

# Can the Subaltern Sing?

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Can the Subaltern Sing?

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## ABSTRACT

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Can the Subaltern Sing?

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This poetic thesis deals with the subject of liminality: the state of being in-between, whether that status is in space, identity, or society. Exploring several perspectives and navigating personal and political territory, the poems combine experience and theory in an effort to depict and speak with and alongside marginalized voices, and are guided by an *ethos* of experimentation and wordplay. These voices run the gamut from the embittered tones of lower-class American *ennui*, immigrant, minority, and exilic musing and demands, and the unfixed and fluid song from the growing transgender community. The thesis consists of four distinct yet interconnected sections: “Early Work: Experiments in Duality,” “Theoretical Poetics,” Transliminal Rage,” and “Can the Subaltern Sing?” Each section incorporates liminality as its guiding theme, and attempts to explain how existing on and in the margins affects identity. The body of poems is preceded by a critical introduction which explicates the themes and influences present in the thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Critical Introduction	5
I. <i>Early Work: Experiments in Duality</i>	
Simmons: A Day in the Life	20
Simmons Watches Infomercials at 3:26 AM	22
Memento Mori	25
Cloudburst	26
II. <i>Theoretical Poetics</i>	
First, the Machine Killed Sensuality	28
Liminal Letters #1	29
Liminal Letters #2	30
Liminal Letters #3	31
Liminal Letters #4	32
Liminal Letters #6	33
Liminal Letters #7	34
Liminal Letters #9	35
Verbigeration #2	36
Verbigeration #3	38
Verbigeration #4	40
III. <i>Transliminal Rage</i>	
Liminal Letters #10	43
Liminal Letters #11	44
Liminal Letters #12	45
Sea Change	46
Self-Portrait as an Oyster	47
Survivor's Jazz	49
When I Tell You My Anger is an Appalachian Cliffside,	51
IV. <i>Can the Subaltern Sing?</i>	
Taking the Stage	54

## Can the Subaltern Sing? A Critical Introduction

“And it was at that age... Poetry arrived  
in search of me.” – Pablo Neruda, “Poetry”

### INTRODUCTION:

A week into my first undergraduate semester at Ohio University, I met a man who altered my life with a question. A PhD candidate in Engineering from Serbia, Marjan noticed me scribbling snippets of overheard conversations outside Donkey Coffee and asked what I was writing. I explained that I was trying some experimental poetry. He gave me a skeptical look, sat at my table with his espresso, and asked, “But isn’t all poetry an experiment?” I stared at him, dumbfounded for a second; the notion exploded across my brain like a neon sign at midnight. Over the course of my studies in creating poetry, I’ve never come across a more insightful – or influential – observation. Ever since that day, my work has been guided by an *ethos* of experimentation: the desire to create verse which employs and plays with formal conventions, explores modern social issues and critical theory, and pushes against borders, boundaries, and expectations of both bodies of poetry and the physical human body.

To this end, I have selected the poems of this thesis. While written at differing times over the last year and a half, these selections are unified by a particular theme: the concept of liminality. I was introduced to this word by a seminar I took part in during Spring 2018, Critical Theory II, taught by Dr. Katarzyna Marciniak. The course dealt with transnational literature, identity formation (particularly immigrant/exilic identities), and notions of dwelling outside, beyond, and/or between borders. These ideas had a

special impact for me, as a transgender and non-binary poet. The divide between *physically gendered body* and *mental gender identity* is a ‘border’ I navigate and transgress daily – in a sense, I deliberately live in liminality. The poems selected for my thesis similarly challenge convention while investigating and disturbing borders; obsessive and inquisitive, they push against the understood boundaries of poetic aesthetic, format, and content.

#### INFLUENCES:

Ironically, the notion of breaking such traditional expectations inherently draws upon and understands convention. After all, one must understand the norms in order to subvert them. Nor is the idea of poetic defiance new to the current American generation; its roots stretch deeply into history and spread globally. My discovery of three particularly rebellious poets – Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Pablo Neruda – inspired me as a sophomore writer to pursue poetry as my life’s work, and continues to shape my writing as an act of personal empowerment. While the poems presented here bear little *stylistic* resemblance to their body of work, this thesis shares their love of brazen experimentation, unflinching engagement with the darker sides of life, sense of political protest, and deep emotional investment.

I read “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman for the first time in 2011. At the time, I considered myself a fiction writer; however, I found reading the long poem intensely moving – and inspiring. His frank sensuality, self-identification with nature, and deliberate investigation of what it meant to be human, masculine, American: all of these elements wended their way into my consciousness, and reawakened a long-dormant

poetic voice. While my passion still dwelt with fiction, I began to craft short poems as a form of respite. These were generally paeans on the natural world, or light verse relying on wit and image.

Even though these poems were informal and playful, during this season of burgeoning experimentation, a line from Whitman kept recurring to me: “I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also” (463). Even in his celebration of American identity, Whitman did not shy away from depicting tragedy and the horrors of war. As an individual with a background of rape and deep trauma, the idea of exploring “wicked” themes resonated with me; yet, I flinched away from the idea of putting my personal fear and anger on the page. Poetry, I thought at the time, should be reserved for the beauties of life. However, reading Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” for the first time shook me out of this mentality – and set me firmly in the poetic path.

