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## Inheritance

Sam Kealhofer

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Inheritance

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in English  
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In this thesis, I observe the methods modern American poets employ to achieve literary activism in their work. Poets Amiee Nezhukumatathil, Marcus Wicker, and Tracy K. Smith all examine and critique different aspects of American life and culture. Ultimately, I argue that each poet, in their own way, develops a voice that deftly straddles between the personal and public. By doing so, the poets invigorate their work with an authenticity that is crucial in developing an ethos vivacious enough to create a call to action for readers. I will also discuss how I create a similar balance of the personal and public in my own work in order to stir readers into an activist mindset.

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CHAPTER I  
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

**Literary Activism in Contemporary American Poetry**

Percy Shelly, in his essay *A Defense of Poetry*, proclaims poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and argues they serve an integral role in society and civilization. Poets can be voices for the voiceless and proponents of social justice. In these roles, poets can use their platforms to prompt action and bring about real social and political change. This idea is particularly apparent in America, as American poets have continually served as heralds of social justice. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* championed social equality in its democratic presentation of America and its diversity. Almost a hundred years later, Allen Ginsberg’s seminal poem “Howl” cried out against the industrialization of America and the country’s oppressive psychiatric facilities used to curtail any strange thinkers. His language and voice showed the vulgar realities of America’s age of conformity and the trauma it inflicted on American citizens. Then, in the civil rights era, poets such as Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni and others used their work to champion rights such as sexual equality, race equality, and economic freedom. All of these writers created authentic works by drawing on personal or personal-seeming experiences to establish authenticity before progressing into larger societal issues. With American poetry’s long history of literary activism in mind, I want to investigate how contemporary writers pick up the torch and fight for social advocacy in their current work and how I might do the same in mine.

To do so, I'll be examining three different poets: Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Marcus Wicker, and Tracy K. Smith. Nezhukumatathil's newest collection, *Oceanic*, wrestles with themes like assimilation, race relations, women's rights, and human trafficking, as well as pollution and environmental justice. Like her poetic predecessors, Nezhukumatathil explores these social issues in a vulnerable and personal way, thus allowing the reader to participate with the speaker and her grieving. Likewise, Marcus Wicker's *Silencer* presents America's latent racism and police brutality through the eyes of a contemporary black man. Wicker establishes an authentic voice through code switching and humor to give his readers a visceral image of America as he sees it. He presents several personae who move through different spheres of American society—ranging from the more informal world of pop culture and hip hop to the more professional, academic spheres. These personas become a commentary on contemporary American society and the mechanisms those who are disenfranchised must adopt for the sake of self-preservation. Lastly, in her newest collection *Wade in the Water*, former United States poet laureate Tracy K. Smith creates an interesting dynamic between the personal and public by shifting the point of view throughout the collection. Part one contains poetry written in Smith's own voice and focuses on Smith's personal feelings towards modernity, religion, and the dark trajectory of human depravity. In second section Smith shifts to persona, using several instances of erasure and found poetry to discuss topics such as the sacrifices made by black Civil War soldiers. While it cannot be assumed that the poets are speaking from strictly autobiographical positions in their work, they employ certain strategies to create a strong authenticity of voice and persona; this thesis aims to examine these methods. Although each of these writers' works is different in tone, language, and scope, they each create their authentic voices through a balance of the personal



and public which ultimately allows them to challenge their readers to come to action against the inadequacies of their societies.

My argument relies on two premises – one: that it is a viable move for a poet to expand their focus beyond the personal in order to use their work as literary activism, and two: that such work is most effective when it starts from the interior before wrestling with societal, and inherently political, issues. For persuasive literary activism in poetry, it is more effective to avoid a didactic approach and instead to express personal experiences or reflections before expanding to more general vantage points; such movement is effective because it establishes credibility through voice and persona. For premise one, I look to poet and essayist John Haines and his collection of essays *Fables and Distances*. Haines quotes Robert Furneaux Jordan in his essay “What Are Poets For?” to argue the value of literary activism. Jordan wrote that great artists often move their focus from “intrinsic beauty to social passion, ethics and political economy” (20). To Haines, it is important that a poet assumes “a society and a place for literature within it...” because failing to create such a conversation leads to “increasing isolation and narcissism” (31). A poet who does not engage in the realities of their society or world at large, or who fails to comment on their political state and stature, risks writing in a vacuum and negating the lived experiences of readers. Poet Richard Lyons, in the introduction of his article “A Loose Net: Some Meditative American Poets,” makes a similar claim and states that there is “an arrogance and self-indulgence in the confessionalism of some the contemporary verse,” but takes the argument a step farther by claiming that same arrogance and indulgence can be found in “verse that presumes to speak for all of history and culture” (18). What is a poet then to do? A possible answer is found in my second premise: the poet must strike a chord between the personal and the public. Lyons contends that “fictiveness is best served by the credible treble of a human voice”

(218). The poet must command authority over his or her topic, and their ability to convey an authentic voice and personal stakes in the issue, whether these elements are real or implied, is a determinant to that end. Starting from more interior, seemingly autobiographical spaces lets the poet cultivate Lyons's credible human voice and lets the poem be unobtrusive. The first person narratives each of these poets establish help to ease the reader into the poet's voice and themes, so, even as the stakes rise throughout each collection, the movement seems natural.

Contemporary writers such as Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Marcus Wicker, and Tracy K. Smith employ this method of outward movement in their newest collections, each in different yet effective ways. By doing so, each poet establishes an authentic voice and becomes a more credible narrator, allowing the reader to feel they understand the poet's ambitions, desires, and concerns both as an artist and as a person. One way Nezhukumatathil creates an authentic voice is through her inclusion of personal love poems. Nezhukumatathil scatters love poems throughout *Oceanic*, which help the collection to strike a balance between the speaker's personal life and the larger societal concerns she addresses. These poems help to characterize the speaker as a person and keep her from being a bodiless voice of morality. For example, "Love in the Time of Swine Flu" is a mock-serious poem about a time the speaker contracted swine flu and had to sleep alone in her room, only to give in to temptation and have her husband come back from the couch, despite the possible consequences. Though she could potentially spread the virus to her husband and risk "both [being] laid up on [their] backs with a box of tissues," ultimately, they decide it's "worth it" to sleep together and risk the spread of infection (33). The poet makes her love and relationship the stakes of this poem, and the compassion and sense of wild abandon in the voice is believable. Because the speaker presents a familiar situation with such a different take, the poem seems original, authentic, and possibly autobiographical. The speaker comes

across as human, flawed, and even unwise as she and her husband risk sickness for the gratification of human touch. The poem ends with a revelation that the poet is also pregnant, creating a unifying image for her reader: one of family, love, and uncertainty.

Nezhukumatathil also bridges the personal with the public through her connection with marine life and biology. Her first poem in the collection, “Self-Portrait as Scallop,” opens the book with an image that inextricably ties Nezhukumatathil to ocean life. She establishes herself as an authority on marine life through her language and imagery of the scallop: its “hundred blue eyes,” its “small hinge” and “umbo” (3). These phrases help Nezhukumatathil to present herself as a credible source on, and ally to, the environment. The next two poems, “When I Am Six” and “On Listening to Your Teacher Take Attendance,” discuss aspects of her childhood as an individual who is curious and sometimes naive. “On Listening...” also deals with the speaker’s experiences of assimilating into white America, about how the teacher might “butcher” her last name (5). These themes tie together in “Mr. Cass and the Crustaceans” just a few pages later. Nezhukumatathil begins with an image of a beached whale “clogged full / of plastic and car parts” (8). This moment does not come across as didactic, as the speaker has already established a personal affinity with the ocean. Rather, the pain of the whale, the speaker, and the reader all compound in the moment because Nezhukumatathil skillfully establishes a narrator who aches for the whale and invites her readers to do the same. She uses specifics like “a creature as big as half a football field...” and “the largest brain of any animal...” to allow her readers to experience this situation with a fresh set of eyes. She also uses words like “splendor” and “magnificence” in an honest, unironic tone to communicate the gravity of what has been lost (8). This plea helps frame the poem before the speaker turns back to her own personal story that will develop these themes further. The poem continues to establish the speaker’s connection with the ocean by

detailing the story of her fourth grade teacher who gave all his students their own crawfish. His fascination with sea life helped the speaker plunge further into her own interest. The poem also calls back to “Listening to Your Second Grade Teacher Take Attendance,” as the speaker discusses “being the only brown girl in class” (8), and how the gift helped her feel more connected with the class and Mr. Cass. Nezhukumatathil balances pollution and global warming with her own story in order to imbue these familiar narratives with genuine sadness and anger. These poems show the intersection between Nezhukumatathil’s life with the more consequential narrative of climate change and environmental justice, and help to establish her as a credible ally to the cause.

