Don't Ever Stop

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by

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ABSTRACT

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How do we deal with death, especially when that death is in the form of suicide? How do we live with the abuses and addictions of our parents? Can love survive in the event of a zombie apocalypse? These questions and others are tackled in this collection of poems. The introduction focuses on the question of writing about tragedy and suicide in particular, and the difficulties one faces when trying to convey something new and meaningful about such an old subject.

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Dedicated to Samuel Tsutomu Colquitt

and my mother
Before you read this manuscript, I feel that it’s important to explain the death of my friend Sam Colquitt. On April 19, 2008, he took his own life. At the time, I was living with him along with three other friends in a house in Nacogdoches, Texas, where I was finishing the last year of my undergraduate degree. None of the other roommates were home at the time of his suicide; I had just gotten off work when I found him in his room.

This might seem like a particularly morbid way to begin discussing my poetry and my goals as a poet, and it is. However, I feel that the impact of this event on my life and my writing is worth exploring, and has a lot to do with the poems in this manuscript. That’s not to say that all of my poems are about Sam or suicide; in fact, only a few of the poems that I ended up choosing to include are about his death. However, a lot of insight can be gained by an exploration of the topic.

It goes without saying that the loss of a friend to suicide had a huge impact on my life, especially coming at a time when I was already going through major changes – I was about to graduate from college and move halfway across the country to begin graduate school. What has surprised me, however, is the extent to which Sam’s death affected my writing. There are a number of different issues that arose in my poetry, issues that have informed my writing of the past two years and will inform the writing I hope to do in the future.

Perhaps the greatest issue I’ve been struggling with is the most obvious: how do I say something meaningful about Sam that means anything to an outside reader? In the weeks immediately following his death, I wrote a few poems about him and the aftermath
among my friends because I had to complete my undergraduate thesis. None of these poems turned out to be anything more than emotional release on the page. I was surprised by the ease with which I was able to write about my feelings at the time, considering how fresh the wound was. I think I expected that I would try to write about Sam and just stare at the blank page and break down. That hasn’t ever been the issue, though. I will write poems about him again and again, with almost no hesitation. It wasn’t until I got back into a workshop setting that I realized the difficulty of impacting the reader of a poem with even a shade of the same emotion I feel when writing or reading the poem.

I think it is helpful to look at the first poem I shared with a workshop about the suicide. Titled “Making a Mess of Everything,” it focused on the image of Sam’s hair after he shot himself. This is the poem as presented to the workshop, with only minor revisions:

The blood, obviously, I remember well.

But it’s the way your hair was wet,

hanging off the stretcher, twisted

and tangled together, stretching

to the ground like a poor

Rapunzel imitation, some sick joke,

that really stands out.

The hair sprinkled the hallway,

the steps, the stoop, the curb;

it even watered the sporadic patches
of grass we called a lawn.

The hair was always a big deal –
sleek, black, down past your shoulders,
you sitting serenely as your girlfriend played with it,
combed it, put it in braids.

Fitting, then, that it seemed to linger on
when you were already gone,

the hair more vibrant and alive than ever before.

The first problem that was discussed about this poem was narrative clarity. Who was this person covered in blood? How did the speaker know him? Why was he dead? Had the speaker shot him? The poem didn’t answer these questions, and at the time I wasn’t sure I could state these specifics clearly in the poem and still have something interesting and poetic. It’s a fine line the poet has to walk; do I leave these ambiguities up for interpretation, or does it matter to me that the reader knows who Sam was to me?

Another issue with this poem is the macabre imagery. How much can I talk about blood and bloody hair in a poem before I cross the line into obscene and gratuitous? Does this imagery serve a purpose? Clearly, the scene depicted in this poem is one that stands out in my mind, but does a reader want to see it? These are questions that I unfortunately didn’t have an answer to. I abandoned this poem largely because of that fact, and because I feared that the poem was doing nothing more than posturing: “Look at this tragic thing that happened to me. Isn’t that tragic?”
This, I’ve realized, is not my goal in writing these poems, and I think writing these failed poems was necessary in order to find what my goals actually are. There are two things I hope to achieve with these poems; there is the personal goal of capturing who Sam was and the wider goal of writing something meaningful about how we deal with loss. The more I write about him, however, the more I start to realize that the first goal is not a very feasible one. Every reader comes to a poem with a different lens, and even if I could write the poem that perfectly captures him, each reader would see only his or her unique version of him. There’s also the concern that almost anything I write about a victim of suicide is going to be eclipsed by the act of suicide itself. I think this is evident in the poems I wrote that focus on Sam before his death, “Maintenance” and “Baptismal in Reverse.” With these poems I tried to give some impression of his character but ended up with only a picture of a deeply troubled guy on the verge of breaking down. That said, I don’t consider these poems to be “failures.” When I read them, I see the friend that I knew, and although my readers might not, I’m content with that.

