ABSTRACT

BETWEEN SENSE & NONCE

By Angela Lyn Weaver

The poems in this collection attend to the potential lushness of language and meaning. The risks taken often involve finding the balance between sense and nonce. When it works, the poems encourage a productive negotiation and discovery of aesthetic and sense-oriented meaning, the foregrounding of meaning as a material construction. The poems are most often free verse and tilt from memory’s landscapes and inhabitants to explorations of relationships that sometimes succeed and sometimes collapse. Those poems that record lost hope nevertheless struggle to maintain trust between poet and reader.
BETWEEN SENSE AND NONCE

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Sloped Garden

She traces circles for shrubs,  
left to right on graph paper squares.  
Lots of perennials this time around,  
checks for well-mannered vines and x’s  
for the bittersweet that strangles trees.

She sees herself choked  
by wisteria; it climbs uterine walls,  
unpruned and rampant, shooters  
up twenty feet at growing tips.  
She plots the railroad tie stairs  
straight up in back  
where builders will cut the hill  
to carve a foundation  
with bedrooms for every child.

She tracks the retaining wall  
of thick chunks of stone  
pulled from the creek,  
where her daughters might play.  
The bones of the garden:  
Japanese maple branches,  
shagbark hickory for border,  
a split-rail fence spilling with birds,  
butterfly plants, and parsley-like  
hosts for the larvae.

The paper smudged full, she numbers the plan,  
fourteen, folds the paper in the pages  
of EBB’s sonnets, resumes folding  
diapers, slow, slow, in a trailer with no yard.
Prettyland

There, no branches hang, no right angles. 
I want the sun blocked by the treetops, 
so I'm safe in a place for secrets 
that I could shout so loud the doves 
would startle, drop needles and cedar twigs 
and still no one would know I came here; 
no sounds reach to or from the house.

No one else travels beyond webs and thorns, 
to the underbelly where the wind 
can’t blow enough to feel, just to see 
in the sway above my head. The only thing: 
needles soft as wet hay. 
Pill bugs and doves look on as moss crawls 
on rocks, slides whole like yards of fabric.

But it wasn’t here this summer. 
When the doves move and part the trees 
glints of sun make it to the silt, 
reflect on the grey-brown tarp 
of leafless trees, into the air 
around me, and I rest on the floor, staring 
into the colorless canvas, the new silence.
Snake Feeding

Your unhinged jaws lurch forward, 
tilt toward its fin; it flips, 
slaps the light snow on the rock bank. 
I watch, boots sink and suck 
mud each step, and still, 
you don’t move—unable, so close 
to full, when you are not afraid?

The fish, I decide, is valuable. 
I spin, find a v-tip stick longer than you 
in the snow-slick leaves, rub red fingers 
to warm them for its deliverance.

Your tiny bones relax like a ribbon, 
unravel under the scissor-trap, release. 
The minnow falls to the chilled waters 
and sinks: a tin penny. 
I want it to swim for you.
Broken

A bottle’s neck clasps sidewalk cracks,
nestles in the grass; intimate slivers
litter the plush of a broken goose,
the one I played with as a child.

A dark cushion drops my shoulders
as night sighs me to my knees,
wet with the mud of the hole I’ve dug,
slicing worms with mom’s garden spade.

My goose let me fly in dreams;
we trembled in air, lost our balance to tip
out of bed and bumped our shins
on the world together.

Now, unprotected, flown
to the sidewalk alone, it grasps
my arms again and leaves
bruises in the shape of wings.
Long Night

The dream brings snapshots
of my sister—she eats pickles
from a Mickey Mouse plate
early in the night.

We whisper twinkle twinkle,
backs down, and stare at a poster-strewn ceiling.
The ska band background thumps purple blue
overhead, melts to a trickle on walls.

She does not choose to hear
my lullabies, wants to fade away.

Articulate, we write separate under
the same wet leaf-pile, scratch out
the air we already breathe.