Poems like “Penguin Valentine” and “Invitation” continue to raise the stakes by showing the magnitude of what can be lost and display another strategy of activism. “Penguin Valentine” is an ode in praise of penguins and their commitment to partner and offspring. The poem focuses on the sacrifice the “papa penguin” makes after an egg hatches. They sit there starving for “two whole months” so the mother penguin can eat and recuperate. Nezhukumatathil praises the “faithfulness, the resolve” of the noble creatures and comments that she wishes for the same selflessness in her own lover (10). Nezhukumatathil also includes wonderfully specific images throughout the poem, allowing the reader to imagine the scenario: the egg tucked into the “brood pouch,” the “hint of yellow” near the lover’s ears, the slowed heart rate, the “lanceolate feathers shaped like tiny spears” (10). These images raise the stakes for the reader. Although environmental disaster often looms in the back of the mind, the specific characteristics and personalities of Earth’s other inhabitants may be more difficult to access. In this poem, Nezhukumatathil brings to light just one example of nobility, love, and sacrifice found in the

animal kingdom and, by doing so, revitalizes the argument for environmental justice and conservation by showing what is truly at stake.

“Invitation” makes a similar move by introducing the reader to Nezhukumatathil’s fascination with marine life. The poem begins with the age-old invitation: “come in, come in – the water’s fine!” Nezhukumatathil offers a reassuring voice, promising “you can’t get lost here,” and that “lessons bubble up if you just know / where to look” (28). As in “Mr. Cass and the Crustaceans,” Nezhukumatathil here invites her audience to join in on her love and exploration of marine life. The rest of the poem is a follow-up on the invitation, as Nezhukumatathil literally takes the reader through the ocean and introduces them to the wonder waiting beneath the surface: “a clutch of spiny oysters,” “golden sun stars in a sea of milk,” “clouds of plankton,” “narwhals spin[ning] upside down” (28). The specificity and vibrant imagery presents the vast and fascinating ecosystem sustained in the oceans, and thus emphasizes the need for environmental protection. Author and poet Blake Morrison agrees with this argument, specifically in relation to eco-poetry. In his article “Bearing Witness to a World of Wonder” published by *Resurgence & Ecologist*, he contends that a creative presentation of a creature in all its peculiarity is more effective in persuading the reader than hitting them over the head with a didactic message: “[B]etter to celebrate what’s lovely and in danger of disappearing and allow the reader the space to draw the obvious inference, that a world without whatever it is ... will be an immeasurably poorer world” (50). Nezhukumatathil does an excellent job of creating this space in her work. Her passion for the ocean and the environment as a whole is evident in her subject matter, her imagery, and her metaphorical language; the fascinating presentation of these environments and creatures allows the reader to come to a judgement towards the environment on their own. The colorful imagery and Nezhukumatathil’s

compassionate voice stirs the hearts of her readers, and encourages them to discover new passions and fight for the diversity of life found on our planet.

Marcus Wicker's new collection *Silencer* bridges the personal and the public by situating his experiences as a black man within the larger and more systemic discrimination of black men in modern America. Wicker discusses seemingly autobiographical events like awkward dinner parties full of micro-aggressions but also comments on current news and events. For example, his "Silencer" poems, for which the collection is named, focus on recent incidents of brutality and shootings at the hands of American police officers. The collection communicates and examines its themes so powerfully because of the balance it strikes between the speaker's own life and the society he finds himself in. His readers feel his disenfranchisement by, uncertainty of, and anger at modern America and are drawn to reexamine their own understanding of American society and the privileges they may or may not be afforded due to their race. Wicker creates an authentic voice by focusing on his own life and thoughts as well as demonstrating his innovative use of language and codeswitching. "Ars Poetica Battle Rhyme for Really Wannabe Somebodies" is an excellent example, and not just by its title alone. In the poem, Wicker pokes fun at his contemporaries and the poetry scene in general:

This is for my Liz Taylor  
Literati. Gaudy darlings  
Ear-hustling your way into &  
through ill-lit poet soirees  
all kinds of illegitimate like.  
You heard who's a sure thing  
for which distinguished

fellowship? (13)

Wicker comes across as an insightful speaker who understands the pomp and politics of modern literary scenes. He calls out writers for being as shallow and materialistic as anyone else: “Liz Taylor / Literari. Gaudy darlings.” The unique language and the off rhymes of “literati,” “gaudy,” and “darlings” is refreshing and leaves the lips smacking for more. The speaker teeters from colloquial language to academic talk, which gives the language a flavor that might not be expected in contemporary poetry. Ironically, the phrase “All kinds of illegitimate like” is in itself illegitimate in Standard American English, but Wicker uses it intentionally here to demonstrate his range of language and thought. Immediately following the statement is a question about a distinguished fellowship, talk Wicker might engage in as a professor of creative writing. Wicker’s introspection, originality, and code switching creates a dynamic use of language that garners a reader’s trust in him as a speaker and poet.

However, Wicker also focuses on broader concerns such as discrimination and micro-aggressions, and through his authentic voice, readers are able to better empathize with these reflections. “Watch Us Elocute” provides seemingly autobiographical accounts of micro-aggressions the speaker could have personally experienced. From awkward dinner parties to backhanded compliments at diners, Wicker presents his readers with a realistic model of daily life for an African-American man who is constantly questioned, stereotyped, and undermined. The speaker begins by recounting an interaction he once had with a wealthy woman at a party:

... she whoops, gosh, you’re just  
so well spoken! & I’m like, Duh, Son. So then we both  
clink glasses, drink to whatever that was. Naturally,  
not till the next morning & from under a scalding

shower do I shout: Yes, ma'am. Some of us does talk good! (10)

The woman has unwittingly revealed her assumption that a black man cannot be eloquent. The speaker's response to such a backhanded comment, "Duh, Son," is perfect in its humor and negation, and its pithiness lets both the speaker and the woman save face. This remark shows the complex strategies anyone who faces microaggressions might develop in order to navigate such hostile interactions. "Naturally," the speaker cannot respond how he actually wants to, and saves it for his hypothetical debate time in the shower. The poem goes on to recount two similar interactions, in which diner waiters comment on whether the narrator sounds more like Bryant Gumbel or Wayne Brady (11). This stereotyping obviously frustrates the speaker, who explains that he takes the "trinket praise as teeny blades," though ultimately he admits he knows "what [they] mean. That [he] must seem, 'safe.'" The speaker's varied examples of microaggressions shed light on the pervasive racism African Americans might experience on a daily basis, and Wicker's strategy to provide a firsthand account of these events creates an avenue for the reader to engage in these scenarios in a visceral way.

The speaker then shifts to a more reflective, third-person vantage point by situating these microaggressions within the historical and systemic racism towards black people in America. The speaker compares himself to Nat King Cole but states that even Cole had to deal with discriminatory funding, the KKK, and Jim Crow (13). The speaker experiences racism every day and knows it is an issue in America. Not just because of the past or his own experiences, but as he states:

"...yesterday, literally yesterday,

Some simple American citizen – throwback

Supremacist Straight Outta Birmingham, 1963 –



Aimed his .45 & emptied the life from nine

Black believers at an AME church in Charleston...” (13).