That leaves the goal of writing meaningfully about grief and death. Not an easy task, considering the long line of poets writing about death before me, and by some poetic standards, a challenge too great to overcome. I can’t say that I’ve come up with a groundbreaking solution to this problem, but the strategy I’ve found that works in my poems is misdirection. Language, of course, is also one of the most important factors in the success of a poem, but talking around the subject in a way that is interesting has led me to poems about Sam that I think achieve what I want them to achieve. My poem
“Elegy for Intimacy,” for example, does mention Sam’s death in a direct way, but the bulk of the poem is about having sex with an ex-girlfriend. I think I’ve managed to say something interesting about death in this poem specifically by not focusing on it. What stands out on a first reading is the raw emotion and the shock of phrases like “Fuck me now if you’re gonna fuck me.” However, the poem gets at something more than just awkward ex-sex; tied up in this moment is the way we try to deal with grief in its immediate aftermath.

I’ve turned to the work of Anne Sexton, a poet so fixated on death and suicide, while thinking about this topic, largely due to a quotation from one of her letters: “Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem” (qtd. in Clifford 204). Jennifer Schomburg Kanke introduced me to this quotation last year, and it’s sat in the back of my mind since. At first I thought that the implication was that suicide can’t work as the subject of a poem, but considering how many poems Sexton has about suicide, that doesn’t make sense. If the suggestion is that poetry and suicide have differing aims, I’m not sure I agree with it. I hope that my poetry will leave some sort of legacy (fleeting though it may be), and I feel that Sam had some idea of his own legacy when he died (as did, perhaps, Sexton and Plath). One poem that really intrigues me is “Sylvia’s Death”; mostly, it is fascinating in its honesty about Sexton’s admiration for Plath even in her suicide, which, unfortunately, doesn’t help me much in thinking about my own poems. Sexton’s portrayal of death as “our boy” – some kind of white knight figure for the both of them – is wonderful and tragic at the same time. These lines in particular stand out to me:
and since that time he waited
under our heart, our cupboard,

and I see now that we store him up
year after year, old suicides

and I know at the news of your death,
a terrible taste for it, like salt. (Sexton 127)

What strikes me about these lines is how Sexton deals with the suicide and loss of her friend as someone who is suicidal herself. The line about storing up old suicides year after year certainly resonates strongly with my poetry. I like to think that I am not as obsessed with death as Anne Sexton was, but isn’t there something very morbid in writing on the same person’s death again and again? The last line in particular inspired a poem I wrote very recently, “After You Died.”

I envision a conversation with Sexton about this very topic in the last poem of this manuscript, “Swan Songs.” I have chosen to end on this poem, as the problem at the core of the poem is in a way the problem at the core of this introduction (and, perhaps, this manuscript). At the end of an imagined discussion on the nature of suicide notes with Sexton, I hope for “the slightest of nods” from her. Clearly, this is an impossible hope, but I can at times feel that a poet has no business writing about suicide in a world where poets who wrote about suicide and actually committed suicide exist. Yet the more I read the work of Sexton, Plath, and others, the more I realize the importance (necessity, even)
of engaging in a literary conversation with these poets. I will never actually be given the blessing of these poetic giants, but by reading and thinking about their work as I tackle the subject myself, I believe I will get to the point where I don’t feel I need anyone’s approval.

Of course, only a handful of the poems in this manuscript are directly about Sam. However, something else that has changed about my poetry is a greater openness about my own life. Over the past two years, I’ve written a number of poems that would most likely be classified as working in the confessional mode. In the poetry I wrote before coming to Ohio University, I very rarely attempted to talk about the particulars of my personal life. I wrote a poem about my grandmother’s death and a few poems about traveling I did, but most of the poems I wrote incorporated a highly detached speaker. The poet’s feelings about the things being observed in the poem were frequently hinted at but rarely made explicit. I still think this is a useful stance to take, and I don’t mean to suggest that I’ll never write another poem in that style again. However, the subject matter of my poems has become less about places I’ve been to or people I’ve noticed and more about things going on in my own life.