Awake now I mean to call her
but refuse again to dial. Certain that tone
is her voice again, she lullabies me to dream,
sings please hang up and try again.
Petersburg

Hushed voices shim through
the walls of a Petersburg childhood,
the way tension dangles
on the edge of syllables,
dissolves through plaster.
It was never mom and dad;
they never let me hear
their fighting, so I grow sheltered.

That edge of words
fades when we move away
from Petersburg neighbors,
the ones who hid behind the shed
with shotguns; I let it
slide away, forget it
until years later when mom whispers
to the phone: The doctors are wrong.
The forced forms of sound shiver
until it’s only the syntax of speech,
the block-it-out-ness too much for sense.

Her ribcage tightens, limbs still,
afraid this breath will be the last
before tears, that to breathe
is too much like life.

I don’t wonder what she means;
I’ve heard the argument before,
but still I listen, watch her slide
down, back to kitchen wall,
bended knees above the floor
until she sees me, reaches out
as if to touch my face
and with trembling hand
closes the door.
Solid Precision

Her dim nights fill with sewing,
fabric sieges in rows. She makes
dolls from scraps and leftover clothes.
We leave each untouched, lonely eyes
that open and close to girls’ *rock-a-byes*
under the tree that early morning.
Kisses on foreheads at bedtime
that night were soft anyway,
but the photo she snaps to remember
her work still lingers for years.
It’s the look on her face,
one of those instants that someone records.
Narcoleptic Carl

When I was a manager,
my employees would prank-call security
and leave me with the nuisance
of placating a narcoleptic rent-a-cop.

I’d let him in the side
entrance of my smoke-yellow office
and lead him with me
on bribery walks in the store.

Okay, Carl, you sit here—
I’m gonna get into this little safe
and rustle up some change.
One day, I went to the safe

and Carl was asleep.  I looked
around, crushed a twenty
in his palm, and told his
supervisor, I found him this way.
Women with Markers

Stay clear of Jack, girls
He’ll break you in half
Urinate on the stick
Mozambique’s a trap

Think beyond yourself
Fight freedom’s run
Bells toll for children
Even foreign ones

Don’t look down now
Jerry Robins is a jerk Shit
Tide’ll get that stain
How hard you gotta twerk it

Pray for me God (to who)
Jenny is a whore on beer
Can see her down the block
I was here last year

Your ad could be here
Your dad could be here
Please be a sweetie
And wipe the seatie
On Paper

We had lunch a few times and spoke of families, the Brady’s and Cleaver’s. They were nothing like her family, or anyone’s really. Now she asks me to help write her mother’s eulogy. She says I’m neutral; I’ve never met her mother or heard the stories.

So we write, polish sentences as smoothly as she daily polishes the pineapple crystal bowl her mother gave her. Her mother watches, afghan-covered on the couch, and I’m nervous, afraid pen to paper might end what’s left of her.

She starts the stories, *My brother left home at fifteen* and I know I can’t write about this woman *She used to leave us home for days* because we can’t revise lives like words. *I moved out and got married to get away* She’s still here, hears us in a patchwork stare—*We all love her now, but then…*

we watch the woman not gone, listen for a wheeze; *I hope it happens soon,* she says.
A Struggle in Acting
Ars Poetica

Slip beneath chronicles, myths of upbringing,
falseness of diction, inevitable joys.
Under them circles relief from the skimpy.

Create waves, anti-myths laced
with truth, sheltered in a swelter of words.
When the steadfast ripples, consider a start.

Layer lives like wet sand, let them collapse
but rebuild, no wreck of roughshod days.
Cracked walls are cuts of flavor, Midwestern spice.

Liken immersion to the spreading of notions
then think of a basket—no, a coffee can, rusted.
The past is the trickiest act one plays.