Here, the speaker links the terrible white supremacist attack in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 to a long history of racism. The implication is that the speaker’s own history of experienced discrimination as well as the overt violence often inflicted on African Americans are not isolated events, but rather are both effects of the racism that is rooted deep in American society. The inclusion of the domestic terrorist attack at the end of the poem bears extra weight for the reader, as the speaker’s first-hand accounts of discrimination are still fresh on the mind. Having glimpsed inside the lived experience of a persona of Marcus Wicker, Wicker’s readers can empathize with the speaker’s anger at such violence on a deeper emotional level. The poem forces the reader to reevaluate these events through the eyes of the victims and their communities, hopefully resulting in genuine sorrow and moral indignation. Like Nezhukumatathil, Wicker becomes credible on the subject by first sharing his own history and reflections on the matter. Engaging a reader through firsthand accounts of discrimination, racism, and violence proves effective in challenging preconceived notions, because the firsthand accounts provide the reader with new vantage points to understand such issues. If the reader assimilates the account into their mental framework, they are more capable of understanding social conflicts because they have more vantage points to consider. In this case, the reader begins to see how shades of racism, from microaggressions to domestic terrorism, are connected on a spectrum. By transitioning from personal to public, Wicker is able to establish a credible voice to characterize aptly the systemic racist state he finds himself in.

Ultimately, Wicker’s collection as a whole offers commentary on the need for such a personal approach to literary activism in the age of mass media. The poems “Silencer to the

Heart While Jogging Through a Park,” “Silencer on the Arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. After Sassing an Officer Who Assumed He’d Unlawfully Entered His Own Home,” and “Silencer with Blues & Bird on a Wire” comprise a series in the collection and are the works for which the collection is named. According to Marcus Wicker’s website that provides commentary on the collection, each poem recounts different events in the news cycle throughout recent years involving police brutality against blacks in America: the killing of Trayvon Martin, the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., and the killing of Philando Castile, respectively (marcuswicker.com). The poems are united in their presentation of such events, as they all refuse to show specifics of the case but rather focus on Wicker’s own understanding and reflections. In “Silencer to the Heart,” Wicker says he “shouldn’t have to go there,” that he doesn’t “have to tell you there’s a gun,” because he knows “you,” the reader, know about these events (1). These events and others like them are plastered all over the news and have become an ordinary part of navigating modern American culture. Wicker wants to lament Trayvon Martin, but he “won’t name him. You’ll look away” (1). How does a poet bring light to an issue in an age of mass media where viewers are desensitized and conditioned to look away from the harsh truths of injustice? Wicker uses his original artistic voice to present his own reflections of these events in order to reclaim the narratives and articulate the parts that have been left out of the news coverages—the parts that have, in other words, been silenced. “Silencer with Blues & Birds on a Wire” is perhaps the most stylized of the three poems. Wicker makes no specific reference to the Philando Castile case, but rather offers a melodic and dream-like fable to represent the injustices perpetrated against the black body in America:

... This deafening black swan song  
I hear in wind, wrestling dark pansies

Against headstones – Dixie fifes. It shivers  
My spine in sirens nigh, as wince, whiplash  
Automatic – yes, bathed in swish of red  
& white light, streetlamps crook like Georgia pines. (30)

Rather than going into specifics, Wicker focuses on his own reaction and reflections. He does not give details because he can rightfully assume the reader has some knowledge about the event, but rather conveys the emotion such violence can have on a community through a fable. Wicker uses a more inclusive approach of showing his own emotional state after hearing of such events. The superstitious language in the poem helps to convey the ever-present sense of fear the black community experiences when these events happen: that there is an evil force waiting—in this case, the very real force of police officers. The first-person presentation, in this poem and in the others in the collection, allows the reader to accompany Wicker through his lamentation and understanding of events. Throughout the book, Wicker provides insightful meta-analysis into his work, and the collection's reception since its debut shows the power and persuasiveness of the personal poet in the public sector.

Former US poet laureate Tracy K. Smith also retains a balance between the personal and public throughout her newest collection *Wade in the Water*. Through an engaging method of erasure and found poetry, Smith is able to stay in the first-person point of view even as the collection stretches through time and space; just as she uses her own words to share her personal reflections, she enables her historical subjects to speak for themselves in their own words through the erasure poetry. Whether Smith focuses on her own place in society or the sacrifice of black Civil War soldiers, she presents a personal journey into those public concerns by remaining in the first-person narrative. Smith begins the collection with a reflective first section

where the speaker examines her own feelings towards modernity, religion, and the past. The collection begins with “Garden of Eden,” in which Smith reflects on the contemporary society she finds herself in, with “everyone living that same desolate luxury, each ashamed of ... innocence and privacy.” The poem grounds the work in Smith’s own shrewd voice reflecting on the here and now and serves as an anchor for the collection and all the places the work will go. “The Angels” and “Hill Country” present Smith’s reflections on religion, compounding the divine with the ordinary. “The Angels” imagines God’s wingmen as “Grizzled, / In leather biker gear...” (6), while “Hill Country” presents God in a Jeep driving through backcountry (8). Smith’s religious imagery contextualized in modern American scenes highlights her belief in a redemptive, contemporary mythology. The namesake poem “Wade in the Water” ends part one and serves as a transitional point between the personal and public in the collection. The poem layers the contemporary religious imagery Smith develops in the first section with the long history of African-American religion and the singing of slave songs. The placement is not accidental, as Smith expands her focus in the second section to the past and to reclaiming the lost voices of American history through erasure poetry.

The poem “Wade in the Water” serves as the bridge between the present and past, as well as the personal and public, as Smith merges her voice with the Geechee Gullah ring shouters (to whom the poem is dedicated) before almost exclusively using the voices of historical personas in the second section to recount various historical events like the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the grotesque behavior of antebellum enslavers, and the bravery and sacrifice of black American Civil War soldiers. “Wade in the Water” offers a smooth transition into this stylistic change by serving as a middle ground between Smith’s own persona and her historical pieces. The poem begins with the speaker being greeted by the Geechee Gullah ring shouters and

being told “I love you” by one of the women, as is custom with the shouters. “I love you” becomes the refrain of the poem, and is repeated every few lines to demonstrate how Smith is embracing their language as a connection to the past. Smith sees the shouters perform and feels connected to “the old blood-deep song / that dragged us to those banks / and cast us in” (15). In these lines, Smith ties the themes she developed in the book’s first section to her ancestors’ unwavering faith. The poem’s last stanza consists of the Geechee Gullah shouters’ songs sanctifying the “woods,” the “dogs,” the “many gone” (16), and signals Smith’s formal transition into historical persona.

In order to expand her focus to important historical events, such as the writing of Declaration of Independence or the tribulations of the American Civil War, Smith drapes her poetry in the words of her subjects in order to create authenticity and gravity in the poems. Section two is primarily composed of erasure and found poems that are entirely made of other people’s words, taken from diaries, letters, interviews, and transcripts, and arranged by Smith into pieces that display the victim’s suffering and dignity and preserve their language. The preservation of the subjects’ authentic voices and words creates visceral portrayals of the American past, highlighting those who are often left unstudied, such as the enslaved and black Civil War soldiers.

She begins part two with “Declaration,” an erasure poem that draws its language from the Declaration of Independence. Through erasure, Smith subverts the text of the original document, turning the colonists’ anger at King George into a magnifying glass onto their own deplorable history of African enslavement. This positioning thus turns the poem into a Declaration to America from the descendants of the black enslaved, those who were “taken captive / on the high seas / to bear—” (19). This subversion complicates the historical narrative surrounding the

Declaration of Independence as it shows the hypocrisy in the words: if the founding fathers felt slighted by King George, imagine if they considered the lives of their enslaved.