Trying to write about Sam’s suicide has led me to take more risks in my poems. Putting into words something that I’m still so close to emotionally has led me to write about other things that are weighing on my mind. “Elegy for Intimacy” is perhaps the clearest example of this transition. The poem is about dealing with Sam’s death at its core, but it also has a lot to do with the conflicted feelings I had about an ex-girlfriend at the time. Before coming to this program, I can’t imagine that I ever would have written
lines such as these: “Her boyfriend called from Alaska, his voice / crackling out of cell
phone speakers / as she sat up in bed, blanket sliding down around bare breasts.” I not
only talk about my sex life in the poem, I also make specific reference to somebody I
know personally, who, if she read the poem, would be upset to see the stark mention of
infidelity in print. I’ll admit (though perhaps I shouldn’t) that I took a cathartic joy in
writing a poem about a failed relationship, and I’m happy with the end result. In fact,
“Elegy for Intimacy” was the first poem I wrote about Sam that I could say I was happy
with almost right away.

I consider this poem to be a key turning point in my writing, as it has led me to
write about other subjects I previously considered too difficult to write about – most
notably, my father. For a long time, I’ve dealt with my father’s alcoholism, but I seldom
tried to write about it. I didn’t want to write something in a poem that would somehow
embarrass my family or my dad in particular, and I wasn’t sure that I would even be able
to convey the way I felt about his drinking accurately. And of course, there is the same
challenge of trying to say something new in the wake of “My Papa’s Waltz” or Scott
Russell Sanders’ “Under the Influence.” However, once I came to terms with the fact that
I was going to write poems about death and suicide, there was no reason I couldn’t try to
write something fresh about alcoholism. “My Father’s Voice” and “Reconnaissance” are
the two poems I’ve written about my dad thus far. Although I feel that “My Father’s
Voice” owes a lot to the Roethke poem, I think my poem manages to make things
interesting through language such as “his voice carries within it that husky, jovial tone /
like the unwitting Patient Zero carrying the seed of pandemic.” The focus is also on the
struggle to have an adult relationship with an alcoholic father, and not on a childhood raised by one.

Despite all of this, I’m not sure how much further I plan to explore Sam’s death in my poetry. Now that I’m two years removed from the event, I find myself less compelled to put words to paper about it, and I’m content with the handful of poems that I can look at as a success. I doubt I’ll stop writing about him entirely, but it seems less essential that he’s represented in my poetry now. My poetry has shifted in a new direction from where it was two years ago, and the poems I’ve been writing lately are more interesting to write and, I hope, more compelling to read. There’s something comforting about a positive change in my writing coming out of the tragedy of Sam’s death.

Works Cited


SUMMERTIME AT THE DING DONG LOUNGE

We ride to New York crammed together
in Dan’s Ford Taurus, windows down not
because we want to feel the air on our face
but because the A/C is busted. Twenty-four
hours of driving from Texas to NYC, five guys
heading straight from the hostel to the Ding Dong
Lounge in the Upper West Side, and a guy asks
us if we’re in town for the Pride Parade,
which we laugh off and start conversing with the speed-talking
Israeli girl reading *Eat, Pray, Love* at the bar who
assures us several times that she is not on crack
though we never asked if she was, and we drink beer
even though we’re already high on sleep deprivation.
Soon we’re smoking pot on the roof of her apartment
building laying out on the precarious overhang
at the lip of the roof staring at the cars
and late night pedestrians rushing by
wondering if we’ll ever get to sleep
in this sleepless, absurd city
when her friend comes over and is too drunk
to stand up straight and we take our awkward
exit never to see the girl again.
Back at the hostel, 3 a.m., a bleary-eye inquisition
from the stunning girl with a beautiful accent
and a deep tan who is sharing our room
and tells us she was mugged in Times Square
earlier that night before accusing us of stealing
her passport from her bag because we’re the only
other people who have been in the room all night.
We don’t know what to say. I look around the room
at the creaky metal bunk beds, as if I’ll find it
peeking out from under a mattress somewhere.
Dru asks, *are you Chilean?* She isn’t. She’s French.
I want to tell her she’s a bitch and an idiot,
that the mugger clearly took it, doesn’t she know
anything about New York City?
But didn’t we just miss our subway stop
by ten blocks? Didn’t I just offer to let
an unknown French girl search our bags
and rifle through our valuables?
MY FATHER’S VOICE