Spin readers upward to avoid suffocation.
Even then, never forget to ask: where are they,
and, how close are we to possible?
The Will to Stay

It’s been done, this slow
dying. He’s nothing new.
Even raspy complaints, stress
for his soft wife, get no mention
when doctors go home, leave them alone.

The move is momentous
after 40 years grounded, closer to work
for her but away from him during hard times.
Not typical. Only half his sons show
to load the U-Haul on Saturday.

He refused to move, sure he could still tend
the garden. Now tomatoes fall to rot
as he sits in a hospital bed. She tells him
the new yard is trimmed and mowed,
not that she paid the neighbor kid.

He might see this new home,
his chair ready, a precise mimicry
of the old room. Or he won’t. Then
another man will sit in a chair, dying.
Or the house will be torn down for the access road.
September 11

As we talk, it seems
that’s what to talk about, but
she hasn’t had time to watch
the news, read a paper, not
like me, staring at coverage
for ten hours that day.

So I don’t know what to say.
Caring about other people’s problems
—carry-on bag numbers,
mosque security, poster faces
in faraway subways—a luxury.

Winter looms, grass crumbles
underfoot, leaves brown and drop
limp in the rain this year.
Her kids’ clothes, layaway, lost
this weekend if the bill’s not paid.
Rent’s overdue and the landlord, gut over belt,
makes cash advances she can’t accept;
she hides behind closed blinds
from the husband who tries wrestling
back into her life for a week;
he carries tales of a new pair
of Levis he’s interviewing in.

And she’ll take him back, someone to watch
the kids, hoping to enroll in school, anything
but part-time hours at the mall,
though she gives up a scholarship to keep her hours
and keep her kids in winter clothes.

She doesn’t say any of this,
only stares and puffs a GPC,
asks, did you say something about a war?
when I hand her children paper
American flags.
Little League, 1979

for John Weisenberger

A boy, heavy for his age, a few years yet away from glasses, squints once from a shadow into the partial sun above deep right field, sucks a dusty breath, and lifts his arm above his head, fingers spread inside oil-stretched leather. He shifts left, back, right, under the arc of the sun-glinted ball and this time, despite the import of the game, the weight of the late inning, it thuds into his glove.

The faint scent of sweat and leather fades after twenty long years, not like the dust smell; the red stitches against the foggy sunset of the ball. Secreted on a shelf, boxed among cards, it ages with him.

I, too, age with him and think: I'll never know him for as long as he's held this memory, never understand emotion as pure.

Until he slides the ball into a taped box labeled “careful, fragile,” when I move away, a gift better than words, as though he’s sensed abstract need build over years, and he needs me to have confidence in the shadow of a familiar word that lurks nearer daily, dares us: succeed.
Shopping Around

This lady testing juice (the Kroger brand at left, the national at right) forgets her past each morning, behind her paper stand. She didn’t notice Wendy, who bought potatoes, milk, no juice. Our tester never knew remembrance came down aisles in frozen sections. For years our tester’s childhood was subdued, not repressed, just missing recollection—until this little woman asked for coupons without a glance to her. Then years of lies to friends, her mom, the individual wrongs she’d forgotten, formed again. The sighs at night when Dad was late came back when faced with this face. His mistress. “Want a taste?”
Soil Building

In composition, we are stark, rock cracked
to sand, even as humus creeps to fill pores.
Ours are transparent acts, designed to avoid
desire for bloodmeal and wood ash.
No one denies us the desire to smother.

Structures—dirt mound, cucumber vine—
barren and exposed now under drips, bald
when tested under family conversations; acidic
results, still. Bronze fennel brings ladybugs
to aphids, can we rely on such things for our resolve?

