

# TROPICAL DEPRESSION

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By

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# Therapy Dog

## Anecdote of the Puddle

Lo, I was baptized by the blossoms  
of a lilac bush. That's what it felt like  
it felt like. I can't tell the invisible yous  
how much I love flowers, glazed by rain.

With his eyes, my shih tzu says to me  
—what is your deal  
with symbolic actions in real landscapes?  
Who wants to get slapped by a few pallid  
petals? He was just being cranky.

He had spent all morning cowering  
in a utility closet from the thunder gods.

It's a crock, I suggest to him,  
about the thunder gods, and try  
to explain accuweather to him.  
He looks at me again with

my favorite eyes, on account of all  
the projections I've flung and collected  
over the years—sacrifice, fealty, devotion—  
those buggy inbred eyes.

And wordlessly, we decide  
to go through the puddle together,  
eschewing drier earth on higher ground.

## Like Wolves Watching a Child

I judge myself and sometimes others  
and judge myself for judging others,  
like a wolf pounces for fun or attacks  
for food. It nourishes my bad brain,  
the one that quietly hums as a baby wolf  
yips to express just about anything. Yip,  
I am getting old. Yip, I am voracious.  
Yip, mate with me. Yip, let's play fight,  
which looks like real fighting.

But what  
of the child? The one being watched,  
the brain that doesn't even know  
it's a brain, the present brain, undiseased,  
a clump of matter, doused in chemicals,  
the brain in a sandbox thinking nothing  
more than the coolness of the grains,  
how you can keep digging and it will only  
get damper and more comforting, sun  
bleaching out the predator on the periphery  
waiting until it is time to strike.

While the dog was doing  
what can only be called  
gamboling in a sunny  
patch of grass,  
all I could think of  
was how infrequently  
I ride my bicycle  
and how much  
this town sucks.  
That didn't seem right  
so I called the doctor  
who will see me  
in a month and a half.  
What else can  
I do during that time  
but keep thinking  
bad thoughts  
while the dog gambols  
and the green grass grows?



## Neighborhood Watch

This morning, I pivoted the spigot  
so therapy dog could drink, then  
noticed the house's owners peering  
at us. Exposed then, for who I am  
really. They said something jolly.  
Therapy dog could curdle the cold  
milky heart of any vampyr.

Thought like an earworm, thought  
like a wasp, stinging through the soft  
wound of my days—something like  
an email, words left unsaid or  
said, that might truly expose me  
as the crazy, depraved, self-centered  
person I am. Two ideas of woman  
but only one can touch a sprinkler.

I rely on lists and calendars  
to live a liveable life. We passed  
yellow blooming jasmine, a vine  
in confused profusion in February,  
wafting fragrance to passersby.  
We passed a three-legged dog  
with a magnificent pink tongue.

It's just like waking up.  
You can visit the library  
and drop off overdue books.

You can walk in the sunshine  
and feel only a modicum of fear  
of men enjoying lunch outside.

When you're under, gravity works differently  
of course heavy and gelatinous.  
You must rest frequently.

It's almost not worth describing,  
like the aura before a migraine,  
burnt toast scent before a stroke.

You feel wistful about austere cleaning  
techniques and when you could distinguish  
what brought you joy or not.

You are high-functioning.  
You summon your mania,  
your logorrhea, your cluttered speech.

You read the news, it gets worse.  
You show up and you show and  
you know that treading water  
is the hardest way to swim.

I Got Stoned and Went to the Rothko Chapel  
and Nothing Happened

Your mind does two tidy two-steps.  
This is silly. You're a skeptic.  
Still silly. Try again.  
Think of your friends and  
how they live their lives.  
Methods—sage sticks, spruce oil,  
ellipticals, eclipses—that once  
worked, don't anymore.

Here's what it looks like—  
you enter an antechamber  
where a pale girl whimpers  
towards a guest book. Tones  
akin to medieval chanting pipe  
in whitely, as if underwater.

Here, schmucks are having  
spiritual experiences.  
These schmucks do not feel silly,  
eyes closed, cross-legged  
or prone on lacquered benches.  
What helps other people—  
knitting, yoga, veganism—  
is not even money, necessarily.

What a thing! A man could make  
his own memorial with stacks on  
stacks of cash from wealthy patrons,  
apertifs on silver platters—all to be taken  
seriously. I've been depressed  
since leaving New York sounds  
dramatic but appears factual.

In the sanctuary, nine canvases  
in different shades of dark. If I ever  
was a holy thing, I am not now.

## Whales

In a previous iteration, I wore a jute suit  
with wooden toggles. It was a riot. I was in Japan,  
acting silly in monasteries. In my present  
incarnation, I am taking a bath, doused with  
Viennese seeds, valerian and hops.  
From an angle, my belly looks like  
a breached whale, full of vital circuitry.

There are a few hypotheses as to why whales breach:  
to shake off barnacles and parasites  
or like that innocent horse scratching its behind—  
no fingers, an itch. It's reverberative.  
Stranded babies breach to send visual and  
audible signals in their search for their mamas.  
It's theorized to be fun.

When I was a child, my father took many baths,  
before he came out as gay. Wondering what's  
really wrong is a lifelong preoccupation.  
At least we have words to have fun. The seaman  
says the weather is fair today and reiterates  
his optimistic report throughout the quay.

## Poem About Feelings and My Dog

To lazily lounge on the beige  
chaise, like my dog, or to run  
for fun is a dream for a girl  
like me. The idea of nation  
becomes vertiginous and  
my secondary and tertiary  
feelings billow, my range  
of motion narrows. I hunch  
and hurry. In Houston, we  
wear sandals in November.

I want my dog to live forever.  
I want to be a zygote again.  
I want to be a dumb plant.

Every morning, my graceful dog thinks,  
oh please don't bother me. But most times I do,  
exerting my 10x mass on him. Sometimes I let  
the weight of the day's news exert itself on me.  
Aggressors are yelling, detention camps built,  
lesbians killed in Cameroon, gay men in Chechnya,  
abuses of power against the most vulnerable  
across these 50 states. Facebook's algorithms  
across two billion users. An hour, maybe more,  
until even my bladder is enraged.

I drape the dog's harness over his shoulders.  
He stretches, sleek as a seal, then straightens  
so I can clip him in, our way of holding on to each other.  
We pass the upscale restaurant with its patch  
of lemongrass and mint, where neighborhood pups pee.  
We pass the Kwik Kar Lube men dancing  
to drum up business. We pass Hunan Village,  
a front for Russian mobsters, its underworld aromas.

Mostly, we pass houses and their mystifying residents.  
We espy Cat Girlfriend with her sexy white socks,  
hiding in the marigolds. I daydream I'll go to the gym,  
to the dog park. That I will start and complete an essay.  
We return to our kibble and cereal,  
and hours melt under the heat of my laptop.  
Avatar me is a beast, while analog me recedes.

Sitting in the rose-scented bathtub,  
I am always sick, rarely heroic.  
Here's what I can tell you: I have  
a thousand ablutions. My brother  
the surgeon swings a bonecutter while  
I snack on sturgeon atop a fancy cracker.

I ail with Greco-Roman etymologies:  
hemorrhoids, diarrhea, cirrhosis,  
little bubbles of pain, what the good  
doctor would call complaints.

Symptoms can be managed, not cured.  
Symptoms brought on by a whirling dervish  
of worry and I wonder, does a sufi  
ever stub his toe, and think, why me?

And I wonder if my friend is really  
pregnant. Why else wouldn't she touch  
the champagne? And if she is, I'll spend  
money I don't, and from the looks of it,  
will never have, trying to show the baby  
phenomena adults just can't see:

the joy of plush toys, a crisscross  
of hyphenated senses, an evening  
without irony, a bubble bath without pain.

Now my mind is  
freed for more valuable  
ruminations, such as would  
this cat really attack therapy  
dog while I'm standing right  
here?

As the drama between  
these two creatures unfolds  
I'm an observer, completely  
effaced or I am either animal  
or I am nothing at all.



The citizenry is inflamed. We are inflamed.  
As a child, I fancied I was born in the wrong decade—  
who didn't? Protest in a sweet weed haze, all aglitter,  
letting sunlight linger on my bosom, listening  
to folk music. Now, I don't know what to do.