I still remember the visceral, bone-deep reaction I had after reading “Howl;” my hands were shaking, and every nerve of my body seemed electrified. *This is what I need to do with my life*, I said to myself that day. By depicting life in all of its gruesome glory, in at once challenging and embracing American ideals, and blatantly proclaiming his queer identity – something I sensed in myself, but was still far from coming to terms with – Ginsberg revealed a higher purpose for making art with words. He describes this as the power and mandate to “just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind – sum up my life” (Ginsberg, “Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*” 229). From then on, I decided to discard my preconceived notions of what poetry could or should engage, and how it should appear on

the page; in allowing content and mood to dictate form, I developed voice and learned to embody my anger and my taboos, rather than running from them.

Another canonical poet who helped shape my purpose is Chilean writer Pablo Neruda. Reading the first stanza of “Poet’s Obligation” clarified and cohered what I wished my own work to do: “To whoever is not listening to the sea / this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up... / I arrive and open the door of his prison” (Neruda, 1-2, 6). In crafting lush images and vibrant scenes, Neruda’s poems exemplify the sensory (and sensual) richness I attempt to bring to life in the reader’s imagination. However, as a witness to death and suffering – just like Whitman and Ginsberg – he also did not limit himself to expressing the beautiful and exalting the senses. One powerful example of both vibrant image and stark horror comes from his famous depiction of the Spanish Civil War, “I Explain a Few Things.” In contrasting his well-known tendency toward the lyric with bold, simple phrases, Neruda commands a power to mourn and “howl” in a single breath:

You will ask: why does your poetry  
not speak to us of sleep, of the leaves,  
of the great volcanoes of your native land?

Come and see the blood in the streets,  
come and see  
the blood in the streets,  
come and see the blood



in the streets! (72-79)

These powerful final stanzas embody a dichotomy – beauty and tragedy, unified by deep feeling – that I longed to explore through my craft. Although I had not yet hit upon the concept of liminality, being poised between polarizing dualities (and exploring the spaces between them) would continue to drive me throughout my career, and serve as major inspiration today.

#### ENTERING THE LIMINAL BODY

This collection of poems is divided into four sections, each reflecting a different entry into liminal space and identity. The first, “Early Works: Experiments in Duality” collects the poems that – on the surface – may appear unrelated to the theme. However, the two “Simmons” pieces, at their core, are a case study of a man who is perpetually trapped in-between. He simultaneously desires fulfillment and denies its possibility; he watches the world outside his door with longing, yet rejects the thought of entering it for himself. Despite his distinct personality on the page, he is so apathetic that he does not even think of himself as an individual – hence the lack of any personal pronoun. While drafting, I began to think of Simmons as my inner Philip Larkin; revisiting his work for inspiration, Larkin’s “Aubade” resonated with my ideas of the persona. Here was a speaker who at once embraced the classic chestnut of praising the dawn, yet played with the expected conceit with his sour, “half-drunk” musings on mortality and fear. His voice – resigned, angry, bitter – intrigued me as an excellent model for the character in development. Simmons took shape as a middle-aged alcoholic filled with *ennui*, at once revolting and oddly sympathetic; his life revolves around his punch-clock job, watching

television, and drinking. The more I pictured his cyclic routine (epitomized in “Simmons: A Week in the Life”), the clearer his voice became: gruff, with flat effect, idiomatic and curt.

The two ‘nature’ poems in the section also speak to a concept of competing dualities: rain and sunshine, heat and cold. Out of all the selections, they most typify my poetic style and voice prior to the incorporation of theoretical elements: conversational, narrative, concerned with evoking image and the senses *à la* Whitman or Neruda. Still, they too engage with the idea of liminality – states of being in transition, either in season or in motion, perpetually uncertain and as changeable as weather.

#### QUESTIONING CRAFT AND THE BODY POLITIC

The second and longest section, “Theoretical Poetics,” deliberately plays with ongoing tensions between theory and creative work, as well as discussions of craft and form. While the difference between “poetry” and “poetics” is clear to me, the *rationale* for keeping the distinction so far separate is one I wish to confront. The two series that constitute this section draw a great deal of influence from the Critical Theory class; they call attention to the crises of life in postmodern America, particularly those faced by people forced to dwell *upon* and *within* the margins of ‘accepted’ society. These poems draw upon a melding of the intellectual, the political, and the creative to obsessively question – and challenge – the norms and mores we are forced to adapt to in academia and in daily life.

One text that stimulated this idea of hybridity is Trinh Minh-ha’s 2011 book *Elsewhere, Within Here*, which we discussed extensively in Dr. Marciniak’s class. I was

struck by Trinh's complex blend of theory and poetic diction; her book spoke to me in layers of meaning, with the potential for hidden messages. With these ideas in mind, I decided to experiment with excision and erasure. Taking a page from the chapter "Voice Over I," I blacked out words until I found two specific ideas: the appearance and physicality of the body as fictional constraint, and the troubling image of a tongue being cut to "interrupt" the speaker. Instead of the literal meaning of "falsify," the poem took on dimensions of speaking truths still *regarded* as fiction; instead of allowing the speaker to "tell all secrets," the "Machine" (a stand-in for systems of oppression via forced conformity) warns them that their sensual internality will lead to violation. However, the speaker still chooses to put forth their inner life via voice and music. This message, as will be demonstrated, gives particular guidance to the overarching work of the thesis.

