big rains come.

They drive red leaves wider than father's hand down the throats of white metal gutters. Rain beats the earth to remind her that she sleeps under a heavy canvas tarp, and when wet weeps through the heavenly weave, the whole sky can come unplugged at once.

Rent clumps of stone slide down Main Street, and old Ms. Daphne turns from her Bible to watch couches, floor lamps, and rolls of carpet glide away. Water ignores the sound of the screen door slamming behind us. We chase our nests while gasped breaths raw our throats.

The water thickens with wet newspapers that beg us—with the entwined fingers of every headline we see—to stop running. They urge us to churn white water; they urge us to plow home, where the gutters choke—they urge us— and vomit refuse onto the house's vinyl siding.

Clear lines of dark form on the bucking canvas as it's wrung out. Water smothers sky—the floods shove security from our shaking, pruny hands. Lunging home through shattered gardens, we ripple the sky's reflection.

Broken Bread and Sparrows

The Housing Market Crash
makes the butter on the counter
melt more quickly than usual.

My closet and my brother's
fold into pillars—he stands like Samson
between them. His swollen hands
drop action figures into storage bins
and, empty, twitch with love.

His jar of marbles shatters:
the wild orbs lounge
in the living room shag;
in a forest of glass shards,
they listen to Dad,

who sings of broken bread and sparrows
from the shower.

A drought of toys
comes with homelessness.
The eviction notice dove
into Mom's nightstand,
and rain taps the cardboard boxes
Dad picked up from Walmart.

Mom taps the kitchen counter
with orchid-nails and picks basil.
She tears the leaves,
she gathers them
in the sink,

she throws them
from the kitchen window
and sloughs the vacuum and mop off
at the door to cry in her sister's arms.

A Return

I leave every ocean-sand-stretch
like I leave my mother;
afraid because I am no god.
The wind-provoked Atlantic

—that loose, giant
mouth; that filling lung;
and the rhythm of one thousand
lips receding from
the sand and my clavicle—

its grainy warmth
in my mouth
taught my burning lungs

not to breathe. I offered
my body to mermaids,
but they believe
in the membrane

between water and magic.
I live 574 miles
from the coastline.
I was content to
leak dead into the tide;

now I wind the net
of my sisters' hair
around my fingers
as I walk to my car alone

(this weave
will carry my soul home
to the Ohio River
if someone takes me

away). Still, I sprint to oceans
and my mother to be possessed;
for belonging,
and not to shake apart.

Catch It

Reading Jeannette Winterson split a tight thing in this chamber-heart: the sun on the water and me, in the sun slap dead, downing. Downing down. Hoarded quarters and scraps of paper in the blue room yellow window panes, open windows, currents kissing paper scraps scamper around the room across surface of the wooden desk and floor dark wood turned raspberry fire in sun hitting on the glass and through. Sheets on velvet reupholstered chairs keep sun bleach off. Chairs in the green room. Cherry wood blue felt, mahogany chairs orange leather, a yellow shaggy monster with great posture—a high back and lovely wooden armrests that glide into deep lapping seats. Arranged in circles, staring each its neighbor down, all confronting some *thing*—even the small blue cushioned child's chair in the corner: a spiderweb. Whisk it down, more through, we need to find what's busted escaping and seeping, the source: come.

Firing Process

How can you object to the
rending of your body,
the planting of your fleshly
Ziploc bag—the one holding your
guts and thoughts and soul-filling—
on the frontlines; How can you
reject the tearing light
that splits atoms—
his molecular fingers slip
from the sweaty hands
of his brother; How
can you refuse to fight our wars;