It's easy to think as a child. It's adulthood  
that's queer. My team of healthcare professionals  
has traced my condition to the inflammation  
of various body parts and dark twisted fantasies.  
Did you know the common cold can cause  
depression? Put that in your cognition.

A good day is signing a petition on the internet  
and watching the dog taste a blueberry.  
Now he's rolling in it on the filthy blue carpet  
I bought for the fretwork. He is cracking me up  
with this free radical, pawing its shredded blue skin.

I survey my soreness. Heel pain is hellish,  
plantar fasciitis. Below my left canine  
my gum line is drooping. Maybe my right side  
is better, but isn't the heart what's left?

## The Martian

When one speculates about Mars  
the mind reels against scale and space.  
You make syllables: big bang, black hole.  
Ask questions: how, why, what the fuck?

Comparisons, like in the military,  
it's hurry up and wait or orbit and bloom.  
How these planets align, the same eight partners  
for some version of eternity, while we humans  
check our chakras, consider a year a lifetime.

The pas de deux between my neighbor and me,  
lavendar laundry wafts through the rafters,  
so I go downstairs and clean my clothes. I turn  
my music down so his baby can sleep, our routines  
mirrored, minor disturbances. Waiter, there is a fish

with legs in my primordial soup. You can't  
help but wish the bacterial bouquet the best.  
We're each a wandering nebula. We believe  
in you, more than you'll or we'll ever know.

Love, the earthlings.

# Person of Interest

Not many passions take your pants off—  
painting with oils, reading in the afternoon,  
other people's bodies. I want to really  
say something here. I want to be clear.

But just as no two people see the same  
colors, what you hear is not what I'm  
saying. Not conversations as much as  
serial misunderstandings, proximate  
in space. One considers the dictionary  
definition of "man." One considers  
the definition of "woman." One considers  
arm hair, soft spaces on a hot body.

The obsessive heat-seeking quality  
of attraction. The paint on my pinkie is  
for you—a little poison, a little turpentine.  
The snaggletooth I want to stick my  
tongue into. This is pigment from a rock,  
this is pigment from a bug, this is pigment  
from a bleeding heart, and this is jeopardy.

Passion brought me here, but passion  
cannot save me. To mix linseed and  
varnish, to create something is to vanish  
what was there before. Chroma for fastness,  
chemistry tricks. Such bold strokes in  
erasing and framing delicate beginnings.

Deliriously in love, we debased ourselves,  
fishnet stockings and public proclamations.

I flaunted my décolletage and thought my  
thoughts in decasyllables. It was disgusting.

Once the affair was given some air, decanted,  
he is still debonair, by default. We are denizens

of a society we enlisted in, even once  
our worst defects, those bedeviling deerticks,

were declassified. You thought I'd mention  
the deathrattle, two desperados at the depot,

on the way to detox, dividends depreciating,  
the helium high deflating, flaccid. But no.

We chose détente. Not worthy, per se, of  
everlasting devotional, but not despoiled either,

not at all. A demotic love to withstand the dew.  
A dessert course with sweetness to last and last.

I don't mean to steal  
a trope but I am translating  
a poem. I'm doing it  
right now. The writer doesn't  
know what people think of her,  
not really. Put it this way:  
she's a 21<sup>st</sup> century girl.

Or this way: she lives  
near a taco truck so  
fragrant little fragments  
get stuck to her sweater  
and puppy thinks:  
nourishment. How do I  
know all this about the  
writer? We keep in touch.

Mostly laughs, but I suspect  
a degree of darkness. She  
disagrees stridently with my  
simple diction. We wrangle.

In a language with such  
exquisite words, like  
exquisite or nuthatch,  
why keep saying trash?

She seems to know  
a lot about my language  
but she will never really  
know how I understand  
my language, what it can  
do to two people on a balmy  
night, and that's exactly  
where I derive my power.

## Self-Portrait as Financial District

The language of commerce  
I know naught about—  
but the financial district and I,  
we share a nautical history.

We are not fun nor are we  
inconsequential. We matter  
to some people's pockets.

Our borders are a craggy mystery,  
squeezed at the tip like a uterus.

Within us are pleasure piers,  
the Patriot dive, and carts  
and carts of hot dog vendors.

Sometimes, there are happy hours,  
but then, we are empty, cavernous.

We are filled with ghosts  
of men in slate-colored suits  
and varying elegance of shoe.

We walk down memories down  
Maiden Lane, where families  
watch movies in the summertime.

Now, there is a splendid park  
built on the uneven scars of disaster.

This is Mannahatta,  
where a man becomes a bridge,  
where the faint smell of chum  
shifts provenance from traitor to trader.

At night, we hum with the solitary clip  
of cobblestone, hushed headlines  
on discarded newspapers, the voices  
of people who have passed through us.

The zoologist who casually knows  
the inside of a marsupial pouch  
is enviable--although she too has laundry.

In my favorite cartoon,  
a lady-cow in pearls says to her husband:  
“Wendell, I am not content.”

My love is with she  
who cuts coconuts with a machete  
and she of quiet mind lost in knitting.

We can't share everything,  
neither Kaddish nor Kabuki.  
You know, I'm on the old theme again,  
the incalculable commons and our modern estrangement.

How proudly Houstonians  
claim kolaches their own.  
Sister, in a kameez or chamois,  
I beg you to taste my sincerity.

I'll be sitting here  
in the burning capital of Me-ville.  
By kayak or cable, please come.



## Unpopular Opinion

Gossip is good for the people,  
defined as uploading data  
to the collective unconscious.  
Who's gotta have it and who's  
out of her gourd? As a person  
who engages in tittle-tattle,  
I incubate. I watch your lil' eggys.

People just gobble it up.  
Because what happens to one  
could happen to any. This one's  
grown a goatee. This one's raised  
the gauntlet. Goiters are morbid,  
even flanked by golden adornments.

I was well bred, but how long  
does it stick? In whose good graces  
shall I seek succor? What is gauche?  
Who is louche? And who will be  
our new governess? I am just  
a tiny gosling looking for a juicy  
grain in this big, big world.

Dear God, master of everything.  
Dear God, I will be your servant  
if you exist, Amen.  
Dear God, servant might be too strong  
a word, as might worshipper.  
What is worshipping really  
but romantic folly.  
Dear God, I would be your believee.  
Dear God, but why is this about me?  
Dear God, this is for yew trees,  
their roots scraggling the sidewalks freely,  
and for the magnificent machineries of war.  
I say over and over again and again,  
if I were born in another time  
I would be dead, dead, dead.  
Thank you for your infinite wisdom.  
Thank you for setting the clock.  
Dear God, just tell me if you're there  
for answering questions or  
accepting praise or hearing pleas, please.  
Dear God, an egg.  
Dear God, a shepherd in a time  
when mutton is out of fashion.  
Dear God, thank you for those creatures who live in deep-sea thermal vents.  
Dear God, delicious meats.  
Dear God, the powers of persuasion.  
Dear God, electricity in the brain was a nice touch.  
Dear God, I spent time in the big box shop tonight,  
considering eight elements of a bed.  
Dear God, how I want to crawl back to the crib.  
Dear God, what about refugees.  
Dear radical God, I love my dog and my beloved so badly,  
I wish you invented immortality  
for more than just yourself.  
Dear God, I guess that is our toil.  
Dear God, how will it end? Amen.

In the deft Delft memento mori,  
there's the eternal fruit basket—  
a cornucopia of mauve mulberries,  
vermillion pomegranates, canary citrons,  
tawny almonds, and fleshy peaches.

A creamy cranium so smooth,  
you want to run your fingers over it,  
handle it, like the frenzied impulse  
to dip a hand into bins of grains and lentils.

The room, in the painting, you suppose,  
is perfumed and putrid. Burnt candle ends  
lend a gamey quality to the air, the whole  
affair. Dusty books and imported orchids,  
a half-busted nut peeking out of its shell  
and a sticky-looking grandfather clock.

Who doesn't know they will die every single day?  
Who doesn't practice the panic and grief  
of a beloved one's sudden death? An overripe  
atmosphere among the squawks and jangles  
of daily apocalypse, the mortal melody,  
baroque but slightly boring.

