Repast in Negative

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This thesis titled
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Repast in Negative is a collection of 26 poems written, edited, and collected during Libby Fackler’s time at Ohio University. The poems focus largely on how food, food production, and food-related objects help us to develop not only a sense of self but also our relationships with other people. Additional poems explore illness, artistry, coming-of-age stories, and rural spaces. The collection is preceded by a critical introduction in which Fackler analyzes the use of food and of food-related objects in poems by Gertrude Stein, Thomas Lux, Harryette Mullen, and Allen Ginsberg.
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We often think about food production and consumption in a very abstract way—as numbers, as ingredients, as constituent parts, as demographics—but we don’t see images of the real, daily meal in the location where that meal is eaten. What I want is to tell stories of people and relationships through a look at food (a central object in our day-to-day lives) and I want to tell these stories through poetry and photos.

I find myself equating the role of food in our lives with the role of poetry and art. My explorations of food, food practices, and agriculture have convinced me that food organizes human behavior and relationships: physically we need food to survive and our body and physical senses are excited by the experience of consuming food, our moods and emotions are greatly influenced by the kinds of food we eat, and the process and act of preparing food creates bonds between the people sharing that meal. Language also organizes human behavior and relationships as well as helping us come to a sense of self, though that self is in flux. I become “me/I” when I am able to use language to place myself in social and political spheres.

When I talk about becoming a self, I’m working with the following definition of subjection: positioning the self (by the self) within sociopolitical discourses by use of a language preceded by feeling and emotion. When we consume food, our physical senses—taste, smell, and touch—are the first ways we understand that experience; whether or not that external sensory experience is pleasurable informs an internal experience (an emotion). When we taste a cookie that is just like what our dear
grandmother used to make, we internally experience a sweet sadness, nostalgia. When a new smell of food hits our nose and we have no memory of it, what emotion then do we experience? We have no prior interpretation (via memory) that allows us to organize that smell in the “self” as we understand it. In this way, we are constantly in the subjectification process. When it comes to consuming art, specifically poetry, we first visually encounter the work, then we encounter the sound of the language, then we understand individual words and phrases, and then we interpret the accumulation and arrangement of that language. When we read poetry we are consuming the objectification of the author’s feeling (Barclay, 63). When that objectification affects us, when it does something to us, when it challenges our external and internal feelings, then that is what furthers our sense of I and, more so, we. To produce art is to produce something liminal. Practically speaking, this production of the liminal is what allows the marginalized—those people who are politically and socially disregarded—to gain power. When artists write about food—its production, consumption, and place in our world—they are not just talking about food but about what it means to be human and alive.

My exploration of this subject has included analysis of poems by Gertrude Stein, Thomas Lux, Harryette Mullen, and Allen Ginsberg to understand how these poets use the places and stuff of food to say something about who we are; about society, capitalism, consumerism, and power; and about how we understand our relationships with the people around us. You aren’t just what you eat but also how and where you do that eating.

Gertrude Stein’s cubist portraits of objects have heavily influenced this project. Stein’s collection *Tender Buttons* focuses on creating portraits of the things of ordinary
life—rooms, objects, and foods—and shows a depth to the stuff that surrounds us on a daily basis. Stein’s portraits were not meant to be human-centric but rather to show the world as a place where things are just as central as people, that they have depth—though not life—of their own.

It was a way a day, this made some sum. Suppose a cod liver a cod liver is an oil, suppose a cod liver oil is tunny, suppose a cod liver oil tunny is pressed suppose a cod liver oil tunny pressed is china and secret with a bestow a bestow reed, a reed to be a reed to be, in a reed to be.

Next to me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a foldersome waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with her for less. (Stein, 287)

“A Centre in a Table,” the final poem of the foods section of Tender Buttons, focuses on the meaning of objects insofar as they exist as stand-alone entities. A physical table holds the things we consume, the heirlooms we possess, and represents the interior life of a female author who manipulates language (a consumable thing) in a nearly inconsumable way. Stein’s use of syntax, her free association, and her repetition are what make her writing difficult to digest. The combination of these things is what makes her work the written form of cubist art. Stein draws attention to language itself—highly modernist—by showing the reader that she (the reader) actually controls the syntax of the sentence (many examples of this will follow—when a word, for example, may act as noun or verb) depending on her reading of the text (Welch, EPC). This can be confusing because readers are not used to a quivering grammatical function. Object portraits, such
as “A Centre in a Table,” necessarily contribute to portraits of the people who are surrounded by those objects. Thus, in this instance, the poem contributes to a definition of the female writer.

The poem begins “It was a way a day, this made some sum,” meaning that the total of a day culminates in the things placed on a table—we drop our keys on the table, our books and papers, we eat our meals there. The poem then draws the reader outward and creates a bizarre logic demonstrative of the associative connectedness of stuff: “Suppose a cod liver a cod liver is an oil, suppose a cod liver oil is tunny, suppose a cod liver oil tunny is pressed suppose a cod liver oil tunny pressed is china and secret.” Here, The speaker is asking us to follow her thought process, to begin by imagining a cod liver and then imagining that as fish oil and then as tuna and then as a pressed tuna (I take this to mean canned tuna) as china like china tableware upon which tuna and fish are eaten. The last part of this given phrase, “and secret,” is confusing unless we turn the whole sentence around so that we think of the china as something fishy, or secretive, in that it holds so many associations and connections. This is part of the cubist influence, a portrait of a whole through focusing on disparate parts. The reader is next given a nearly unintelligible string of words, “with a bestow a bestow reed, a reed to be a reed to be, in a reed to be.” It is unclear here whether “reed” is meant as a noun or Stein is engaging in wordplay (which is likely) and “reed” is a pun on “read” and, therefore, a verb. At the center of the table could be a bundle or bouquet of reeds meant as decoration held in a china vase or centerpiece. The repetition of “reed to be” is, again, the cubist influence on
Stein’s work—repetition has a cumulative effect that gives the object three-dimensional depth and prominence.

The next stanza reads “Next to me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a foldersome waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with her for less.” Here Stein places the persona next to a folder and a waiter (it is unclear whether the waiter is a person or a silver tray used in formal dining) either standing or sitting beside the folder. “Re letter” can be taken several ways. Re-letter, for instance, could have the same sense as revise the words on a page, or re letter might bring to mind “relater,” as in someone who relates or narrates a story (a writer, for instance), or “letter” might be a play on “let her.” Additionally “re” is conventionally short for “regarding” so that the phrase becomes “regarding the letter.” The “read her. Read her with her for less” asks for the waiter, perhaps, or the reader to consider the issue at the center of being a female, which is judgment based on gender rather than on the merits of the woman. The speaker is suggesting that one read her—as a person, as writing—while placing less emphasis on her-ness.

“The centre in a table,” or the heart of the matter of a table, may represent the interior life of a woman who manipulates language (a consumable thing) in an inconsumable way (Macoy, Poetic Sequence). Tables hold the things we consume—books of words we consume by reading and thinking, and the food we consume to sustain life—and the things we possess, perhaps china vase heirlooms passed down from one generation to the next. Women are more than their whole; they are their many associative parts—from the books they consume to the food they consume to the heirlooms they hold
on to. To read a person as no more than a pronoun is reductive. The heart of the matter of a table is complex, just as the heart of the matter of woman (or man, or human) is complex. The speaker is objectifying in order to subjectify by comparing the meaning of a table to the meaning of a woman in order to gain clarity about a self. In other words she, the persona, is seeing from the perspective of the object.

Stein allows me to think more intently about what I call the “negative” and “leftovers” of domestic and social spaces. In my poem “Leftovers,” I imagine a home that is haunted by ghosts (the “leftovers” of people) who are interested in the daily food-related leftovers of the living person who occupies the house. At the end of the poem, the speaker thinks “Perhaps, I think, the leftovers, not the life...I trail off, not sure how to say the thing unsaid,/my every fumbling step creating new negative space in my wake,/uncertain what insistence there is in peripheral things/whose presence, I feel, begins to outweigh my own.”

Stein also serves as one of my sources of inspiration and defense against writer’s block. Her way of writing opens up the possibilities of what language can do. In my poem “Maple Syrup: A Love Song,” the speaker is unwrapping a connection between the process of making maple syrup—which requires an enormous reduction of twenty gallons of sap producing only one gallon of syrup—and the process of beginning a romantic relationship with someone, neither of which are easy tasks. At the end of the poem the speaker is unfolding the many layers of meaning in “reduction” and “heat” and “maple syrup” in a way that is similar to how Stein layers the multitude of meanings that objects hold in her poems in Tender Buttons. Though I find great pleasure in
experiencing Stein’s work and I cherish its complexity, there also comes a point when I crave a firmer use of language. Thomas Lux’s “Refrigerator, 1957” offers another look at the peripheral stuff of our lives but does so in a less language-complicated way that invites the reader to consider the links among food, family, history, and nostalgia.

