

Hello Nothingness

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Abstract

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This dissertation is divided into two sections: an essay titled “Poetic Function Between Fact and Fiction: Examples from Six Contemporary American Poets” and a book manuscript titled *Hello Nothingness*.

“Poetic Function Between Fact and Fiction: Examples from Six Contemporary American Poets” analyzes six examples from contemporary American lyric poetry to highlight the tension between fictionality and factuality in broader trends in lyric poetry. While this poetological tension between fictionality and factuality can be understood to exist broadly across the span of lyric poetry, this essay highlights selections from contemporary American lyric poetry to demonstrate the rhetorical and functional effects made possible by this interplay in lyric poetry.

Hello Nothingness is composed of lyric poems that interrogate the uncertainty between perception and lived experience. The poems in the manuscript juxtapose high lyricism with language meant to mimic interior thought patterns, often making use of ekphrastic, surrealist, and/or confessional modes to explore their subject matter. The manuscript pays close attention to the formal composition of its free verse poems, and the poems themselves often combine artifacts of personal experience with disjunctive, lyrical expression to explore the poems’ concerns.

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Poetic Function Between Fact and Fiction: Examples from Six Contemporary American Poets

I. Introduction

The idea for this topic came to me while eating breakfast with a group of fellow poets, discussing a well-known, often-anthologized poem by a famous American poet when one of my companions mentioned that the father in the poem, which is about family dynamics, was really the poet's stepfather. Would this new detail change our understanding of the poem, one of my colleagues asked, while another asked if the revelation that some detail from a poem, which purports to be true, had in fact been fabricated would leave us feeling somehow cheated or duped. At the time, I answered, unequivocally, that my feelings about the poem in question wouldn't change, that the world of the successful poem would be self-evident and therefore not reliant on questions of factuality or fictionality.

After all, we turn to poetry for different reasons than we turn to memoir, documentary, and journalism, which are all concerned with delivering truth about events based in fact. Poetry, as we have come to know it in the present day, is concerned with inner experience, artistic expression, and the explication of emotion, which doesn't always align with the earnestness of factual reporting. But we also turn to poetry for different reasons than we turn to short stories, the novel, theater, or film. While the spectacle of drama and film provides visual accompaniment to stylized narratives, which are often fictional but sometimes factual, and while the invented world of the novel allows for extensive exploration of character and dialogue alongside the development of

narrative structure, lyric poetry, with its expanded utilization of metaphor, imagery, and other figurative techniques, most often focuses on interior emotional states, creating micro-narratives based on image and metaphor, without a necessary adherence to factual happenings, to explore human experience through a closer, more intimate perspective than is typical for other genres.

This is all to say that, while other genres might be weighed down by the “what” and “where” of their narratives, lyric poetry tends to focus on the “why” and “how” of its speakers’ and characters’ lives. This shift in focus allows for the presence of fictional signifiers in poems that are assumed to have factual basis; as examples, few serious critics would discredit the authenticity of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” because of the all-encompassing consciousness of its narrative, just as few would question the sincerity of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” because of its speaker’s invented persona.

My original suspicion, before diving deeper into this path of inquiry, was that the inclusion of explicitly imaginary, fictional elements in lyric poetry came from a conscious choice by individual poets, further consideration of the issue has shown that this fact-fiction ambiguity in poetry is more pervasive than I originally thought, where the inclusion of common tropes of metaphorization and figurative explication pushes the boundaries of poetry as a genre to include elements of the fictional. And while this phenomenon might be far-reaching, an awareness of the inherent tension between factual and fictional modes of utterance in lyric poetry is crucial to our understanding of the effects, functions, and possibilities of poetry. As such, I have selected a group of six

poems by contemporary American poets, which call attention to this ambiguity in some way, often through modes of intertextuality, ambiguity regarding the identity of the poem's addresser, and the utilization of character as a literary device. By interrogating this set of poems in terms of this ambivalence, I hope to illustrate the importance of this ambivalence across the span of poetry that does not draw attention to this interplay as well.

Along these lines of thought, literary theorist Peter Hühn, who has written extensively on the presence of fictional elements in poetry, provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon in his 2014 essay, "The Problem of Fictionality and Factuality in Lyric Poetry," in which Hühn argues toward the impossibility of defining lyric poetry as purely factual or fictional. Early in the article, Hühn begins by establishing the difficulty of maintaining either strict definition:

The term "fictional"—as logically opposed to "factual"—normally refers to "the species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters," comprising novels, short stories, novellas, and also—by implication—dramas and films. Applying the terms fictionality and factuality to lyric poetry is uncommon and usually considered inappropriate or irrelevant. But implicitly most poetological concepts by poets, critics, or theorists do in fact contain statements that opt either for the fictional or the factual status of poems, without using these terms. However, explicitly applying these

terms to lyric poems is apt to highlight specific and distinctive features and functions of poetry. (Hühn 155)

While most contemporary poetry is considered to exist in the realm of factuality, with poetic expressions assumed to represent factual events from the poet/speaker's internal and exterior lives, poetry is often condensed into compact illustrations of mental and emotional states, relying on micro-narratives and audiences' cultural and emotional awarenesses to make connections within the text. This mode of abbreviation allows lyric poets the freedom to explore associative leaps and guide the narratives and symbolism of their poetry, somewhat freed from the burden of representing the poem's events as purely factual. At the same time, lyrical poetry often relies on systems of signs with counterparts in the real world, grounding all but the most avant-garde poetry, at least partially, in the realm of the factual. T. S. Eliot's *J. Alfred Prufrock*, for example, may not have existed outside of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," though the cultural, mythological, and social signifiers within the poem resonate with experiences from the real world.

Some important poets and critics from the past (such as William Wordsworth, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Käte Hamburger, and, recently, Brian McHale and Susan Lanser) declare the theoretical, poetological, and critical statements of poetry to be factual, representing events and emotions experienced by the speaker, who serves as a stand-in for the poet (Hühn 159). Others, (such as Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel T. Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe, Monroe C. Beardsley, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Werner Wolf, and Dieter Burdorf) place heavy emphasis on the fictional aspect of poetry,

maintaining distance between the stated experience of a poem's speaker with the lived experience of a poet, considering the contents of a poem a representation of a mental state, which may or may not be factual (Hühn 159).