## Husband

Bey Hota Amore, no one would guess  
how we met, now that we're so neatly  
folded into each other. You leave home  
to visit family and I can't find my phone  
for days. You are the Finder. (It was  
in the car, finally.) And you begin  
to bore of your jejune brothers  
and unending fields of corn and soy,  
all owned by the same conglomerate.  
You were married, and I engaged  
in what Jefferson would call an  
entangling alliance. (I maintain  
an isolationist policy towards that  
cold and unpredictable country.)

Part proud as a farmboy could be,  
part disappointed your high school  
Spanish teacher did not allow you to  
rename yourself. Where are the Panchos  
and Pablos of Iowa anyway? Detasseling corn  
or cleaving chicken parts at the Tyson factory  
until displaced by Somalis,  
the way I replaced your first wife  
in the smooth machinery of your heart.

At City Hall on Chambers Street,  
I'm in a magenta dress and we ask  
Fatima the judge's clerk to act as  
official witness to our bond of eternal love.  
Bey Hota Amore, you'll never know  
how everything you do interests me.  
Your actions I can predict, but not your  
motivations. (It feels embarrassing  
now to write a love letter for one's spouse.)

Because there is no tidy closing.

We are two parallel lines with each  
passing day, a slashed line between us,  
like the dotted paper used to practice  
new alphabets, on to which children  
scribble stories to learn and grow.

## The Good Eye/I

I have one good eye/I  
and one bad one  
and a chorus of doctors.

Dr. Handsome says my diagnosis  
is idiopathic.  
Well, whose isn't?

My mama nurtured  
my good eye/I  
and my bad one.

Treatment is injected  
every six weeks.

It feels just like skin,  
just like a pinch,  
tho I understand your wincing.

My eye/I has scars  
and tissue damage  
from rogue blood vessels.

Visualize veins like vines.

Eye/I am the princess  
of the retinologists'  
purgatorial waiting room

amid old folks with sugars  
and walkers and restless caretakers.

The chorus numbs me gently  
with drops and time.

To see things immediately  
I must close my eye/I

and take dimensions  
on blind faith.

## We're Not There Yet

Because first I want to go to Peru together,  
eat purple potatoes and buy knitted caps with earflaps,  
headhigh from mountain air, a newer, thinner weather.

Or we can fly to Costa Rica, but let's be real, the Zika tethers  
us to milder climes. I may get pregnant some day, perhaps,  
and I'll apply my grit to the plan we pursue together

that I reserve for, oh, business emails, Spanish leather,  
watching my friends' kids grow from fatty laptraps  
to kindergarteners. I don't feel I'm getting older, whether

my father says so, or not. Just my younger self dims further.  
Were past things really better? When I'd collapse  
on grass, around a ring of youths, giggling at blue ether?

In my fiercest nostalgia, I'm roaming fields of heather.  
How to shrink self-concern, live without maps,  
love thy neighbor, really be in inclement weather?

Time for bright flamingo feathers and to fill our gaps  
together. And we'll get there when we get there.



## A Bend

Our durable bond winks  
and welches through silt  
and flotsam with wonder.  
It's us with a brand, with  
an alternative band. Halt  
and do schist when your  
shy sweetheart needs a  
bump up the day ladder. I,  
his frau, and he, my fella.  
When night dunks, we go  
to our house, sweat and weight.  
When night dunks, our sickness  
remains elusive. When we were  
sworn in, we danced, were stern,  
wore jade through night and stage.  
You can't unsay it, entwined  
thru a dear baldness. So dab,  
be bold, bald, be bageled and  
weft with only refined rafters.

“We make if we choose,”  
writes my sister to my mother  
about her computer desktop.  
I have made a tabernacle of sadness  
and my sacrifices are emails  
and those seconds of trusty feminine  
empathy which compose a grand  
requiem of silence. The statuaries  
are still as they should be, devotions  
shadowy. In great cathedrals,  
you exchange money for a prayer  
to light a small votive and I love  
the woman who scrapes the wax  
and wears the kerchief. I am my own  
old woman. My dog drops a deuce  
in front of a townhouse I’ll never afford.  
In my childhood synagogue, modern  
angles of the eternal flame severed our  
connection with the past, which is fine  
provided we have a bright future.

What if our bones and blood vessels  
are just microcosms of the cosmos?  
Like whoa, have a cosmo. We are sitting  
on a porch, summery and starry, a cosseted  
coterie. It's 5'o clock somewhere. Somewhere  
too are kumquats and kindling, liver spots and  
lobster pots. One begins to feel overwrought.

What if our constellations, our kin, and our orbits  
are fixed? How relieving to be part of the celestial  
artery, clots and all. Thy body is thy grounding,  
groundling. Go commune with the cosmic mind.  
O to be not dead but cozy in the before and after,  
the shuffle-ball-change of the mortal coil,  
to be both astral gatekeeper and asshole keymaster.

# Metropolitania Triptych

\*\*\*

Turn of the century New Guineans added pompoms  
of cassowary feathers to their canoe prows.

Other items in their vessels: paradiscal plumes,  
rich spices, slaves for sultans. What comfort

does beauty provide? Why etch a seabird on  
a seafaring craft? Curators name them fetishes

or charms or religion, a great fiction we agree  
to disagree on. Ornate openwork carvings

curve gently skyward, scrolls in the styles  
of Eastern Indonesia. Dragons before,

human heads aft, arrow-shaped noses,  
ancestors whose blessings were sought.

A vast network of maritime trade.  
Chew betel, enter a trace, become a channel.

\*\*\*

Scholars can't agree on if the 16<sup>th</sup>-century bust  
of a female saint is Spanish or Netherlandish

but they do agree on her seductive lusterware.  
(It's all in the glaze.) She shares her space with

a number of Immaculate Conceptions, a belief  
that grew and grew due to a 17th century campaign.

And so they made it jeweled. She resembles  
the Virgin of Guadalupe with Islamic geometries.

A visible compartment in the saint's chest,  
a hinged opening on top of her head.

A thought experiment: Imagine sculpture stimulating  
devotion or technology enshrining capitalism.

Who is this lady? With gilded braids encircling  
her saintly ear or where you'd expect her ear to be?

Painted lashes, wisps of cracked wood like the mustache  
she deserves after four centuries of being worshipped.

\*\*\*

This hero or demon dates back one hundred years  
after Adam died, but before Noah's flood. One day,

we will all bear the name of a natural disaster—  
Katrina, Andrew, Harvey, Ike, Sandy, Audrey.

An el nino event by the Gulf meets a deluge over  
the Atlantic. They fall together breathlessly.

The docent describes the clay figure's makers  
as "once here on this earth" to telescope our distance.

Two women died in the apartment complex where we lived.  
One, was an old lady and the second, a young addict

whose outré velvet heels crushed the garden at midnight.  
To call someone a disaster is to ignore what is manmade.

Slaves realized Nebuchadnezzar's glorious rebuilding  
of Babylon, whose construction spurred cuneiform.

A few millennia later, the Iraqi site served as a military base  
for Polish and American soldiers here on this earth.

# Casa de las flores



This spring, I've seen several allium,  
bright balls of stupid, a pungent purple  
stalking the onion family. My father  
taught me about flowering things.  
Alfalfa is chlorophyll, seaweed is chloroform.

Your childhood was so weird. So much separates  
us—vocabulary, horticultural experiences,  
dietary adherences—that it's a wonder,  
it's a wonder, it's a wonder, crumb bun,  
the connections in our craniums,  
in our respective green thumbs.  
Oh, alabaster calcium, oh, Jamaican rum-rum.

Listen, we know that whatever will come,  
will grow. Whatever will come—pond scum,  
art gum, the common plum—will have  
to connect with cellular moxie.

I got down on my knees and prayed  
because I needed something to believe in  
and my own powers of observation  
seemed like a good place to start.

Amid grasshoppers' chirping chimes,  
bulbous eggplants on the vine,  
slender lengths of daylilies in twilight,

the grass was dry and prickly  
near the abandoned fire pit.  
It looked like an ancestral altar,  
ingenious indigenous mortared masonry.