Erasure, of course, is nothing new in the poetic world. Mary Ruefle, one of the most established pioneers of erasure poetry, called the style "a form I can't resist" during a craft discussion at the 2015 Palm Beach Poetry Festival. Intriguingly, she described the act not as removal, but one of "bandaging the words, and the ones that are left are those that seep out." This is apt when considering "First, the Machine Killed Sensuality," as the themes I found 'bled through' Trinh's original text. Tiana Nobile, writing for the February 2019 issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*, espouses similar ideas in her article "Haunted by History: The Poetics of Erasure." In considering *Voyager*, an erasure of a memoir by former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, she asks a vital question: "What happens when we consider erasure as a form of discovery and invention rather than depletion?... Poets who work with erasure are actively engaging with... and taking

charge of an intertextual discourse” (Nobile 34). These observations, and the idea of entering a conversation with text to discover unexpected nuances, help elucidate my purpose in experimenting with this form.

The “Liminal Letters” series also has its roots in theory and experimentation – this time with the fine art of brevity. By turns philosophical, challenging, and critical, each “letter” addresses an unnamed male authority figure. As revealed in the ninth letter, this person espouses a dogmatic, nationalistic rhetoric which troubles the speaker (deliberately left anonymous and amorphous, as to open possibilities of self-identification with her/him/them and broaden the critical lens.) The poems speak of in-between places, persons, and states of being; they question assimilatory practices, fixed identities, and the practices and policies of American politics and culture. While I must acknowledge that the current regime and political climate provided influence for these ideas, the series draws equal inspiration from the theorists – Trinh, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (just to name a few) – that I engaged with during the creation of the poems.

The other series, “Verbigeration,” also draws heavily on theory, and is the most stylistically experimental of the thesis. In Kim Addonizio’s treatise on craft, *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within*, she lists a series of unusual and obscure words as a tool of creative germination. Her definition of verbigeration – “n. *Obsessive repetition of meaningless words and phrases*” (Addonizio 60, emphasis mine) – grabbed my imagination. As obsession with certain themes and ideas fuels my poetic creativity, the word seemed ripe for exploration; I also sensed potential for a fruitful tension between the *appearance* of being ‘meaningless’ and finding a deeper, complex meaning. At the

time, I had cravings to write something more heavily formal than the “Letters.” While some modern poets reject fixed forms (indeed, my listed influences are well-known for open verse), at times I find constraints, paradoxically, liberating. As Nobile says in her article, “While form can act as a container and a foundation, it can also provide the poet with the freedom to move and take risks within the frame” (35). With its self-invented repetitive structure (inspired by pantoum, one of my favorite forms), rejection of image for the abstract, and constantly shifting, recombinant levels of meaning and wordplay, the “Verbigeration” series is certainly the ‘riskiest’ set of poems in the thesis.

As stated above, no artist works in a vacuum, and few poetic forms are original to their creator. While completing my studies, an introduction to two “language poets” showed me the conceit of believing that I was creating something completely new in form or by the addition of theory to poetry. The idea of epistolary poems is well-established, but “Dear Mr. Fanelli” by Charles Bernstein exemplifies what I was aiming for with the “Liminal Letters.” Much like the speaker of the “Letters,” Bernstein’s speaker feels obliged to inform authority – in his case, the manager of a subway station – about the problems with the station, and gradually, with life overall: “I thought, if / you really wanted to / get to the bottom / of what’s wrong then / maybe it was my job / to write to you” (61-66). The speaker also references theorist Hanna Arendt, which is unsurprising given Bernstein’s status as a theorist himself, and in his interest in writing that “blurred, confused, and denied the boundary between poetry and critical writing about poetry” (“Charles Bernstein”). Like Bernstein, poet and theorist Lyn Hejinian engages in deliberate lingual play and brings abstract theory into her work. While I had

not read her “constant change figures” before crafting the “Verbigeration” series, her complex interweaving of repeated lines to alter and blur meaning is closely akin to my aims with the poems.

“RAGE SWELLS / IN BODIES...”

As a poet concerned with American identity and culture, I feel obliged to comment upon and critique the behavior of its current government. In particular, I am troubled by its culture of hostility to people who live on or in the margins: immigrants, practitioners of non-Christian faiths, women, and the LGBTQA+ community, to name only a few. With this rising tide of violence, I feel an equal tide of resistance needs to swell past the artificial breakwaters, boundaries, and borders in order to reclaim justice – and peace. The poems of the third section reflect this desire, and the anger and fear that drive it. The speaker of the “Liminal Letters,” tired of politely requesting change, now demands it; they threaten grave consequences if the current trend of oppression and deceit continues. This culminates in “Sea Change,” an image-driven prose poem depicting my hopes for a collective resistance. The following poems mainly turn from the imagined and theoretical to the narrative and personal: unflinching depictions and examinations of my identity as a survivor of rape, and the resulting rage that is as much a part of that identity as the Appalachian mountain setting where the violations took place. Of all the poems of this body of work, this section speaks most to my influence from Ginsberg – in content, if not form.

“NOW IS IT MY BODY? / OR SOMEONE I MIGHT BE?” (ALICE COOPER)

Although this thesis was written around the themes of liminality, identity, and political consciousness, another theme evolved during the cohesion process: music. In some ways, this focus was inevitable – I’ve developed a deep interest in musical performance during my time at Ohio University. Specifically, I’ve taken to performing weekly at the local karaoke night at the Smiling Skull Saloon. While at first this was merely a stress valve, engaging with karaoke proved a fertile ground for creativity and intellectual engagement. By examining it as a form of collective, performative poetry, I drew newfound energy and inspiration for this body of work. Moreover, I realized that the poems stemming from these evenings echoed many of the themes already elucidated in the other pieces. To this end, I crafted “Taking the Stage” to serve as the finale. Narrative, musical, and intensely personal, the long poem contains allusions to other thesis poems and performed songs, touches on ideas and questions stemming from my studies of queer and identity theory, and draws upon real people and events to depict a typical night at the Skull.