Rather than assigning the entirety of lyrical poetry to one camp or another, Hühn asserts that the different modes of fictionality and factuality can be identified by considering the mode of representation of signs within individual texts. By drawing on Roman Jakobson's model of "Linguistics and Poetics," Hühn asserts that attention to the identity of the addresser and content within a poem can serve as useful tools for factual/fictional distinction, as follows:

- (1) the addresser, the originator of the utterance: the text is "factual" if the real author is speaking as him- or herself, taking responsibility for what is being said; it is "fictional" if the author invents a persona (such as a narrator in a novel) as the instance responsible for the utterance and thus does not personally guarantee its truthfulness;
- (2) the content, the signified (Jakobson's term is "context"), i.e., the mediated state of affairs, entities, actions, attitudes in the utterance—in other words, the story; "factual" in this respect means that the mediated story and its elements are authentic and exist independently of the representation, "fictional" that the happenings are invented and exist only on account of the utterance. (Hühn 157)

Hühn continues by noting that, while other genres of literature might exist along clear lines of fictionality and factuality, the combination of lyric poetry's reliance

on figurative language and the prevalence of a lyric “I” (which can refer, with some level of ambiguity, to either the poet’s interior state or the invented persona of the speaker) blurs the distinction between fictionality and factuality to ambivalence (Hühn 160).

While Huhn’s article seeks to define the potentially contentious issue of ambiguity between factuality and fictionality in lyric poetry, this essay aims to illustrate the effective utilization of this ambiguity in selected contemporary American poetry that blends elements of factuality with fictionality in terms of persona and content, often for emotional and rhetorical effect. Though Hühn would argue that the entirety of lyric poetry exists on this ambivalent fact-fiction spectrum, the poems I have selected make some effort to make this implicit tension explicit, in some way or another consciously making the effort to speak from invented persona, the realm of the surreal (i.e. the realm of the extra-factual), and so on. As part of his article’s main thesis, Hühn concludes:

One should not aim at determining whether the genre of lyric poetry is, in fact, "really" fictional or factual: it can be either and, moreover, it can play with this difference, that is, blur it or oscillate between poles so as to display signals in both directions at the same time, which is central to its function. (Hühn 160-161)

By highlighting sets of movements within the works of this group of contemporary American poets, I hope to demonstrate the importance of this ambiguity in the function of lyric poetry as a whole, as the blurring of lines

between fact and fiction in the poems I will discuss will highlight both the rhetorical and emotional effects made possible by this positionality along with functions of poetry made possible by this ambivalence.

II. Persona

While I've divided the poems in my selections along Jakobson's lines of considering both addresser (considered here as persona) and content in terms of fictional qualities, each poem operates within its own functions of ambiguity toward factuality and fictionality, and my analysis seeks to understand each selection as it utilizes these functions for rhetorical, emotional, and otherwise poetic effect. This section will focus on individual, contemporary examples from American poetry which announce the fictitious qualities of each poem's addresser in the form of persona, considering how this dynamic makes meaning in the poem's function.

Marie Howe's often-anthologized poem, "Part of Eve's Discussion," makes its primary emotional impact by blurring the distinction between persona and lyric personal narrative by partly obscuring and making ambiguous the identity of its speaker. While the title of the poem alludes to the well-known biblical story of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the body of the poem uses relatively colloquial language in a series of similes to describe an unnamed and unspecified feeling. Here is the text of the poem in its entirety:

Part of Eve's Discussion

It was like the moment when a bird decides not to eat from your hand,
and flies, just before it flies, the moment the rivers seem to still
and stop because a storm is coming, but there is no storm, as when
a hundred starlings lift and bank together before they wheel and drop,
very much like the moment, driving on bad ice, when it occurs to you
your car could spin, just before it slowly begins to spin, like
the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say,
it was like that, and after that, it was still like that, only
all the time.

(Howe)

As we can see, the only explicit allusion to the biblical Eve lies in the title of the poem, clearly announcing the most fictitious element of the poem, in which the speaker purports to have insight into the mind of Eve in the Garden of Eden before her plucking of forbidden fruit. At the same time, most of the imagery within the body of the poem declines to indicate when or where the poem might take place, except for the sixth and seventh lines, which mention the feeling of losing control of a car while “driving on bad ice.”

While it might be tempting to consider the inclusion of automobiles in the poem a clear indicator that the speaker is not, in fact, the biblical Eve, such an assumption would rob the poem of its most powerful quality, which is the

blending of narratives between a story of regret from a maligned character from the biblical creation story and a difficult-to-name feeling of dread, uncertainty, or danger that lingers on the peripheries of quotidian life. This invocation of Eve's name immediately aligns the poem with the story of Eve's fall into temptation in the Book of Genesis, assigning a level of gravitas that might not be possible if the poem were solely contained within more mundane subject matter, while the usage of more readily identifiable imagery in the body of the poem recalibrates the landscape of the poem toward something the average person (meaning someone who has never had biblical stories written about them) might recognize. It is worth noting that Howe also left room for uncertainty in the poem by giving it the title "Part of Eve's Discussion" (as opposed to something like "Eve's Recollection" or "Eve's Version of Events" or even simply "Eve's Discussion"), the phrasing of "part of" leaving just enough room for readers to speculate if the utterance of the poem is meant to be considered from Eve's perspective, from the perspective of a speaker who feels some kinship with Eve, or otherwise.

Though the poem takes the form of a single long sentence, it opens on the line "It was like the moment when a bird decides not to eat from your hand," introducing both the anaphoric repetition of "It was like" and its first comparative reference for the poem's unspecified feeling. The repetition of "It was like" throughout the poem underscores the speaker's inability to harness the magnitude of the emotion the poem attempts to describe while heightening the tension around the identity of the speaker. After all, if we really were hearing from Eve

herself, one could imagine the difficulty in describing the feeling of disobeying one's omniscient, omnipotent God and forever altering the course of human history. But the choice to complete that "It was like" structure with references as accessible as a bird deciding not to eat from one's hand, grounding the poem in the first of a series of factual premises, radically shifts the poem from the realm of biblical catastrophe into the realm of everyday contemporary life, which someone like you or I could more readily understand.