My father calls to talk about the upcoming holidays, and starts giving me advice about tires. 
*Do yourself a favor, son, and buy some Michelin*. 
*They'll set you back more, but man are they worth it.* 
*Had mine on the truck for six years and they never wore out.*

Even diffused through cellular towers across the country, his voice carries within it that husky, jovial tone like the unwitting Patient Zero carrying the seed of pandemic. It's the tone that signals he's sipping a Seagram & Seven on the other end, perhaps the second of the night, no doubt poured from one of the stash of burgundy plastic bottles hidden from nobody in the cabinet above the sink. It's the same tone that sometimes leads to his high school football stories or a choked-up memory of his father, but frequently to nothing at all but inane pleasantries.

Does he know I can hear the booze on his breath from a thousand miles away? Doesn't he realize his treads are already wearing thin?
I try to imagine my dad smoking crack and realize I only know the drug as a caricature, a punchline, the cartoonish depictions of crackheads in movies and on TV. Where was the laugh track when he was on crack? Did he assemble pipes from tire gauges and steel wool, like some of the customers used to do at the gas station I worked at?

Still, my mom tells me her stories and I see him as she describes the scene, sitting in the dark yard adorned with a chicken coop, pine trees, and an old Ford on blocks, his face lit by a butane lighter, surrounded by haggard rednecks with missing teeth and pockmarked skin. The way she spied on him and his buddies as she crept through the trees wearing a black sweatshirt and black jogging pants, their marriage reduced to this pathetic double agent bullshit.

Of course, I can clearly remember my father’s disappearing acts when I was growing up – mysterious weekends spent away which even back then I was acutely aware were not normal, which I assumed were spent on a barstool at Steak’n’Ale or curled up in a hotel bed with a bottle of Thunderbird. I want to still believe that was the case.
THE DOLLHOUSE

Before my grandfather died and my grandmother lost most of her wits and had to move into a home, she owned an intricate miniature dollhouse. The house was a sprawling Victorian, with a large cross-section cut out to expose the tiny furniture arranged inside. The dollhouse was in a back room of their house, near an assortment of model locomotives my grandfather had collected. The trains always had a fine layer of dust, but the dollhouse was spotless.

As a kid, I was always more interested in the dollhouse than the trains. I’d stand next to the end table it sat on and peer into each of the rooms, appraising the contents. Tiny towels on a tiny towel rack in the bathroom, next to the medicine cabinet which opened to reveal the smallest prescriptions imaginable. There were copies of *Time* and *Life* shrunk to fit the scale of the dollhouse’s residents, whose faces were so small they were almost featureless. I was afraid to touch anything, because I knew it was fragile and important though I didn’t know why. I never asked her about the dollhouse or how long she’d had it, or where she got it from or how often she cleaned it, and I never told my family that I found it so interesting. My sister told me once that she couldn’t wait until she got to inherit the dollhouse, and I was envious.

The dollhouse sits now in my dad’s garage, covered with cobwebs and roach droppings and I can’t remember the last time I looked at it. The last time I saw my grandma, she was sitting on her couch in a little room, looking frail and featureless, and I felt huge and out of place on the little bed, leafing through her little books of crossword puzzles.
I am large, I contain multitudes –
of regrets, stretching from the time I let a friend
take the fall for the hole I knocked in the wall as a kid
all the way up to words left unsaid to dead friends.
of catalogs of lives of others I've touched or been,
the homeless man I gave change to in Paris, the kids
in Mexico I vainly tried to preach at,
my parents and their generations rising backward
inside like a long shadow at dusk,
from Clyde Barrow (supposedly) back to a faceless
army of Janeses and Vogelsangs.
of the miniscule and numberless joys,
a postcard from New Zealand, the first wind of Fall,
the smell of matches and the sound of a trumpet.
of words, crude and misshapen, bubbling
ever out of me like oil from the rigs my father worked on.
Is this what you call the soul, Walt, or is it just ego
run wild, a sense of endless self that makes Michael Jaynes
feel so full he's sure to burst?
I hardly know who I am or what I mean.
Enter Emma Goldman, center stage, her eyessmelling of wildfire and open rebellion. She speaks, her voice like the smooth skin of a scar, her voice a scream, her voice like rancid butter. There weren’t any in the crowd who weren’t caught up in her words—it was a rioting of stillness among those union workers. She wanted to tear down the foundations of America, our whole society, starting with the corrupt corporate owners. She promised a new world for her brothers and sisters, her throat scraping and clawing at the ears and hearts of her audience. She pointed and cajoled, she called out those who were not in attendance because of their addictions—alcohol and dice won’t fix your problems, and we cannot stand together if we are not one body. By the evening’s end, workers were standing on chairs, hollering her name and pouring into the cold night to find the new America she promised. So quickly the night fought back, however, and the snow was giving no ground. The warmth of hearths and other bodies called them out of the night into bars and homes and the promise stood shivering on the stoop.
HOW TO WRITE A LOVE POEM WHILE STANDING IN LINE AT COSTCO