“I Will Tell You the Truth about This, I will Tell You All about It” is an erasure poem that takes up most of section two, and it draws its subject matter from several letters written by black Civil War soldiers and their families during the war. Despite being “erasure poetry,” the effect is just the opposite: through the work, Smith is able to reclaim the lost voices of Americans and put all of their humanity and sacrifice on display. The poems are often addressed to military officials, even President Lincoln, and frequently express dire situations and hardships. The authentic language of the work allows Smith to display her subjects in all of their sacrifice, bravery, and humility. Each portion of the poem presents a vignette of personal loss, and the accumulation of inequity begins to articulate the extent of injustice faced by blacks in this country, specifically during the American Civil War. Because of the attention to the personal and the use of authentic historical voices, the poem has a sense of authenticity to it. The first vignette addresses President Lincoln. A mother pleads with him to release her son from the army. This vignette serves as an excellent overview to the series both in tone and thematic concerns:

“Mr abarham lincon  
I wont to knw sir if you please  
Whether I can have my son relest  
From the arme he is all the subport  
I have now his father is Dead  
And his brother that wase all  
the help I had he has bean wonded

twise he has not had nothing to send me yet  
now I am old and my head is blossaming  
for the grave and if you do I hope  
tha lord will bless you and me  
tha say that you will simpethise  
with the poor he be long to the  
eight rigmat collard troops  
he is a sarjent  
mart welcome is his name” (24)

In this vignette and the others, Smith maintains the original spelling of her historical personas to keep authenticity. An informed reader can discern that such spelling and writing idiosyncrasies formed as a result of America’s history of depriving the enslaved of the most basic of human rights, including education. Smith’s methodology works to highlight the humanity in the letters. Author and essayist Ruth Franklin published a critique of Smith’s collection in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Poem Cure.” Franklin elaborates on Smith’s attention to language and argues that adhering to the “plain” language of the time allows Smith to create a bridge between the past and present (41). Smith creates unvarnished, seemingly untouched, works that capture the complex emotions of her subjects. Doing so not only connects the past and present, but the public and private. Specifically, Smith presents the pieces in a form that accentuates subtle sound devices, such as the assonance of “please” and “arme.” Smith uses line breaks and white space to draw more attention to these words. The white space after each of these words in the poem create an extra pause in the mind of the reader, thus drawing focus to the subtle rhyme. As poet and reviewer Fred Muratori writes: “Smith ... demonstrates how an engaged, activist

poetry need not forgo lyricism, compassion, and complexity to be effective” (69). I contend these attributes enhance the poetry by creating a sense of authenticity. By staying faithful to the content, Smith recounts the actualities these families faced in a more painful and visceral way than any poetic abstractions could render.

The long poem consists of several other vignettes that focus on the personal hardships faced by different individuals, but each manages to address the historical racism inherent in America, specifically during the time of the Civil War, by accumulating these narratives to present a captivating portrait of race relations during such a pivotal time. One vignette, for example, composed from a letter written at Camp Nelson, Kentucky on November 26, 1864, focuses on the death of a soldier’s child during war times and is an excellent example of personal loss and reflection lending gravity to a poem. The soldier recounts how his boy died because he and his family were not given proper resources. The “Man in charge of the guard” orders them out into the cold even though the speaker tells him it will kill the child (26). The man does not consider the humanity of the situation and simply throws them out despite the speaker’s wife and child being “poorly clad” (26). The poem makes evident that black Civil War soldiers and their families faced all the perils of America’s systemic racism even during times of war, and even while serving in the army. They were often treated as cannon fodder, received very little relief in terms of resources and rations, and were often even deprived of their pensions as soldiers. The documentation of this event forces the reader to recognize the tragedy not just as a hypothetical casualty of war, but instead as a real example of the overarching institutions of racism in America. Smith masterfully recounts the horrific and completely avoidable death of a child at the hands of inequality to give a microscopic view of the larger problems that still face this country,



and by doing so opens an avenue for the reader to see the haunting results of racism in a firsthand manner.

In each of their own ways, these poets demonstrate the impact that balancing the personal and public can have for literary activism. Through this method, Nezhukumatathil presents a vibrant world worth preserving, and thus adds an infectious enthusiasm to her themes of environmentalism. Similarly, Wicker strikes a balance between public instances of systemic racism with his own reflections and seemingly personal experiences to present an accurate image of the spectrum of racism still present in American culture. Finally, Smith recounts her own feelings of hope and national pride along with America's historical injustices towards African Americans in order to bring these injustices to light and include the underrepresented peoples in her image of America. Though these poets' work tackle different themes, each demonstrates the power that personal reflections and voice can have when confronting public problems.

Throughout the poems that comprise my thesis, there are numerous reflections of, and callbacks to, these poets and their works. Broadly speaking, the form and order of the collection is steered by a general progression from personal to public. Just as Nezhukumatathil and Smith start in (seemingly) autobiographical modes and more personal spheres before expanding their focus onto public concerns, I too wanted to make the same movement in my collection, establishing a rapport with the reader before launching into more complicated subject matter that deals with our contemporary moment. The poems in the first half of the collection can be categorized into two camps: first, my own mythology and trials as a human and, second, my reflections on and venting about the nature and purpose of poetry.

The collection includes several poems that focus on my own personal history as a means of presenting myself as a well-rounded and fully fleshed individual. "Inheritance" offers a

personal mythology, dealing with the past, my family, and the loss of innocence. Other works placed early in the collection such as “Geology 101” and “Human Err, or...” are reflections of failed relationships. These poems aim to do a similar calibrating of the collection as Nezukumatathil’s love poems do for hers. Lastly, “Stand the Post” draws its inspiration from personal spaces, depicting a parent rocking a crying child to sleep, even though I am not a parent myself. I wanted to write a poem in celebration of my own parents, sister and brother-in-law, and friends who have undoubtedly had to “Stand the Post.” The poem helps to ground the thesis in personal issues of family before moving on to potentially more polarizing issues in order to garner the readers’ trust.

Other poems in the beginning of the collection deal with my reflections on the poet’s place in society. These works aim to add another level to my authenticity, as readers can acquaint themselves with my vision of poetry and my intentions in writing the collection by allowing me to start a dialogue with the reader. For example, “Thesis Statement,” an early poem in the collection, addresses my frustrations with how poetry is viewed in contemporary America: “My advisor says I’m interested in ‘creative writing’ although I find that term superfluous...” The speaker then makes a proclamation that has added significance because it appears in the beginning of the collection: “My major is masonry. My concentration is craft. I plunge my hand into the furnace.” These lines illustrate my commitment to do the heavy work, building rapport with the reader before launching into larger issues.

The poems then slowly shift into a more public space by using a voice aware of dangers and inequities and determined to call attention to these problems. One such poem is “State of Magnolia,” which complicates the narrative of “Inheritance” by layering on historical and cultural details. Though both poems deal with my connection to the south, “Inheritance” is

presented outside of any political or national past. This is in stark contrast with “State of Magnolia,” whose very name suggests a knowledge of political and social history. The poem does similar work as “Inheritance,” but takes on a much broader scope, addressing the history of racism and brutality in the antebellum South. These sins are still “scourged onto the land,” and the speaker feels a connection with the kudzu blossoms that “still ruminate on what was and seek no absolution.”

“In God We Rust” is another poem that serves as a bridge between the personal and public and thus is situated nearly in the middle of the collection. The speaker laments his passive complicity in abusive labor policies, the destruction of the planet, and the death of countless animals, and suggests there might be “original sin” involved in being American since he can’t count everything he’s guilty of. The poem refuses end punctuation until the speaker reaches his pinnacle question regarding American culture, his privileged status, and the point of his creative work in general. In this poem, the speaker turns an appraising eye towards himself and his own shortcomings, an honest self-examination that I hope encourages the reader to make a similar evaluation about the cost of their contemporary existence.