But the poem's single sentence doesn't stop with "when a bird decides not to eat from your hand," continuing with "and flies, just before it flies," narrowing the specificity of the "It was like" moment down into milliseconds, attempting to isolate the exact moment the speaker realized the bird would not eat from her hand, honing in on the recognition of imminent rejection. Just as the poem stops itself to narrow in on the specific millisecond of a moment, it moves on to another clause, this time continuing with "the moment the rivers seem to still / and stop because a storm is coming, but there is no storm." While the first two references of the poem, with the bird and the stilled river, seem roughly analogous at first glance, a key distinction lies between the two: while the bird image ends with a negative event (the bird leaving the speaker's hand), the storm, which we imagine coming after the river stills, never comes, changing the feeling associated with the image from rejection to anticipation.

The poem continues with two more images (a hundred starlings lifting and banking before a quick descent and a car losing its traction on bad ice and

preparing to spin) that signal the rising anxiety of anticipation, though its final reference in “the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say” is a bit more complicated. One can assume that, in the example she uses, the speaker loses her train of thought from some outside interjection or startling interruption, leaving “the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say” to describe the exact moment the speaker still knew she had something to say but also knew she was in danger of losing it, leaving her, we can imagine, to try futilely to hang onto her fleeting thought before it ultimately drifts away.

Just as the precise meaning of the references used in the poem evolves over time, the rhetorical weight of the poem shifts one last time, in the last two lines. While the first seven lines of the poem are dedicated to finding a simile to explain a feeling that the speaker never directly references (unless, of course, we consider the implications of the poem’s title), the last two lines of the poem expand upon the feeling’s implications with “it was like that, and after that, it was still like that, only / all the time,” ending the poem on the fragment “all the time” and spreading the cloying uncertainty and anxious unease the poem describes throughout the entirety of the speaker’s life, defining the unnamed feeling or event as changing the speaker’s life forever.

Now, to return to ambiguity, if I were pressed to paraphrase this poem as clearly as possible, I would give two possible readings: First, that the speaker really is the Biblical Eve, and the poem shows her trying to contextualize her

feelings after eating the forbidden fruit from Genesis to a modern audience. The second would be that the speaker, who lives in our contemporary world, has committed some blunder so dire she can only express her feelings around it through identifying with Eve and utilizing a series of comparisons. Given the scarcity of evidence in the poem itself, I am happy to let my analysis rest somewhere between. The ambiguity in “Part of Eve’s Discussion” allows for the possibility of both readings at once, in which an understanding of Eve’s dilemma from Eve’s perspective might serve as a reference to understanding events and dilemmas in the real world, and vice versa. And while a more demanding reader might insist on clearly aligning with one interpretation over another, I would argue that the ambiguity created by the uncertainty of the identity of the poem’s addresser lends the poem an additional level of depth, in which the experiences of a character as ancient as Eve are conflated with the experiences of a contemporary speaker.

Continuing with the theme of biblical allusion, Ai’s poem “Salome” invokes the name of Salome, who performed a seductive dance for her stepfather to convince him to behead John the Baptist at her mother’s behest in the New Testament. In addition to announcing the poem’s fictive qualities by indicating the persona of the speaker in its title, Ai’s poem repurposes the story of Salome to fit the narrative of a violently abusive love triangle between the speaker, her mother, and her stepfather, set in pre-industrial Europe. The text of the poem is as follows:

Salomé

I scissor the stem of the red carnation
and set it in a bowl of water.

It floats the way your head would,
if I cut it off.

But what if I tore you apart
for those afternoons

when I was fifteen
and so like a bird of paradise
slaughtered for its feathers.

Even my name suggested wings,
wicker cages, flight.

Come, sit on my lap, you said.

I felt as if I had flown there;

I was weightless.

You were forty and married.

That she was my mother never mattered.

She was a door that opened onto me.

The three of us blended into a kind of somnolence
and musk, the musk of Sundays. Sweat and sweetness.

That dried plum and licorice taste
always back of my tongue
and your tongue against my teeth,
then touching mine. How many times?—
I counted, but could never remember.
And when I thought we'd go on forever,
that nothing could stop us
as we fell endlessly from consciousness,
orders came: War in the north.
Your sword, the gold epaulets,
the uniform so brightly colored,
so unlike war, I thought.
And your horse; how you rode out the gate.
No, how that horse danced beneath you
toward the sound of cannon fire.
I could hear it, so many leagues away.
I could see you fall, your face scarlet,
the horse dancing on without you.
And at the same moment,
Mother sighed and turned clumsily in the hammock,
the Madeira in the thin-stemmed glass
spilled into the grass,

and I felt myself hardening to a brandy-colored wood,
my skin, a thousand strings drawn so taut
that when I walked to the house
I could hear music
tumbling like a waterfall of China silk
behind me.

I took your letter from my bodice.

Salome, I heard your voice,
little bird, fly. But I did not.

I untied the lilac ribbon at my breasts
and lay down on your bed.

After a while, I heard Mother's footsteps,
watched her walk to the window.

I closed my eyes
and when I opened them
the shadow of a sword passed through my throat
and Mother, dressed like a grenadier,
bent and kissed me on the lips.

(Ai)

In the same way that Marie Howe's "Part of Eve's Discussion" uses more colloquial language from the voice of a biblical character, Ai's "Salomé" uses lyrical but personal language to describe an intimate, abusive dynamic

reminiscent of the dynamic referenced in the Bible. While the idea of having a mother request her daughter to seductively dance for her stepfather to execute a political enemy is shocking enough to leave modern audiences uncomfortable, Ai's version of the story raises the stakes of the narrative by making the abusive dynamics implied in the original story explicitly known.