The objects surrounding food provide a landscape for human relationships. Many, if not most, social gatherings take place around food. The stuff of food preparation practically corrupts the senses. Our senses lead us to the kitchen and dining hall, where we taste intricate combinations of flavors, smell the luxurious aromas of cooking, feel the food when we touch or chew it, feel the silverware in our hands and the cool or hot of porcelain dishware as we pass serving dishes from one person to the next, hear the chatter around the dinner table or the sizzling of something still on the stove, see the meticulous attention to detail and design of the dinner table or even the food on the plates. And when our senses react to these sensual stimuli, it’s like an electrical surge through antennae for our memories. The smell of cinnamon and ginger reminds us of Christmas morning, or the taste of lemon takes us back to childhood days spent on our grandfather’s farm sipping lemonade. Thomas Lux’s “Refrigerator, 1957” is a poem of reminiscence, nostalgia, family, and consumerism all wrapped up in a contemplation of a refrigerator and its forgotten contents. Though the poem relies on the purely visual side of the experience described, the vivid visual description creates a kind of synesthesia so that the reader is able not to just picture the refrigerator and its contents but to imagine their smell and taste also.
More like a vault -- you pull the handle out
and on the shelves: not a lot,
and what there is (a boiled potato
in a bag, a chicken carcass
under foil) looking dispirited,
drained, mugged. This is not
a place to go in hope or hunger.
But, just to the right of the middle
of the middle door shelf, on fire, a lit-from-within red,
heart red, sexual red, wet neon red,
shining red in their liquid, exotic,
aloof, slumming
in such company: a jar
of maraschino cherries. Three-quarters
full, fiery globes, like strippers
at a church social. Maraschino cherries, maraschino,
the only foreign word I knew. Not once
did I see these cherries employed: not
in a drink, nor on top
of a glob of ice cream,
or just pop one in your mouth. Not once.
The same jar there through an entire
childhood of dull dinners -- bald meat,
pocked peas and, see above,
boiled potatoes. Maybe
they came over from the old country,
family heirlooms, or were status symbols
bought with a piece of the first paycheck
from a sweatshop,
which beat the pig farm in Bohemia,
handed down from my grandparents
to my parents
to be someday mine,
then my child's?
They were beautiful
and, if I never ate one,
it was because I knew it might be missed
or because I knew it would not be replaced
and because you do not eat
that which rips your heart with joy.

(Lux, 70)

The poem’s first line offers a startling comparison to the title “‘Refrigerator, 1957’/ more like a vault.” The comparison paints a picture for the reader of a refrigerator that has been unused and unopened for a long period of time and that has been closed
tight as if to securely contain something of value (like a bank vault or a burial vault). This is the first instance of juxtaposition in the poem: something opened frequently juxtaposed with something opened infrequently. Juxtaposition is employed heavily throughout the poem, the accumulation of which serves to bring into stark contrast the mundane, exhausted, and boring with the open, vibrant, and lively.

The speaker opens the refrigerator door and gives the reader a description of the degraded contents (lines 3-7), which are starkly contrasted with the fridge’s hidden treasure: the maraschino cherries (lines 8-17). It is only a small imaginative jump to picture a black and white photograph of this open fridge, with the jar of maraschino cherries bright red against the gray-scale. In my own project, the photograph with the vibrantly colored salt shaker has a similar effect that I ruminate on in the accompanying poem. The food described earlier in “Refrigerator, 1957” is unappealing, but the cherries are full of robust, exotic life. Maraschino cherries are empty calories and the epitome of a dessert being over the top (as the phrase “with a cherry on top” exemplifies). Maraschino cherries are a splurge; they’re emblematic of opulence. We see a fetishism toward the exotic—“the only foreign word I knew”—with the repetition of “maraschino” as well as the speaker explicitly describing the cherries’ redness as “sexual” and “wet.” We get a better sense of the narrator as a character through his description of the maraschino cherries as “exotic,” “aloof,” and “slumming” in the company of the lame chicken carcass and leftover potato. He anthropomorphizes the objects of the fridge, “fiery globes, like strippers/ at a church social,” so that the cherries—exotic and foreign and flashy and used to garnish sweets and alcoholic beverages—are vibrant and full of life as
opposed to the “church social” of the chicken and potatoes, which then must represent morality and dullness and bland diets. Given this description, the reader is left to assume that the narrator favors the less virtuous side of life.

The narrator goes on to consider the history of these maraschino cherries insofar as he can recall it (lines 17-25). The reader gets a description of all the ways a maraschino cherry might have been employed—but was not—during the narrator’s childhood. Again the cherries are juxtaposed with the blandness of his childhood meals. The “see above” is a contrived instance of the author pointing to the poem as artifact or object. “Look, I’m a poem! I’m words on a page, and if you glide your finger upward you’ll find the ‘potatoes’ preceding me!” the phrase seems to yell at us. Such heavy-handedness draws the reader’s attention to the work of art as an object to be consumed, as are the maraschino cherries. The poem may sit between the covers of a book (a kind of vault) waiting to be (re)discovered, but there is no way to know the poem completely when it is revealed. The same is true of the maraschino cherries, whose origin eludes the speaker.

The speaker, unable to recall the cherries in his childhood, next contemplates where they might have come from and what place they might hold in his family (lines 25-33). Here we receive some history of the speaker’s family. They apparently emigrated from the Czech Republic, where his ancestors worked as pig farmers. The speaker imagines how his pig-farming Czech grandparents might have obtained the exotic maraschino cherries, and the more he thinks, the more importance he lavishes upon the object. The speaker sees it—a simple jar of maraschino cherries produced to be eaten—as
so oddly significant that he considers facetiously how someday he may bequeath it to his own child.

The poem ends sweetly, nostalgically: “They were beautiful/ and, if I never ate one,/ it was because I knew it might be missed/ or because I knew it would not be replaced/ and because you do not eat/ that which rips your heart with joy” (lines 35-40). The speaker hopes to gain clarity about his self through an assigned importance to the object. He gains this clarity by considering family and culture and how objects that do not intrinsically hold meaning gain meaning in their passing from one generation to the next.

In my poem “Pickle Making,” the speaker similarly considers—with sweetness and nostalgia—the history of pickle making in her family. As she makes pickles with her grandmother’s recipe and uses cucumbers from the same garden as her grandmother did, she is overcome with wistfulness. Also in this poem, the speaker ends up pushing a huge jar of pickles to the back of her fridge as if the pickle making is more ritual and nostalgia than for actual consumption purposes.

In Chuck Palahniuk’s cult classic novel *Fight Club*, the protagonist’s alter ego, Tyler Durden, says, “the things you own end up owning you.” Lux’s poem does more than hint at this post-consumerist trope. The end of the poem admits that the object would wholly lose value if even one cherry were to go missing from the jar. The speaker ties himself to this object so that its existence depends on him and he becomes forever responsible for it.

Lux is not the only poet to eroticize the stuff of food, nor is he the first to deal with objectification and consumerism in his poetry. Harryette Mullen responds to Stein’s
Tender Buttons in her own work and engages marketing language and language games to sexualize and genderize the stuff of supermarkets in order, largely, to comment on the racial and gender disparities used in capitalist marketing.

Harryette Mullen’s S*PeRM**k*t and Trimmings were written to correspond, respectively, with the “Food” and “Object” sections of Stein’s Tender Buttons, which incorporate consumerist and marketing language. Mullen’s work is clearly heavily influenced by Stein, though Mullen’s language play is not as extreme as Stein’s. The poems in S*PeRM**k*t show a narrator venturing through a supermarket, beginning at the entrance of the store and then moving through the aisles, past displays, into the freezer sections, to the checkout line. Mullen makes the personal political in her work by displaying how marketing language is used to sell objects that consumers buy to define self (to subjectify). Much of the language is meant to illuminate how society is set up to marginalize the marginalized. Like Stein’s work, Mullen’s poems form a sort of collage, except instead of culminating in a portrait of a single object, a single poem moves from one object to the next, or one object becomes another object through language play, through a focus on words and double or triple entendre.

As a title, S*PeRM**k*t, which can be read either as “supermarket” or as “spermkit,” prepares the reader to think about sex and consumerism. Mullen’s brand of feminism seems to aim at transgressing patriarchal society by emphasizing language and putting consumerist culture on archaeological display as if we are looking at a supermarket the way we would look at the artifacts of an ancient culture. Like Lux, Mullen does not view consumerist culture as something quite edible. In my poem “Pig
Not Pork” I attempt a similar look at modern capitalist society but try to focus more on corporate influence and marketing. In this poem I engage actual marketing strategies and language that has been used by the National Pork Board to throw light on how much influence corporate marketing has on not just what we buy but also on our understanding of what is organic and natural and healthy and [insert your choice of buzz word here].

Mullen’s semi-transgressive poetics (through a focus on language) is also a way for her, as a black woman writer, to challenge conventional, often white, poetics and write engagingly on issues of gender, culture, and race. In her poems, the narrator objectifies the women in the poem’s supermarket in order to allow room for the reader to subjectify him/herself. Mullen attempts to disrupt forms of consumerist and patriarchal power through a focus on language use that positions itself in conflict with patriarchal, gender, and consumer tropes. In my poem “Scent,” I try to be transgressive not so much of patriarchal and consumerist power, but of social and economic power. The poem’s hero is a widowed man from a rural area whose speech indicates a lack of scholarly education, but he is kind and wise in ways that are misunderstood and under-appreciated. In the poem he encounters in a public restaurant an aesthetic experience so overwhelming and beautiful that he wants to show his full appreciation for it, but his attempt to do so is met by the jaded, entitled, and fake response of the young and educated with whom he attempts to connect via a shared appreciation.