Your smile transfixed me. Let me clarify—
you had something stuck between your upper incisors
and I was staring because I couldn’t figure out
if it really was a bit of broccoli floret
staring back at me and how could you not notice?
You took it to mean something
else entirely and I cracked a smile
thinking about it, knowing you were beautiful
and yet this flaw was all I could see,
and this only caused you to smile with that extra bit
of sincerity that made your nose crinkle.
I willed my eyes upward and noticed that your eyelashes
looked so plump that I wanted to pluck one like a ripe fig.
One had already fallen and sat rotting comfortably
on the top of your left cheek. I had to fight the urge
not to lift it lightly with my fingertip. I wanted to blow it away
and steal your wish, make one involving you and me,
gone gray and wrinkled, reading to each other
before rolling over and saying goodnight.
I didn’t. I licked my teeth with my lips parted and took my change.
UNDEATH DO US PART

If the zombies come for us,
with their rotten meat stench and paralytic shuffle,
I'm afraid we'll have to break up.
Not because I'll feel less of an attraction to you
after days of running when your face is covered in dirt
and blood, and not because we'll argue
about who gets to use the chainsaw,
but because I know that we'll inevitably be locked
in a room together in some abandoned warehouse,
strip mall, or grocery store. And you know how it goes:
once the intrepid survivors find themselves
trapped in a room, doors and windows securely boarded up,
somebody – a mother, a best friend, a lover – is always hiding
the mark of human teeth on their leg.
I'd rather succumb to the zombie hordes outside and let
myself become a part of the mindless oblivion
than have to kill you. Or, if I'm the one covering up the blood
seeping through the leg of my pants, I couldn’t stand the thought
of you having to kill me.

Yes, I know that our self-preservation instincts will overcome
our love for one another. You'll trip over a detached limb
and I'll think for a minute of saving you, maybe, but the zombies
will be right behind us. If we stick together, we’ll both go down.
Better you just head north, and I'll make
for the coast, and we'll agree to meet in Poughkeepsie
in a few weeks after this all blows over.
I watch the guy at the coffee shop,
jean shorts and mud-caked hiking boots,
as he jiggles the handle of the men’s room
and, finding it locked, walks into
the women’s restroom with no hesitation,
like he’s done it many times before.

*The balls on that guy,* I think.
Such decisiveness,
such nonchalance.
*Why don’t I have balls like that?*
I can’t imagine he’s the kind of guy
who, like me, stands in the shampoo
aisle for ten minutes, trying to decide
if he should buy the kind
with conditioner in the same bottle.

I certainly can’t picture him waiting
at the crosswalk – he’s a serial jay-walker
if I’ve ever seen one. He probably
grabs the scalding plate when he’s eating out
after the waiter has told him it’s hot.

*Well, what are balls anyway?*
I think, and go back to sorting
through clipped coupons,
attempting to figure out
which brand of coffee is more ‘me’.
*And besides, do I really want to be*
*the guy wearing jean shorts in public?*
A CHANCE MEETING IN THE SMITHSONIAN

Passing by relics of American history and pop culture – the Fonz’s jacket from Happy Days not far from a flag almost two centuries old – I stop and converse with the janitor dutifully sweeping the hallway near the gift shop. He tells me he’s been a custodian at the museum for fifteen years, and loves the job more than any other he’s had. His favorite part is cleaning the glass display cases, removing smudges left by awe-struck people reaching out for tactile proof of dreams. He says he sees the sign of his work every time he sees a pane of glass free of other people’s marks.
IN AN ANTIQUE SHOP IN AUSTIN