Ai's "Salomé" begins with the lines "I scissor the stem of the red carnation / and set it in a bowl of water," the image of the floating carnation head reminiscent of the image from the Bible Salome is most often associated with: John the Baptist's head resting on a silver platter. This time, however, the aggression of the image is directed not toward a political enemy in John the Baptist, but toward the speaker's stepfather, as the poem continues "It floats the way your head would / if I cut it off" before continuing to highlight the character's abuse, which only exists as subtext in the original story, with the lines "But what if I tore you apart / for those afternoons / when I was fifteen / and so like a bird of paradise / slaughtered for its feathers," directly referencing a history of sexual abuse in Ai's version of the story.

While the inclusion of references like cannon fire, gold epaulets, and Madeira suggests the setting of the poem lies outside of our familiar, contemporary American landscape, the core tension of the poem lies in its heightened emotional utterances, which is to say that, while processing a poem named after a figure from biblical Galilee, set in pre-industrial, war-torn Europe, might be difficult for some readers, the poem takes care to focus on the emotional state of its dramatic speaker, with lines like "I was weightless. /

You were forty and married. / That she was my mother never mattered. / She was a door that opened onto me.” Though questions of temporality and setting of “Salomé” might provide points of alienation for some readers, lines like “I was weightless” and “She was a door that opened onto me” use the tool of figurative language to communicate emotional states that transcend temporality, while the directness of lines like “You were forty and married. / That she was my mother never mattered” allows for an intimate understanding of the conflicts at play in the poem.

The poem continues its serpentine path through desire and despair, until we learn the speaker’s stepfather has been called away to war, with the speaker’s description of her stepfather’s uniform: “Your sword, the gold epaulets, / the uniform so brightly colored, / so unlike war, I thought,” the description as conflicted as other elements of the poem. Salomé, the speaker, describes her family dynamic as “a kind of somnolence,” though she opens the poem by imagining beheading her stepfather. Earlier, she describes herself as a bird of paradise, harmed for its feathers, and, here, she notes the garishness of her stepfather’s military uniform while understanding there’s a strong possibility that he might die in the war. Salomé never explicitly tells us how she feels about this possibility, but the abundance of ambivalence throughout the poem suggests she might not know how to feel.

We see this same undercurrent of uncertainty as the speaker’s mother falls into drinking and Salomé notes herself “hardening to a brandy-colored wood.” As the cycle of jealousy and pain continues to rise toward the end of the poem, we see the speaker’s sense of resignation growing, ignoring a letter from her stepfather that suggests she fly

like a bird and simply lying down in his bed instead. Though we might expect a poem like this to find its way to a tragic end, the climax comes in the form of subdued symbolism with the lines “the shadow of a sword passed through my throat / and Mother, dressed like a grenadier, / bent and kissed me on the lips.” With this ending, we see the beheading implied by the poem’s title would be merely symbolic, severing Salomé from her sense of innocence, trust, and so on, her mother dressed as a soldier, having abandoned the nurturing role of parent and adopted a soldier’s uniform, representing violence. Though this version of the story contains no literal beheading, the poem’s ending uses symbolic weight borrowed from its biblical allusion to establish the metaphorical premise of the poem.

While Ai’s persona poem “Salomé” leans heavily toward the side of the fictional, with its biblical allusiveness and pre-modern setting, Ai’s careful attention to emotional detail and interpersonal dynamics within the poem lend a sense of credibility to its content. While the characters, at least as they’re described, might not be real, the confessional tone along with the specificity of detail allows for the sense that some aspect of the emotional core of the poem might be real. This specificity and detail in the treatment of the poem’s characters, combined with the usage of the lyric “I,” which is commonly associated with personal utterance, allows for, at the very least, the illusion of authenticity, which is central to the poem’s function and effect. Just as a contemporary reader might feel alienated by the setting of this reimagined biblical story and its intimate treatment of an inappropriate sexual dynamic, Ai’s treatment of the poem’s speaker, as if she were sharing deep emotional truths from a position of duress, helps create a level of

realism to aid readers in investing in the poem's emotional stakes. This function of invented authenticity to express authentic emotions, as Hühn would tell us, may exist broadly across the spectrum of lyric poetry, though Ai's "Salomé" calls attention to this effect by retelling a well-known biblical narrative with details of anachronistic realism.

American poet Matthea Harvey is well-known for including elements of surrealism and the fantastic into her work. Her cycle of mermaid poems uses pithy humor and a reserved, third-person perspective on each of its subjects, always a mermaid with a particular quirk. While the poems in this series might not fit the traditional persona poem criteria of explicitly featuring a speaker other than the poet as the source of their utterances, Harvey's mermaid poems focus almost entirely on painting compelling character sketches of their fictional subjects. Her poem "The Inside Out Mermaid" considers one such mermaid, a mermaid who has taken to living with her organs inside-out, with utter seriousness, as if she were a real person, as a way of trying to illustrate the feeling of being figuratively "inside-out." Here is the full text of the prose poem below:

The Inside Out Mermaid

The Inside Out Mermaid is fine with letting it all hang out—veins, muscles, the bits of fat at her belly, her small gray spleen. At first her lover loves it—with her organs on the outside, she's the ultimate open book. He can pump her lungs like two bellows and make her gasp; ask her difficult questions and study the synapses firing in her brain as she answers to see if she's lying; poke a pleasure center in the frontal lobe and watch her squirm. No need for

bouquets or sad stories about his childhood. He just plucks a pulmonary vein and watches the left ventricle flounder. But before long, she starts to sense that her lover, like all the others before him, is getting restless. This is when she starts showing them her collections—the basket of keys from all over the world, the box of zippers with teeth of every imaginable size—all chosen to convey a sense of openness. As a last resort, she'll even read out loud the entries from her diary about him to him. But eventually he'll become convinced she's hiding things from him and she is. Her perfect skin. Her long black hair. Her red mouth, never chapped from exposure to sun or wind, how she secretly loves that he can't touch her here or here.