Mullen exploits the bifurcation of meaning inherent in language. Words that appear to mean one thing can also mean something else. The first untitled poem in *S*PeRM**K*T sketches not only a scene of women entering a supermarket and starting a
shopping expedition but also the creative process of writing (Mullen, 65). The poem begins “Lines assemble gutter and margin.” The “lines,” in their context, most obviously refer to the lines in the grocery store, but also can refer to the writer’s lines on paper. In the context of the grocery store, “gutter” and “margin” may act as verbs describing the shoppers’ movements. In the context of writing, however, “gutter” and “margin” may describe parts of the paper on which hand writing takes place—the margins and gutters of the paper—so that written lines are actually assembling on parts of the paper usually kept blank. This might refer to comments for critique and revision written in the margins and gutters of a paper. Or the lines of typed text can be understood to organize the space left over to be the gutter and margin. Following this logic, in which the lines delineate social class, the speaker of the poem is commenting on socio-political inequality in which marginal groups are provided only the leftovers and dregs in society. An additional reading would be that “margins” and “gutter” refer to the place or perspective a writer is coming from, so that this first sentence would be read “lines assemble from the gutters and margins.” Mullen herself writes from a marginalized perspective as a black female, and these words and syntax give agency to those whose agency is typically smothered and silenced. The addition “from the” to this first sentence could also refer to the kinds of shoppers in the supermarket—not the white, male, upper-class, but rather those from the “gutter” and “margin.”

The poem continues with “Outside and in, they straighten a place. Organize a stand. Shelve space. Square footage.” Is the physical place of the supermarket being described in these sentences? It would seem that “they” refers to the “lines” in the first
sentence of the poem. So the place the “lines” of people could straighten would be the supermarket, likely by creating a traffic pattern through the aisles and the parking lot. If the “lines” are written lines, then “they” would straighten the mind (in) and page (outside). The following sentences appear to be a continuation of the thought so each could read “Outside and in, they…organize a stand…shelve space….square footage.” Where “they” refers to lines of writing, “stand” suddenly seems to take on a new meaning—organizing a stand on a position. Or, if “they” refers to lines as social class barriers then the reader is to understand that social class boundaries organize society. If “they” refers to “gutter” and “margin,” then the reader is left with the reverse idea that it’s the marginalized who actually organize society. Are words on a paper organized around the gutter and margin or is it the other way around? Is power organized around the downtrodden or the other way around?

Mullen uses association and comparison to drive her poem forward. “Pushing oddly evening aisle catches the tale of an eye. Displays the cherished share.” Of course “oddly” and “evening” can be broken down to “odd” and “even,” which serves to underline a feeling of opposition in the poem—that opposites exist side by side and intermingled. The supermarket is presented as a place where stories/lives pass and intersect. Supermarkets are places that both equalize people, since everyone is there to fulfill basic needs, and distance people, since race and economics factor into how people fulfill their needs and wants. With so many kinds of people in one space, we are only able to interpret their lives by hearing them speak and seeing them behave in a limited space and time; we see people and create stories about them based upon a limited image.
“Displays” may be read as either the noun or as wordplay on “displace,” a verb.

“Cherished” may be a noun rather than an adjective and “share” the verb, so that the displays of goods in the grocery store are shared by the cherished/all people. If the sentence is read as “displaced, the cherished share,” the syntax of the sentence becomes confusing but may be interpreted as displaced (marginalized/hybrid) peoples as the cherished share of society.

The next sentence is Mullen’s most explicit commentary on womanhood and family: “Individually wrapped singles, frozen divorced compartments, six-pack widows all express themselves while women wait in family ways, all bulging baskets, squirming young.” Food, its packaging, and its marketing, is made indicative of relationships. The most evocative part of the section is “women wait in family ways,” which reductively places women’s roles as primarily the providers, caretakers, creators, and producers for families. I look at this theme in my poem “Dilemma.” In this poem a mother and wife is struggling to balance the resources available to her, her value system in terms of what she knows of food production, and her desire to please her family while choosing items to purchase at the grocery store. She weighs her options with great care and concern but by the end of the poem is so wrapped up in the web of options and is pulled in so many directions that she has a difficult time seeing how her decisions really matter.

The final sentences of Mullen’s poem drive home the examination and comparison of writing (from a marginalized perspective) with the operations within a supermarket: “More on line incites the eyes. Bold names label familiar type faces. Her hand scanning throwaway lines.” “On line” could be read as “online” meaning that there
is more information, marketing, consumerism, communication, etc. on the Internet to influence, inform, and distract us. The sentence may also refer to the lines of words on a page whose ideas stir up feelings in the reader. “Bold names label familiar type faces” could be read as insults (“bold names”) directed at a particular person because of bigoted stereotyping (“label familiar type faces”); or, the sentence may be read as branding and marketing on physical goods. The final sentence, “Her hand scanning throwaway lines,” again appears to deal with marketing—the “throwaway lines” referring to catchy marketing phrases that grab a consumer’s attention but don’t necessarily mean anything. The “throwaway lines” may refer to the lines on a barcode—so what we buy/consume at the supermarket is all strangers see and know of us. To follow this same vein, the “throwaway lines” hold a double meaning: people become disposable.

Lux and Mullen both engage with food, consumerist culture, and the social and power dynamics inherent in these subjects. Mullen focuses on a more transgressive poetics meant to critique and call attention to society’s ills by appealing to reader self-reflection. In his poem “A Supermarket in California,” Allen Ginsberg also critiques consumerist culture, but he does so not by language play but by engaging with Walt Whitman’s ideas about Americanism and the American Dream (Ginsberg, 344-45). Both Ginsberg and Mullen write from marginalized (in terms of political power) perspectives—Ginsberg from a queer perspective and Mullen from that of a black woman. It is noteworthy that both poems from these two poets take place in supermarkets.
In his poem, Ginsberg’s persona questions whether Whitman’s view of an America of possibility, inclusiveness, and happiness exists now or even if it did a century before. In the poem Ginsberg’s persona speaks to Whitman—more precisely, the speaker speaks directly to the audience, but he writes in a contrived epistolary form to Whitman—as if he is contemporary. Ginsberg’s narrator contemplates the changes in American society in the last century, and questions how these changes conflict with Whitman’s vision, a vision that Americans have embraced since the original publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The poem argues that the demanding nature of capitalistic society oppresses the already marginalized and makes it more difficult for emergence in the mainstream.

Ginsberg and Whitman both write from a queer perspective, which in the 1850s and 1950s was taboo. The speaker of the poem describes Whitman as a “childless, lonely old grubber” and “dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher”—this is a less than appealing description of queers in mainstream society that appears to further an “Other” status. These epithets show respect for Whitman’s wisdom, his empathy towards the marginalized, and his hopeful view of America’s potential; however, they also show pity for Whitman at the end of his days — dying poor, alone, and still marginalized (his queerness never ceased to shock readers and critics of the time). Ginsberg employs these descriptions of Whitman to further the “Other” status of the queer in order to make a point. America’s vision of Whitman is that of the everyman, and so when the speaker paints him as a “lonely old grubber,” all readers, not just those who are queer, take this to heart. This personalization is enough for Ginsberg’s readers to understand and reject the
America that he is describing in the poem. Without realizing, readers become empathetic to the marginalized queer in the poem.

Ginsberg mimics Whitman’s free-verse paragraph-like form, using lines so long that they carry onto the next line. Whenever Ginsberg refers to Whitman, he does so by using his full name, which is both a show of respect and a way to single Whitman out from the crowd. The poem is written as a dream-like journey with the narrator following Whitman through a supermarket at night. Ginsberg anchors this poem in a specific time and place in the italicized note that he placed beneath the poem, Berkeley 1955. This distinction is important, as it separates Whitman and Ginsberg by a timeline. Contained in this timeline is a span further distanced by an increase in vehicular transportation of food, and a rise in the marketing and commercialization of food and other objects (with the use of radio and television).

Ginsberg romanticizes the subject of his poem in a way similar to Whitman’s romanticizing views of America. The grocery story in the poem becomes a place seen with fresh eyes aware of the diversity and life contained in this singular location where cultures meet. Families shop at supermarkets on a regular basis, and thus encounters occur between diverse consumers and a capitalistic society that relies on profit and advertisement. Ginsberg uses the phrase “neon fruit supermarket” to represent America as a demanding society; neon flashes, glows, and calls attention to society. In Ginsberg’s America, everything is an advertisement, demanding attention and recognition. He writes, “In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went/ into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!” As part of the everyday experience, the supermarket
could contain enumerations as plural as those that Whitman addresses famously in his
own poetry.

Ginsberg latches onto Whitman’s idea of retaining individuality while also being
part of the collective, as expressed in “I Hear America Singing.” In this vein, Ginsberg
writes, “We strode down the open corridors together in our/ solitary fancy.” The narrator
imagines walking with Whitman, seeing juxtapositions in the chaos of capitalism, “Aisles
full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!” Though the narrator
and Whitman walk together, they are solitary entities, sharing a similar but disparate
space. Whitman not only accepted but exploited an American capitalistic society\(^1\),
whereas Ginsberg rejects the idea of capitalism. He views it not as an accepted necessity
but as a constraining choice, and it is here where Whitman and Ginsberg come into
conflict.