Drainage is trouble and we are impulsive,
though we dry that issue in time, sop its remains.
Frankness reveals low pH and partial sun.
Exposed, we search for groundcover,
something credulous and rustic for texture.
II
Cold Frame

We long to extend the season, to begin in early spring, throw plastic covers, avoid the frost that’s sure to stilt speech cool evenings outside the garden. Imagine—you and I are a cold frame, faces tilted south, surviving well into the winter. In our bottomless box we take root, lift the lid on warm days to prevent overheating and rot. When we fail, we take comfort in mulching next season’s failures.
Three Kinds of Stares

Chapped lips, in a request for a playful kiss,
drop relaxed; eyes close slowly, with a sigh:
    warm, a coming storm swallows the clean sheets
    and we chase one flung from the line.

A slight grin and downward stare,
shoulders back but askew:
    wet mornings under the 75 overpass--you and I
    shoulder to shoulder walk to Shell, wait for Triple A.

Light wrinkles follow a squint,
cheeks lift, pull back from thinned lips:
    moonlit rivalries, breaths into gloveless hands;
    we follow the dim arc of a foul ball, missed.
Some Lies Matter

Forgetfulness minds me to be wary of images in unaided flashes.

I intuit their origins before rounding the corners to remember a past made from concentrate. Troubled in the remote adjustments of treble, halted in such progressions of unselfhood, I find myself asking for a longer and more refined shadow, this one so squat and connected, its feet grounded, its stats crunched like grape nuts.

It’s then I pretend that I’m feeling.
The Day

He whirls surprised, round the yellow room,
knowing exactly now, for the first time.

Never in daydream or night-tossing
near his wife, large bland woman she is,
did he, could he, know it—

but I assumed,

felt okay voicing it first,
since I get his good hours, morning caffeine-buzz hours,
drifting afternoon hours, occasional midnight
Sam Adams hours. Not the limp-look-hours
he gives her, as he’s crushed at her six a.m. dragging-ins
leaving late the crumply other man
I imagine her with.

Of course he whirls
with that look through stirred smoke,
as the radio screeches the song he made
my song. (It was then I first assumed
he was falling with me, tripping beyond her.)

But he didn’t know.

I turn my back to him as he whirls
to test the truth.
Forget Guilt

The blue glint of muted TV screens slivers our midnight walk; we picture children asleep behind the windows. We walk silenced through his suburb, not hand in hand, and I listen for all this to shatter with the memory of her voice.

We explore now after dark beers, while she’s at work, third shift casino. Contact, sighs, sleep: minutes push us closer to the end of her shift.

Asleep, he struggles as I cover him with her mother’s knitted throw. I leave to watch the sun rise alone.
Hiding

Over lies relationships crackle, burn up.
Never hesitate when you need to speak and
you and I together become truly
decadent pagans.

Reconsider in unison every look you
wipe away, decide on the face you’ll keep up.
Make it one you’re proud of in solitary
moments of thinking.

Wait, no. Hide your anger behind clenched fingers,
eyebrows tight together for me, and lose it.
Hold a laugh in, stifled like sneezes. Fake it.
Honesty kills love.
Sycamores on the Ohio

I cross the bridge too fast
to look back, fight a semi for a lane,
his head still pressing the window in sleep,
and pass the midfrozen forest below.

Months of roiling snow have melted
with rain into the river’s brown-black slew.
Water crawled up branches, the great cusps
frozen with tonight’s coldest air,
so only the gaunt tops of trees sway
as we pass under a concrete-filled night.

He twitches in his sleep, though frozen
in cramp at the neck. Nothing will save
us. On this tri-state digression,
lit by fluorescents, treetops fail to move us.
Winter Blue

I dread the winter sky
and spring unfurls above me,
giggles at my artificiality
in thin cedars bent by snow.

I love a man,
though strangers in heat,
tickled thought of his lips.
He will. Will again.

So today I dread alone.
And the man will disappear,
a toothbrush left behind
in the snow. I will find it
in spring, among a washcloth drift.
The memory will drip back
as winter tears the soil in return.
Not Lost

Without love of something tangible
—cold hardwood floors,
rain-slick hammocks—

the word is empty, wilted, plain.
Not imaginable, no, something to restrain.
Love something tactile.
The clutch of soul mates is vague; you lose
this love, it’s out of the fates.