Why should the falling and breaking and
slamming of your body into the earth
not be our music, and why
should we not dance? They

cry out as we pestle-grind
them in this cup:
we pour them out
before Our Father,
the Divine Vessel,
for who else has the shelf
space? I do not credit myself
with their making: lighting
them, wetting them—

pouring water over their
turtle-shield skin
until clay takes
to itself, until platelets
fuse into compressed rings
as hands rain force—or
dousing them. I will
only tell you,

that if I like what grows
out of this fertilizer, I will

find someone to praise;
I will pay all of your debts.
We send men to war on fire,

so their smoking clothes
speak to the sky
through the sandpaper heat
of the desert, and through trees,
and blink out in sequences,
but few kids enlist
in the Scouts nowadays, so
America can't read

smoke. Fifty-two
historic sites cannot anoint
a nation with olive oil and seal it
for peace, but its people

can beg. Plenty of
people have put their hands
on me and pressed, and
the womb speaks with heat
for this reason: that
through her smoking sons,
the world would hear
her beg. How many
men will I expel
from my borders before I
am no longer strong

enough to push back?
When colonial ships
hit the costal stone
of these fertile hills and
fruited plains, we stepped
out of our ships
on fire. We send boys to
war and light others up;
I do not know why
they stretch and

flick up, and

explore with their mouths
and hands, and why
cold metal feels so
good against inflamed
foreheads, or why the leather
on my steering wheel
steadies me. I am not a man;
I am not a boy; the only
burning I feel
is mine: I have
never been to war.
But if you extend a match,

I will strike back as
hard as I can.
The virus might take;
I do not know if
my white blood cells can stem
the light that tried to eat
every human
in Vietnam:
I do not have the muscle
to hit hard enough,
but for you I strike and
strike again. Language

is no cured canvas:
the wet tissues leaking out
of my mouth rip at the weight
of your pen. I can lend you
salt water and snot, but
is this spark enough
to see in the dark
without blinding us,
or binding dilated pupils to
the hole this bowling ball
pushed through? I am tired

of holding it; its three
solitary concessions are too big
for my fingers to grip it
well. Are all men blind,
are all women
blind, is war instigated or
merely kept at bay
as long as possible; I don't know.
The British fought men
who hunted for a living,
with white X's
across their torsos.

I want to be a holy being,
like Jo Harjo,
but I am too afraid that
we will make ashes of my brother's
body—in jungles

across the world, such boys licked
sloppy kisses at trees and
nighttime and small numbers
and hidden pits and traps and

landmines, but the fog
that slid up their newly carved
cheekbones, like mildew
on vinyl bathroom tile,
strangled these transplanted
flames; our little wicks
burn different colors
and smells than fires
off native boys. Their legs
crumpled, and they fell
face-forward into dirt and
they had already been told
that God didn't hold
much; sometimes you
simply sit down. The land
will love her inhabitants,

as our Mountain
Mama submits
to fracking,
and intermittent floods
to expel her grief
in season. Mother
is a giving tree,
and this hole requires

more than a patch-job, anyway.
I don't know how to turn this pile
of snot and wet
into a seat for you:
if you ask, I'll fetch tape
and newspapers from the store
to start again. Be my hands,
for I am still, a little bit,
on fire, too.

pause

i'm a wet candy slathered on the pages, i'm sticky thin keys held down and pounding out a sound sound sound sound sound sound beat beat beat no break beat no break let up let me up let me rise to silence i wanna rise to break the noise with lack with nothing with a feather duster swiping through cobwebs leaving stark crown moulding white eggshell line leaving air and dragging lugging carting mummied critters to the designation of dust and silence to the realm of *not's* and *got out of here's*: to the leaving. To the cleaning and sweeping and freeing. Bounce up into vast cavity and free, free conscience clean for not violating the emptiness—such unsweeping unbeing undefined—with a form, i'll leave it, i'll leave it stickking stuck to the keys pressed pressed pressed down pressed I'll leave it stuck to the keys i'll let it pound out tip tipping tappy note tune letter sound word tone key click and the door, the door, the door, is removed.

Stone

Water is a thing of completeness;
your nose pushes past mine,
and the wave pulls on itself
and caulks all gaps.
Flowing out in the direction
of the spin, my dress
flies out into a tent,
into bold presence, into a spring
rewrapped and tight again.
I push my legs apart
and back to you. My shoes slide
around my shrinking feet,
and my toes freeze.

Maybe I can catch you,
fold you into myself, and,
reversing, plunge hooks
into that expulsion:
Wet with new birth and
shedding the sack I lived in,
I could throw my arms
around you. I like you,
but my hands are shaking and numb,
so, I argue that the tides are rising,
pulling me toward the
toilets—*I'll wash back up, wait,
catch me in a moment—*
but the closed stall shelters me.
If I surge upwards
in this vase, if I can
splash out, I will break
back to you across the tile.
I like you.