(Harvey)

As we can see, the first line of “The Inside Out Mermaid” begins with Harvey’s characteristic treatment of an absurd premise with cheeky seriousness, the bits of fat at her belly a poke at humorous realism coupled with the grotesqueness of the gray spleen. The next sentence “At first her lover loves it—with her organs on the outside, she's the ultimate open book” connects the subject of the poem’s inside-out qualities with emotional openness, openly identifying one of the main metaphors of the poem. Lines like “He can pump her lungs like two bellows and make her gasp; ask her difficult questions and study the synapses firing in her brain as she answers to see if she's lying” allude to the mermaid’s newfound susceptibility toward manipulation, as the actions of pumping her lungs

to make her gasp and asking her questions to see how her brain reacts were only made possible by the mermaid's literal openness.

The next lines of "No need for bouquets or sad stories about his childhood. He just plucks a pulmonary vein and watches the left ventricle flounder" further this allegorical comparison between grotesque openness and emotional vulnerability, as the inclusion of "No need for bouquets or sad stories about his childhood" demonstrates how the inside-out nature of the inside-out mermaid allows for the mermaid's love to bypass traditional avenues toward emotional intimacy like courtship (in the form of flowers) and sharing emotional experiences in "sad stories about his childhood." Despite her extreme openness, we see the inside-out mermaid's lover growing restless, unsatisfied with the access he's been generously given.

In an ironic move, Harvey then has her mermaid character show even more of herself, sharing her collections of "the basket of keys from all over the world, the box of zippers with teeth of every imaginable size—all chosen to convey a sense of openness." We see that, despite quite literally sharing all of her insides, the effect of even the inside-out mermaid's openness is fading, leading her to share even more personal belongings, her collection of keepsakes meant to represent a dedication to emotional openness, even going further to read passages of her diary to him.

Near the end of the poem, Harvey includes a slight twist, as the story continues with the line "But eventually he'll become convinced she's hiding

things from him and she is. Her perfect skin. Her long black hair,” introducing another element of irony: Despite the inside-out mermaid’s dedication to the idea of openness and despite her fantastic ability to morph her body inside-out, some part of her being remains inaccessible. The poem ends by continuing its list construction with the line “Her red mouth, never chapped from exposure to sun or wind, how she secretly loves that he can’t touch her here or here.” While the inclusion of “Her red mouth” continues the list construction of objects the mermaid is (unintentionally) hiding from her lover, Harvey changes the nature of the list by changing its final item from an object to a secret, which is that the inside-out mermaid “secretly loves that he can’t touch her here or here,” finally admitting that she enjoys keeping some part of herself inaccessible, even if it creates tension in her romantic relationships.

Even more so than Marie Howe’s “Part of Eve’s Discussion” and Ai’s “Salomé,” “The Inside Out Mermaid” announces its fictional qualities by not only focusing on a mythological creature as its subject but by also subjecting its mythological subject to a grotesque transformation for the sake of its central allegory, though its major concern of connecting romantic intimacy through emotional accessibility is very much grounded in real concerns. While most contemporary readers might not be familiar with the lived experiences of mermaids, Harvey treats the characters in “The Inside Out Mermaid” as if they’re real, human characters, the mythological nature of its subject along with the mermaid’s surreal treatment serving as identifying markers of allegory, just as

fairy tales and folklore, where mermaids were historically featured, often served as allegory in the past.

Here, the fictional aspects of the poem serve as masks for the very real sets of emotions surrounding intimacy and emotional vulnerability that the poem attempts to discuss. The probability that Harvey, as creator of the poem, is likely intimately familiar with the tensions between intimacy and vulnerability portrayed in “The Inside Out Mermaid” serves to underscore its factual core, which it then explores through the fictions of allegory. Like Ai’s poem “Salomé,” Harvey’s “The Inside Out Mermaid” dedicates its energy toward treating its central character as an authentic human being, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction by bringing factual concerns to a fictional premise, in the same way that Howe’s “Part of Eve’s Discussion” obscures the identity of its speaker for enhanced effect. Beyond relying on their extra-factual elements for spectacle, each poem in this selection uses its fictional qualities to enhance readers’ appreciation for their rhetorical and emotional cores, demonstrating the effective use of fictional qualities in contemporary American lyric poetry.

III. Content

While the second section of this essay focused on contemporary American lyric poetry that showcases fictional qualities in invented persona and subject, this section will focus on poems that utilize fictive elements to enhance the content of their core texts through allusion, metaphor, and other figurative tools. Looking back to Jakobson’s “Linguistics and Poetics” proves valuable in considering

poetic content, as we are reminded that “‘factual’ in this respect means that the mediated story and its elements are authentic and exist independently of the representation, ‘fictional’ that the happenings are invented and exist only on account of the utterance” (Hühn 157). A close examination of the following poems will underscore the intermingling of factual and fictional representation for poetic effect, as each poem I’ve selected contains some invented element alongside other elements that likely exist independently of the world of the poem.

Mary Jo Bang’s “And as in Alice” is a poem about the allure and danger of imagination, told from a third-person perspective and focusing on an unnamed subject, who serves as a stand-in for both poet and reader and is compared to *Alice in Wonderland*’s Alice in both the title and body of the poem. The full text of the poem can be found below:

And as in Alice

Alice cannot be in the poem, she says, because

She's only a metaphor for childhood

And a poem is a metaphor already

So we'd only have a metaphor

Inside a metaphor. Do you see?

They all nod. They see. Except for the girl

With her head in the rabbit hole. From this vantage,

Her bum looks like the flattened backside

Of a black and white panda. She actually has one

In the crook of her arm.

Of course it's stuffed and not living.

Who would dare hold a real bear so near the outer ear?

She's wondering what possible harm might come to her

If she fell all the way down the dark she's looking through.

Would strange creatures sing songs

Where odd syllables came to a sibilant end at the end.

Perhaps the sounds would be a form of light hissing.

Like when a walrus blows air

Through two fractured front teeth. Perhaps it would

Take the form of a snake. But if a snake, it would need a tree.

Could she grow one from seed? Could one make a cat?

Make it sit on a branch and fade away again

The moment you told it that the rude noise it was hearing was

rational thought

With an axe beating on the forest door.