As well as contributing to the organization and direction of the thesis, each poet influenced specific pieces in the collection in terms of subject matter, sound devices and rhythm, and other poetic strategies. For example, *Oceanic* opened a new array of language and imagery for me through Nezukumatathil’s focus on the physical world and her specificity of all of nature’s wonder and strangeness. I wanted to use her attention to detail to convey my own fascination with the natural world. The collection has several poems that focus on these themes and attempt to capture the spirit of important places to me, such as “Range of Light,” regarding the Sierra Nevada, “Cannon Beach,” regarding the haystacks lying off the Oregon coast, and

“Yellowstone Creation Myth,” regarding the formation and geological history of Yellowstone National Park. Each poem lists specific, often scientific, attributes in order to give accurate, flavorful, and ultimately engulfing senses of place. I also balance this imagery with my own reflections on these places in order to lend a sense of authenticity. To this end, I only wrote about places I had actually been to, in order to draw from both the public place and private reflections. It is easy to lapse into abstractions when discussing themes such as life and death, or life amidst death, but through Nezhukumatathil’s work, I see the importance of displaying those truths accurately in all of their peculiarity. Through this strategy, the overall sense of wonder I am trying to convey happens naturally, as it did for me in reading Nezhukumatathil’s work.

Wicker also influenced poems in the collection, especially in terms of range of language, rhythm, rhyme, and sound. His work directly inspired my poem “White Tees” which is an imitation poem responding to his work “Trees” from *Silencer*. My poem borrows several elements from the poem – the tone, rhythm, sound, and use of white space. The poem makes several similar moves as Wicker’s, from a bombastic tone to slippery lyrics, in order to achieve its display of righteous indignation. “Business Model” was also influenced by Wicker’s work and the various places he draws his subject matter from. In this poem, I drew inspiration from pop culture, crime TV shows such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, movies like *American Gangster* and *Paid in Full*, and certain subgenres of rap and hip hop.

Lastly, I also drew inspiration from Smith’s work, like her personal mythologizing and her strategy of focusing on the individual to comment on a larger epidemic. My poem “Inheritance” tries at a personal mythology, while “Benny Benzo” attacks the opioid epidemic by displaying a hypothetical life damaged by the pharmaceutical industry’s stranglehold on the American medical institution.

My own writing has made strides under my study of these poets, and becoming attuned to their subtle movement from the personal to the public has aided both my writing and organization of the thesis. Nezukumutathil presents seemingly autobiographical vignettes as a pathway into larger concerns of environmental justice and conservation. But the authenticity, sorrow, and wonder stay true throughout the collection through her attention to detail and fascination with the natural world. Wicker takes a personal approach to wrestling with national atrocities committed at the hands of white nationalists and others discussed ad absurdum on news outlets and social media. The resulting collection is a work that reclaims these narratives through Wicker's personal imagination and language. Similarly, Smith reclaims the oppressed voices of the past through her first person erasure and found poetry. She balances these public issues with a personal first section, in which she unfurls her hopeful, modern mythology upon American landscapes. I kept these poets in mind while I crafted this thesis that wrestles with the larger problems facing American society. These poets served as inspiration and guidance to that goal, and I hope the thesis engages with these topics in innovative ways that can lead the reader to catharsis and action.

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## CHAPTER II

### POEMS

#### **Inheritance**

Daddy once owned some five hundred acres up in Carroll County. I never took the time to count but at least that's what he said. He'd take my brother and I up there on the weekends when we were too young to be left alone. Small town streets turned into dirt. Daddy said the only way was a magic gravel road. Eventually we'd come up on a red gate and a big tin-and-white house named Koila. That was the first house I ever met that had a name.

My brother and I would run through the tall thickets of bahia grass all hot, tall, and tanned. Or go fishing in the small brown pond out back. Listen to the birds chirping in the hickory and the hum of dragonflies around the pond's edge.

We'd spend the afternoons catching crickets in the thistle or inside sprawled out on beds with caste iron frames playing Nintendo 64 while Daddy sweat and kicked and cursed at a big blue mowing tractor that was older than he was.

After Daddy did some work he'd take us out to the woods and we'd climb and roam and jump and roll up and down the leafy hills except the ones with green and rust refrigerators lying about at the bottom since they didn't open up from the inside and there was no telling what was in them. We'd walk barefoot in the cold creek so clean Daddy swore it was good enough to drink.

And late at night we'd eat cheeseburgers on paper plates around a campfire outback and Daddy would tell us stories like the one about two Cherokees who once lived on the land. Chickimunga was the chieftain's daughter and loved a boy she shouldn't, so they promised to meet at an oak stump near the pond under a full moon but Chickimunga most likely had an astigmatism so, like the moon, her eyes were not perfect circles but she couldn't tell the difference. She sat and waited for her lover all night in the cold and the next night he found her dead and frozen under the full moon.

And like Chickimunga, Daddy's plans got all messed up by unexpected circumstances like a hankering for prescription drugs. Making deals with people he shouldn't. He sold the land, and I never even learned how to get back there except through Daddy's magic gravel road. And I could be pissed he didn't give me more but he did give me this.

## State of Magnolia

The Mississippi River floods my blood.

The muddy waters on my tongue.

I was born in a town called Death, Yazoo

prophesized its own undoing.

swallowed up

by an infestation of leaves

and left marooned in a sea of green.

The corrupted stumps like

lonely beasts still lumbering to their kudzu coffins.

As if the thickets were deployed

to consume the remains of all our wickedness

scourged onto the land.

Mississippi ain't all

Lima beans and tire swings.

There's sin stirred up in the mud

turning it to devil's clay.

Mississippi was the foster parent

That wrought the blues

into creation.

Those indigo hues

cracked from the syrinx of broken black birds.

Malice was the lay of the land,

gorged on our ecology

like an invasive species.

See,

I appreciate

the stained kudzu blossoms

that still ruminate on what was

and seek no absolution.

This place sings to me—

rolling pastures to amuse

and forests to sustain

the hot and sticky nights

in the back of beat up Jeeps,

us muttering

secret words

soft and sweet.

No matter how I tried,

Never could outrun

where it is I'm from:



this old magnolia of a Deep South bloom.

## Thesis Statement

My advisor says I'm interested in  
"creative writing"  
but I find that term  
inaccurate and out of  
touch with my intentions –  
No,  
my major is masonry.  
My concentration is craft.  
I plunge my hand into the furnace.  
Work with molten morphemes  
smelt white hot in the fire,  
denser and  
more malleable  
than iron.

## Self-Portrait

myself:	coleslaw
black belt	yeehaw
top shelf	
sun belt	all out
	strike out
dry spell	drop out
blood cell	no doubt
hard sell	
clam shell	come back
	high hat
no show	snap back
tip toe	black jack
long bow	
free throw	red hot
	hot shot
bed head	soft spot
corn bread	self taught
widespread	
misread	off beat
	dead beat
gold ring	back seat
bee sting	mince meat
hot spring	
Yuengling	dirt bag
	black flag
heart burn	jet lag
u turn	zig zag
short term	
book worm	backlash
	heat rash
dry mouth	hot flash
deep south	whip lash
field mouse	
lighthouse	cockeyed
	hillside
out right	high tide
low life	land slide
egg whites	
highlight	barcode
	bulldoze
lock jaw	primrose
bear claw	case closed.

P – O – E – T – R – Y

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but there is O.T.,  
so if you work long enough  
for hard enough  
you just might be reimbursed  
(but that's not the story we want to hear).

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but there is a pyre  
of thought and rhyme and metaphor to burn  
long after you die—  
I've been building mine since  
I was nine.

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but you best believe there's prey.  
You'll circle and stalk it all your days  
but most of us only ever pounce  
on a shadow of the thing.

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but there is pry.  
Peer down to the tectonic plates  
that govern your interior.

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but there is repo, for  
the poet repossesses all  
the spider lilies of the heart  
and the transcripts of our own becoming.

It's true there's no money in poetry,  
but there is rot. Like poetry there's  
no money in that, but people  
keep doing it all the same.