Love warm blankets; it’s okay.
Stay out of the fates’ human
path of loss this way.
For Murmurs

We separate love and \textit{in} love the way of friends and lovers, sure to choose is wrong; if forced to choose, the yellow or red bouquet? When lines are clear we see them both belong, admit our love to friends with wit, with ease. Our love to lovers stresses \textit{in} to hold back our fears: all the same without duties. Distinctions people give themselves fold. So I refuse to say in love. It seems unnatural: \textit{I love you, but I'm not in...} Allow uncertain words, and ramble dreams, suggested borders reinforce taboo. And only then we'll wish for murmurs. \textit{Out of love?} they'll ask. We'll answer, full of doubt.
Separation

The nights here are too quiet.
But early, crisp before morning glories
wilt in the sun, a chainsaw song melts from forte
on the air. The scent of pine reaches me
while I peer over the woodpile and the breeze drops
dust on his boots. I curl my toes against the mud
and frosted grass, see shapes in steam clouds
drift from his forehead. I slip inside unseen
and wait, again, for the day.
Hold, Please

I decided this morning before my first coffee
to put my life aside, perhaps a month, a year,
revel instead on the cusp of others’ days.
I’ll let my sister refinance her fifteen-year mortgage,
my neighbor paint his bathroom yellow,
the Clinique-counter woman catch a makeover,
the smart redhead down the hall end a dissertation,
a second cousin deliver twins six hours apart.
I’ll stay here until I decide what here means,
eat leftover pork chops and read romance novels,
wait for someone to ask me back to the easy life again.
If Snowflakes

As a child, I rubbed my eyelids
to witness light and color blur:
the search for an unguarded,
thoughtless second, for repetition.

Today, you still try to convince me
that we are not the same as anyone
here before, even though so many
have lived to die since anyone began
to keep count. Billions compound.

I need proof from you, a formula
or theorem, but you can’t prove true
individuality. You say I am one
whose experiences deviate, if only by virtue
of construction or chance. Separate.

You gloat: I repeat myself. I’ve not
found that second; meditation is taught.
In Carnal Flashes

Adorned to abandon a woman,
he lives in carnal flashes.
This day of storm, she poses
in receding heat, a shapemaker
of fixed form over serious remains,
leftovers of the relationship:
tapes, mohair sweater, photos.
Such acuity, even the rain pauses
to watch her pack in muted light.
He takes a print in surprise—
open eyes and curves, the fade.

He develops a line of drivel
and wet hair, backlit against the vinyl
curtains, spells his discontent
with the letters of memory, leaves
it sealed for the postman to smear.
With the hint of a breast, with venery,
he stuns her, rush hour driver opening
mail in the car. He hopes such acts
overcome design, senses it will remind her
of fire-retardant sheets, the ecstasy of typicality.
The Way

How long I'll get to stay is unknown.
If your love will endure today is unknown.

Under the dimmed canopy we sleep.
The life we'll have to pay is unknown.

No one else sees you shudder in your sleep.
At midnight the desire to betray is unknown.

You laugh as rain blankets your shirt.
To forget is to remember the way is unknown.

I sob through the black edges of winter day.
You think in pastel to ensure grey is unknown.

I tremble at the shadows of days soon passed.
When you mouth Angie, yesterday is unknown.
Talk of the Falling

She speaks through the box like a tithe; a confession of rollaway beds, waking to thoughts of food and prenatal yoga, wanting to know what happened.

It’s all in the creeping verisimilitude: man and she—a ten-thousand foot view of a quondam trinity. The priest says it was chemical. Unhealthy cognitions.

They fake average all evening, consider tomorrow. Leave it up to speculation about access, a reflection punishing voracity. Man’s curry, favored, or his luminosity, rejected.