(Bang)

The poem begins with a meta-nod toward creative writing workshop conventions, in which the “she” in “Alice cannot be in the poem, she says” can be assumed to be a poetry instructor of some kind, acting as arbitrator of appropriate moves to be made in poetry. And while the poem sets the stage of its setting amongst students who capitulate to this kind of instruction, as we see in the second stanza’s “Do you see?/ They all nod. They see,” the poem itself focuses on “the girl / With her head in the rabbit hole,” who is both a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*’s Alice and a counterpoint to the voice in the first stanza who insists that including Alice in a poem would leave it too burdened by metaphor.

From there, the major movements in the poem come in the form of image and metaphor. We’re told almost immediately that “From this vantage,/ Her bum looks like the flattened backside // Of a black and white panda” before the line continues “She actually has one / In the crook of her arm. / Of course it’s stuffed and not living.” While this series of lines is most likely intended to be playful, it introduces the idea that things we perceive might not be exactly as they appear. Just as the girl might look like a panda from some distance, the poem gives the indication that this stuffed panda the girl holds might appear real to someone from a different perspective, causing concern for this subject, who appears lost in her imagination. While, as readers, we know that this threat isn’t cause for concern, the phrasing of “Who would dare hold a real bear so near the outer ear?” in the next lines implies that the girl’s curiosity and imaginativeness might lead to carelessness of some kind.

This potential for harm is expanded upon in the next lines, which read “She’s wondering what possible harm might come to her / If she fell all the way down the dark she’s looking through.” Though it may be tempting to read the possibility of her fall as literal, I understand the threat of falling through the dark as a metaphor for getting lost in one’s imagination, as the rest of the poem turns to speculation about what could be found in the dark instead of indulging in the fantastical journey the poem’s subject likely craves. The next lines of the poem, “Would strange creatures sing songs / Where odd syllables came to a sibilant end at the end” read as playful, with heavy alliteration between “s” sounds, the assonance between “syllables” and “sibilant,” and the repetition of “end,” the singing creatures it references likely one of the preferred discoveries at the end of this dark hole that has the girl in the poem transfixed.

The tone of the possibilities the poem presents next grows increasingly sinister, maintaining its playfulness in the next stanza with “Perhaps the sounds would be a form of light hissing. / Like when a walrus blows air / Through two fractured front teeth,” the ominousness of the hissing offset by the whimsy of comparing it to the sound made by blowing through walrus teeth. From there, the poem makes an imagistic leap with “Perhaps it would/ Take the form of a snake. But if a snake, it would need a tree,” transforming the sound the subject hoped to find at the bottom of the hole, which she imagined as upbeat singing, into the image of a snake, which is associated with danger, the insistence of pairing the snake with a tree a reference to the Book of Genesis, in which a serpent convinced Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, dooming humanity to an eternity exiled from paradise.

While the introduction of the snake and its biblical allusion marks a high point in the poem's consideration of danger, the last stanza of the poem shows its subject wondering how to grow a tree or create a cat in this realm of imagination, the cat a reference to *Alice in Wonderland's* Cheshire Cat. The poem ends with the girl wondering if she can make the cat "sit on a branch and fade away again / The moment you told it that the rude noise it was hearing was rational thought / With an axe beating on the forest door," suggesting that she hopes for some mastery over the imagination, including the ability to summon and dismiss her imagination's inhabitants at will.

While the treatment of this unnamed girl, who serves as the subject of the poem, as parallel to Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* is fictional, having been fabricated for the purposes of this poem, its consideration of imagination as an alluring but potentially dangerous facet of reality can be seen as factual, given its existence outside the realm of the poem. "And as in Alice" uses the surreal, fictional elements of its premise to deliver insight into its subject matter which might not be possible with other forms of poetic expression. By using signifiers that belong to the imagination while framing the poem in a real setting, Bang has managed to craft a poem that calls attention to this ambiguity between factuality and fictionality to serve the poem's functions, especially when considering the metapoetic in the first stanza, as the poem resists the unnamed teacher's assertion that including allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* would reduce the poem into nothing more than "a metaphor inside a metaphor."

Jericho Brown's poem "Dear Dr. Frankenstein" makes similar use of allegory, referencing both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Book of Genesis to talk about the untamable nature of erotic desire. Over the course of the poem, the speaker likens himself to both *Frankenstein's* Dr. Frankenstein and Genesis's Adam, the majority of its images and metaphors relating to one of these two fictional frameworks. The full text of the poem is as follows:

Dear Dr. Frankenstein

I, too, know the science of building men

Out of fragments in little light

Where I'll be damned if lightning don't

Strike as I forget one

May have a thief's thumb,

Another, a murderer's arm,

And watch the men I've made leave

Like an idea I meant to write down,

Like a vehicle stuck

In reverse, like the monster

God came to know the moment
Adam named animals and claimed
Eve, turning from heaven to her

As if she was his
To run. No word he said could be tamed.

No science. No design. Nothing taken
Gently into his hand or your hand or mine,
Nothing we erect is our own.

(Brown)

Brown begins the poem with a bout of doubled meaning: the statement “I, too, know the science of building men” refers to both the fictional science Dr. Frankenstein uses in *Frankenstein* to animate his monster as well as the figurative science the speaker uses to try to tame potential romantic partners into suitable relationships. By continuing that the speaker builds these men “Out of fragments of little light,” we see the speaker attempting to “construct” these men out of their small, light-filled qualities, focused only on their desirable aspects.

The following lines show the inevitable fault in this process, as the poem continues with “Where I’ll be damned if lightning don’t // Strike as I forget one / May have a thief’s thumb, // Another, a murderer’s arm,” the lightning in the poem’s third line symbolizing some turbulence in the relationship, violent or otherwise, the references to

the body parts of criminals suggesting that some aspect of the men the speaker of this poem has chosen to become romantically involved with was always inclined to end things poorly, the speaker, in his haste to create a suitable partner, having missed thief's thumb and murderer's arm as signs, as the speaker clearly mentions his forgetfulness.

Next, before the poem shifts toward its Genesis references, we find the only lines in the poem that aren't connected to either allegorical mode, continuing from the lines about lightning striking in "And watch the men I've made leave / Like an idea I meant to write down," the speaker acknowledging that his forgetfulness or otherwise inattentiveness cause the relationships he's describing to fail, that his failure in understanding he can't control his romantic partners, regardless of how much he thinks he can mold them, leads both to the failure of past relationships and the instigating thought behind this poem. While these lines are short, resting on a short couplet, their status lying outside of the poem's central allegories affords them a privileged position as guidance for understanding the emotional core of the poem, belonging solely to the speaker and not, in some part, to other references.