This distinction forces the narrator to question what will become of America
should society continue its emphasis on materialism. He poses this question to Whitman:
“Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour./ Which way does your
beard point tonight?” This is more than a simple matter of the compass—Where is this
nation going? Where should America be headed? Is this right, this demanding, selfish
capitalism? The speaker answers his own question in the form of another question nearer
to the end of the poem: “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love/ past blue
automobiles, in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” Whitman’s America is lost,

\(^1\) From *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems*, the 1855 edition of “Song of Myself,”
section 23, “A word of reality… materialism first and last imbuing.”
according to Ginsberg, and lacks love and the acceptance and openness that love requires. Instead, Ginsberg’s America consists of an increased focus on the material, and he criticizes the American Dream’s attention to individual property ownership, claiming that this has created a lonely society (“blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage”). My poems “A Conversation” and “Evolution” both deal with the issues of loneliness in contemporary society. In “A Conversation” the speaker is left feeling voiceless and unheard after a bad conversation over a cell phone. As the speaker waits for her cell phone to charge, she misplaces her anger towards her dog, the only other company she has. In this poem I have played with the idea of how cell phones have made us dependent on constant contact that lacks so much of the interaction that makes us human (closeness, intimacy, even the engagement of our senses beyond that of just hearing). In “Evolution” I imagine a society in which individual property ownership and capitalist greed has led to the downfall of human civilization and artificial intelligence proves to be the next step in evolution that can survive in the awful conditions left to them. These poems are juxtaposed with “Maple Syrup: A Love Song” and “Blueberries,” both of which talk about love—romantic and familial, respectively—as something of the earth and not material. A similar theme and juxtaposition can be found in “Operation Sexy Baker,” the equivalent of “A Conversation,” and “Vegetable Craving,” the equivalent of “Evolution.”
Ginsberg ends his poem in a scene of Whitman’s death. Whitman is made a myth in this description, as he arrives on the shores of Hades. Placing Whitman in this mythological setting strips him of his status as a person, detracting from the reality of Whitman’s America. Thus, Ginsberg is saying that Whitman’s America may have never existed, that the poet’s vision was fuller of possibility than the nation itself was. Whitman marketed himself as the ideal representation of the everyman, and he did so effectively. People shared his vision of America, thus perpetuating a capitalist society that allowed for further self-involvement. In Ginsberg’s poem, the speaker wanders through a grocery store, his path intersecting with other people’s paths, able to possess anything, but when he leaves he purchases nothing. At the end of the poem the speaker is alone, just as Whitman is alone, both having attempted to engage in the consumer culture of the supermarket but leaving empty-handed, even despite Whitman’s flirtations: “Are you my Angel?”

What Stein, Lux, Mullen, and Ginsberg have shown me is the way art forms (language play, in their case) can be manipulated to work as transgressive texts, the way food can be engaged in poetry as a way to view and talk about human relationships and social structures, and how art can manipulate its viewer/reader into self-reflection. Stein and Mullen use a level of intricate language play that I have not yet fully been able to achieve, but I hope that my use of photographs would enhance the investigation of my themes and subjects. Lux’s description of a seemingly mundane object reveals a beautiful

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2 The underworld in Greek mythology. Ginsberg writes that Whitman arrives on the shores of Lethe, which was a river in Hades. Charon, also mentioned in the poem, was the old man who ferried the dead to Hades.
look at familial history and nostalgia that has helped me to think about ways that food and other objects allow us to engage with the self and the world around us. Ginsberg’s elegant and understated dream-like journey with another artist has helped me to think about love and place and the power structures that form around those things, often to negative effect. These writers challenge their readers and comment on the intricacies of daily lives, and they do so with an inviting level of playfulness.

I imagine this project as eventually being in book format, with a photo or photos on one page and a poem on the facing page. Both the images and the writing would receive equal space. The poem might tell a story about the photo or might simply be inspired by the photo (not always in an obvious way), but each piece would have weight on its own—the photo would say one thing, and the poem would say another. I also imagine that the photographs and poetry would inhabit a kind of negative space. Because the photographs do not include people, only the meal being eaten and the location where that meal is being eaten, they act as the space surrounding the subject (the who of the photo), though that subject is left out completely. Even though the person is not in the photo, is not technically the subject, it’s hard to separate that scene (a meal clearly prepared by or meant for a person in the space where that person lives or eats on a regular basis) from that “person.” In the conversation surrounding the “slow foods” movement, experts and food writers often leave out what people are really eating and the conditions in which they are doing that eating. If individuals were actually present in the photographs then their physical appearance would automatically allow (maybe even encourage) reductive/colonial/racist interpretations. The goal of the project is to get away
from the idea of the consumption and pleasure of food (which dominates most of what I have read of food-related poetry) and to focus instead on the production of food (from planting and harvesting to cooking and the manners of eating) and how it plays into our social environment.

The project aims to create portraits of people through absence: the viewer/reader sees no human visage, only the food to be consumed and the objects creating the space where the food is consumed. The actual subject of the project is the people, the individuals, whose literal nonpresence makes them the negative space of the project as a whole. However, the photographs and the poetry combine to create portraits of individuals—so while the person is the subject, the works are done in negative. It is my hope that this will allow us to shed more light on real lives that consume “real food.”

Food and the objects and places that offer the backdrop to food consumption provide a main medium through which self-definition occurs. In a capitalistic society that consumes constantly, we find ourselves surrounded by a juxtaposition of semi-permanence and waste. This project hopes to explore the leftovers, the negative space, the in-betweens of an environment that demands attention in order to help us put in perspective not only who I am but who you are.


Blueberries

Before Winnie there was just Lily
and her parents on the farm and
since her third birthday, Lily asks for blueberries.
Her parents counter cake? presents? a kitten?
but Lily wants blueberries in the winter
and now little sister Winnie follows suit.

When catching tadpoles
little boys fight and flirt with Lily,
but she ignores them, showing
Winnie the slimy, legless bodies in her net.
Then the sisters, holding hands,
tour the jungle of Mary Fate Park—
nets raised, prepared to catch whatever is ferocious
in the depths of the lilypadded pond.

When asked how she got such imaginative kids
their mother shrugs, suggests, “maybe it’s all the blueberries...” and laughs.

Lily shrinks away from the big, black dog
closing in to sniff her. Winnie calls the dog to her, unafraid,
and her sister uncoils with a sigh.
After crashing her bike and getting stitches in her head,
Winnie cries whenever someone mentions it;
so Lily covers Winnie’s ears with her hands.

When asked how she got such brave, sweet girls,
their mother shrugs and says, “I think it’s all the blueberries.”

Lily chops her dark hair off and prefers pants to skirts
but Winnie loves her dresses and long, yellow curls.
The two are inseparable—wrestling like boys
and smiling like girls though neither one
would even think to say it like this.

When asked how she got such unique children,
their mother shrugs and says, “blueberries.”
Honeybee Keeper

I smoke the bees to sleep
by burning newspaper
then open the hive box,
take Langstroth frames fat
with dandelion honey
while the bees watch,
drowsy and drunk.

The heated uncapping knife
bleeds honey off the comb
the way sun bleeds from the sky at dusk,
and each octagonal space is crushed.
Months of careful work and planning
gone to pay their rent.

I return to the field
after extraction,
no suit except for gloves
to replace the empty frames,
and offer bare skin in sacrifice or repentance.
The bees are awake and at work.

The swarm rushes around me
but never touches flesh,
and I listen to their wings
beating, bashing, busting
breaking the air the way
ocean breaks on rocks and
a million shards of water are
dashed against the sky,
catching pin-pricks of sunlight
like dandelion petals, like honey drips.

But there is no ocean.
The swarm moves off
the air collapses, expands between us
until the sound of their wing beats is muffled
by distance
I imagine winging away
the way they do
unperturbed by a loss of everything,
by a starting over.
Lunch 60 Years Later

Macular degeneration,
*retinal deterioration*
dimness, loss, distortion,
but the kitchen is the same,
the same brand of chicken salad
in the same spot
in the same fridge. Her hands
feel for the correct knife’s blade or handle
to make and cut

sandwiches for her husband’s lunch.
60 years of lunches—
part of their marriage deal.

For their anniversary
they each chose the same card from the IGA,
white with large pink and gold
letters that looped and arched across the front,
inside doves carry a banner with a note of devotion
on the enduringness of love.

One humid afternoon he hangs wind chimes
and the hummingbird feeder
outside the kitchen window.

She has always loved the birds,
and glass ones—penguins, swans, cardinals, and robins—
line the window sill, so that sun glances
a rainbow across the table,
birds reduced to their essential lights,
which is all that’s left for her to see.