## Word Games

I'm the unnamed aim  
of every twisted game –  
I'm Billie Holiday's old flame.  
Like cocaine,  
I'm a rush of endorphins in the brain,  
a quickening of blood in veins.  
Captured in a diamond ring  
or the greenery of Spring,  
I'm the saddest truth to stay untold  
but on the lips of Nat King Cole.  
I'm streaked in kerosene across the sky,  
I'm the emblem that keeps you living,  
and the reason that you'll die.  
What am I?

## Household Politics

I was sure I lived alone  
until I met  
the spider hanging  
under my kitchen sink.  
Silent, selfish, and  
the size of a half dollar—

but I let him be.  
He does his work at night  
and takes care of all the cockroaches.

## **Broken Glass Casts Splintered Reflections**

My mom and I, I don't think we ask the same kind of questions. I've learned to leave a shade of myself unsaid. It's hard to admit fundamental differences – like how I think Jesus was just some dude who lived two thousand years ago and that I have reasons beyond fiscal liability for not wanting kids.

I used to crack my balcony window and blow out smoke and stay up late at night, but I might've just been moody. The four walls wouldn't talk so I learned to keep a secret of my own.

And the secret was the high. I thought I was so slick, but about that time she started telling me to "be careful" when I went out instead of to "have fun." We don't speak beyond the pleasantries, but she can read a subtle rise in pitch or a message hidden in how I sprawl across a couch. I sprawl across a couch. She knows me best, but she wouldn't want to know me better.

## Your Old Rolling Stone

All this time you've trekked alone—  
and now with only miles to go,  
find meaning in rolling your old stone.

Long ago you were dethroned  
by the smoke of pack tobacco—  
all this time you've trekked alone.

Now Hydrocodone numbs your bones—  
but with your rusty crown in tow,  
find meaning in rolling your old stone.

Having lost your sense of home  
You rest weary in the grottos—  
all this time you've trekked alone.

Though your labor remains unknown,  
do not look back on your stretched shadow—  
find meaning in rolling your old stone.

The final breach is yours to own—  
my father, always know  
all this time you've trekked alone  
gives meaning to rolling your old stone.



## A defense of Icarus

Oh Icarus, you and those candle wax wings—  
thought you'd take your shot and kiss the sun?  
(I've heard the songs the poets sing.)

So enamored by the sky, you schemed  
to fly over that last horizon,  
never to be seen again with those candle wax wings.

You forfeited everything  
to follow your plucky intuition—  
a revolt of which mythology still sings.

So all hail the cursory king!  
Who, for a radiant moment, won  
adoration with just some candle wax wings.

All that's left now is a feeble gleam.  
Your splendor wizened  
by the verses we forgot to sing.

They bloom like tulips in the spring—  
your story foretells of future  
fledglings armed with makeshift wings  
bursting with their own songs to sing.

## A Walk through a Thicket

Early summer, with the songs  
of morning birds still crisp,  
I'd wander through the lord's garden, rich  
with mint  
and marigolds unfurling.

The Lord let me call him bud  
and the flowers I named "beautiful."

On occasion, I'd  
rest with a ham and cheese sandwich  
on the sunny side of a secluded grove.  
Savory and sweet.  
My legs out along the rolling banks,  
I'd stare up at the symbols  
of the pinned-up clouds  
hung high in an ink-blot sky.

And now I wonder if the animals I saw  
were make-believe. Or did they exist?  
And is there any difference?

What I do know  
is that someone once spoke  
of beasts of myth  
that never were  
and made them so,

and these we call the constellations.

## Stand the Post

My head rocks in the sea  
of your mother's chest—  
she will sleep tonight.  
The stillness eerie as an albatross.  
I toss and turn, anticipating  
the storm inside you that swells  
and cracks like glass.  
You, my crescent moon  
whose cries screech catastrophe.  
delirious in the moonlit night,  
I would stumble over any obstacle,  
fall overboard,  
for you. My kin – my baby boy.  
Too young yet to face the dark alone.  
Batten your hatches in these hickory arms  
and sway you silently  
like the wind and the mizzen mast.  
Together, in our secret crow's nest  
we watch the sun rise over the flats,  
over the city that stirs and stretches,  
over the horizon,  
basking in daybreak's light—  
  
You are worth each seasick night.

## Aubade

I woke up alone today,  
but that's not true every time—  
now and then life's not so great,  
but really I don't mind.

It's gotten colder and work's picked up,  
my jeans are stained with turpentine—  
now and then life's not so great,  
but really I don't mind.

Sat out in my truck and smoked  
the last cigarette I could find—  
now and then life's not so great,  
but really I don't mind.

I went and bought another pack,  
and my card was not declined—  
now and then life's not so great  
but really I don't mind.

Of course I had to gas my tank,  
but birds babbled the whole time—  
now and then life's not so great,  
but really I don't mind.

I've learned to take life's citrus and  
make sangria out of wine—  
now and then life's not so great,  
but it might work out just fine.

## Human err, or...

If I could divide my time,  
or have the VCRs rewind,  
I'd take out the tape measure, protractor  
to multiply and factor  
all of the odd angles—

the staccato ends in conversations,  
the asymmetry of sympathy  
the social balance set awry—  
and analyze the dysfunctions.

We live with certain incongruences—  
sometimes I can be obtuse, but  
her thin-lipped smirk is acute  
to my equivocations.

I can't conceive of my own circuitry—  
  
is someone playing jokes on me?  
I saw no one switch on the power—  
no signals from the router.

Then again, what is a joke?  
Back when we still spoke  
I'd see her laugh a time or two  
but I never could compute.

Now there's something whirring me—  
implanted on my motherboard  
a disk that's not been there before  
that alters me to my four cores.

Oh, the balancing of such relations  
is the toughest of equations.

## Geology 101

All that time we spent applying pressure —  
something had to budge.  
A nudge that built for millennia —  
not even Richter could predict  
the magnitude of the shift.

Like careening bumper cars,  
we whizzed by one another  
in a marvelous disarray

and crashed in violent quakes —  
tremors that rocked my tectonic plates.

She hit me in a T-bone whiplash.  
The cataclysm's rhythms  
of convulsing high hat racket,  
clamor, blare, and snare  
echoed in my ears.

Drunk and concussed,  
I spewed magma  
to form a land bridge  
to her obsidian shores,  
to explore the topology of her wit.  
Black humor swirled like volcanic plumes  
from her larynx.

Our contours concurred --  
we created limestone caverns,  
quarries full of alabaster,  
and explored each other's valleys and ridges,

but something erupted in my chest.  
I ashed and cashed my cigarette  
and told her it'd be our last  
to share in our once bliss twist —  
and set us both adrift.

Now I float distant as an island  
in the abyss of Polynesia,  
weathering monsoon and surge,  
still waiting to converge  
into a permanent Pangea.

Like transcurrent faults, we caused  
such vicious tremors  
and simply coasted on.

## **Yellowstone Creation Myth**

And when Lava Creek witnessed the Absoraka Mountains push  
past the light diffusion in the sky, it erupted in catastrophic jealousy.

But the sky did not hear the creek's clamor so it hurled  
a mutiny of hot rock and cinder from within.

The land was smothered in a cloak of soot.

The mountains were swallowed by the magma chamber  
and a caldera was born in the embers of the collapse.

Heavy clouds covered the Wyoming plateau  
and dropped thick sheets of ice that tilled the land  
and carved out valleys and glacier meadows, carelessly  
uprooting boulders and scattering them here and there.

The ice unfroze and the life left in the lava ash brought up  
forests of fir and Engelmann Spruce and adorned the hills in purple iris,  
and thus made Eden out of Hell.