#### CONCLUSION:

As this thesis owes so much to theoretical work, I would be remiss in eliding the importance of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to the title and the overall thought process. In critiquing the way Western academia purports to speak for the subject and defines the ‘Other’ as necessarily lesser, thus establishing power over the subject, she puts her finger on the question of how marginalized persons occupying liminal space are spoken about, rather than allowing

them voice. Paradoxically, in investigating this issue as both a Western academic and a resident of that space (if not precisely subaltern), I must at once acknowledge my own position of privilege and lack thereof, all while attempting to speak *alongside* and *in harmony with* the subaltern. My attempt to answer this question with the vehicles of poetry and song from within that in-between space may ultimately fail, as Spivak suggests, due to the inherent imbalance of power. Nonetheless, I will – I *must* – keep singing.



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I.

*Early Works:*  
*Experiments in Duality*

“Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what’s really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now...”

- Philip Larkin, “Aubade”

## Simmons: A Week in the Life

Monday. Shower, shave. Bus to work.  
Boss bitches about equipment. Fucker.  
Punch out. Nod to night watch.  
Back to house. Drink shit booze  
until finally falling into sleep,  
long after windows go dark.

Tuesday. Wake up in the dark:  
3:26 AM again. Lie on couch, watch  
shit TV till dawn. Slack day at work.  
Boss bitches about football. Fucker.  
After, store stop – need more booze.  
Drink. Try not to think. Sleep.

Wednesday. Shit night, broken sleep.  
Shave, no shower. Cut chin: dark  
blood flows. Quick shot of booze.  
Miss the last bus to work;  
boss bitches about lateness. Fucker.  
Gonna quit someday – just watch.

Thursday. Payday. Think watch  
is busted, but saving cash for booze  
at Tin Pig tonight. Got some sleep.  
Kept on the clock till dark;  
mostly bullshit and busywork.  
Boss bitches about bitches. Fucker.

Friday. Hungover. Call boss; fucker  
bitches about missing work  
too much. Too bad. Make room dark,  
try to find some real sleep.  
No shower, no shave; just watch  
shit movies, aspirin, water, booze.

Saturday. Must buy more booze.  
Woke up from shit sleep  
with dream of boss bitching. Fucker.  
TV's busted. Sit on couch, watch  
the world out the window until dark:  
drink, try not to think. Doesn't work.

Sunday. No sleep as dark  
turns to day. No work, no booze,  
no TV to watch. Shit. Motherfucker.

## Simmons Watches Infomercials at 3:26 AM

“Hi! Billy Mays here for  
Infinite Recursion! Has this  
ever happened to you?”

Everything’s gone flat – warm  
Coors, batteries in the remote,  
tires on the beater out back.

What else to do but drink  
anyway, watch the bearded shill  
smarm whatever crap – already

forgotten – he’s hawking this time.  
His mouth moves like a race horse,  
tongue a frantic jockey whipping

his words on. Used to play  
the ponies. Got played by  
the ponies. Now no play

at all. Crotch itching  
again – pills don’t work so well  
when you ain’t taking them,

when you can’t afford them,  
when you ain’t getting any  
anyway. Just scratch it raw.

“Hi! Billy Mays here  
for Infinite Recursion!  
Has this ever happened

to you?” One more  
Camel in the pack  
before the time comes

to break up used butts  
for their last half-burnt  
fragments: stale home-

rolleds're better than none.  
Smoke it. What have lungs  
ever done for me anyhow.

"Percy," the boss said  
yesterday – fucker knows  
not to call me that –

"Percy, them things'll  
kill ya." Said back,  
ain't that the point,

and he blinked like a big  
fat fish, wet-mouthed  
slackjaw, before wheezing

out his stupid guffaw  
and hitching khakis past  
his hairy potbelly.

"Hi! Billy Mays  
here for Infinite  
Recursion! Has this ever

happened to you?"  
Tell it, Billy. Make me  
believe there's a point

to your existence, to whatever  
product you're pushing  
from beyond your well-earned

grave, since the hell-damned  
TV keeps whoring  
out your face, your corpse

for five easy installments  
of nineteen ninety-five,  
shipping and rough handling

never included. Tell me  
there's life beyond these  
nicotine-green walls,

just so I can keep it  
locked out a little  
longer. Sell it, Billy.

“Hi! Billy Mays  
here for  
Infinite Recursion!

Has this  
ever happened  
to *you*?”



## Memento Mori

In case I have been coaxed  
by the buttery warmth of dawnlight  
and ripeness of the milk-streaked sky  
into forgetting, January offers  
a reminder: her breeze caresses  
my cheek like the gentle hand  
of a corpse.

## Cloudburst

A sudden shower in August:  
bruise-deep clouds, sullen  
from a day's long wait  
to weep, surrender their  
weight to drown the world.

In the gray light, students  
scuttle like squirrels over  
Central Green, heading for  
whatever shelter the weather  
might offer. I do too,

protecting a treasure of  
texts with my body  
and dashing to the bus stop.  
My nose drips. Rain rolls  
down my ears. The bus is late.

Once we're rolling, a random  
remark begins lively  
conversation with a stranger –  
Vonnegut, poetry, philosophy. We  
shake hands, exchange names.

Departing the bus, I find  
the unexpected: sunshine.  
The road is dry as Mars. I ask  
my husband if he was caught.  
“What rain?” he replies.