He points toward the bird feeder, filled
with sugar water, the emerald back of
a hummingbird zipping past.
She is eager to see,
the crust of her sandwich losing its contents
in her palsied hand. Where? Where?
He says, can’t you see it?
But he sees that she can’t:

Oh darling

The strawberries
rot in their bowl
the celery turns brown at the edges,
and he says no more, taking up a celery stick and
biting into the green end.
I.
She returned for her parents,
even though she never thought she’d be back.
But they are old, her mother nearly blind,
her father shrunk and brittle,
and she has married her high school sweetheart
nearly 40 years later, and there is
no reason not to move.
So most nights she walks the block to her parents’,
checks the fridge for spoiled food her mom can’t see
and then they hold hands and pray, play cards, talk football and family.
She misses her friends, her bread baking, the farmer’s market,
and especially the garden in her old backyard whose soil
she tended diligently until it was so rich it turned black.
II.
Sometimes she takes walks with her daughter.
They pause where the earth dips
and the factory where paddles used to be made
sits sunk beside the railroad tracks,
its black lot glazed and hot.
Long ago waiting there with the heat
her father purchased two newly carved paddles,
one for the school where he taught
and one for home.
“Spare the rod and spoil the child”
she quotes to her daughter
who thought she had meant canoe paddles.

III.
There’s the lot where her parents lived
in 1955 when they first moved to town.
A squat house now sits where that old trailer home had been.
They had lived by the church,
walked to work,
rented a garage to store the car they never drove.
Her daughter laughs at this, it’s so hard to imagine.

IV.
She wonders how often her husband visits his parents
at their plot in the cemetery. She wonders if he talks
to them, asks questions or yells when he thinks about
how they beat him, kicked him out at 17
when he fought back, broke his dad’s nose.
She thinks he probably says nothing at all
just stands there in the sun or moonlight,
feeling the nebulous edges of his sorrow or serenity.

V.
At church (nobody else thought she’d be back either),
she meets classmates who
recognize her instantly and she has to
mentally strip fifty pounds from each frame
put them back in their red and black cheerleader’s uniform:
*oh Betsy, it’s you,* she’ll say.
Old blind women with splotchy makeup
and too much perfume ask her to join one
group or another until she finds herself in the choir,
one oval mouth amongst many
and she thinks
this is community
and then one day it’s true.
Her husband plays ref for the Church’s senior volleyball league,
goes on pick-ups for the food bank,
and sometimes misses Sunday church—
everyone asks after him before sending up a prayer.

VI.
Nobody understands her need for a garden
in a yard that’s only ever grown grass.
It won’t grow they say
And she marks out the beds and lifts the sod
and asks her husband to till.
By July there are strawberries, raspberries,
cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, corn,
there’s more,
and when she makes salsa on game days
she sets out Tupperware-to-go for the guests.
From the garden, she says
hoping just a little that they’re impressed
There’s too much for us.

VII.
She spies him on their deck, watching
a new painting every evening
envelop the sky. She walks out and takes his hand.
Some nights the light is gentler, as if the sun
has forgiven the day as it slips away
but some nights
some nights
the sun blazes so far,
so close—like blood bubbling to the surface,
frothing over,
not like a wound or a stain but like
the color under your eyelids when you stare
too long into light and then shut your eyes:
the center painfully bright but the fringes faint,
melting into the glimmer and wink
right there at the lip of your periphery.
Figure C. *Garden Salsa*, Libby Jean Fackler, Baltimore, Ohio.
Figure D. *A Gallon of Pickles*, Libby Jean Fackler, Baltimore, Ohio.

In stages: soil, seeds, weeds, sprouts, weeds, plant, weeds, water, weeds, wait, blossoms, cucumbers, cucumbers, cucumbers.

Cucumbers ready for pickling, sliced thin, almost see-through slices; a sheer blouse or the mist
sitting in a valley. A sheer blouse
through which an arm holds steady a knife,
a house in a valley where the mist
rests on cool mornings before a hot day;
a garden beyond the wet window.

So thin in a gallon-sized glass jar;
the woman remembers her grandmother’s cursive and
the hamburger pickle recipe clearly,
translucently as the sweet onion’s first skin
sliced so trim or the skin of her grandmother’s hand—
paper white, wrinkled, knuckles deformed from arthritis;
her eyes brim over from the sting.
Her image is reflected in the glass
jar, rounded, and the wet window, malformed.

Those sweet pickles her grandmother made
from the cucumbers grown in the valley,
where the water would sit sometimes
after the heavy rain, the heavy puddles—
mirrors that disappear under a hot sun.
The last of the summer cucumbers conserved
by the brine, the old dented lid screwed on,
the whole thing left at the back of the fridge
until sweet, until the salt softened their skin.

In thin slices in the glass jar then
vinegar and sugar and salt and spice;
leaks between the packed slices,
filling the empty spaces, her hand in
the mouth of the jar, swallowed to her wrist,
and the sleeves of the sheer blouse rolled up,
the knife on the counter with cucumber skin
in its teeth, and the mist lifted, the valley exposed.
Scent

I minded my own business,  
my own business you know
when she swept by, man in tow
and I caught a slug of that scent,
it went straight up my nose
and clouded up my sense-making lobe
and I tried to blow it out
in my hankie but it was caught good
like she was some temptress with smells.

All the rest of my dinner, my tacos
and ‘ritas tasted like what it was,
the scent I mean, and I scarfed
it down and then wanted more;
I wanted to bathe in that perfume,
I wanted my head to be murky with it.

I watched her and her man meet
another couple and not one of them
three leaned in for a sniff
of that sweetness wafting off her skin—
nobody else appreciated it.
I drank another Corona while
they ate fajitas and quesadillas
and laughed like only twenty-somethings do.

I tried to shake it like a burr off a coat sleeve, but
the scent was on my tongue and
under my skin and I imagined it spilled
like a port-wine stain over my flesh.
It even infected the wood of the booth I’d kept warm for my wife,
late now, these last 13 years.

By the time they were done
I’d glugged down another few Coronas
and felt pretty liquidity-courageous
and I stood tall and straightened
my coat and went over to their table.

“‘Scuse me ma’am”—I tried to sound polite—
“I just wanted to tell you that whatever
perfume you have on is… divine.”
“Oh, why thank you, that’s so kind” she replied and I said “I just wanted to tell you that” and then I walked around their booth and sat on a stool at the bar, sapped of strength, my shaky hand grabbing hold of another Corona while my chest filled with some new warmth. I heard them in that booth snickering and the other girl said “careful Lu he’s gonna make potpourri outa your wrists” and they hyena laughed like twenty-somethings do; they couldn’t see me, they didn’t know I’d heard.
Maple Syrup: A Love Song

reduction, a more than small reducing, a 40:1 ratio. It begins with a tap tap
tap and tap and tap like a wood pecker but just a drill twisting out a taphole. Is your
sapwood healthy? Go tap elsewhere pecker. Collect sap. Valentine’s day’s just around the
corner market, it’s a quick trip for chocolates. Or stay. Tap the spile in, hang a bucket,
wait. Sap runs best past a night when the mercury freezes. The boiler is a flame or a hot
rock or a sultry dance. Heat to reduce. Sugar inside water outside on a Sunday morning
with honeycomb holes on a flapjack and nothing to do but be here. It’s not as slow as this
in January and it’s sweet but not low not white. Evaporated not dried up. Yes, syrup, sir
up stir up stirrups strapped on and a riding whip. That’s a little kinky and a little jejune
like smoke in the chimney, snow on the ground. An amber shade determines the grade.
One maple two maple red maple black maple. Lighter earlier darker later like I like my
coffee like a Sunday morning: temperamental volatile mercurial quicksilver not gold not
steady just pure unpredictable the way the seasons change but the seasons always
change... The later the season the less concentrated the sugar. More work, and even
greater a reduction. A reduction is a lack of oxygen and a reason and a thickening and a
flavor and a complexity and a dry liquid. The heating is a gentle persuasion and a
simmer, a boil, a staying, a rolling on with. Maple syrup is a concentration and a slow
move, a long wait, a not knowing, a stickiness, and a wound that heals.
History and a Salt Shaker

Figure E. *Dinner for Two*, Colleen O’Neil, Carbondale, Colorado

I.

This is something about a home:

this unadorned Colorado mountain cabin
devoid of typical American valuables
not necessarily a rejection of such tethers
but the result of a decision to live simply.

Here sits an ornamental thing:
An aqua-colored ceramic fish or something with
holes in place of eyes, filled to the gills, and when tipped:
salt.

History and language have been written around salt.
To start, the *Celts* and *Gauls*, both Greek for *salt people*,
were masterful salt miners who lived near Hallein,
Salzburg, and Hallstatt, whose names also contain salt.
II.

In the Colorado home lives a couple whose life was blessed by salt and they keep salt around the house to melt ice, to gargle in sore throats, and toss in boiling water, meals, and bread. They discuss their salaries, salt money, and say things like, “now there’s a woman worth her salt” and when they hike all the trails they follow lead to salt licks.

III.

The tragedy of Celtic history is that it was written by the Romans, who enslaved 3 million Celts, absorbed their innovations as their own and left Druids to guard an unwritten history and turn legend, as if to remind those of us to come of all the things we’ll never know.

The Colorado couple’s friend—a historian at a university—tells them he no longer owns a salt shaker, no longer has salt in his cupboards, does not feel a need to add salt to his foods; Yet at Christmas they watch him reach toward the center of the table, wrap his hands around the shaker, douse his meal.