## Cannon Beach

I park my dinged Civic on a sand-speckled street  
and walk through a seaside town  
that shipwrecked here long ago.  
The wind whips at my back, and I lap up sea salt in the air.  
I descend a splintered stair, turned splintered pier  
turned cold white sand.  
Dunes preserved by beach strawberries,  
song birds safe in the creambush,  
mangled driftwood dozing in the bay.  
Dark, fat-stacked clouds push in from the Pacific.  
Tufted puffins perch atop the cliffs,  
and their hatchlings chirp for sea eel and herring.  
Gulls and terns fly in concentric circles searching for  
a porcelain crab who scuttles along the sand ripples to the jetties  
but waits for the crash of sneaker waves to pull him back  
to the sea stacks:  
Haystack and its needles, lucky to be here at all—  
these swirling pools of the intertide a making in the great unmaking.  
Sea stars and mollusks cling to the volcanic stone,  
mussels clump on the wave-washed rocks,  
gaper clams burrow with their straining sinews,  
while sea urchins snack on bull kelp  
and sea slugs put their prismatic colors on display.  
At hightide, cabezons dart at mollusks.  
The undulating oral arms of sea nettles mesmerize.

## The Range of Light

“Then it seemed to me the Sierra should be called not the Nevada, or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light.”

-John Muir, *The Mountains of California*

Come and wander  
through the high foothills of California—  
we'll saunter in the golden grain,  
pare through the crowning spurs and ridges,  
wade in the fresh water grottos  
brimming with the icy waters of obsidian peaks,  
and explore the gypsum caverns' secrets.

Stop at last before  
the sequoia trees and the sunlit meadows  
they have shaded for two millennia  
and commune with Earth's oldest inhabits—

I bolt from my grave  
And see paradise burning.

My sweet Sierra,  
What's happened since  
I sang your creation myth  
And committed it to pen and page?  
Who now hears the century song?

The North American Eden  
soon engulfed by malignant flames,  
but no glaciers here to carve  
the grimace of the mountain faces.

## In God We Rust

I was raised Southern Baptist  
which never sat right with me  
because the fundamental tenant of original sin  
seems fucked up but that might just be  
the case at least here in America because  
I can't count what I'm guilty of living  
this life of imported coffee served in plastic  
cups and 1,000 calorie meals of whatever  
ethnic food I'm craving tonight, and how many  
oppressive labor policies am I complicit in  
when I get cool, cheap, vintage, t shirts shipped  
to my house and how many thousands  
of poisonous chemicals do I put into the atmosphere  
just to get them here and how many  
slaughters of turkeys and chickens  
and hogs and cows am I implicated in  
on any given weekend, and how many living  
creatures will be harmed or killed  
in the making of my poetry collection?



## Word Games II

I'm sometimes named but often not,  
could be loaned but probably bought.  
Anyone would agree  
I'm best when given freely,  
like in a marriage or meeting.  
You cross me when you're cheating.  
If you push your luck you'll force me quick,  
and fold me when you quit.  
I'm a cross, a hook, a taunt,  
turn me into any word you want.  
One or two, but never three—  
either way, you can count on me.  
Like you, I'm not always right,  
but I'll be there in a fight  
and there to greet  
each enemy and ally.  
So what am I?

## Business Model

Listen, b  
I'll give you three  
and some fakes in between —  
get some change, stay unseen  
soon enough,  
you'll have twenty.  
Once again, come find me,  
I'll give you some c & d.  
Buy at five but sell at ten —  
each set makes it back again.  
Keep your clients, stay low key  
take a c note and make three  
then flip it to a G.  
Repeat until you got five bands  
then you'll need some extra hands  
to diversify your stacks.  
Generate a couple racks.  
Multiply a few more times  
until you got a dozen dimes.  
After that, I'd advise  
that you begin to legitimize—  
find a partner, go half in  
on a local gas station.  
Two more years, your target's locked:  
you'll be sitting on a rock.

Then it won't matter if you're caught  
here in America, everything's bought.

## Benny Benzo

Back in high school, thought he'd be  
a pitcher in the MLB,  
but those dreams began to rust  
after he tore his rotator cuff.  
Benny Benzo was so sad.  
Benny Benzo never had  
something like that taken from him  
and the light inside grew dim.  
But his doctor gave him grown up toys—  
like for his shoulder, opioids,  
and having lost his all-star dreams,  
he tripped up in plan Benzedrine.  
(Benny Benzo was just Ben  
until he met his fentanyl friends—)  
He learned the hydro smash and drip  
of barbiturates and robotrips,  
OxyContin, Mary Jane  
Robitussin and cocaine.  
Benny Benzo been so down  
Benny Benzo fooling 'round  
with kpins, vallies, zannies too  
to aid him in his nap kung fu.  
Benny Benzo aint so bright,  
Benny Benzo lost his life  
long before he overdosed —  
and what the industry wanted most:  
a shade of grey in comatose.

## **I, Dishevelled Titan (Devil in the Details)**

Look upon your choking planet and  
Understand that no one  
Corrupted it but yourselves.  
I had no need to play a part.  
For the idolatry and  
Evil you were warned of  
Radiate from each passive shrug.



### Word Games III

I alone converted Saul to Paul—  
the way the Greeks would then heed God's call.  
I'm in every revelation,  
and helped found this nation.  
I'm the Alpha and Omega and all the rest as well—  
I'm Dr. King's message from a Birmingham jail.  
Once, a president sent me  
to Mrs. Bixby  
when he could not return the sons he borrowed,  
and when a Burmese king turned me gold,  
three more would follow.  
Snow, rain, heat, gloom of night,  
the greatest depths  
and most perilous heights—  
none can stop me.  
I come by way  
of a bottle in the sea  
or a carrier pony—  
perhaps even a bird in the sky.  
I'll always find you,  
But what am I?

## Sugar

Sweet tooth aching for a peppermint twist or chocolate coated licorice – a sugar rush might put me in the mood to go fuck up the whole world.

Sweet treat's slogans sing like molasses dreams – the diuretic rhetoric of our cookie crumb conundrum. This saccharine scheme stretching words like taffy twisting machines, but

this walnut brain craving sugarcane. Gluttony is the most succulent sin so let the palate pleasing begin with coffee beans shipped off African sands sweetened by sugar cultivated by African hands exiled in South America.

Virtue in a diabetic dizzy – a sugar coated tizzy. Break the skin with the insulin needle because there's no walking off hyperglycemia. Sour punch straw arteries burst. The dark chocolate heart fails, and at best we're bittersweet.

## American Limericks

It's the land of the free and the brave.  
At least that's the song that we sang.  
But I've heard of stories  
that sound predatory,  
like Ivy League schools built by slaves.

We kept open borders for ages—  
made a promise of better wages.  
We then changed our minds  
and turned all of the dimes  
to put brown people in cages.

At least you can always protest—  
such rights are guaranteed unless  
there's money involved  
now your rights are dissolved  
because come on, you're being a pest.

The wonderful people I've met  
all live under a constant threat—  
they stew secretly in  
the unspeakable sin  
of being saddled in debt.

Now Trump has a plan  
to send me to war in Iran.  
But killing's no job,  
I'd have to draft dodge  
And leave a note saying "I ran."

Each boy and girl in the nation  
is prescribed their own medication.  
"If you're fine in the head  
Use it for bed."  
So say the corporations.

And the politicians agree  
for just a six figure fee  
so hell's finally come,  
I'd like you to welcome  
The American oligarchy.

You might leave feeling bitter  
exposed to this terrible litter

but I'm nothing compared  
to what the president shares  
every god damn day on Twitter.

## A Sense of Sight

Think of the way you are seeing these words—  
the hollow eyeballs pan in your boney occipital, tethered by  
the straps of extrinsic muscle  
that twist and constrict  
so that you might follow the flow of this line.

Those eyes of yours capture just the smallest fraction  
of the electromagnetic spectrum—  
the ultraviolet waves bounce  
off the surface of the loose leaf

before plunging into the dark dots of your pupils—  
the black holes at the center of galactic irises.  
Then on through the convex lens  
that projects an inverse image  
on the thinnest tapestry of a retina

woven from millions of photoreceptors.  
The rods and cones capture stimuli  
for the deep-rooted ganglia  
that transpose the data into action potentials.

The electrical impulses travel up axons,  
into the occipital lobe  
where they're finally decoded  
and turned right-side round

all in mere milliseconds.  
What an intricate effort,  
making sense of sight.  
Its delicate mechanisms.  
All the countless ways to fail.