## *II.*

### *Theoretical Poetics*

“If identity refers to the whole pattern of sameness within a being, the style of a continuing me that permeated all the changes undergone, then difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another.”

- Trinh Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You”

## First, the Machine Killed Sensuality

*an erasure of Trinh Minh-ha's "Voice Over I"*

Follow delight, awaken  
desire; finally reject  
the surface, tell all secrets.

Exposed in the confines  
of this body, inside, between;  
the name, the image is a fiction.  
Report the I a fiction of identity.  
Not all of what is  
seen, felt, is I.

I've been told, "The tongue  
that falsifies must be cut. Selectively, tactically  
interrupted; breath of love, a tear.  
Voice evokes rape." Does it lie?

Perhaps it is too difficult  
to go on wondering  
what asserts itself over  
the silence: an absent  
presence, a present absence.

A voice exists – physical, erotic – a  
world is being built in music, and silence.  
I: detached from myself in space. There.

## Liminal Letters #1

Dear Sir, Is there ever a  
state where we are not  
seeking, we are not  
looking for something?

Does this differ  
from searching  
for nothing?

And do we call either,  
“Death?”

## Liminal Letters #2

Dear Sir, It is no good  
asking if we are lost;

for being lost implies  
a way to get back,

a place to return *to*.

## Liminal Letters #3

Dear Sir, If suspension  
in a solution is a form  
of transformation, I urge  
you to recall: it is also  
an act of dissolution.

## Liminal Letters #4

Dear Sir, The distance  
between the bridges is  
greater than you know;

dividing the border,  
the water is deeper  
than anyone can go.

For those who live  
along this river,  
safety is never sure;

cast adrift and worse,  
labeled a curse,  
a plague to be endured.

Dear Sir, You ask, "Why must you persist?"  
I answer you now: to assert that we exist.



## Liminal Letters #6

Dear Sir, From the steps  
of the halls where men  
decide our fates, the actress  
playing Lady Liberty  
proclaims, "America  
is in action." A trick  
of the ear, I hear instead  
"America is in ashes."

Sir, My single question is:  
Who first struck the matches?

## Liminal Letters #7

Dear Sir, I see  
you with the usual  
cronies, smiling,  
laughing through  
the brackish air  
of the cigar bar

as snow falls  
on the body of  
the man – hopefully  
sleeping – in the  
alley outside, empty  
bottle nestled by  
his side; through

the smoke-stained  
window, your skin  
is tinged, tinted to  
almost the same  
hue as his,  
or mine.

# Liminal Letters #9

D We must believe that America is strong.  
 e We have built a mighty nation, and we shall protect it at all costs.  
 a We will defend it from those who would corrupt it, pollute it, defile it: the aliens in our midst.  
 r Our cause is righteous, our hearts are worthy, our American blood beats red and pure.  
 S Our land is one of opportunity, and we will not let that be snatched away.  
 i Nor will we allow the bread to be stolen from our table, the shirts from our backs,  
 r the guns from our hands. Our rights are assured and unassailable: we receive all guarantees.  
 ' We have built the freest nation on God's green Earth with our own two hands;  
 T we must continue to build a haven where our children may walk in safety,  
 h untainted by the evils of this world. And how can we have a Heaven  
 i if we don't cast out the sinners, the snakes, the demons?  
 s For our nation's health, we must excise its tumors, pry the leeches from our veins.  
 Scrub the slime from our bodies and be certain we are clean.  
 So shall we be saved from the stain of the criminal, the invader, the agent of terror,  
 the unfit and the unworthy. But we believe in peace:  
 it is only the actions and hostile nature of the Other that provokes this nation  
 to repay violence for violence, an eye for an I. We must stand strong.  
 We remember the deeds of our forefathers, who fled persecution  
 and fought for every inch of this sacred land, who won it from those  
 dwelling in primitivism before our brave voyage; we remember our veterans,  
 who sacrificed blood for our freedom, who fought to bring democracy  
 to a thousand foreign lands. We honor their sacrifices, just as we honor  
 our supporters, our sponsors, our law enforcement officers; the hard workers  
 and peace-keepers that have made our nation so great. We thank them for their service,  
 their contributions to our proud and diverse country, this melting pot  
 that grows and glows so white-hot and fierce that it melts away all impurities  
 to leave the shining steel of our society exposed and gleaming.  
 We love our country like we love our parents, our fathers and mothers  
 and our mother tongue; and just like our parents, we must honor and respect  
 and obey the commands of our leaders – we know what is best.  
 We shelter and defend, nurture and protect against the evil all around:  
 the terror in the dark, the knife in the back, the blackness of the enemy's hearts.  
 They violate our borders, the walls we erect to keep safe and sacrosanct  
 our American identity, the rights and duties of men and women, our children  
 from corrosion, corruption, and filth; we must drive them back, push them out.  
 We must be vigilant. We must be determined. We must be steadfast.  
 Stay the course, and we will inevitably prevail. It is our destiny.  
 We will lead the world to freedom; we will lead this world to its new golden age.  
 God bless and keep our American family;  
 God bless our beautiful nation.  
 Thank you, and good night.

## Verbigeration #2

*shall we sing                      a deliberate strategy                      liminality is*  
*among the wreckage    of consumption and expulsion    an in-between existence*

*sound echoes in a void              the self is constructed              silence is felt*  
*and i have said nothing              from all that is other              as absence*

1. Shall we sing  
among the wreckage?  
A deliberate strategy  
of consumption and expulsion,  
liminality is  
an in-between existence.  
Sound echoes in a void,  
and I have said nothing.  
The self is constructed  
from all that is other:  
silence is felt  
as absence.
  