Instead, I melt; the carpet
and drapes soak me up.
I bleed into dark, abstract
shadows on my clothes.

Water dashes
against coastlines and
dirt and unclean dishware.
It shatters, then
recollects itself;

I might like to take you,
but I don't know how
to let you put your
hands on me without parting
and withdrawing
to let you pass through;
Your bare hands meet nothing
but temperature and slight
resistance. Your fingers
are cold with wet
and wind that licks
the places you thought I'd be.

I wash out of the apartment.
I splash down the stairs into
streets of icy, winter-stone bodies.
If you take me in your hands or
mouth, I'll unseam into ribbons
you cannot cup.

I look back up to the window.
Finger-tips of water
tap the glass, press my
shoulders, trace my hair, my back,
the rooves. The sky gathers
into bodies that break
and form blankets on rocks and people.
I stick out my tongue, the tide rises.
I am ushered away.

Spring Song, Green

I. Speaker 1

I knew by the color of the grass
you were prepared to leave.

Your hair hung dark
after winter, and thinner.

Your nose mourned.
The lines to your eyes

drew up like bedroom shades,
the kind hoisted by a chord.

You left when the light came:
the days trembled looser;

time's jaw
and shoulders

and tongue
released

into a freer speech of days.
I had never seen

someone tap a table so quickly,
so often.

II. Speaker 2

I knot the severed, dripping tether
above my navel that links me to you.
My flat hand on your chest
tangles in thin strings of glue.

Could I have walked my way to love
and wholeness, exchanged sweat
for cement to ground me,
poured the sludge in my porous innards
to tether myself to you?

Thin strings of glue knit the hairs

on my forearm together
and staple me to you, but
I can't push through
to the middle of you and find love
in your entrails. I leave you at the door.

III. Speaker 1

I had no plans today, so I bought a goldfish,
which will live about three months. How

did you know it was time to leave? I must
have slept through your deliberation.

I file what's left of you in boxes. My mother
cleared a dry corner of her attic, for your books.

I've written my name over yours in Grey's
Anatomy, in the end pages. I have no interest in

reading about the body: I remember, as you let
the luggage go for a moment to put on your

gloves, you put your bare hand on my chest,
and my body quieted, because, for a moment,

it intuited that you would stay. I am the body—
broken, impatient, and missing the winter.

IV. Speaker 2

I lost my love for you
before spring. I didn't dream
about you before you took up smoking
and quit. I wished for you, then
couldn't sleep

for the smell of you.
That suitcase—an unzipped invitation—
gave me exactly two square feet

in which to breathe. *Breathing
things are free,*
—I suppose that's why

I've always loved green
and loved leaving; it's a rapturous thing
to snap myself against you and go.

But the impression of you—
stuck in the door—imprints itself
on my forehead and chest.

V. Speaker 1

chattering:incessant:volatile:
your tempo escalated like summer's

heat returned, but it was March.
I picked the metronomic debris

from my sweater and nightstand and
the dishware. Now, I worry the white

enamel on this coffee mug and pick up
your letter. The envelope flap blushes

your lipstick color as I tear through
dry spit. I smooth talons into hands,

but my sweaty eyes and nose and
fingers are overeager and slipping—

neighborhoods of neatly printed symbols
devolve into indistinct balls. I smell

where your perfume rubbed off your wrist:
You embossed the paper as you wrote

—except in the section about Martha's
curtains (blue, checkered), and your

explanation for this gold chain, neatly
coiled in its heavy paper shell. It hid

in the corner fabric of your jewelry box
—it feels like a stranger, icy and flat,

against your sternum. You left wearing
orange. Maybe you bounced off the grass,

so it shone, but, also, everything's green
in March. I have a frog-colored hat. I rolled

the bill between my hands at your back
as you burned away. Do you wish I tapped

like you, or bit my nails, instead of this
frothing hat grounded by sweaty fingers?

VI. Speaker 2

Where does this
tightening come from?
What gripping thing
holds you here: imposes
your lips, slacking apart in
quiet surprise, against my mind?
How dare you look towards me,
so astonished. Where is your
sense of periphery, where
is your grasp of context;
no man leaves for wholeness
—having it, that is.