In the next stanzas, Brown begins to connect his utilization of the *Frankenstein* story to the Book of Genesis's creation story with the lines "like the monster // God came to know the moment / Adam named animals and claimed / Eve, turning from heaven to her." Here, the poem's speaker compares himself to God as a creator of men, watching as Adam turned from a life of piety and paradise in the Garden of Eden to a life of terrestrial pleasure. Just as the speaker, earlier in the poem, has hoped to create partners who fulfill his needs and desire for control, the poem implies a similar dissatisfaction in

God in seeing his creation, Adam, run amok, consuming the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge with Eve before fleeing the desert in exile, with the hint that Eve, too cannot be tamed in the lines “As if she was his / to run.”

The poem continues by staying with Adam, continuing that “No word he said could be tamed,” continuing the theme of showing figures who can name and create but not control, before blurring allegory into universality in the final stanza of “No science. No design. Nothing taken / Gently into his hand or your hand or mine, / Nothing we erect is our own.” The first two examples of “No science” and “No design” mold the twin narratives of *Frankenstein* and the Book of Genesis together, while reducing them to terms that could be universally applied. In continuing this motion toward the universal, the poem ends with the lines “Nothing taken / Gently into his hand or your hand or mine, / Nothing we erect is our own,” claiming that nothing one claims as theirs, especially in the form of tenderness, of taking something tenderly in one’s hand, truly belongs to them, each creation ruled by its own volition as soon as it’s left its creators hands.

Though we can assume that “Dear Dr. Frankenstein” shows an unnamed speaker, serving as a stand-in for the poet and maintaining a factual status with regard to its addresser, the body of the poem relies almost entirely on signifiers with references to fictional texts. While the poem speaks from a contemporary perspective, the majority of its consideration comes through the lens of the fictional in the fantastical reanimation of *Frankenstein* and the creation story of The Book of Genesis. This is to say that, while the poem makes no explicit claims to its fictional status in speaking from a persona without a real-world counterpart or creating narrative without a real-world counterpart, the poem’s

heavy usage of image and metaphor associated with fictional texts aligns it, at least partially, in the realm of the fictional. In undertaking the task of describing factual experience through fictional metaphor, Brown has managed to both create a poem in the liminal space between fact and fiction while also demonstrating the opportunity to create new connections between fictional works to further the goals of a particular poem.

Language poet Michael Palmer's poem "The Classical Study," the first of a series of poems with the same title from his 2011 collection *Thread*, features a conversation with a cryptic character named the Master of Shadows who references poetry from the American canon in an attempt to undermine the highbrow questions asked by the poem's speaker. Similarly to the other poems in this section, "The Classical Study" utilizes literary references to expand the boundaries of the poem's reality. While the central concerns of the poem might be plausibly factual, Palmer enters the world of the fictional by mediating the conversation of the poem through a fictional character, a purported master the speaker comes to in an attempt to resolve sets of existential questions.

"The Classical Study" reads as follows in its entirety:

The Classical Study

I asked the Master of Shadows

wherefore and wherefrom

but he said that art was short

and life was long

Said: let us praise

those flames that consume the day

stone by stone

and the lilac by the barn

and the hours when you were young

and the mother- and the father-tongue.

Curled by fire the leaves of grass,

buckled, the roof beam,

shattered, the wagon's haft,

ash-flecks in the wind's swell.

Have you forgotten the whistling of the stones,

the heave and shift of the windrows?

So I asked the Master of Shadows

about the above and the below,

the this and the that,

the first and the last,

but he said,

I am no master

only a shadow,

and he laughed.

(Palmer)

The first couplet of the poem begins mid-scene, asking the Master of Shadows the vague questions of “wherefore and wherefrom,” the antiquated language suggesting a level of gravitas inherent in the question, at least in the eyes of the speaker, the openness of essentially asking “for what” and “from where” suggesting questions of existential meaning or purpose. Instead of offering a compelling or at least elucidating answer, the Master responds “that art was short / and life was long,” an inversion of the proper aphorism of “life is short, and art is long,” its pithy non-answer likely a tongue-in-cheek jab at the questions from the first stanza.

Instead of answering the speaker’s open-ended “wherefore and wherefrom,” the Master continues by saying “let us praise / those flames that consume the day // stone by stone / and the lilac by the barn,” diverting the speaker’s and reader’s attention away from the immediacy of the speaker’s question. While this response might read as an additional non-answer, further inspection reveals a likely reference to Robert Frost’s

“The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” the mention of “those flames that consume the day” in Palmer’s poem likely a reference to the burnt-down house in Frost’s poem, the “lilac by the barn” in Palmer’s poem likely a reference to the lilac mentioned in Frost’s poem, the barn in Frost’s poem spared by the blaze, the lilac able to grow again in the space cleared by the fire. While this allusion might be subtle, its details are important: Frost’s poem ends with the lines “One had to be versed in country things / Not to believe the phoebes wept,” reminding readers that, while the burning of the house in the poem might be tragic by human standards, it is ultimately meaningless to animals like birds, whose lives continue without understanding for human concerns.

With these allusive qualities in mind, the Master’s command to “praise / those flames that consume the day” is an invitation to welcome the destruction and renewal, as referenced by the “lilac by the barn,” of flame, to let go of the overthinking and personification of nature Frost critiques in “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things.” So, if the “wherefore and wherefrom” from the first stanza essentially asks “Where do we come from and why?” the Master’s response makes sense if we read it as a suggestion for the speaker to not overthink his life, to avoid assigning human emotion or intelligence to nature. The Master continues by suggesting praise for “the hours when you were young / and the mother- and father-tongue,” implying the answers to the speaker's existential questions might lie in the details of the speaker’s own story or in the language of his ancestors.