2. Liminality is  
a deliberate strategy;  
shall we sing  
an in-between existence  
of consumption and expulsion  
among the wreckage,  
as absence  
from all that is other?  
And I have said... nothing.  
Silence is felt.  
The self is constructed:  
sound, echoes, in a void.

3. “As absence,  
the self is constructed,  
and I have,” said nothing.  
Sound echoes in a void.  
From all that is other,  
silence is felt –  
an in-between existence,  
a deliberate strategy  
among the wreckage.  
Shall we? Sing  
of consumption and expulsion:  
liminality *is*.
  
4. An in-between existence.  
Shall we sing?  
Silence is felt  
and I have said nothing –  
a deliberate strategy  
from all that is other.  
Liminality is  
among the wreckage,  
sound echoes in a void  
as absence;  
the self is constructed  
of consumption and expulsion.

## Verbigeration #3

*the obsessive repetition of  
meaningless words and phrases*

*can the subaltern speak.  
with a censored tongue*

*the severing of words  
with deliberate intention*

*when voices are silenced  
an emptiness comes*

*a decade of dissociation  
a fragmentation of self*

*who owns the rights  
to speak of this sickness*

1. The obsessive repetition of  
meaningless words and phrases:  
can the subaltern speak  
with a censored tongue –  
the severing of words  
with deliberate intention?  
When voices are silenced,  
an emptiness comes;  
a decade of dissociation,  
a fragmentation of self.  
Who owns the rights  
to speak of this sickness?
  
2. The severing of words.  
Can the subaltern speak  
the obsessive? Repetition of/  
with deliberate intention:  
with a censored tongue,  
meaningless. Words and phrases  
to speak of this sickness,  
a fragmentation of self.  
An emptiness comes.  
Who owns the rights?  
A decade of dissociation  
when voices are silenced.

3. To speak of this sickness  
 (a decade of dissociation),  
 an emptiness comes  
 when voices are silenced;  
 a fragmentation of self,  
 who owns the rights.  
 With deliberate intention  
 can the subaltern speak  
 “meaningless” words and phrases.  
 The obsessive. Repetition. Of...  
 With a censored tongue,  
 the severing of words.
  
4. With deliberate intention,  
 the obsessive repetition of  
 “Who owns the rights?”  
 An emptiness comes.  
 Can the subaltern speak  
 a fragmentation of self,  
 the severing of words –  
 meaningless words and phrases –  
 when voices are silenced?  
 To speak of this sickness:  
 a decade of dissociation  
 with a censored tongue.

## Verbigeration #4

*the stranger functions  
as society's shadow*

*becoming the feared  
a hostile invader*

*a way to separate  
the inner and outer*

*to create the self  
we expel the other*

*without a country  
yet bound by borders*

*the nation states  
of uncertainty*

1. The stranger functions  
as society's shadow.  
Becoming the feared,  
a hostile invader;  
a way to separate  
the inner and outer.  
To create the self,  
we expel the other.  
Without a country,  
yet bound by borders:  
the nation-states  
of uncertainty.
2. A way to separate,  
becoming the feared;  
the stranger. Functions:  
the inner and outer,  
a hostile invader  
as society's shadow  
of uncertainty,  
yet bound by borders.  
We expel the other,  
the nation-states  
without a country,  
to create the self.



3. Of uncertainty:  
without a country,  
we expel the other  
to create the self.  
Yet, bound by borders,  
the nation states  
the “Inner” and “Outer,”  
becoming. The feared  
as society’s shadow,  
the stranger functions –  
a hostile invader,  
a way to separate.
4. The inner, and outer;  
the stranger functions.  
The nation states,  
“We expel the other,”  
becoming the feared  
yet bound by borders.  
A way to separate  
as society’s shadow,  
to create the self  
of uncertainty:  
without a country,  
a hostile invader.

### *III.*

## *Transliminal Rage*

“Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse  
and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch  
the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!”

- Allen Ginsberg, “Howl”

## Liminal Letters #10

Sir, With both  
stained hands you pull  
the lever on the  
stigma machine;

our bodies, stamped  
with the slurs of  
rejection, roll from  
the disassembly line.

## Liminal Letters #11

Sir, Rage swells  
in bodies like a tin can  
left too long to blacken  
in the ashes of a fire;

should you continue  
to feed the flames,  
do not dare to weep  
when the shrapnel  
strikes.

## Liminal Letters #12

Sir, You have disregarded wisdom  
to fan the blaze still higher,  
too blinded by your greed to grab  
the glory you desire

to notice that what you've ignited  
is a nation's funeral pyre.

## Sea Change

And it was as if they had awoken from a season of madness into the dawnlight. The people left their houses, poured into the streets. They greeted each other at once as strangers and as old, dear friends. Some held each other close, in groups or singly; others wept, and were comforted. The murmur of their voices drowned the preceding silence, swelling to a crest like the tide breaking on a beach of indifference, spilling over the breakwaters that had sought to hold the force of their love apart. Eyes of all colors met; hands of a hundred hues joined in an unspoken accord. The multitudinous sea of humanity flooded out into the morning streets, ready to topple that which had oppressed, regressed, and deceived them into denying their united glories. The roar of their marching feet echoed into the open sky, carrying for hundreds of miles. Deep in the lair of the beast, he apprehended the wave of sound coming his way. His disdainful laughter could not drown the rising tide of resistance, and did nothing to quell his shivering heart.