We are all cursed with hollow
wooden legs and acutely attuned
to our own appetites, and

I have told you already
how I looked up at the dawn
drawn across the ceiling,
brushed onto you, and felt such,
swelling, breaking, darling;
dawn—I am flooded; I am broken
by your eyelashes and the way
they draw mountains—
inverted—on your cheekbones,
in the hollows just under your eyes;
you, Jagged Thing; I am cut
on every finger and pad,
every lip and surface flesh
I move to embrace you. Yet
you dip into my chest and pull
—what is this thrashing? What is
the meter, how can I hold a tornado
that wields gestures of tenderness
from you to reduce my body

to a stinging that sets itself to
singing along with this
frothing symphony in you
that I cannot get on top of. How
do you excel at *sweeping*;
you are a brushing of flesh and
breath upon me: Where is my standing,
in you? Where can my light hit
and not be broken and refracted back,
and tossed into you and around—
distorted and wholly new—the room
we reside inside. Lift me out of you,
please. There is nothing
but succumbing here.

I have told you
already, everything.

VII. Speaker 1

Your shirt has holes in the cuffs.
I rub the fabric and conjure you

—you forgot so few things, but
this shirt was yours. Your palms

bloomed from these petal sleeves;
your petal knees ground from this petal hem,
little yielding petal heels

rained from the bottoms of crisp petal calves,
and bridged petal insteps poured into pads of petal feet and toes,
pink pinched petal blooms. And your blushing petal eyelids

fall, drift, hang;
your petal-poke black point forest lashes
shade your budded eyes, your tangled petal-shelled hair,

your inner peach scallop-shelled thick crunch petal ears
peek from above the collar,
your slick swelled

petal curling slashing laughter-lips,
your bluish flesh petal-budded brain sending
petals from your mind—

—out past the stalk stem swinging uvula
tight flower incubating knot bulb of petals
crushed close to the stem,

through the hollow bulb of your mouth
and over your tongue. The rest of you is shrouded
In cotton-polyester blend.

You were put here by a God who knows
how cold my ceramic hands grow in winter,

and how poor I am at horticulture. My lonely
porcelain form has lain under this gentle

shrubbery for five months, and grass is
too green to remember you, clearly, today.

VIII. Speaker 2

My dreams put
you on a flat lake,
in a boat. The soft sky
thickens your silhouette
and glazes icy-blue triangles

of water with lavender
as they flick upward
towards heaven. I wish you
moved me. Your posture
promises reconciliation,
and the alien water pleads.
I believe the voice
that says swimming

out to you would pull
my hair, would pour cold
inside my skull:
ice to fuse my head

and spine. Those glassy
crests move against my feet
like the tongues of children
against softened ice cream:
shavings of this pink sky on

the slate-water surface

want inside me; I'd be
dead in the water until
your corded limbs lifted me
into your skiff.

I don't think I want the first
thing of wholeness I see
to be you. My dry clothes,
my warm hair—shoes empty of
water and sog promise
better comfort. When I leave
this dream's grey fist,
my clothes will no longer
smell like you.

End.

On the First Day,

I doused myself in sleet.
My father rode ocean waves
to where they break,
and turned back into

water, again, so
I wanted the river:
I want the stone that
bears my name
installed by the creek
where I towed
my brother in:
I hope the creek
sniffs my name, tongues
it, tastes it and takes
it on its back in small
pieces. I want the water
to push until I
wear out. My brother

will not burn
nor erode into the sea
because I will become
the rock—I will
submit when Moses
strikes; I will rain: I am
the skies: heavy, lashed,
eternal, and buoyant. Thus,
my constitution is not
that of an ocean—it's creation's
first day, when light and
darkness licked through
space, but yet no sky and
waters: I am forming

boundaries and
I am learning how to
put the fire out. Don't
ignore the popping
of your ears at
the bottom of the lake: learn
to hold my hand, until
we're close to the surface;
until we see sunlight

shredded on the lip
above us; that shell,
that seal. Until we are born
together into sky.

Sweet Closing

The last cookie
is in my belly;
I licked my finger

and gobbled up each speck.