I considered the sprigs and sprays  
of Queen Anne's lace and caught myself  
mourning its imperialistic name,  
then its classification as a weed.

The hairy plant itself lacks language.  
Some lavender grew dumbly by,  
as any plant ought, and when I  
pinched a bit and brought it to my nose,  
I breathed oh my god, oh my god.

Consider the red veins of the wild rose leaves,  
the glinting hilt of a piece of pyrite.  
I've heard tell—I've said it myself—  
Sonoran arroyos make a moonscape.  
What then sets a scene particularly earthly?

Lawns. Seeds manufactured, sodded and sown  
by people referred to as "landscapers"  
by some, "day laborers" by others,  
who some call nothing, not thinking of names  
or children or chicken dinners of others.

Or perhaps real earth is equatorial jungle, lush,  
dwindling by the day to make way for rubber plantations.  
But this is not a critique of late-stage capitalism,  
as eminently critiquable and unstoppable as it is.

This is not about making your mark, but  
finding your Mars. In the labyrinthine orbitals  
of the model eye, in indigo fibers of the rug  
upon which therapy dog sleeps.  
In the unconsidered, you can find it.

Ho!

First we approach the back of the beloved  
against a scrim of cinnamon striations.  
If my heart rate accelerates, even at all,  
I think I'm going to die. Juniper berries,  
pretty white trunks, ponderosa pines.

In a different dessert, across the world  
unspeakable things are happening.  
Over here, it is independence day.  
Weather changes so suddenly, afternoon storms.  
Therapy dog is distractingly unhappy.

In one desert, ancestral Puebloans.  
In one desert, wandering Jews.  
O pioneers, hallucinating among  
the red rocks. Thatch of dried grasses,  
pert yellow moths, crickets. Rest, heart.

## Summering in Tuscany

Sweat is the chief smell of my little cell  
and I am sideyeing every medieval hearth.  
Heat rash brushes my inner thighs.  
I don't even note the dampness in all  
the usual places, my pits, crotch,  
the small of my back, my underboob.  
How it blisters on my forehead and  
how it can be swiped away like  
so many credit card purchases.  
How close it comes to baking  
my brain. Every shower, a mikvah.

The pansy lumbered down the path and  
the plum tree shook its craggy branches.  
It was a plant party. Cinnamon roots thrust  
through the earth, stout and curled and dusty.

The apricot threw its arms in the air  
like it just didn't care, despite the sunburn  
gaining on its fleshy orbs. Late in the afternoon,  
sun shafts from buttercup to buttery,  
shadows cluster in byways.

Let lavender sing and lilacs be  
like, damn today was a good day.  
The sky kissed a tawny redhead's  
crown. Orchids turned into  
themselves where they feel safest.

A pendulous breeze suggested snacks.

Congratulations!

Boxy, built to the property line, but worse  
these townhouse complexes invade the neighborhood  
like teenage postules. They make me want things:

Space, laminate flooring, ownership,  
a garage to obviate the choice between  
parking under a tree and collecting birdshit  
or remembering my Dora the Explora windshield  
reflector, a painful reminder that we are  
from dorks and to dorks will return.

But then bright hibiscus and glossy gladiola  
stand out against the ochres and ecrus  
of concrete walls. The very wildness  
of the tropics backlit by the senseless  
transience of the city—neither planned,  
both blossoming through the cracks.

Our molting neighborhood lacks consistent  
sidewalks. Sometimes we walk on  
a flood-pitted road, sometimes a desire  
line carved through dying summer grass,  
sometimes edging orange-netted construction,  
sometimes on Belgian blocks of new blemishes.

Houston is a halfway city, not committed  
to a life of direction, nostalgic for the invisible past.  
Where oh where do I belong.

At the Oark general store, dozens of bikers  
and bearded irises, explosions  
of purple and leather. We've driven into  
the northwestern Arkansas federal forest with  
our Hillary bumper sticker. After all, there's  
a Clinton historic house—for Bill—  
about an hour down the road. How hard  
should I work to convince people that  
abortion legislation should be left up to  
women, as collecting kindling and fetching  
water once was here? Abortifacients, wild  
carrot, blue cohosh, vervain, squaw mint,  
spring in profusion in these—not mountains,  
but high and divided plateau. Dogs with jobs,  
an airedale with a dried gash on her neck  
looking like a shorn sheep, an alert daschund.

We plan to make a fire tonight, my sweet  
heart and I. We're a couple here  
a couple nights—marshmallows,  
sausage, beans, watermelon. So isolated,  
is my recurring observation. This place  
is the dream of the meditation tape—  
hear the breeze through creaking trees,  
see iridescent black butterflies,  
yes, even the woodpecker is charming,  
banging its small head against hard oak.  
Baby poop colored buds, verdant meadows,  
the distant whirr of a 4 x 4. We visit an artist  
couple at the mouth of the country road.  
She had magnificent looms, he made pottery.

I see you, serious-looking father and son  
eating eggs at the café. They're decked  
in full camo for turkey-hunting season.  
A teenage girl with cerebral palsy shuffles  
behind a waitress carrying blueberry pie.  
We take care of our own. Try to resist



using the overgrown path to the woods  
as a metaphor. Try not to blunt its sharpness.

## Kayaking the Bay

In the estuary, the esprit du corps was merry,  
the novelty of out-of-doors, anticipation of sore muscles  
—though it never quite happens where you think—  
see the fatty meat between thumb and forefinger.

We paddled in the Bay, kayaking tidal bores  
on a weekday. We were sorry for the state of the union,  
foreign wars, man versus man, man versus nature,  
man versus woman, the plight of whores, babies  
with low apgar scores, but it drained like an abscess  
when we stepped offshore. Quietly, it began to pour.

So not every day is Yom Yippur, sorry about  
incessant inside chores—sweeping floors,  
shutting drawers, staring at the closed door.

Pine needles fall  
like rain on the camellias.  
I could tell you where I am,  
but I'm more interested in  
where you are,  
spineless prickly pear.  
I'm partial to marshes,  
where land dissolves into  
water. I hate the suburbs  
where people dissolve  
into land. It's easy.  
It's so easy to sit on  
some bench,  
some pale green fungus  
blooming like sea sponges,  
like a field of blossoms.  
Discoloration, you might say.  
More like recolonization,  
star-like fungus substituting hues  
on a wooden bench. What colonizes  
your thought-clusters?  
Camellias come in blood red,  
buttercup yellow and moth gray.  
Mine are scarlet firestalk.

## A Skillful Flier

Bob the Bird Man speaks with the breeze.  
Every day, Bob the Bird Man migrates  
between a nondescript house in Galveston Bay  
and a spare wooden tower by the quay.  
It is hard to distinguish him from his neighbors,  
except for his bright red Diesel-burning car  
and the curved bill of his baseball hat.  
When it rains, which is often, Bob the Bird Man  
shivers like a warbler. When it swelters,  
which is often, Bob the Bird Man hovers  
like a hummingbird. He just gets hot.

Roseate spoonbills, the glamor pusses  
of the aviary used to turn on Bob the Bird Man  
but lately he's drawn to the power and speed  
of the Cooper's hawk, small and brown.  
The observatory has a thatched roof  
and several sugar-water feeders,  
papered with maps and sign-up sheets.  
Sometimes, people convocate, wide-eyed  
with binoculars. But truly, Bob the Bird Man  
is a solitary creature, alone among the marsh  
grasses, the offbeat melody of bullfrogs.

I want to tell you about these birds I saw,  
grackles pecking on the museum's meticulous lawn.  
I know the trash-compactor cracking of their caw caw calls,

the way they chatter together, forage with knifey beaks  
and keen eyes, in this certain slant of light—  
walking by with a bag of dog shit—iridescent.

Like mother-of-pearled mollusks, like an oil slick  
in the Gulf, black and blue. There is the sun,  
there is the light, and here are these dumb birds.

I want to give you a message from the untouchable  
and unnameable. *Don't fuck this up*, is one message.  
*Landscape is magnificent if your mind is receptive*,

is another. *This is for you and you and you*, is a third.  
So I made these bird-flavored tercets to nourish you.