Among the Shriner fez collection
and the faded baseball pennants, I find
a curious Victorian ornament –
tendrils of pale blonde hair tightly woven through
a garland of dried flowers, ribbons and twigs.
Who was this person
that sacrificed this hair for art – old
or young, hag or maiden? Yet, how divine –
there will always be some piece
of who she was, this part of that earthly vessel
staring down from the wall
of an old hippie’s living room
next to the framed Warhol soup can.
When the guy started to fall down the escalator, I just watched. Well past his forties, at least, his arms full of grocery bags. He'd just gotten off the PATH train from the city to Jersey. The bags might have been full of cans of peas, tuna, pinto beans, boxes of dried pasta and cereal, but the sound was all wrong. Maybe the bags were full of souvenirs. Empire State Building paperweights, a T-shirt from the Rainbow Room, something for the kids in Jersey City to hold onto -- the way he held onto the bags as step after relentless step extended his fall, not even trying to grab the handrail or stand up on his own. It might have been funny in some other context.

I stared down at the blank face bumping against my feet for a moment before we helped him up. Safely at the top of the escalator, we kept asking are you okay? but he didn't, couldn't answer. He looked at his feet and spoke only through the static white noise of plastic bags as his hands started to shake.
THE DOG ON MITCHELL STREET

Every day as I leave my empty apartment and walk to work,
I pass this little green house on the corner.
The house itself is a dilapidated piece of shit,
but the yard’s pretty nice.
Big, if nothing else.

When I walk by that little green house,
this dog they keep chained in the yard goes wild,
struggling against his restraints,
saliva flying at me from between teeth
as white as the paint on the windowsill behind him –
teeth whiter than you might expect. It’s a violent, underfed thing.
Sometimes I imagine that his spittle is sentient,
reaching out for the contact his scrawny canine body is being denied.
At first the bastard mutt pissed me off, carrying on like that
as though I were trying to break into his domain.

I never see the owner in the yard feeding him
when I pass by the little green house,
and I don’t ever see the dog being led on walks around the block.
For all I know, somebody chained the pitiful creature
to that tree years ago, and somehow the tenacious pup has survived
on his own.

Why is it that in every snarl, every snap of teeth hitting teeth,
every explosive bark – I hear the sound of abandonment and loneliness,
the sound of a young child standing alone in a crowded supermarket,
the sound of my brother’s silent sobs at our mother’s funeral,
the sound of a grown man on his own and unable to sleep
without the T.V., without the sound, however manufactured,
of somebody else’s voice in the room?
A BRUTAL LESSON IN WATCHING YOUR MOUTH

He looks at the other guy in the dirt:
whiskeyed, punch-drunk and high,
his face a mask of blood and agony.
The victor rears back like a cobra,
launches a line of spit that bobs
and weaves
in the streetlight’s glow
as it lands on the loudmouth’s broken nose.

I don’t see him as the other onlookers surely must.
Even as he’s breaking another man’s jaw,
I think of him as some jacked-up Jackson Pollock,
splattering his message across
the barflies and low-lifes of this town.
MOTOWN MUSIC IN A VEGAS CASINO

A smoky den fills with the rhythm of drum-beats pounding like cannon fire, the bass line throbbing like a heart. The keyboard sings in sweet disharmony with the electronic song of a thousand snowy-haired slaves spending a thousand silvery nickels on a thousand hungry slot machines. The entertainer on stage wails and croons a Marvin Gaye tune, his voice as bright and vibrant as the silk green suit he’s wearing – as full of life and color as the city itself.
Night does little to dampen the late spring heat.  
Even at 2:30 in the morning, Las Vegas swelters.

From my position in front of the Greek Isles Casino,  
I’ve got a clear view of the Stardust;  
its marquee stopped twinkling months ago.

I hear a distant roar as spectators  
on the Strip cheer with excitement.
The demolition begins with a flourish –  
rows of lights flare along the front of the condemned casino,  
constellations form a countdown.

I watch the numbers roll back to zero.  
The building collapses floor by floor,  
sending a cloud of dust into the air –  
the casino’s spirit departing.

Some architect’s life work,  
gone in minutes.

The dust charges down the street, but I don’t take cover;  
I close my eyes as it overtakes me, I let it invade my nose and mouth –  
I taste the sweat of a hundred legacies disappearing into the night air.
An abandoned tractor nestled against a stand of pine,
ivy throttling the steering wheel,
weeds wrapped up in its axles,
overcome by the earth it was built to subdue.

Dull copper and charcoal stone mortared
into a picturesque cottage, perfect
but for the thick black bars that shield the windows,
marring this home’s face like two black eyes.