I probably missed some pieces
—which will turn into cockroaches,

tonight, and crawl over
my arms and stomach
and neck and thighs—

But it's worth it for this tea,
this plate of cookies,

the extra hour in bed; the warmth,
this pen, the page, this sun.

mother, epilogue

Many times I write about mothers because it is what I know intimately, and it's what I believe I will one day become, and I love enough of it and am frustrated with enough of it to have a dynamic and rich box of pens and old nail files that don't work very well, and gloss and tape and other stuff to exploit in the name of art and healing, in what feels like performing trauma but what I hope can become a confrontation with pulled and knotted chords of muscle; a pain that promises healing and a greater range of motion, and while I'd like to write about other things in the future, *mother* is the bump I keep tripping over, and I worry that it's causing some pronounced limping or that I'm grabbing the crutch of women, of my mother, because they matter to me but also because they are closer and yet less immediate, too, and I am afraid of the physical consequences of becoming a mother and I am afraid emotionally I will mess it up in ways I'm unable to rectify, and I have watched my mother *mourn* over such mistakes in me—yet I don't know how to begin or end, only how to pick at the scab and how to sloppily mop the floor in the aftermath with this paper, and certainly not how to patch things over: I'm better at sewing than this, I'm better at soccer than this, I am much worse at folding clothes but better at ironing, and I've always been able to memorize license plates and phone numbers on the very first try, so to my mother: I would give this world and all *all* of it to fix us—you are still the God-central figure, but I will continue to chip at that pedestal; I will continue to make you human.

Honors Thesis Reflection, Spring 2020

Motivation

The journey of writing these poems began long before this project took shape. I am a strong believer in context when it comes to diving deeper into any sort of cultural artifact, even if it is merely a microcosm, so I would like to provide the background for this collection.

With this project, I began with gecko eyes. I wasn't sure what genre-part of me I wanted to carve, and what started out as a compromise between the (seemingly) opposite pulls of intellectualism and artistry shook out over time into a "simple" collection of poetry. My original plan involved a seventy-page collection of essays, creative non-fiction, short stories, and a little poetry, but someone (a professor, I don't remember which) asked me, "What do you do, organically?"

I was still pressing into that question when, during the summer of 2019, I unpacked spider-filled boxes filled with journals from my childhood. I watched scrappy "dear diary" entries turn into Disney-esque songs with pretty raw lyrics for an eight-year old, before attempts at notation faded, and my thoughts fell from page to page in an honest stream of consciousness. What caught my attention was the documented tendency to obscure a situation with hyperbole, metaphor, and events from the lives of people around me in a poetic manner.

As I began to untangle what gave me an articulate range of motion, as a human being, I called on my tagline for explaining to people why I took voice lessons in high school, "If I'm gonna sing all the time, I'd like to be on key." If I'm going to keep blood-letting with these poems—because poetry, for some reason, seems to be my pain language—I might as well study the craft of poetry.

When I began this project, I emphasized to Dr. McDowell both my lack of training and my desire to learn the technical skill sets that I knew would strengthen the vocabulary of my execution of this project. I came into his office in Spring 2019 with a few of my weaknesses laid out; lack of experience, no sense of lineation, and insecurity that often weakens my poems for the sake of propriety. However, I felt such conviction that, if nothing else, I would get better. I felt—feel—very much that Dr. McDowell took a chance on me.

The year before I left for a study abroad program in Fall 2019, I couldn't read enough to put the fire out. I read Jeanette Winterson, Adrienne Rich, Margaret Atwood's poetry, Kaveh Akbar, sam sax, Hanif Abdurraqib, Claudia Rankine, Natalie Diaz, Audre Lorde, Anne Sexton, Lee Young, John Berryman, Anne Bradstreet, Mary Szybist, and Ovid, to name a few whose work I came back to while creating this project. While I intended to implement the Confessionalists' style by infusing poems with the weight of personal experience, I also drew from the Symbolists and Psychoanalysts in my use of Big Symbols (I don't like to credit Freud with certain motifs, though it was quick of him to catch the pattern) to talk about difficult topics.