Lot’s wife, looking back upon forsaken Sodom, is turned into a pillar of salt and every year she falls and the tourist foundation chooses for her a new salt pillar and new postcards must be made. And in that same Judean desert, near the Dead Sea, where living things float on water, some 200 varieties of plants demand to live and so use the abundant salt to suck moisture from the air and from the buried, rare, fresh springs.

IV.

In this uncluttered Colorado house on this kitchen table that bears no signs of leftovers from the rest of the day (only two forks, one bowl, one plate of salad, corn, and bread await); it seems that here, led by the elegance of a salt shaker divorced of mate, is a tiny revolution: to be alone, to be simple, to be happy.

In the cabin’s kitchen, out of the way of the window where late-afternoon sunlight streams through uncurtained,
the couple’s faded cotton clothes hang to dry—

In 1930, Gandhi spun cotton in jail after being arrested for walking some 240 miles to the Dandi sea—thousands of followers in his wake, thousands more to come—and undoing 126 years of British oppression in a moment as they slid their hands in the sea, held up palms full of salt.

V.

History expands, consumes, and, like brine, preserves the things that cultures value.
When the Colorado couple tosses salt in sourdough bread they think nothing of

Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, bringing flat, unleavened bread that lacked salt, a luxury: This absence a rejection of wealthy, slave-owning Egyptians whose whips had so long licked their backs.

or tossing salt over a shoulder for luck, or the possibility of enhanced fertility, or warding off the evil eye and evil spirits, they don’t psychoanalyze why salt gets the center of the table, or think that they in any way provoke or evade these histories.

VI.

If this Colorado mountain collapsed in on itself today, snow and ice might preserve the bodies and the simple items in the house, for centuries to come, like the 10,000 year old man or mammoth; though recall that at the Durnberg mountain in 400 BC a salt mine tunnel collapsed and trapped a Celt in his colorful garb with his tools, torch, and leather shoes and for over 2000 years the salt and water in the mountain made a brine to seal him in until he was uncovered, the brightness of his clothes the same as the day he was imprisoned

And so if things thawed and froze and thawed again, it seems that perhaps only the ceramic fish would survive, encased by a brine made from the salt inside, leaving those in the future to wonder who owned so ornate a salt shaker and why.
Pig not Pork

Figure F. Pork, Libby Jean Fackler, Baltimore, Ohio.

The Iowa field, a festering wound
where today’s GMOs change “pork” not “pig”--
reversing red meat and white--& the ground
is hard & sparse & things meant small are made big.

The feedlot, a septic tank
of corn-stuffed antibiotic-doped
animals. Don't stress, don't stress!
We'll make it organic.
The NPB's got a new campaign: “People, Pigs and Planet.”

I picture piggie-lovers picketing
after the 1987 ads, signs held high,
hoof-painted: “Call Us Pig Not Pork,”
they'd have pink masks and academics would question
if the snouts were appreciation or appropriation
there'd be a whole pig movement on our hands
until the tipping point and things reversed,
white meat changed to red again.

Super-marts, savage plastic
jungles where ethics are easily forgot,
where sterility taints gastric pleasure
& meat is *white* and *lean* & never rots. ³

³ “Pork. The Other White Meat” was an advertising campaign introduced in 1987 by the National Pork Board (NPB), located in Des Moines, Iowa.
On Self-Loathing

The company identified an untapped market, so we started selling self-loathing. First, one person started doing it, and then it went viral. The best commodities sell themselves. It was so cool particularly because it wasn’t cool. Irony was in and so everyone had to have it. There were worldwide competitions for which country’s citizens hated themselves most, and the newest census showed we all outdid ourselves. Suicide rates blossomed. People hated their bodies for being too… anything, and hated their gender, and hated their sex and hated their flaws and any perceived perfections, they hated their skin, their thoughts, all the feelings they felt.

I invested in quite a bit of stock.

The company had a firm No Return policy, and the product was made well—locally too—so it rarely broke or wore out. Then it seemed to mutate and self-generate, so sales slowed and we had to think of something new. The new thing we thought was:

*accessorize and personalize your self-loathing!*

the message winked on 20-foot-tall LED billboards.

When my daughter bought it secondhand on her way to school and came home crying, mascara running down her cheeks, saying her body was too straight and her skull too thick, her heart shriveled like a dead flower petal, I finally fully realized *what a success this business was!* I said “oh contemptible, detestable, abominable you, those aren’t *your* faults. Now let’s get the company to reset those synapses, we can’t have you cloaked in someone else’s self-loathing when there is so much potential for that in yourself.” She sobbed, her tears more beautiful than our brightest LED.
Figure G. *Dinner*, Becky Craig, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
I.
She goes shopping
and exchanges one guilt for another:
fatty, salty, processed dip
to coax her kids to eat the broccoli
she knows they should.
This is her idea of diplomacy.

Her shopping list: needed
disposable things like
Red Solo cups, paper napkins,
aluminum foil for summer campfires,
a six-pack of glass-bottled beer to end the day,
a plastic jug of apple cider,
cut flowers to put in the bulbous ceramic vase;

and also sustainable things like local apples
to fill the canvas bag,
and a new bpa-free water bottle,
local beer, a local acorn squash,
and instead of cut flowers, a living one to water.

II.
Where to put it all? How to use it?
what to keep? Non-organic Washington apples
are big and waxy and cheap but she knows
the man who owns the apple farm outside of town--
his daughter and hers go to school together--
but these small, knobby things are two dollars more...

What bottles, what waste best to tie
in a black plastic sack
and leave at the side of her street?

The scales in her mind weigh
as she stands in an aisle, each hand holding
a brand to compare.
She pictures the messy kitchen table,
their fridge covered in papers and magnets,
the cluttered place they occupy,
the stuff and things that take up space.

She pictures her child’s finger guiding eyes along the lines in a book,
while they try to dine at the dinner table
amidst mail and the daily clutter
and she looks at all the waste in her cart--
the plastic and foil and packaging
and the processed semi-foods from mega agribusiness
and corporate schemes that put small apple farmers out of business--
and she cannot think of one thing left for her to do about it.
Evolution

It’s 2300. The newspaper is not paper, hasn’t been for some time, and it’s not on the WWW either, it’s a projection that can be held, the pages are images that can be turned, but disappear, evaporate into nothing when you’re done.

Jim is a cyborg, but so is everyone else. He is reading the Politics section of the paper and eating his dinner; this is routine. He bites into a peach picked from the neighborhood’s community greenhouse and peach juice drips and dribbles down his mechanical knee—lubricating a joint momentarily before the dog licks it off—Jim doesn't notice, just continues reading the newspaper’s lead story outlining the state of the wellness system and its recently minted marriage to the department of agriculture. The newest policies subsidize apples and kale.

The front page of the paper declares: FRACKING FIASCO FINISHED: LAST OF THE MACHINERY FOUND, EJECTED. “Finally,” Jim mumbles as a small earthquake makes his table quiver.

He turns to the Health section of the paper, reads on: REMAINING HUMANS STILL WAIT FOR END. “Let go,” Jim hisses, thinking of the humans wasting away in their sickness centers, life support wheezing lullabies.

The dog under the table is bored and nibbles momentarily on the metal ghosts of his owner’s bones—just to move his jaws. Jim smacks him lightly with the paper. “I’ll have to get those marks buffed out again!” he scolds. The dog yawns and says into his interpreter, “Sorry, I’m bored,” stretches and moves toward the door.

Jim thinks of the humans and feels a brief pang of empathy not for their willingness to live—he’s not sure they ever had that—but for their stubbornness not to die. The pang is ever so brief as he looks out the kitchen window at the scorched trees, the jaundiced sky,
the motionless water, the dog digging for scraps in the garden, the dusty soil collapsing into itself.
Red Riding Hood: Epilogue

Part I: Wolves

the whole house creaks, sounds of stomachs,  
wood doors on bare cupboards moan and settle in the heat,  
and the girl waits for death to consume her, her grandmother:  
she knows hunger like a lover, feels it twisting within her.

Outside, wolves circle the house,  
“Come out, Hood” their howls seem to say.  
Floorboards squeak above her from the bedroom  
and she wishes they’d be silent.

Part II: Button Holes

The grandmother in her bedroom with scissors  
is overwhelmed by loose threads
in the rumpled linens and clothes.

She knows a devil is in her laundry.
There is a whole men’s button-up shirt that is
now just an –up shirt. How long now was it
since the wolves gnashed and tore?
she wonders, scratching at the blood stains with a fingernail.

The empty space from each missing button
leaves nothing to fill each clean hole--
Too many holes, too many threads.

She cuts buttons from the other clothes,
freeing each hole
from the anxiety of losing its better button-half.
Each snip of the scissors loosens her mind.

The granddaughter stands in the doorway,
mouth gaping, hungry.
“Grandma, how frightening you are,”
she whispers, drowned out by a howl
below the window and a low, threatening growl.
Grandma turns her head to the doorframe
eyes staring yet seeing nothing.

Part 3: Doll’s Eyes

For days the granddaughter watches
from her place in the doorway
she speaks, but gave up long ago on answers.
The grandmother sits in her nightgown,
scissors in hand, head down—
The girl glimpses a smile
and the dark pinholes of pupils.