They speak less and less and forgo conclusions, a fallback up front without talk of the falling. Discussion is prepackaged, the way novice recluses may be ready for.
No One Answered

He said he’d call her tomorrow.
She said why wait til tomorrow.

She said the Victoria’s Secret shopping was for him.
He said nothing fit him.

He said he wasn’t sure where their life was going.
She said he’d better ask for directions.

He said take two rights, north a mile, it’s on the left.
She said he needed to think before he spoke.

He said the apartment needed a man’s touch.
She said no man was going to touch it.

He said he was leaving tonight.
She said okay.
Beyond Articulation

Shorn apprentice of the thin profession, I am lost.
Leave me by your slack continent of ardent lashes, freed.
You’re merging your words, you used to say
with a rotund robin inflection—cluck, cluck, cluck:
are-tick-you-late—just the tip of the tongue slips
out/in like hints. You aren’t coffee or cream. See?

Suspended: raised above the grass, uncowlike,
with a bent toward, a propensity for, an inclination to,
wait on it, you will be fulfilled. Over, over
your envelope’s scripts clasp, pending.
Wonderful bright, not the high IQ kind, but splendid.
Imagine swirls, the gristle of cement and loam
pushed into water with an apparently unrelated hoe,
like bricks sucking up eggshell paint, thirsting
to be artificial, the next sextant horizon again.

New surface tension spreads beyond the frostbelt
as walls hover in your sleep and render melted rifts.
I wanted great lists of blends, words in the sand.
We’re Always Lost

Our meeting is on a cold night.
Bare branches sift snow into our hair
and streetlights sputter yellows
against the one car parked at the curb.

He raises his voice in the polite way
women do at grocery stores when baggers
smash oranges into bread. I won’t answer
to it and cover my mouth with a scarf.

Speaker answers: Go to A
Speaker leaves: Go to B
Snow clings to each eyelash, 
melts as I match his stare. Then: 
Yes. And his skin tightens. Yes I did. 
And I can’t take it back, as they say.

Would you? he asks. Take it back, 
you mean? No, he says. Finish your answer, that is, he says. Oh. What more is there? Nothing, he says.

Speaker is elusive: Go to C 
Speaker is lucid: Go to D
Snow clings to each eyelash, 
melts as I match his stare. Then: 
he blinks, lowers his eyes. Blows
thin steam into his hands, a sigh.

I decide to run now, but the snow
has turned to slush, and, each step,
I must calculate tread and intent.
I want to know if he watches me leave.

Speaker reflects: Go to C
Speaker continues: Go to E
C
How can nothing remain of something
that hasn’t yet disappeared?
He still stands, shoulders hunched now,
in the quiet light of a late-night street.

If there’s nothing left to tell, are we
to be silent? Or still? No, it’s time
to leave. We cannot go the way we came.
A snow bank blocks our path.

Happy ending: Go to F
Sad ending: Go to F
D

The conversation goes the way I expect. He has known, almost, the whole time: This isn’t working, will never work. We aren’t “the one” for each other.

I want to have lied to him just now, to have held him and said “No. You’re wrong, just jealous, honey.” It’s been too late to do what’s right for some time.

Lost: Go to F
Reunited: Go to F
Nearer our street, holiday lights dangle, 
not lit so close to New Years and so late. 
Boxes emptied of toys, tools or clothes 
line the street for pickup, sheltered by snow.

Our decision...only a week ago?...No 
presents this year. All we need is each other. 
And then the ring. Always running, he says. 
Even scheduled consideration can’t help now.

Resolution: Go to F 
Dissolution: Go to F
F

By the next meeting, we will both be better. Not better people; people over each other. Chance encounter through a mutual friend, he’ll be buying fireworks at a road side stand.

We might speak the polite way ex-lovers do years later for the first time. He’ll introduce me to his wife, a matronly woman, and his child. I’ll nod and walk away—I won’t answer to it.