Before going to Scotland, God and I made a pact that we were going to get through the dark together—I expected loneliness and isolation in the UK, after an artistic drought that summer. I told God, "Okay—I wanted to go to Germany, and you said no to four different programs. Then, you through this in my lap, doors wide open. You put me here; I'm emptied out, so show up," (thankfully, that's exactly what happened). The motivation for this project was pruning in what felt like a personal winter: tightening my technical poetry skills and the hope for personal growth. I wanted to come out the other side of the difficult season I was in, and my hurting demanded poetry as its vehicle.

Craft

We determined that I would continue writing (of course, I had already started) through Fall 2019 while I was abroad, and that Spring 2020 would comprise the assembly of the collection. When we realized that editing poems through phone calls between Nashville and Scotland was ineffective, we postponed the editing stage to the spring. This decision proved to be an incredible blessing, as it allowed me to write through the personal healing that took place in Scotland.

When I walked back onto Belmont's campus, I believed I had seventy pages of material to use for this collection (the end goal was thirty pages of usable). However, throughout the editing process (I sometimes call it the "salvaging" process), I tallied closer to one hundred and twenty-five pages written over the previous year. I saw these "scraps" as beautiful building blocks, and I was equipped to honor these experiences and treat them like a work of art—by that, I mean lay into them.

To provide an example of a poem before and after the editing process, I have included "Bird Song" in its original and current forms (because in poetry we like to show more than tell). Below that, I've provided a description of some general edits as they applied to this poem and many others in the collection:

Original

*You would like the yield, she writes,
Angry and fending us off with plenty
A stemming a stemming this season in Ohio.*

*You look on slate rooves, wet, you sit.
The grey is a nuance, grey is stark but soft like a crow
Or quiet raven. They look so much alike how can
black be distinguishable from black.*

You write with a thin pen that the natural light
shines in a fieldgrass color. You remind her
Of cloudy days when the trapped light bounds,
doubles up on itself, pushes the colors
To something that slips under your scalp like a letter opener

Under the flap of this new envelope
She twists out counterclockwise and the flap breaks
Come visit me. Sentiment. Her eyes hood and hands placate the page,
Right thumb bottom corner rubbing, left hand
to her chin and first finger cements
On her upper lip, flattened. *The sunlight*

*Here hasn't been such a boxed mania, alienated
and usurped by atmospheric pressure. But when it rained
I saw the world reflected in a puddle on the blacktop
And fell backwards headfirst into cerulean sky is this what you mean
By color? Sincerely—*

Yes! But... Neck kinked to the left, you walk on the coast in October tightness,
A scarf of green dialed to painful directness tamped down against your chest,
Held tight in a wad of distance; measured, rendered in
coronas. *Have you felt the wind-?*

*It breaks up our days—tie it all down, she knows you mean
The webbing between your fingers, the across your hair,
The speed and touchlessness of being in love and gone.
Yes, we know the wind it is great
And it comes from the beach with a roughness, you elaborate
Senselessly, rambling in a frothing you stir up
an ounce of milk to fill the whole glass*

Thinking fervor, and heat, and passion
fulfilment is in volume not
thickness, you can make this a rich foam
and no one will know the difference, but she's already stuck her
finger in the glass to taste, the oil's already set to fold it all back, down,
into tightness. You sign your name

And place the stamp she traces your address,

lifts the metal lid and the hinge cries loudly,
Startles the woman with a postcard for her oldest daughter, back home
In Seattle, the letter lands and stills, the walk home is a dead thing.

Final

...Come visit me...

My brother's sky is a soft grey crow.
He writes letters under slate rooves. Outside,

light settles on the town in a fieldgrass hue;
something that slips under his scalp

like a letter opener and tugs him home.
My hands placate the page. The sunlight

in Ohio isn't the same boxed mania,
but, when it rained last week, I saw

the world reflected beautifully in a puddle
and fell backwards into the cerulean sky—

*is this what you mean by color? Sincerely,
your sister. We measure the space between us*

by the days until his flight. The October
wind beats his coat. When my brother signs

his name, he draws his "O" from the bottom
and works his way back around to the bottom

again, like a balloon. The hinge on the metal
mailbox lid cries loudly and startles the woman

with a postcard for her daughter in Seattle.
The letter lands like a dead thing.