A lone pair of headlights passes at three a.m.,
heading into the desolate, decaying country.
The wayward farmer, perhaps, finally returned
to bring life to that lonely home and set to plow
that husk of metal and overgrown ivy.
RETURNING, AFTER THE FLOOD

The grass grows long, snaking up around the derelict rails where the streetcars used to rattle and shake.

Up from the worn metal tracks, the Walgreens on the corner is boarded up – a spray paint encrusted fortress.

Not the first dead storefront I've seen. Some have smashed-in windows – insides gutted twice over, looters and city workers taking their turn.

Bourbon Street still sings with the music of vacationing drunks, bums puking in the gutter, and strip club barkers, but to me it’s a funeral dirge.

I am a streetcar in this city – devoid of destination, useless and out of place.
LIGHT SHOW

From thousands of feet in the air,
Houston at night looks like a tangled heap
of orange Christmas lights.

I stare from my cramped window seat,
and wonder if the power plant worker
ever gets to see the result of his labors by plane.

The woman in the Longhorns sweatshirt
next to me doesn’t seem to be concerned about it.
Neither do the two businessmen across the aisle,
the deep grooves on their faces filled with the glow
of twin laptop screens.

I look back at the spider-web
of unnatural light an eternity below me
and understand why I’m leaving.
SOME ASSEMBLY

I was staring at the assembly guide spread out on the floor, trying to figure out how one of the long pieces of cheap wood had ended up in the wrong place. The TV was murmuring sweet nothings and the bookshelf was slightly swaying, seemingly unable to support itself. It reminded me of you on one of our rough nights, when the weight of too many gin and tonics and my loose tongue made you weave down the street. The phone rang and I let it go to the machine. My hands were tied up with holding my feeble creation steady. It wasn’t you, calling to see if I wanted to get dinner, because you never called, even before we broke up. Still, I thought the sigh that preceded that automated voice asking me to give blood was the exasperated sigh I knew every intonation of. I let go. The whole damn thing fell apart.
A WEEKEND IN BON WIER

I know of an old country road
which twists and twines alongside a thick
forest of pine trees. A dusty lane leads
from the road to a cozy old home
where I spent many summers. My grandmother
lived there until the day that she died.

I remember right after she had died,
my brother Travis and I on a different road,
driving to honor our late grandmother.
The silence in the car was so thick
it was almost palpable, as we left our home
city and got on a highway that leads
into East Texas. We started talking, and small talk eventually leads
to real talk, and soon we talked about how she died.
She’d survived a stove exploding in her own home
and every imaginable hurdle in the road,
but her heart was clogged and her thick
arteries could no longer support my grandmother.

The extended family said goodbye to the grandmother
who was the foundation under our family's feet, and my mom took the lead role in orchestrating our recovery. My mind was thick
with memories of times before she died,
ten years old, chasing her big furry Chow down the road,
and hearing her voice telling me to get on home
because dinner was ready. After the wake we were in that same home,
my close family sitting around the porch my grandmother
used to sit on, looking out on that dusty road,
the familiar path that would the next day lead
us back to our lives. My brother suddenly spoke: “I almost died
once, in Mexico” and began to narrate in his thick
voice, while we sat enrapt, the air so thick
with our cigarette smoke. The story was a bad drug deal, far from home,
and while I listened, my childhood version of him died.
It was an incredibly surreal experience, and my grandmother,
had she heard it, would’ve been appalled, but it led
to a different understanding of my brother. Soon we were on the road
again, the road that passed through the land she loved, the Big Thicket. On that drive home, I realized what different lives Travis and I had led, and that our grandmother would’ve smiled to see our closeness after she died.
MAINTENANCE

Sam is sitting on the ratty couch and the coffee table is covered with his supplies. Laid out on a white rag is a 9mm Beretta, carefully disassembled with each part arranged in front of him. Kacey sits across the table, and he points to each part of the gun and looks at her as he names them. Slide. Barrel. Magazine. Then he starts to clean. He scrubs each scrap of metal with a toothbrush, the bristles of which are black and fan out like plumage. Kacey smiles, seeing the peace in his face, his diligence, the quick, automated movements. Things he can’t move past or get over are forgotten as he works at each piece. His life is a well-oiled, freshly-cleaned gun. He wants her to know how to clean a pistol, knowing he’ll turn this Beretta on himself in a week, knowing he’ll leave one of his guns to her. He applies lubricant to the internal mechanisms, starts to lock things into place, and in a matter of moments the pistol is reassembled. He points it at the ceiling and pulls the trigger a few times. She flinches at each empty click.
BAPTISMAL IN REVERSE

A light morning rain starts to fall
on Sam’s face and washes away the whiskey
that lingers on his lips and the whiskey
he’s spilled on his bare chest.