Stop,
Anger fills her emptiness.
*Please stop.*

Light glints off cutting blades,
blades sever the thready veins
of a doll’s black button eyes.

No eye socket:
strings sprout from the cloth face
red-dyed fabric spurts of blood
blinding the pretty faced doll with its
fine-stitched cherry-colored lips.

Mason jars line bookshelves —
the books long since burned
when there were still food to be cooked.
Each jar filled with buttons,
leaving stray strings everywhere like grasping fingers.

The girl wakes:
   In my dream
   It was my face,
   that dull
doll face,
   blinded.

She breaks the jars
looking for her dolls’ eyes,
each shatter echoed by a howl nearby.

She crawls into grandma’s room
as if she is the wolf,
stands when she reaches the bed,
her damp hands clasped, hiding something.

The grandmother rolls over and sees the girl
in a knife shaped strip of moonlight.

Opening her clammy hands the girl reveals
one doll eye.

She places it on her tongue,
gives a single triumphant swallow.

Her grandma comprehends,
raises her scissors with a snarl.
And the girl, relieved, turns her head to the window,
sees a fog rolling in
to soften the ache of dawn.
Vegetable Craving

Beets bleed over the cutting board,
violet and red soaking into
hairy scalped carrot tops
and the filmy skin of onions
sticking translucently to everything.

So I dreamt of purple carrots.
It was under a blue midnight
I saw myself hunched over crossed legs
my hands in the breathing soil
burying Purple Haze, Purple Dragon, Atomic Red—
heaps more surrounded me,
patiently awaiting their planting.

I woke with a craving
for carrots,
but wondering what
made me give them back.

Maybe the soil had said
*Here is a rainbow made of earth.*
Or maybe roles reversed and instead of soil,
humans provided the nourishment we once uprooted.
Or perhaps the soil was simply tired of giving
and now was taking back.

*Planet of the Carrots,* I think,
writing a B-movie screenplay in my head—
would the carrots employ onions, beets, broccoli too?
Would they get rid of us? Turn poison in our bodies?
Or maybe evil for evil is a human impulse,
and the vegetables would know the soil needed
more than we had to give.
Making Chile Rellenos

Red peppers—spread open like hearts
or maybe a kidney cut in two—bubble and sweat in the oven.
I watch. I wait. I think about a lover who is not coming, coming home
walking up the sidewalk, past the garden, past the broken mailbox with our names,
and opening the door, smelling the butter on the beans
and laughing—I close my eyes, feel a flutter beneath my blouse.
It’s only when the pot overflows and my face slips from my hand
that I realize I’ve fallen asleep, eyes sunk.
I pull the pot off; prepare myself for the peppers’ charred remains
but through the lighted oven door I see them shine
the way fresh-spilled blood shines
just a little black around the edges, a wrinkle here and there.
Now that’s something to be admired:
the wet resilience of red peppers halved, gutted, scorched
the way your name on the mailbox
has never come off even when I’ve doused it in gasoline,
watched it burn, seen the paint peel.
All my words had fallen short before they reached the mouth piece of the phone and I could close my eyes now and picture them sprinkling futilely into the straining ear at the other end.

Silence announced itself like the moon to the night.

I made dinner for one but there was still too much; and the dog’s panting vacuumed up all the room’s oxygen, I wheezed trying to pry open a window while white paint peeled off the sill where my cell phone charged.

Silence announced itself like a breeze through a forest.

Dinner grew cold. I thought about words so much
I could feel their caress along my tongue,  
against the backs of my teeth,  
and then tasted them lose all meaning;  
there's no bitterness, no tart, at the cusp of loss and language.

Silence announced itself like flame to dry wood.

I picked at the dinner left on my plate—  
a little pork, a little pita—  
but my tongue felt corroded from rough words  
and I tasted nothing and swallowed hard.  
I downed a beer, and another, instead.

Silence announced itself like water to fire.

My dog stretched, flexed, yawned,  
saw me and wagged his tail  
but I thought he could have done it better  
"more to the left, Huck" I groused,  
then buried my cold nose against his warm ears  
but he only shrugged, already safe in doggy slumber.

Silence opened itself like a black body bag.
That Wednesday I bring in caramel coconut walnut brownies to get the PR staff over the hump of a 40-hour week none of us wants.

On Tuesday night a stick of butter melts on the electric stovetop. I preheat the oven, flirting with the boyfriend in hopes of... electricity to make up after an argument I hope is like one of those stomachaches that turn out to be just hunger. The butter begins to bubble. I add semi-sweetened chocolate, chopped. I inhale the sweet aroma, sigh. He grunts. He blows his nose.

I crack the eggs with sugar, a little vanilla, whipping with the wrist until thoroughly mixed and voilà add the flour, fold it in.

Boyfriend unfolds his laptop at the dinner table, digs in like coding’s dessert. I use a spatula to scrape the chocolate butter into the mix, then pour half the batter into a pre-greased 8x8. Caramel sauce warmed,
I drizzle it over the chocolate, coconut and walnuts the only barrier between brownie layers. The oven beeps, successfully preheated. He plugs in ear buds.

In the oven for 40 minutes. I seductively suck warm caramel sauce off my fingertips in attempt two of “operation sexy baker.” He goes out for a night smoke, the ember at the end of the cigarette, the pale screen of the phone his only light.

The timer sings out bzzzz at 9:23. I cut the first piece of decadence and hand it to my love on a plate, cut a hot slice for myself, scorching my tongue. He eats, his back to me. I clean up and we go to bed at 11:15, boyfriend and I, the dog the only one snuggling up.

And at work the next day everyone jokes I’m the only one burning off the calories from the sinful, foodgasmic brownies I brought to sweeten up our boredom, though they don’t know that even these sins failed to heat the bedroom, leaving me just a crumb turned ember in the oven hungering to burn more.
Road Games

It’s always slow in Amish country.
We dodge black buggies, those lazy trundling beetles,
and middle-class-beige Buicks.
We’re quiet as if the weight of speaking
has been lifted. Then we crest a hill
and I spot a road sign and say
*horse and buggy in my pants.*
You smile without a sideways glance
*55 mph in my pants*
You chuckle, *ouch, the chafing...*
then counter *tractor in my pants*
and we go at it for miles:
*railroad crossing in my pants*
school bus in my pants
eww that’s so gro--
*pedestrian crossing in my pants!*
I stretch my arm around your seat and curl
the hair at the nape of your neck with my finger.
*Deer in my pants*
*Can you imagine the antlers?*
*Falling rocks in my pants*
slippery when wet in my pants
I cry out
*You snorted, you just snorted!*
No *U-turn in my pants*
*Nuh-uh, no going back once you’re in*
We cruise up behind a semi,
it’s the perfect moment
and we both blurt out—
*Oversized load in my pants!*
We wipe the tears from our eyes,
and soon our snorts diminish to hiccups
and your hand wipes a tear from your eye
then comes to rest on my thigh.
We approach a white cross, worn and mud splattered,
sprouting crookedly at the road’s edge
a tattered purple ribbon ripples halfheartedly
in some raspy spring breeze
and a wisp of cloud stretches across the sun.
*Stop in my pants?* you attempt,
but I rest my cheek against the door window
and the heavy groan of the compact car
fills my ears and I see we are out of Amish country now.
You take my hand and we give the silence permission to expand.
Eraser

The poet is doing it wrong.
She had a dream that all the real
poets convinced her that if she knew
anything
then she would know which words
had been banned for use—
*evil, soul, self-esteem,* and *very*
Was she so ignorant that she missed the
memo outlining all the bad word choices?
Colleagues handed over her poems,
everything crossed out
in white ink, so that she held blank sheets.
“A fresh start is the best start.”

The next night she began to lose her sight.
It slowly
abandoned her,
it failed by increments so methodically
that the doctor predicted the precise day it would be
totally,
irreparably gone
and her eyes would be no
more than the damp
remains
of melted snow on a warm day.
“A fresh start is the best start”
the doctor said, his edges already
blurred. Her mouth moved but
there was no voice to ask
what he meant.

She wakes and there is no moon
and she cannot see
and can’t recall if it was a dream
or a memory
and when she thinks of the absent moon
no words come to mind, no despair,
and she easily feels her way out of bed
and to her desk, where she searches every drawer,
snaps every pencil in two,
throws away the lead ends,
and eraser to paper, with no light,
presses, drags the rubber until appears from nothing the word “moon.”
Hanging Lake

People coming down
tell those of us headed up
that there are seven bridges
before the final sharp climb to the top.
*Is it worth it?* we ask.
They assure us:
incredible beauty,
outstanding view.
Hairpin turns make me dizzy
there are so many of them,
my direction always in flux
so that I don’t know which way I started from
except that it’s somewhere below us.

Switchback follows switchback and
I stay on the trail, avoiding
shortcuts that, signs warn me, cause erosion.
Rocks shift under my feet and I stumble.
Past bridge seven, a stranger takes my photo:
   I hold a railing, the canyon drops around me.
And then the last few vertical steps
and Hanging Lake is at my feet,
impossible blues and greens,
waterfalls that come out of the sky
and fish like something from Dr. Seuss—
silver threads that dart and sparkle like jewelry with fins.
More signs warn of an ecosystem so delicate that
human touch—our oily skin, I guess,
corrosive—could not just disrupt but destroy it.