Some more overt changes between these poems include the stanzas (variety to couplets), the shortened length, and the relationship between the people in the poem, which shifts to first- and

second-person pronouns, and becomes familial. However, these changes are symptomatic: in the original draft (not even a first draft, by the way), the entire poem is filtered through a description. For example, “*You would like the yield, she writes,*” “*You remind her/Of cloudy days,*” and “*And it comes from the beach with a roughness, you elaborate,*” make the poem less direct and more narrative. As an intentional technique, those effects can enhance a poem, but they were unintentional byproducts here.

Additionally, I tend to overexplain in poems, obscuring the point of the piece. In the final draft, “You write with a thin pen that the natural light/shines in a fieldgrass color. You remind her/Of cloudy days when the trapped light bounds,/doubles up on itself, pushes the colors/To something that slips under your scalp like a letter opener/Under the flap of this new envelope” becomes “Outside, /light settles on the town in a fieldgrass hue;/something that slips under his scalp/like a letter opener and tugs him home.” By cutting inessentials, the final draft achieves a directness that enhances the poignancy of the poem. Lastly, by writing about homesickness and the difficulties of long-distance communication through a sibling relationship, the peripheral associations brought in by a romantic relationship are cleared away, allowing the reader to focus on the themes of home and belonging.

Meetings between Dr. McDowell and I proved immensely productive. He approached each critique with honesty and trusted me not to take his “criticism” personally, while making sure to verbalize what I did right. That affirmation helped me gain confidence in my own editing skills. The learning curve arched steeply, seeing as how I went from little to no training to heaps of guidance. As the weeks passed, I saw the merit of his suggestions in the caliber of edited pieces I brought to our meetings. One of the books that most improved in my craft is *A Broken Thing*, a collection of essays by poets about lineation. Another area we honed in on was cutting

unnecessary words. Finally, we practiced finding and highlighting essential images and themes. The number of “darlings” I killed greatly outnumbered those that I spared.

Successes

I have always seen myself as a patchwork, or collection. I described my creative outlets as “breathing underwater” in one journal. I like how magical that sounds. The water has always been a home to me, as this collection of poems reveals. This process took scraps of what I’ve taken in and what I’ve walked through and woven it into something that spills across my computer screen when I reread it. I’m proud of the strong voice in these poems.

I’ve always had trouble not writing like my mom is looking over my shoulder, so to write in bold gestures across twenty-eight pages is an accomplishment. Additionally, I think the images in these poems are strong, and my ability to capitalize on an image and to preserve the integrity of a train of thought has improved greatly.

My understanding of a line, as well, grew rapidly over the past two months. Each line break seems to speak with a bit of autonomy, now. The longest poem in this collection, “Spring Song, Green,” is a particularly hard-fought achievement. What started as a fifteen-page monster with three distinct voices using the first-person pronoun became one of the stronger tragedies. “Spring Song, Green” is an example of me trying something new, just to see if I could.

It’s certainly not the only one, though, and I’m thankful that my thesis director entertained those efforts—especially the paragraph poems. Those were some of the most fun to write, and I threw them into our editing pool on a whim, but I really love the way they turned out. They combine my love of the aural aspect of language with the written form that the poetry in this collection takes.

Finally, I feel these poems walk the line between sentiment and sentimentality much better than I used to. Learning the difference between public and private poetry—what you show others verses what you write for yourself—helped alleviate fear about coming down on the wrong side of that coin, and falling flat. This increased awareness makes me feel much more secure in the work I've produced through this collection. I regret being displaced from my dog-eared books and notebooks full of sources I used to help me dig deeper. I hope to retrieve them soon, despite quarantining.

The project definitely meets the gracious guidelines I set for it; I have learned so much about the technical aspect of poetry, and my confidence in editing encourages me to trust my voice. Also, I'm not in the place I was when I started writing. I think the journey of healing may have happened parallel to the poetry itself, but revising each piece certainly cemented that sense of wholeness I've gotten to know. Hence the collection's name, *The Sun Cuts In*—it describes that healing while honoring the struggle that comes with it. I'm very grateful for what I've learned through crafting this body of work, and I hope it will carry me on to the next small collection, and the next—whether public or private.