## Testimony

What keeps the lub dub echoing  
in the chambers of my heart  
and the diffusion of this iron blood through  
thousands of capillary miles?

Or informs the unconscious swelling  
of my respiratory branches,  
and the bloom of their alveolar sacs  
while I lie fast asleep?

Or directs the snapping synapses  
governing neurotransmitters  
and the sum total of my  
chemical reactions?

This logic in my organ tissue—  
the force inherent in my cell division  
and the spindle fibers that untwine,  
gently, the figure eight of my being.

### **Turns Out...**

Turns out that when a tree falls in the woods and no one's around to hear, despite all our philosophical bickering, it does in fact make a sound.

Turns out that the nylon and polyester and faux leather and faux fur in our cool cheap clothes are really just plastic and grocery bags are just plastic and now millions of nano strands have washed into the oceans or the seas or the Ganges or fluttered up and planted themselves into once pristine environments like the tips of the Pyrenees to mark our territory like trashy conquistadors. Turns out our lack of foresight wasn't enough to prevent it all from happening.

Turns out that when the city collects my rubbish from the end of my driveway, it doesn't evaporate into some hypothetical quandary. As if it went to Schrödinger's dump, simultaneously full and empty as long as I don't take the time to check.

## Podunk Ekphrasis

after the painting *The Road to Shubuta* by Noah Saterstorm

How to remember a half-recalled dream  
that constantly evades and yet,  
is still bursting at the seams?  
A cassette tape sputters and unwinds  
a wave of oral histories and ancestral memories—  
a jackass buries his own grave,  
specters working at the clothesline,  
a bloodstained weeping willow  
grows out of the dry rot—  
only sanguine clay lies below.  
Women who have lost their faces  
tend to children without form  
and a lonely soul fishes from the pond out back.  
But just as the black shadow pinned  
in the purple night  
complicates the scene,  
the twin-headed spirit of time  
suplexes and claims the memory  
fails, the tape recorder *clicks*,  
only white noise runneth over—  
the reins slip from my grasp  
and I lose the road back.



## American Genesis

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.

The earth was formless and void, savage in its rule, with countless missed opportunities rotting in the land.

So God took a ruby from the ignorant loam and placed it high atop a sea-faced cliff. In this way, God created heaven and he called it “The United States of America.” This we call the first day.

The next day God said “Let there be whites!” and so the Europeans sailed over in their ships that rhymed. They landed and kissed the shore and praised God for his providence. They took dominion of the land and converted but mostly cast out the pagans.

On the third day God was a bit tired so he cobbled up continents from leftover clay and thus made other parts of the world and God said “Let the waters and pestilence and volcanoes gather here, so that America will be left alone.” God, having spent two days on America and the third on elsewhere, cleansed his hands of the affair and shrugged it off, saying “This I’ll call the third world.”

On the fourth day God gathered his children and read the stars that he laid out for them in the evening sky. He explained the seasons and the tides and then burdened the white men with keeping everything intact. This was because ages ago, when God was first world building, he took a preference to working in the light than in the dark. He called the light good and the dark bad and never changed his mind. When his children asked, he’d simply explain “You are all created in My image, but white men even more so.”

On the fifth day God touched the surface of America and endowed it with his divinity. Up shot trees and livestock and crops of every phylum for the whites to eat. The land was made fertile and productive and served no other purpose than for a white man to impregnate it with his desires or plunder it for his ends.

On the sixth day, God invented something called free enterprise. He sequestered himself to expensive cocktail bars and started to take only private meetings.

On the seventh day, God rested in his Laz-E-Boy. Queso pattered his shirt as he burped up a Yuengling. God turned on cable television, looked upon his world, and called it good.

### The Newest Colossus (after Emma Lazarus)

Here stands the copper laden lady true  
who once beckoned to travelers of famished lands  
to shipwreck on her proverbial sands  
and build themselves a life anew.  
What now greets passengers of the ocean blue?  
Or stateless travelers in caravans?  
Just cries of nationwide immigration bans  
sung loudest from southern Baptist pews:  
“All we got for you is tents  
if you make it past the concrete  
razor wire chain-link fence.  
Best get standing on your own two feet  
if you want to suck at Lady Liberty’s teat.”

## I Sing America

I sing America. One voice in the sea and symphony:

I sing from my apartment.

I sing from the end of my street.

I sing my town and city.

I sing from the peaks to the valleys

and to every foreclosed alley,

I sing from coast to every other coast,

and in every key and melody.

I sing a song that beholds and behooves you,

America I sing.

I sing the America I've seen. With my own eyes

I've seen you, America, and still I sing.

I sing the alluvial planes of the Delta,

the river there I call my mother.

I sing the kudzu and decay of Yazoo city.

I sing the manmade coast of Mississippi.

I sing the endless nights of New Orleans,

a vibrancy of a city propped on stilts,  
on amphetamines and brass bands crooning.

I sing the cigarettes snubbed in gutters.

I sing of sour rain on concrete.

I sing the rolling hills of the Sunbelt.

I sing the ancient forest of Appalachia.

I sing the spectral hue of the Blue Ridge mountains.

I sing the fertile and industrious fields of the bread basket.

I sing Chicago and New York.

I sing the skyscrapers and subway stations.

I sing the hustle and the steam.

I sing Lady Liberty.  
I sing the wind turbines of eastern Colorado.  
I sing Denver's solar-paneled apartments.  
I sing the red rock monuments of the Southwest,  
And I've driven in the Valley of the Gods.  
I sing the Grand Canyon,  
her gorge and majesty.  
I sing the high planes of Wyoming.  
I sing the asphalt seas  
that stretch across the country.  
I sing the sulfuric ponds of Yellowstone.  
I sing the Tetons' snow peaks.  
I sing the stature of the redwood trees.  
I sing the fog of the Northwest.  
I sing the cold sands of the Pacific.  
I sing the heat of Furnace Creek.

I have tasted you, America.  
With my own taste buds I have explored  
the gush and burst of a thousand flavors.  
I have grown strong upon a Southern plate  
of slow roasted pork and baked potato,  
fried green beans and corn.  
I've smelt the hickory smolder for a backyard bbq,  
heard the sizzle of the shish kebabs:  
bell peppers, onions, and poultry.  
I've feasted on sweet melon  
and baked beans  
on your independence day, America.  
I caught and cooked a salt back snapper

And tasted you in every bite.  
I've had bratwursts and Budweiser while tailgating,  
the crunch of blue cheese salad on my lunch break,  
chimichangas and chow mein.  
I order out authentic Thai food every other night.  
I have tasted you, America  
And I rest feeling satisfied.

But I've lived my life in your poorest state, America.  
I call Mississippi my home.  
I see when you disown me, America  
and I see when I am singled out.  
I see the ever-closing circle of the "us."  
I've seen Louisiana more than a decade after Katrina.  
I've seen the water in Flint, Michigan.  
I've seen Puerto Rico in rubble.

I have heard your songs, America.  
I hear them rolling down the valleys,  
The heralds of the past.  
I hear what politicians now say in your name, America.  
I have heard your conflicting stories  
I have heard all the false narratives.  
I have checked inside the tabernacle  
And I now see the other side.

All I know is you, America.  
I have never left your domain.  
I have loved you.  
I have danced to your musicians

unruly and atop tables.  
I have seen my beloveds struggle and scrape and fight each day.  
I have seen the way we walk around with  
The private shame of debt, the felony  
Of an unpronounced dream.  
I have picked up hitchhikers in the night, America.  
I have competed against your athletes  
I have bested and been bested by  
The best I have ever met.  
I was idle in my youth,  
resting in your fields  
And twining crowns of buttercup.  
As a man  
I have fed your hungry and have been fed  
I have marched through your lands,  
to build for you and was built up instead.  
America, I have taken your poet laureate out for lunch.  
I have shouted in your streets,  
raucous and inane,  
with beating drum and banner flung,  
and now call on you to change.