He drops the empty bottle of Jack Daniels
and lights another cigarette. Shirtless and shoeless,
he stands in the middle of the yard, smoking,
oblivious of the cars driving past and the looks
the Sunday-morning drivers give him.

I ask him what he’s doing and he tells me
he’s trying to forget what she felt like.
ELEGY FOR INTIMACY

Her boyfriend called from Alaska, his voice crackling out of cell phone speakers as she sat up in bed, blanket sliding down around bare breasts. In the glow of the cell phone's screen I could see a few fine hairs bristling on her shoulder. Her red bra was still in my hands and for a second in the darkness it looked like they'd been dipped in the blood I'd seen pooled around my roommate's body the night before. Somehow his suicide had thrust us back together like two cars colliding. She told the muffled voice on the phone she was okay, told him that everything was okay. She hung up the phone and started kissing me, drunk, sloppy kisses and it felt like we were back together again, and I was glad for it.

It was short-lived. She felt comfortable like a worn pair of sneakers before, felt comfortable like a hotel bed that night. She said, "I need this." She said, "You need this." She said, "Fuck me now if you're gonna fuck me."

I did, and I lay there staring at the holes in the ceiling. She remarked that my roommate had never liked her much. I told her that wasn't true. I didn't feel very truthful when I said it. She rolled over and I went to wrap my arms around her chest and her skin was cold, rigor mortised, and I clung to her because I thought I could bring myself back to life.
WHEN YOU DIED

When you died, I spent months looking
for my own death lurking around some corner
of the night. I was convinced every car
I rode in was destined for a T-bone collision
or that I’d die on the toilet like Elvis.
I drank and smoked to excess secure
in the knowledge of my imminent mortality,
and there were a few nights I think I courted it.
Other nights I’d lie in bed in a panic,
afraid to face even the temporary oblivion
of sleep. Yet, here I am, whole of body
and sound of mind. How did you do it?
How did you face death so unflinchingly?
SWAN SONGS

Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. – Anne Sexton

Remarking once on the many drafts her poem “Suicide Note” went through, Sexton wrote that had it been a real note, she imagined there’d only have been one draft. “One does not perfect at gunpoint.”

But Anne, I can’t agree. If I could find you in some bar in Boston drinking extra dry martinis I’d eagerly approach, holding Sam’s lengthy suicide note in my hands like an admirer hoping to get a copy of Live or Die signed, and I’d show you how much time he must have spent on what he called his swan song – really wanting, I think, to get it all right, get everything down on paper.

I’d point to the childhood stories he tells of chasing fireflies and of his youthful dreams which he found deferred more and more, the older he got, all poetic in their own morbid way. Yes, we’d go down the list of names, and I’d point to my own name, almost hysterically, where he told me that my poetry was good, that I had something poignant to offer the world. Would you believe me then?

What if I let you read the part of the note addressed to his mother, his father, his brother, the ex-girlfriend who broke his mind and heart? The last is full of vitriol, true, passion enough to maybe make the case that you’re right about the drafting of suicide notes. But there’s tenderness, too, and a careful precision of language, something he always strived for, even though he never wrote poetry.

I would try to make you see him, sitting in his room in the weeks before he put the gun in his mouth, writing and rewriting the note, deciding who to include and what to say about them. Trying to figure out how to make us understand. His face would be blank, as it so often was, he always the stoic, very rarely did we see him driven to rage or tears. He might have typed “Dear friends” at one point, he might have written “I could admit / that I am only a coward” and erased it.
I don’t think he did, though, and like your suicide in that poem, he didn’t think of himself as a coward. He thought he was being noble, in some way. I will say this, Anne – he must have thought about it a lot, and I know he didn’t write it hastily.

And I guess, Anne, that’s what made it all the worse. I almost wish he hadn’t seemed so deliberate, that I could believe he was drunk and shot himself in a moment of weakness. He wasn’t and he didn’t.

You may wonder why I would want to argue with you, why I’ve turned to Anne Sexton to bicker about suicide, and I really don’t have a better answer than some vague hope that you, such a famous suicide yourself, might give me some insight into that inscrutable world, and staring at our reflections in the mirror behind that bar in Boston, I might see you give the slightest of nods.