## Beds I Have Known

Okra, we didn't know what to do with.  
And tomatoes in their vegetal variety—  
like their wintry opposite, like berries  
in the holly, a cardinal in snow.  
The corn was a joke, erect as soldiers,  
fruit sprouting crazily from their elbows.  
We had farm parties, farmers' almanacs,  
and hand-hewn a-frames. Some frondescence  
out of lexicon—berry briars in bramble,  
an herb wheel, a mint plot heathered with  
honeybees. And the wildflowers, homeless,  
painted, clumped up by the entrance,  
out of bounds—tiger lily, sweet pea,  
buttercup—and how we loved them.

## Mary Ruefle Poem

Mary Ruefle advised me to stand underneath the weeping  
Alaskan spruce—it was actually a cedar—and so I did  
for a few minutes, enough to narrate the thought  
that Mary Ruefle told me to stand underneath a tree.  
Then I went for a walk by the lake. Restless and skeptical,  
perceive, perceive, I commanded myself. I saw a teen  
writing in his journal, and jealousy rippled through me,  
for his focus and dumb face and all he doesn't know  
is coming after him. Consciousness is the brain turning  
on itself. I regret not bringing bug spray is just a distraction,  
or how silly to wear sandals in this muck. These thoughts  
doublestuff themselves into my mind's eye socket.  
Fire ants and spiders and unknown animals shuffle  
among the ferns. We're aware of cause and effect,  
consequence, sequence, we all know how this ends.

## **A Lyric Apologia in Four Parts: Humor, Music, Feminism, and Nature**

As a thirsty undergraduate, I enrolled in a graduate seminar on contemporary poetry. Our reading list was bifurcated into “official verse culture” and avant-garde units. Ever the eager student, I showed up on the first day prepared with highlighted passages I liked from the assigned prizewinning, bestselling poetry book. I am glad I kept my mouth shut, for once in my life. I was not in on the joke embedded in the syllabus. I, in fact, was the joke, a bourgeois pig, an aesthetic enemy of progress—or so I learned as the class proceeded to shred the collection’s accessibility, its narrative tendencies, even the author as a human.

That dismissive attitude towards lyric aesthetics continued through several more graduate seminars at the same institution, which privileged the avant-garde and experimental, the foundations of the Language school. I am glad I processed a lot theory then, when I was energetic enough for the gentlemen of the Frankfurt School and user-unfriendly manifestos. Although the collections on our reading lists were ethnically diverse, it seemed to me then, as now, that European men from the last century produced many of our foundational theoretical texts. There were some golden nuggets. J.L. Austin’s “speech acts” and Saussurean structuralism continue to influence my thinking on the power and possibility of language. Yet, a rift developed between my creative practice and my critical values.



It's been fifteen years since I embarked on formal poetics training, and I've toted a sense of unease with the alignment of avant-garde aesthetics and progressive politics. My work has unmistakably lyrical tendencies: a first-person speaker, sonic structures, natural imagery. Through my early critical lens, I could critique these in my sleep. Does the subject position perpetuate privilege of a unified self? Isn't feminist poetics marked by disjunctive syntax? And really, flowers?

Since the birth of the poetic tradition we recognize as lyric, a sense of ambivalence has hovered over the individual speaker. Deliberately adopting a persona was a topos in ancient Greek lyric, used to express ironic self-deprecation or feigned humility. In Horatian *recusatio*, the speaker declines to launch into epic poetry before first apologizing for his insufficiencies as a storyteller. And thus, throughout the history of oral and written literature in the West, self-expression has served as a foil for grand concepts about cultural history and nation building.

More recently, post-war literary criticism handily divided poetry into binaries such as raw or cooked, counterculture or establishment, stage or page, absorptive or impermeable, expressive or intellectual. In "Aesthetic Tendency And The Politics of Poetry," the manifesto of the Language collective, their beef against "the norms of persona-centered, 'expressive' poetry" was made explicit (Silliman 261). Confessional poetry, in particular, was criticized as "experience...digested for its moral content and then dramatized and framed," as if Sylvia Plath's output was the usual cud (Silliman 264).

Of course, there is plenty to critique about some iterations of lyric poetry: its corny reliance on epiphany; its ambition to transcend time; its lack of interpretive lens through which to view subjectivity and privilege; its qualities of naivety, sincerity, and self-centeredness; the artifice of overheard utterance, etc. Then again, as Virginia Jackson theorizes, perhaps the term lyric has become an empty vessel, negatively defined as whatever des rigueur criticism or competing aesthetics require to establish themselves as a better alternative. Put another way, it behooves us to remember that Tea Party apologists still credit the GOP as “the party of Lincoln,” when clearly its values have morphed over the past two hundred years into a diametric position.

If so, lyric has become a bogeyman representing a sort of conservative guilelessness. In *Lyric Shame*, Gillian White observes that “shame now attaches to the supposed politics of thinking of poetry as the lyric expression of a person,” a phenomenon affecting both composers and critics of poetry. White traces how the Language school’s “blend of post-structural theory, social critique...and advocacy of modernist poetic techniques” initiated a renewed anti-lyricism (White 11-17). Now absorbed into the academy, Language criticism and values, and most importantly, individual practitioners “engender an increasingly polarizing, intolerant critical context,” like the one I witnessed in my contemporary poetry class.

White illustrates how a particularly obstreperous Language disciple used his blog platform to name names, declaring which poets were “in” and

bullying those who belonged to the mock-worthy School of Quietude. “His willingness to assert categories and evaluate critical comments,” she writes, “returns questions of taste to the critical agenda as politics” (White 22). That is, one’s resistance to, or ignorance of, avant-garde techniques implicates not just one’s aesthetics, but one’s commitment to social and political wokeness as well. And disguising personal taste as moral high ground, no matter how divorced from market forces or institutional favor it claims to be, is dangerous.

Many works by women and people of color were summarily dismissed for frontloading “identity,” which became conflated with lyric subjectivity. That is, the perspective of such poets could not achieve the “impersonality” valued by this breed of avant-garde. Since Language poets have become preeminent critics and academic gatekeepers, this thinking has become pervasive. In *Thinking Its Presence*, Dorothy Wang’s seminal revision of content, form, and race, she recounts Marjorie Perloff’s tenure as MLA president. In speeches and columns, Perloff champions the heritage of “the literary” avant-garde, represented by figures such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and William Faulkner, which she perceives are being edged out of the curriculum by “culturally and politically oriented” work by unnamed but distinctively racialized writers (Wang 4-7).

No matter the formal qualities, works by women and poets of color are cast as autobiographical, representative, and ethnographic. Wang drily concludes that “being marginalized in one arena, as avant-garde poets and

critics have been, does not guarantee that one understands forms of marginalizations in other arenas” (Wang 10). Critics such as Evie Shockley, Anthony Reed, and Timothy Yu have also written about the marginalization and erasure of experimental poets of color through a limited avant-garde/lyric framework.

If the definition of avant-garde is due for expansion and revivification, so too is that of lyricism. In *Lyric Shame*, White radically recasts the Language/avant-garde and lyric/expressive binary. She argues that lyric is an interpretative framework, an underused tool to analyze a wide range of work. Limited to its schmaltzy aspects, lyric’s interventions in tone, irony, and figuration are neglected. White excavates innovation in the work of several women poets who’ve been subject to Language disapproval, from Elizabeth Bishop’s “metadiscursive” speaker to Bernadette Mayer’s “hybrid poetic-critical” meditations. A lyric-I can demonstrate a poststructuralist critique of a unified subjectivity or Butler’s gender performativity just as well as strategies available to a Language poet. After all, the genre’s endurance is a testament to its imaginative power.

For me, the last decade or so has been dedicated to reconciling this aesthetic binary, or, put another way, to repudiating the ideologies that punt lyricism into the cutesy corner. Lyric may be hazily defined, but, like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote in his decision about hardcore porn, I know it when I see it. In the spirit of Audre Lorde’s contention that “In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower,” I seek to

redefine and refine my critical and compositional hang-ups (Lorde 112). By viewing my poetic preoccupations with humor, feminism, music, and nature through an interpretive lyric lens, I can see more clearly how these motifs move through *Tropical Depression*—and claim space for my own contributions to the poetry world.