## Self-Portrait as an Oyster

Like most, I built my shell  
from specks of old stones  
hurled with the force of waves:  
ugly stones, stones of the poor,  
stones of hunger, lonely  
stones. I sucked them from  
the ocean floor, swallowed  
silty essence to make a home  
until the water's blows  
could no longer wound.  
Too old to be young, too  
young to be so old: I  
thought myself wise  
and safe. Cemented  
among the spat, I grew.

Then down came  
the diver, with his  
sack and knife-blade  
smile. *How pretty,*  
the bubbles burst  
from his mouth;  
*How pretty you are.*  
I watched them rise,  
bewildered, amazed;  
I'd had no idea that  
there was an above  
*here*, where the light  
came from, where there  
was such a thing as  
air. *Take me there,*  
I asked. Like a fool.

With one careless hand  
he broke my connection  
to the earth, to my nest;  
legs churning, he took  
me up to his world. In  
reflex, I closed up tight  
to the touch of the wind.  
Calmly, he probed for

the crack in my home,  
murmuring *Yes, so pretty*  
all the while, until his blade  
was as far in as he could force.

Then, with an expert thrust and twist,  
he cracked me open, peered  
inside, plucked the pearl  
I had possessed so long.  
He scowled at its size, but  
added the jewel to his bag. After,  
remembering me in his hand,  
now an oozing mess of  
slime and broken shell,  
he pitched me back  
into the ocean to seep  
brine and other, darker  
fluids, onto the sea bed.



## Survivor's Jazz

0. It is not abnormal for those who survive sexual assault to feel uncomfortable or out of touch with their bodies.
  
1. it is assault  
     it is sexual  
     it is uncomfortable  
     it is touch  
     it is with bodies  
     it is out
  
2. abnormal assault  
     abnormal to feel  
     abnormal touch  
     abnormal bodies  
     abnormal uncomfortable  
     abnormal to survive
  
3. assault with their bodies  
     assault of touch  
     assault comfort  
     assault to feel  
     assault: uncomfortable touch  
     assault their bodies
  
4. not abnormal  
     not comfortable to touch  
     not sex: assault  
     not normal who survive  
     not out of their bodies  
     not their bodies

5. survive to feel  
survive to touch  
survive: feel comfort  
survive their bodies  
survive assault  
survive sexual assault  
survive

## When I Tell You My Anger is an Appalachian Cliffside,

start by listening.

And understand  
that I do not mean  
those postcard hills,  
pine-ridden and eroded  
by the gentle breezes  
of time, which tourists  
believe are all of our  
mountains. Not this.

This is the raw wound  
of bomb blasts, carved  
for others to pass on,  
pass by, pass over  
with heavy wheels and  
gazes elsewhere, anywhere  
but on the evidence of  
this destruction.

This is scree, this is  
slippage, naked stone  
left exposed to crack  
and crumble until the thrust  
of its gravity is too much  
to bear, breaking away  
boulders to hurl forth  
onto whatever awaits  
beneath. This is black  
veins, old scars of coal  
which leach acid tears  
under relentless rains,  
further decaying the face  
until weight must give way.

In time, I promise  
there will be rich soil  
here for a sapling  
of trust to take root,  
spread leaves and stand  
stout against further falls;  
someday, the slope  
will bear tall yellow grass,  
placid rivulets of peace,  
provide refuge for life.

Give it enough time;  
just give me sufficient  
centuries.

## *IV.*

### *Can the Subaltern Sing?*

“So desperately I sing to thee of love  
Sure but also rage and hate and pain and fear of self  
And I can't keep these feelings on the shelf...”

- Blues Traveler, “Hook”

## Taking the Stage

the flood on the floor  
 of the Smiling Skull Saloon  
 reaches our usual corner table.  
 it shimmers with neon, leaks  
 through my boots as friends arrive:  
 the widow, my mirror, the  
 recovered, the historian, a  
 midwestern Pavarotti. beers  
 acquired, songs signed for;  
 we explore individual +  
 collective identity between sips.

karaoke starts early tonight.  
 half-grown, the strangers  
 of the night enter, bright with drink,  
 shaking off coats beaded with tepid  
 January rain. we smirk, mildly tolerant  
 of their youth – once, we were  
 unknown too, before bound by  
 the pleasure of shared musical moments.  
 + now the wait. meanwhile, my mirror  
 is first to own the stage tonight: *i went  
 today; maybe i will go again  
 tomorrow. and the music there, it was  
 hauntingly familiar...* i watch them,  
 intense + breathtaking, belting out  
 the highs + lows. a marvel to find a  
 friend so like me, who knows the risks  
 of a life spent in-between states  
 of being + motion; fluid, indeterminate,  
 thumbing their nose at gender norms.

as they accept our fervent  
 applause, the local Pavarotti details  
 his operatic setlist – much the same  
 as always. mine is still a mystery  
 to my comrades in music; i'm  
 known for never revealing,  
 a deliberate strategy until  
 boots meet stage + the first  
 notes ring clear through the chatter  
 of high spirits. i smile, nod

appreciatively, turn my ears  
 to the historian as he takes  
 his turn under the lights: *let's stay  
 together, whether times are good  
 or bad, happy or sad.* fresh  
 territory for him. each performer  
 seems to claim their own  
 position, in space + in song –  
 all experimentation, a new  
 fear to embrace upon the stage.