Reluctantly, I turn to leave,
head back to the trail,
take the hairpins in reverse.
A rock slips from under me
and I lunge, reach out,
steady myself on a tree that feels unreal.
The bark is shiny and dented
and glasslike beneath my hand,
smoothed not just by friction but by those
corrosive human oils
from hundreds or thousands of hands,
of which mine is one,
not the largest or the smallest
not the roughest, oldest, youngest,
just another hand,
searching for a hold
as if so much beauty has made people
drunk, disoriented.
And then it occurs to me
the picture in my head is already faded
to colors I’m more accustomed to,
even the logicless name “hanging lake”…
Hanging? but it was. It was, I say.
I continue my descent
never looking back
afraid that looking back
I’ll see no path behind me
as if hanging lake was no more
than a dream that waking smudges
the way a reflection in a pool smudges under rainfall
and leaves us wondering
what it was, that endlessly lovely thing
now blotted, now ripples and wake.
Leftovers

The images right under my eyelids changed; those freckles of light that appear, those imprints of things against nothing, now take the outlines of people I have not seen, specters that one night invaded my vision and never left. The days now frequently end this way, like garlic stained breath—persistent, then familiar and so not entirely off-putting.

The ghosts seem to haunt especially the kitchen, the air is always coldest there, the dust never settled. They must admire the mundane meaningful remains of my day:

a wood table ringed by glass mason jar mugs
with half-peeled applesauce labels, a sticky residual dew;
a fork and knife forgotten and slick from cutting, stabbing beef, spoons all clean but hollow in the drawer;
rumpled cloth napkins stained with oil, left among empty chairs at empty table spaces. The stale, hard bread darkening in the back of the empty fridge;
Scars and divots that decorate
a counter that is not a cutting board;
The old, dull knife in the cold sink water, obscured by the last chilled bubble of glistening Dawn;
on the floor, a missed spot is devoured by a fly that always swoops in through the crack in the door;
and the clock on the stovetop still blinking a frozen time like a warm, red heartbeat above cool, electric coils.

When I wake, the things admired are the things I clean and put away, I erase the negative space and the periphery: the ring, not the table, the rumpledness of the napkin, not the cloth, the divots, not the counter:
\textit{Perhaps}, I think, \textit{the leftovers, not the life}...
I trail off, not sure how to say the thing unsaid, my every fumbling step creating new negative space in my wake, uncertain what insistence there is in peripheral things whose presence, I feel, begins to outweigh my own.
Variations on a Bedroom Theme

1. Childhood Bedroom

The cassette player clicked at its end. That sinister noise demanded a vulnerable journey. My bare feet skimmed the floor as I dashed to flip the tape to side 2, then leapt through the air into bed, landing like a fallen kite.

The reassuring voice crooned on, but outside my window the distorted shadow of a dinosaur head revealed itself.

My panic, bulbous and expanding, washed out the sound of soothing make believe I mean, the shadow was real! but before the teeth could ever plunge I pulled the sheet, my shield, above my head, knowing cotton was the mortal enemy of my nighttime foe.

2. The Couch at Gram’s House

The grandfather clock in my grandmother’s house had a face like the full moon. It loomed in a corner by the coat closet, half-cloaked in dark shadow.

That fat ticking face wagged its dangling tongue left… right… left… right.

Until, loll’d by the rocking of that crude clock I would find myself upon a boat on the gentlest of dream seas.

3. Master Bedroom

In the divorce, the youngest kid gets the biggest room, the one with soft, purple, shag carpet that she’ll later tear up,
exposing smooth wood beneath.

4. First Year Dorm Room with a Sorority Girl

This roommate mumbled indiscernibly, even when I thought I was friendly. During hazing week her soon-to-be sisters brought a giant stuffed gorilla while I slept. I woke to it in her bed. It stared, grim eyed, at me, and horrified I thought maybe EKO had cursed her, the poor monkey.

5. The Triple

Drama was not allowed in the triple, a room exposed by three window-lined walls we had to be sure to curtain cover at night afraid now of prying eyes more frightening than dinosaur shadows.

6. Sunshine Room

I remember white sunlight like ice, and limbs so perfectly tangled like we were some new brute: savage and sweet.

7. Spacious Room

The old windows betrayed the house, let the chill in, and the naked hardwood floors creaked, echoed like the cough of a widower alone for the first time.

8. The Inbetween Bedroom

It’s a room always missing real movements and the unhung mirror has the same look as a grandfather clock as it leans on the floor staring warped at the ceiling who smiles back at its likeness.
9. Bedroom Without a Mirror

A window looks east
the scintilla of dust meets me in the sunrise
and on cloudy days the train’s roar
ripples right into bed
sitting like the dog at my feet.
I am written by each day’s long journey,
every one a sort of genesis and revelation
subsumed in you & me, such egoless ecstasy.

10. On the Establishment of Dreams

In our caffeine-resistant afternoons
the bedroom does its job, planning
the coming night’s dreams by
weaving together frayed thoughts.
In the night, the walls and curtains,
the shadows, clocks, mirrors,
sheets, the voices all lean in to whisper.
Nell

13 years.
In thir-teen-years Nell ran away
twice.
The first time Dad found her
at 2 a.m. when the rivers were flooding and
he’d spent six hours searching,
knowing his mother was watching out her window,
that I was at my mom’s 12 miles away, fretting.
The second time he kicked at her and she bolted
I cried at school until he called, said he
found her on the railroad trestle
and carried her a quarter of a mile to safety over
treacherous ties, spikes, and rails.

Once we cut her nails too
short and tried to duct tape socks on her feet.
She kicked them off,
ate half a blueberry crumble,
then puked blue all over our white wool carpet.
After that we had wood floors.

We thought if she was human
she’d probably be trailer trash
like the trailer trash at the edge of town
who put up signs in the summer that said:
“nite carlews fur sale”

She was a border collie who couldn’t herd
but liked to chase our sheep into the ditches,
get their wool heavy with water,
let their dumb bahs call pitifully for help.

Nell, my childhood dog, had a dignified death—
that 13-year-old, rolling in shit,
runt-of-the-litter, bitch
walked her liver-cancered body up the steps
after taking a final black crap in the yard
lay down on the floor
under the kitchen table
and died
after my father finished his breakfast
so as not to disturb routine too much.
Vigil

The wrong kind of liquid
pooling where he needs
air. Coughing as a clog.

His daughter is awake
peeking through her door at
the vast hallway, a throat,
the bedroom at the other end,
a wet lung.

She hears taut whispers:
*Everything is shutting down.*
*Should we go to the hospital?*
The choked *No.*

She hears her own small voice:
*Is everybody okay?*
Silence gasps back, then uncertain
reassurances. She paces the cold wood
on cold, bare feet, watching
shadows cross the hall.

Then in moments
the coughing dissolves
with a nitro tab under the tongue.
Taut blood vessels relax,
He says he felt the rise of gas under his shoulders,
as if slipping upward from under the scar
the length of his chest.
A belch replaces the coughing.

Lights turn off.
A blurred neon red blinks 3:43.
His heart slows its rapid beat
as oxygen slips in.

She climbs back in bed,
counts the ridges on the ceiling,
a sloppy heartbeat on a white monitor.
Smoke

Smoke not
smoke wakes me up
but I wake
fully moments before
her bedroom door
opens my mother’s thin
voice calling for him

a pause

a few paces on carpeted floor
calling again nearer
heart nearer her throat
this time I think
I hesitate

_Drowning_
_that’s how it’ll be_
he sucks on a swisher sweet
when he says these things
_my lungs’ll fill_
_and then my heart’ll stop_
_I hope it's in my sleep_

now no sound more

So I get up to see
and now it’s my heart
near my throat
I peer down the hall
into the moonlit room
light stripes like ribs
a body a cage enclosing them

    yesterday and other days
he flirts asks her
    are you loved
but she waves his cigarettes
in his face
    am i she asks him in return

but right now they hold each other
a motionless embrace
hearts still
safely beating
I move like smoke to bed

in the morning mom and I will tiptoe
the same as other days
we’ll ask him *What hurts*
everything
  *even my lips* he’ll say
his own arms hugging him
as if letting go
he’ll split along the scar
*They had to cut me open*  
*to see if I had a heart*  
and he laughs
like you wouldn’t believe how he laughs

we’ll tiptoe
we will say the things we always say

It was 4:30 and he hadn’t come to bed all night
she says
  He wasn’t moving in his chair
she says
  A stupor, one eye half open

I always wake up before
I say
like I’ve just smelled smoke
I say
like I’m waiting for the house to burn
All but Six

Fuck ‘em all but six and make ‘em pallbearers.
In lighter moments laugh, in darker cry,
but not to some godly façade or of dry bones bare
Fuck ‘em all but six and make ‘em pallbearers
to carry you where the air does not reek of despair
and where in the space of an eye is the whole goddamn sky.
Fuck ‘em all but six and make ‘em pallbearers,
in darker moments laugh, in lighter cry.