I don't remember alighting on the title *Tropical Depression*. At this point, it feels like the pun has always been there, dad-joking about private grief and climatic menace. Through themes of mental health and nature, the manuscript toggles more broadly between investigating the speaker's interiority and positioning her as a citizen in a broader cultural context. Hello, I'm Erika Jo and I'm a lyric poet.

### **On Humor**

Not only am I nursing *Lyric Shame* as per Gillian White, I am also susceptible to "Humor Anxiety" as diagnosed by Christina Pugh. In a 2006 article in *Poetry*, Pugh reports on "humor anxiety" as the institutional threat of "demoting poetry to the status of entertainment" through high energy, light tones, or a sense of emotional distance (Pugh 230). To me, the academy is starved of a good time, so the threat level seems quite mild. But if the aesthetic stakes actually are high, then well-executed humor is all the more powerful as a creative strategy.

Humor theorists surmise that comedy occurs when a "secondary script" emerges after the first becomes incompatible with reality. To use a hoary example: "A man walks into a bar. Ouch." In the first sentence, the

reader is prepared for a formulaic narrative in a familiar setting with set characters. That expectation is brought to an abrupt halt, perhaps painfully, when a different physical reality is developed. More specifically, according to benign-violation theory, humor occurs in the space between how things are (i.e. “bar” as lead pipe) and how things might be (i.e. “bar” as neighborhood watering hole). Like poetic techniques of rhyme or strong lineation, a benign-violation compels the reader to briefly imagine the potential of an alternate ending.

I’m reminded of Audre Lorde’s exhortation in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” to speak one’s truth within the space of the poem, to name the impossible in order to create new political realities. As well, in *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, Jennifer Andrews observes that humor and irony are discursive strategies to express “the contradictions and dichotomies that shape the lives” of Native women poets, especially as communities increasingly “blend ‘tribal traditions’ and ‘contemporary experience’” (Andrews 3). By demonstrating dueling realities, these writers are able to choose, on the page at least, their preferred or most authentic option. Notice that Andrews relies on a distinctly lyric perspective, which sees “the lives” of the poets as paramount to the form and content of their work.

Humor is experiential and contextual, hallmarks of the lyric genre. As Calista Anne McRae argues in her doctoral dissertation *Lyric as Comedy*, “lyric is a livelier, more paradoxical, and certainly less solipsistic genre than is yet recognized,” through the contributions of funny poems. In her discussion

of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, A. R. Ammons, Lucie Brock-Broido, and Terrance Hayes, McCrae elaborates that the quintet “enacts a self-revealing comedy of the mind and its often labored, blinkered, or illogical cognitive processes; each also creates a comedy of style, where language and form exceed and confound paraphrase” (McCrae abstract). Resistance to paraphrase will resurface when I address how maximalist music generates meaning that floats above semantic sense. For now, we’ll look at how the poetic mechanisms of “style...language and form” work as humor both technically and expressively.

In “Humor Anxiety,” Pugh defends poetry as especially suited to comedy. Formal conventions of rhyme and lineation can enact surprising reversals, which are the core of wit. The use of rhyme, for example, builds expectations that can be confounded or deflated. In the loose villanelle “We’re Not There Yet,” I create a sonic pattern in each stanza’s second line—“earflaps,” “perhaps,” “collapse,” “maps.” This regularity enables me to describe my friends’ children as “fatty laptraps” without missing a beat. The phrase is sonically expected and figuratively unexpected. Elsewhere, deranged rhymes, like “surgeon” and “sturgeon,” “liver spots and lobster pots” and “overwrought,” or sight rhymes like “gay” and “quay” force connections between unlike things. In its most basic definition, rhyme is a sonic correspondence between words. These phonetic associations enrich our field of verbal connotations.

Pugh also cites lineation, “both the principle of organization and the vehicle of expectation in poetry,” as a craft technique essential to humor (Pugh 228). The title “I Got Stoned and Went to the Rothko Chapel / and Nothing Happened” is broken precisely for comedic timing. The first line situates the reader in a meditative space, psychedelia notwithstanding, which is then collapsed into nihilism. This is a particularly delicious inside joke to myself, as I bridle against the barrage of poets who respond quite seriously to the Houston landmark. In my own small way, this break represents a feminist dismissal of the cult of AbEx painters who tidily marginalized women colleagues and family members.

In addition to rhyme and lineation, comedy occurs when registers mix, clashing high and low. In “Mindfulness III,” seeing “gamboling” and “this town sucks” in the same brief space provides a humorous swerve. Towards the end of “Cosmonautilus,” there are several moments where tonal security is displaced through sentence types—declarative, imperative, exclamatory—as well as wide-ranging allusions:

Thy body is thy grounding,  
groundling. Go commune with the cosmic mind.  
O to be not dead but cozy in the before and after,  
the shuffle-ball-change of the mortal coil,  
to be both astral gatekeeper and asshole keymaster.

References to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (e.g. the “to be” soliloquy, “shuffle...mortal coil,” “groundling”) coexist with intimations of the supernatural comedy *Ghostbusters*, which hinges on the coupling of a “gatekeeper,” played by Sigourney Weaver and a “keymaster,” played by



Rick Moranis. This energetic, associative, and unpredictable language is tethered to the lexicon of a presumed speaker.

My poem “Reach Out and Touch Faith” also plays on idiosyncratic juxtapositions. The title declares itself a spiritual meditation and homage to British synth-pop band Depeche Mode. From the first line, the word “icon” pivots from devotional object to a data file.

“We make icons if we choose,”  
writes my sister to my mother  
about her computer desktop

Both “icons” are ideograms—images that represent a larger concept—compartmentalized in function but common enough. The pun enables the poem to explore our contemporary worship of technology indirectly, setting them side-by-side or overlaid as a palimpsest, for contemplation.

Homonyms like “icons” (or “bar,” from the example of a joke structure above) are a major constituent of wordplay. Wordplay is a form of wit that teases out verbal dimensionality with great economy. From the titular *Tropical Depression* to a constellation of examples within, puns operate on several lyric levels simultaneously. As humor, the content of wordplay develops voice, traveling through a thicket of referents, political punditry, snippets of song, negative self-talk, etc. Wordplay also produces multiplicative music through a suite of sound, which we turn to now.

## **On Music**

Reliance on sonic infrastructure or musical “prettiness” is one of the least controversial attributes of lyric, yet my approach betrays my Language past. I’m interested in the materiality of language, its physical presence at the intersection of speech and writing. I define music as an extratextual space to make meaning through sound. It extends beyond the usual features of rhyme and meter to encompass a great range of wordplay, sonic expression, and verbal affiliation.

Harryette Mullen describes the “linguistic quirks and cultural references peculiar to American English as spoken by the multiethnic peoples of the United States” as her “familiar and humble materials.” With Mullen, I share a fondness for “word games, such as acrostics, anagrams, paragrams, lipograms, univocalics, tautograms, charades, homophones, spoonerisms, and palindromes that draw attention to the manipulable properties” of language (“Imagining the Unimagined Reader” 6-7). To Mullen’s hearty compendium, I’d add anaphora and assonance, chiasmus and zeugma, homograph and homophone and their beautiful child homonym. Many of these forms I learned through studying Latin rhetoric. They are established conventions for arranging language to greatest emotional or persuasive effect, which, from an opposite direction, recalls the specter of lyric shame.

To manipulate an individual word is to mess with our internalized rules about language. In “Spun Puns and Anagrams,” Mitchum Huehls asserts that puns provide “emancipation” from prescribed boundaries and “subvert the determining rules” of lexical relationships (Huehls 21). Puns are as old as

written language, with examples found in centuries-old Egyptian papyri and Roman inscriptions. The intention is not about determining the primary or secondary or even tertiary meanings as much as letting them exist together in their ambiguity. My “Eye/I” poem is one such example. The homophonic play invokes the lyric-I, while persisting as a straightforward semantic representation of an eyeball: “I have one good eye/I / and one bad one” or “My eye/I has scars.” It ends with the stanza:

To see things immediately  
I must close my eye/I  
and take dimensions  
on blind faith

Several meanings exist at once—to close one’s “I” is a joke about lyric poetry itself, and the self-absorption it presupposes. Yet to close one’s “eye” in order to see is perilous and paradoxical.