+ as always, we vibrate between  
 genres + boundaries, in hymns  
 of praise for poetry, or in honor  
 of love forever lost but  
 never forgotten. voice evokes  
 joy, + grief, as the widow  
 now attests. *when i think  
 about you, i touch  
 myself.* she's relatively sober  
 tonight – drunk just enough  
 to hold off the shakes, she  
 confides as she arrives  
 back at the table. “i live for  
 this,” she half-smiles around her  
 latest can of brew. seeing the bones  
 of my mother in her thin, wasted  
 face, i cannot bear to pity her.

song switch: some stranger's voice.  
 for a few minutes, *i walk alone* –  
 an irony in this place, a room  
 full of broken silence, where  
 for once i feel at home.  
 in many ways, this dingy  
 cave of a biker bar evokes  
 a home of yore: childhood spent  
 watching mom dispense booze  
 + the best bar burgers love could  
 offer as i read to winos whose eyes,  
 yellowed with incipient cirrhosis,  
 lost the tiny type on yesterday's newspaper.  
 the crack of pool balls, the roar  
 of beasts of chrome + leather

+ steel, the nasal twang recorded  
 + poured forth for a quarter  
 on the scuffed + sticky juke.  
 washed in nostalgia, only now  
 can i see how lonely we all were.

like those memories, flooding swells  
 to soak through seams in shoes  
 deemed waterproof. rainfall on  
 January snow: is there anything  
 wetter? still, i refuse to surrender  
 this corner. by now, the locals have  
 learned my place, as have i; they  
 accept my fits of scribbling as the  
 recovered revisits a favorite. *one  
 more time to kill the pain.*  
 the words give comfort, balm  
 of deep bass + Petty's trademark  
 croon. *you never slow down,*  
*you never grow old:* a  
 challenge, a plea, a benediction  
 we believe in the instant, but  
 which melts into a dawn  
 of separations, the endings of  
 acquaintance – or melds into  
 beginnings, deeper bonds forged  
 by a mutual musicality +  
 humanity of the moment. after,

an emptiness comes. yet  
 my turn comes soon,  
 a duet with our Pavarotti;  
 until then, more *rain, purple  
 rain.* watching the whip-thin  
 biker belting Prince, i smile  
 to see his pride. each time  
 we meet, he tells me he's gay  
 once more, flashing silver skull  
 rings + new patches on black  
 leather vests. another stranger  
 who no longer seems strange. funny  
 to find queer solidarity in the midst  
 of Appalachian Midwest mentality.



stranger still to see the cluster  
 of subalternity centered upon  
 this corner seat. all of us  
 outcast in our own way, deemed  
 the stranger, shadows of society:  
 identities unfixed, perpetually in flux.  
 the historian, failing dissertation defense,  
 has little time left to choose a new road.  
 my mirror, ungendered like me,  
 struggles to unearth a core self  
 + heal too many scars on their wrists;  
 the recovered knows his precipice,  
 clings to life away from the needle  
 + the nod. the widow, whose final solace  
 is the stage and the bottle. our operatic  
 friend i know the least, but social posts  
 suggest a life as stifled + lonely as mine  
 once was, before i found my voice.

together, he + i rise to sing  
 against *the sound of silence*.  
*hello darkness, my old friend;*  
*hear my words that i*  
*might teach you, take my arms...*  
 as we let the last note fade  
 to quiet, we trade fistbumps + stage  
 space with the historian. his velvet  
 voice rises to intense command –  
*sing with me, sing for the year,*  
*sing for the laughter, sing for*  
*the tears.* i marvel how this  
 collective dream draws us in,  
 music binding people the world  
 suggests should be kept

separate. a cross-section of faces  
 across this crowded space  
 shows little similarity: a hundred  
 hues, features softened by dim  
 neon, voices blurred with beer  
 into a grand + slightly off-key  
 chorus. despite the borders,  
 a unity. *sing with me, just for*  
*today. dream until your dream*

*comes true*... he ends with a  
 scream + a flourish, returning  
 for praise grudgingly accepted.  
 "i wish i'd done better," as  
 he always says, as we always  
 say in modesty + mild  
 dissatisfaction. we always dream  
 of improvement; the applause we  
 hear nowhere else but here dims  
 in our ears, as we believe it unearned.  
 this draws us back, craving  
 perfection. but now, a pause

for reflection, for connection  
 over the muted roar of the crowd.  
 engaging in these moments, i  
 remind myself, is as meaningful  
 as writing them, painting a scene  
 with words. yet poetic seduction  
 pulls me back to the page as  
 celebration, as validation, as  
 documentation of being real, here, now,  
 alive: to be here means i survived.  
 i take comfort in how the  
 phrases spill forth, a flow  
 like that on the floor –  
 although this has slowed to  
 a shimmering trickle, less pooled  
 around my boots + my mirror's  
 six-inch heels. for a second, as i reach  
 for the perfect expression, our  
 eyes meet. as always, we smile  
 in the delight of identification of  
*other* that so closely resembles *self*,  
 although more in mentality +  
 identity than the looks of the body.

+ still i yearn to open my throat.  
 + still i yearn to understand  
 the magic of these harmonious evenings,  
 where the subaltern gives voice  
 + takes power from their moments  
 of ownership of singular spotlights.  
 collective poetry, honoring art

+ artist alike, becoming the  
dear image we have come to  
embody: the self true to itself  
through borrowed words +  
the will + wonder of being *heard*.  
+ for a moment i too can hear  
one voice, affirming life,  
affirming existence despite  
all its flaws. then, my name  
is called; the instant breaks  
in an anticipated joy. once  
more, i return to the stage.



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