Music includes other techniques and figures of speech that produce moments of sonic affiliation. Some of my poems are acoustic echo chambers, linguistic experiments to extract meaning from the base materiality of English. In “Delovely,” I riff off Cole Porter’s song of the same name. I wanted to see if the modest phoneme D, a voiced alveolar stop, could replicate the romance of the original:

Deliriously in love, we debased ourselves,  
fishnet stockings and public proclamations.

I flaunted my décolletage and thought my  
thoughts in decasyllables...

In “Unpopular Opinion,” I was interested to see how the sound of “gossip” gets corrupted as it moves along: good, grown, goatee, gauntlet, goiters,

graces, gauche, governess, and gosling. Towards the more radical end of the spectrum, “A Bend” is a homophonic “translation” from a Polish poem. It is the poem most divorced from narrative or expressive sense in the collection:

Our durable bond winks  
and welches through silt  
and flotsam with wonder.  
It’s us with a brand, with  
an alternative band. Halt  
and do schist when your  
shy sweetheart needs a  
bump up the day ladder. I,  
his frau, and he, my fella.

I worried about including this poem in the manuscript, concerned that it would frustrate a reader more expectant of coherence. In one sense, its inclusion is a challenge, “benignly violating” assumptions built by digesting the collection in a lyric mode. In “A Bend,” a diffused sense of romance, a ghost poem almost, gives the reader a foothold in the sonic environment. The collected cacophony resists meaning, presenting a collection of words that makes no sense.

On the other hand, sometimes phonemes that fall short of words are most expressive. In Harryette Mullen’s discussion of the oral tradition from the African diaspora, “from the pygmy yodel to the field holler of the slave; from the blues wail to the gospel hum; from the bebopping scat of the jazz singer to the nonsense riffs erupting in the performance of the rap, dub, or reggae artist, “ she writes, “it is apparent that the voice may be ‘unshackled’ from meaningful words or from the pragmatic function of language as a conveyor of cognitive information” (“African Signs and Spirit Writing” 81).

Of course, to speak of sound on a page is an imaginative exercise. Utterance does not exist in written language, only its representations do. In “Like Wolves Watching a Child,” an onomatopoetic repetition breaks through the meditation:

Yip,  
I am getting old. Yip, I am voracious.  
Yip, mate with me. Yip, let’s play fight,  
which looks like real fighting....

Yipping intensifies the manic feeling sonically, while bolstering the extended metaphor. By exploiting the material of language in a lyrical way, I’ve found music that can withstand the experiential subjectivity of different vernaculars.

### **On Feminism**

In “The Humor Gap,” Christie Nicholson cites evidence that suggests that men and women find different things funny. She writes “men engage more with formulaic jokes, hostile humor and slapstick comedy... Women, on the other hand, prefer to tell funny stories about real life” (Nicholson 43). Women’s humor boosts group solidarity through shared experience, making a strong case in favor of feminist lyrical modes. Critics have found subversive feminist humor in several canonical women poets, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emily Dickinson, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Gertrude Stein is sometimes included, though some look askance and think: “not funny ha-ha, but funny strange.” Dorothy Parker is known for her wit, but rarely taught in women’s survey courses. For all of these writers, their distinctly women-

centered humor undermines the patriarchal canon. What about when humor is not present to ease feminist sentiment?

Before I came to Houston, I hadn't read Gloria Anzaldua, Marilyn Chin, Jayne Cortez, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, or Muriel Rukeyser. My aforementioned contemporary poetry professor was certainly not interested in their bald-faced lyricism, despite their unquestionable dedication to progressive politics. I contend that the academy is only partially able to process their praxis. The sociocultural reality is that men still dominate public spheres, while women's lives are private and unexplored. Put broadly, our inability to elect a woman president thus far testifies to American discomfort of women as powerful oratory leaders. Looking at the lineage of so-called identity poetics from a rehabilitated lyric perspective, I proudly claim the 1970s feminist chestnut that "the personal is political," whether delivered indirectly through humor or served straight.

Categorizing poets by gender can be murky business. Some argue that it others or diminishes the accomplishments of women poets. Amy Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop declined to publish in women-only anthologies. In 2006, *Poetry* ran an article co-signed by three women poets, recommending "that we ought to abolish the unpleasant term 'women's poetry'" ("Exchange" 322). In "Education of a Poet," Louise Glück laments what she perceives a limited ambition: "I'm puzzled not emotionally but logically, by the contemporary determination of women to write as women" (Leahy 312). It's prudent also to note the spectrum of gender and the dangers of biological determinism.

Finally, the category itself is blurry—is “women’s poetry” work by women, for women, about women? Does it only count as feminist if there are explicitly radical ideas?

However, looking at poetry through the lens of gender also yields rewards. This is often the context where unsung masters are reclaimed and where underrepresented concerns and methodologies are expanded. After the *Poetry* article came out against “women’s poetry,” Anna Leahy published a response in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*. In her defense of the term “women’s poetry,” she observes that “current tensions between our domestic lives and our writing and publishing careers are not unrelated to conflicts between domestic responsibilities and desire to write faced by women poets of previous centuries.” This parallelism is telling, citing both “domestic lives” and “publishing careers,” neither of which tend to crop up in literary criticism. Acknowledging male-dominated curricula, university faculty, and professional awards, Leahy continues, “if our formative training is gendered, it seems illogical that writing is easily un-gendered” (Leahy 312-314). Again, the connection between “training” and “writing” emerges as a stop against the concept of pure poetry. It also gets to the heart of my own lyric shame.

Threaded throughout *Tropical Depression* are feminine themes such as abortion legislation, the female body in pain, even Hillary Clinton makes a cameo. It is imperative for me to avoid the earnest tones of healing and

wellness, elements of feminist self-care that have become commodified past  
the point of sincerity:

I ail with Greco-Roman etymologies:  
hemorrhoids, diarrhea, cirrhosis,  
little bubbles of pain, what the good  
doctor would call complaints.  
("For the Little One")

We were sorry for the state of the union,  
foreign wars, man versus man, man versus nature,  
man versus woman, the plight of whores, babies  
with low apgar scores,  
("Kayaking the Bay")

... How hard  
should I work to convince people that  
abortion legislation should be left up to  
women, as collecting kindling and fetching  
water once was here?  
("Post Mortem: Bear Country")

Or we can fly to Costa Rica, but let's be real, the Zika tethers  
us to milder climes. I may get pregnant some day, perhaps  
("We're Not There Yet")

My feminism is present in my choice to use the lyric first-person, to own, on  
some level, my own voices. Beyond obvious feminist fodder, my poems  
discuss late-stage capitalism and the 2016 election, references to my Jewish  
faith and real love poetry for my real husband.

Another key theme in the collection is of course depression. Mental  
health is well-trod territory for poets. It's a tricky topic to perspectivize—both  
incredibly pervasive in American society and a personal manifestation of  
moods, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and genes. As I write in  
"Neighborhood Watch," there are "two ideas of woman / but only one can



touch a sprinkler.” Lyric lends a physically embodied speaker to my political and private poetics.

As Leahy illustrates, the patriarchy affects the process and the product of women poets. In “Reach Out and Touch Faith,” I recognize the “seconds of trusty feminine / empathy which compose a grant / requiem of silence.”

Women are conditioned to manage other people’s feelings, spending precious moments to soothe fragile egos. Poets are not exempt. Each time I massage a message to collaborators and administrators, I know it is energy spent not writing. Again, I’m reminded of Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” particularly the clarion call: “your silence will not protect you.” I’ve found I love to speak on the work of other women.

This year, I presented at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, where Lynn Keller was keynote speaker. I was kvelling to meet the author of *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics*, which seeks to dismantle that dastardly lyric/language binary and listens closely to “necessary innovation” in contemporary poetry by women, from free verse to funky. At lunch, I asked about her recent scholarly pivot from feminist poetics to ecopoetics. Her reply began with a confession that she has always loved the outdoors. I felt a crack in the graduate training that insists on argument and relevance in the critical conversation. Of course, she discussed her university’s interdisciplinary center on humanities and environmentalism, her background on the pulse of contemporary verse, the themes beginning to converge across the fields. But Keller’s impetus for

*Anthropocene* began with herself—her body, her interests, and her experience.

## **On Nature**

It is only appropriate to turn to nature now. Writing about nature is a hallmark of lyric poetry, especially in the Romantic tradition of the sublime, when Dorothy and William Wordsworth wandered lonely as two clouds floating above a field of daffodils. It is easy to flatten the richness of their contributions, to conceive of the natural world as merely a vehicle for subjective revelation. Dorothy Wang points out that many Romantic practitioners were radical activists—Wordsworth distributed pamphlets; Blake was tried for sedition; Coleridge wrote journalism and social philosophy; and Byron died as a volunteer in a political war. It is a refreshing reminder that the lyric aesthetic once aligned with progressive politics.

My own “Praise Psalm” ends on an orgiastic note, not necessarily revelatory but certainly adjacent:

The hairy plant itself lacks language.  
Some lavender grew dumbly by,  
as any plant ought, and when I  
pinched a bit and brought it to my nose,  
I breathed oh my god, oh my god

I relate that the “hairy plant...lacks language” as a stand against instrumentalizing flowers as a pathetic fallacy. However, perceiving them has made the speaker “dumb” as the poem concludes. When I rhapsodize in “Poem About Feelings and My Dog” that “I want to be a dumb plant,” I am not being ironic. Despite recent research on plant cognition, I envy their status

outside the realm of human consciousness, which I strove throughout the manuscript to show it a gift and a curse. Botanical muteness also heightens their power as visual images in a manuscript so otherwise dedicated to sound.

The Romantics were building on a poetic tradition in which natural imagery served in pastoral elegies and erotic sonnets. The lineage stretches back to the Song of Songs, collectively composed before the birth of Christ. In the poem, a woman, whose self-celebration presages that of Whitman, proclaims herself “a rose of Sharon, / a lily of the valley.” Her lover answers, praising her “plants” as:

an orchard of pomegranates  
with choice fruits,  
with henna and nard,  
nard and saffron  
calamus and cinnamon,  
with every kind of incense tree,  
with myrrh and aloes  
and all the finest spices.

This Edenic catalog combines the thrill of ancient trade routes with the domestic haven of a well-tended orchard. As imagery, flowers regularly extend beyond the visual into the olfactory. Some translators naughtily chose to replace “plants” with “thighs,” while describing the lady’s virtues. Her lover goes on to clumsily compares her teeth to “a flock of newly-shorn sheep” and her nose to “the tower of Lebanon,” forever cementing plants, as opposed to fauna or local architecture, as the romantic standard for blazons.

Provocative references to the botanical world have wended through the last three hundred years since Romanticism. William Carlos Williams brought the motif to an American Modern milieu in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower.”

Sylvia Plath castigated her “stupid pupil” for seeing the “too red” tulips during the height of confessionalism. Any given poem by HD, Dickinson, Bishop, or Stevens might contain a plant or two. More recently, Vievee Francis’s anti-pastoral, Joyelle McSweeney’s necropastoral, and the development of ecopoetics have challenged and reshaped the tradition.

With all of that said, for me, talking about plants is less an aesthetic value than a phenomenological assurance. Like a dog sees landscape in greyscale, my eyes see in flora. As I write autobiographically in “Flower Genius,” “My father / taught me about flowering things.” Growing up in suburban New York, we had garden-variety plants on our acre—hydrangea, impatiens, a rose bush, irises, crocuses, snapdragons, honeysuckle. Even as I list them for illustrative purposes, I am greedy to name more. I love the loamy smell of nurseries and their diurnal rhythms. In college, while getting indoctrinated to the cult of avant-garde poetics, I also worked on a vegetable farm.

*Tropical Depression* is rife with “getting slapped by pallid lilac bushes,” “yellow blooming jasmine, a vine / in confused profusion in February,” “the red veins of the wild rose leaves, / the glinting hilt of a piece of pyrite.” The book depicts bird-watching and kayaking estuaries in the Gulf. Poems like “Congratulations!” demonstrate encroaching development in Houston:

But then bright hibiscus and glossy gladiola,  
stand out against the ochres and ecrus  
of concrete walls. The very wildness  
of the tropics backlit by the senseless

transience of the city—neither planned,  
both blossoming through the cracks.

As with wordplay, both the sound and content of these plants are important. In this poem, the stately Latinate “hibiscus” and “gladiola” project against the brutish “ochres and ecrus.” This twists the paradigm—native tropical wildlife is the civilizing force against the city’s barbarian concrete.

With a similar contrast, Tony Hoagland quipped, “When I compared humanity to a flower growing in the shadow of a / munitions factory, / it may be that I was being unfair to flowers” (Hoagland 30). This passage comes from “Misunderstandings,” a poem from *Application for Release from the Dream*. After it was released, I interviewed Tony about some of its themes, especially about countering the drama and pain of selfhood in poetry. I asked if the “observable world can act as an antidepressant.” He responded:

The manifold world is our rescuer from the bottomless implosion of subjectivity and psychology. The external world, especially nature, is beyond us, beneath us and above us, and more real than us; thus it is a life preserver. To look closely is always to lose self-importance. Wonder is the drug of choice for the discriminating user.

This exposition brings us back to the Romantic ideal of wonder, filtered through a modern scrim of psychoanalysis. So be it. While we find in poetry a reminder of an external world “more real” than our personal “subjectivity,” it is often through lyric psychology that we access it.

### **Coda: Individuality and Community**

In his *Diaries*, David Sedaris describes an incident in French class reminiscent of my own compositional process:

Today the teacher called me a sadist. I tried to say that was like the pot calling the kettle black but came out with something closer to “That is like a pan saying to a dark pan, ‘You are a pan.’”

I love the serial misunderstandings embedded in this short section—first between Sedaris and his teacher, next between the pans. In “Art,” I dramatize the failure to connect through words by structuring two speakers:

But just as no two people see the same  
colors, what you hear is not what I’m  
saying. Not conversations as much as  
serial misunderstandings, proximate  
in space.

In this poem, I present semiotic frustration as a romantic scenario. After all, one yearns ardently to say the damn thing, whatever it is, and have it heard. In “Translation,” I again set up the notion of conversation to demonstrate this collapse between the speaker, who identifies as a “21<sup>st</sup> century girl,” and the author of her imaginary source text:

Mostly laughs, but I suspect  
a degree of darkness. She  
disagrees stridently with my  
simple diction. We wrangle.

In a language with such  
exquisite words, like  
exquisite or nuthatch,  
why keep saying trash?

She seems to know  
a lot about my language  
but she will never really  
know how I understand  
my language.

Writing always feels like a translation. First, an impulse is shaped into language, then letters. Once processed through American idioms, diction is

triple-filtered through the spatial and textual and sonic liberties available in poetry. It is through the innovation and vulnerability of others that these liberties are expanded.

If pure meaning is always slipping through words, what does linguistic success look like? I'd argue that language's highest accomplishment is the chorus of voices who use it. Language prospers in the work of people who enable it to be heard. I don't mean merely through the texts of writers. Poetry moves forward through a collective pushes—the context of the text—that may look small from the ground.

Gloria Anzaldua ran a publishing concern; Jayne Cortez founded a theater company; Audre Lorde orchestrated glorious takedowns of white feminists during academic conferences; June Jordan developed a “poetry for the people” workshop in Berkeley. I doubt instant rewards were found in each anthology proof, each production rehearsal, each conference paper draft, each teaching day. However, these contributions are lyric poems—personal efforts—of the highest order. John Stuart Mill famously contended “that eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard.” Needless to say, I disagree with the notion of an individual poet performing cloistered solitude.

As I conclude this paper in Portland, I can hear the noisy squawk of the AWP conference emanating from the convention center. Yes, this literary bonanza has pockets of snobby cliquishness, as well as financial pressures for publishers to recoup their investments. But it is also a reminder of the real work literary citizens do to publish and promote writers, regardless of

aesthetic affiliation. Some folks bemoan the proliferation of creative writing degree programs. I say, the more empowered voices, the better. Poetry is a conversation, a confession, a provocation, an overture to intimacy. Let's all join.



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