The next four lines, in “Curled by fire the leaves of grass, / buckled, the roof beam, // shattered, the wagon’s haft, / ash-flecks in the wind’s swell,” provide images of

destruction, with references to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a foundational text in contemporary American poetics, consumed by flame, followed by images of a roof beam buckling and shattering, the roof beam and wagon haft possibly items from the burnt down home of Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," each of the items destroyed by time or natural disaster, potentially symbolizing the temporality of human creation. The next couplet, "Have you forgotten the whistling of the stones, / the heave and shift of the windrows?" shows the Master asking another frustratingly vague question, asking the speaker, as a response to his existential "wherefore and wherefrom," if he remembers to take the time to appreciate the sounds of nature, suggesting, possibly, that the answer to his existential questions might exist around him.

In a bout of what reads as frustration, the speaker asks another series of ambiguous questions in the poem's only quatrain, reading "So I asked the Master of Shadows / about the above and the below, / the this and the that, / the first and the last." While these questions seem vague, they are just as loaded as the earlier "wherefore and wherefrom," with "the above and the below" concerning a potential afterlife, "the first and the last" a reference to Christianity's concept of "alpha and omega," "the this and the that" encompassing the entirety of lived experience. Just as the speaker of the poem raises its stakes by reiterating his philosophically inclined line of interrogation, hoping for a clear answer, the Master responds with his most elusive answer yet, in "but he said, / I am no master // only a shadow, / and he laughed."

At first glance, this so-called Master's refusal to answer the speaker's questions might appear frustrating, though the revelation given is significant. While the majority of

the poem has treated the Master of Shadows as a cryptic but ultimately knowledgeable figure, the Master of Shadows's admission that he is simply a shadow, whether literal or metaphorical, motions toward the futility of appealing to classical sources of knowledge for clear answers. Regardless of whether these stanzas at the end identify the Master of Shadows as one who is indeed not a master or as a figment of the speaker's imagination, the poem's messaging on praising the renewing destruction of flame and listening to the whistling of stone in the wind is appropriately irreverent, especially in treating figures central to the American canon like Frost and Whitman. Just as the Master of Shadows reveals he is little more than a shadow himself, the poem suggests that similar philosophical inquiries will also dissipate into vague ambiguities, fraught with open-ended questions without the discovery of clear answers.

While the existential questions central to "The Classical Study" are well-known to exist in our shared reality, their factual basis providing a level of familiarity with the concerns of the poem, Palmer has situated the poem's questions inside a conversation with the fantastically-named Master of Shadows, entering the poem into the ontic realm of the fictional, in which the conversations within the poem are assumed to exist only in the poem itself, with further reference to literary material, which is not necessarily factual. By grounding the poem in authentic human concerns but setting the stage, to some extent, in the realm of imagination, Palmer allows for the possibility of creating a poem with both fictional and factual references, creating a paradigm where characters speak outside of conventional dialogue practices with a character who seems to offer answers to the speaker's questions only to disappear as a shadow before the end of the

poem, while both mocking existential plight and indulging in it at the same time. As a deceptively complex poem, “The Classical Study” owes much of its consideration to the push and pull between fact and fiction that it creates in its intricacies.

IV. Conclusion

While some number of the poems I’ve selected for this essay employ similar techniques, from depicting biblical figures in non-traditional temporalities to aligning contemporary speakers with literary characters to painting character portraits of mermaids and shadows, each of the poems I’ve selected has expressed some quality that would be inaccessible through more strictly factual techniques, speaking to the richness of possibility inherent in this mode of poetic composition. Much of the tension within Michael Palmer’s “The Classical Study,” as an example, comes from dialogue between the speaker and the seemingly supernatural Master of Shadows, just as Matthea Harvey’s “The Inside Out Mermaid” uses its consideration of a mythological creature as a tool to deliver its consideration of real-world interpersonal relationships. At the same time, poems like Mary Jo Bang’s “And as in Alice” explicitly call upon the realm of imagination to consider the freedoms and dangers of imagination, which would require a wholly different approach if delivered through strictly factual means.

If this fact-fiction ambiguity is as ever-present in lyric poetry, as Hühn suggests, this awareness of the importance of the fictional should transfer to the analysis of other individual works, whether we are considering the possibilities created by, say, the consideration of the eponymous blackbird in Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or the metaphorization of the aging self in William

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73," which begins "That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang." Naturally, this mode of understanding would apply to my own work as well, which often utilizes tension between the world of the poem and the speaker's interiority, interaction with surreal or fictional characters, and intertextuality in the form of ekphrasis.

My manuscript, *Hello Nothingness*, begins with a poem called "Lest," as an example, which begins with the lines "Walking through shadows that night made, streetlights glancing at passersby, / I'm reminded of crumbling aqueducts I passed through in the Roman countryside," situating the speaker at once navigating through the relative strangeness of night while recalling the strangeness of memory, conflating the night's shadows with the crumbling aqueducts of the past. This experience of simultaneously considering the past and present leads the speaker to "wonder what else catches itself beguiled by dark," asking himself (and the reader) to consider the alternate perspectives afforded by both the darkness of night and the shadows of memory. Later lines like "I'm often betrayed by memory" and Meaning is slippery; / the world gets smaller— You're trapped inside it, then you're not," suggest that the beguiling nature of these specters of meaning might lead to skewed perceptions of the world, as the literal and figurative nightscapes the speaker finds himself in have shown the world of the speaker in a different light.

As another example, "By the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate" argues for the indulgence of imagination through the landscape of one of Salvador Dali's surrealist paintings, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before*

Awakening, treating features of the painting, like the line drawn by a bee in flight, the “maw of an overlarge goldfish,” and a “crumbling of pomegranate seeds” as appealing creations of the imagination to be explored and enjoyed, contrasted by a fictional character in “the man with a leather briefcase” who tells the speaker “MY what little SENSE you make.” While the surreal images of the poem and the man with a leather briefcase are both imagined, this tension between sensory expression and logic is one that I have grappled with extensively across my artistic career. As such, this poem serves as a form of *ars poetica*, in which I argue for the importance of the exploration of imagination, especially as the speaker ignores the critique from the man with the briefcase in favor of considering the imagined personalities of other paintings, this time by Edvard Munch and Gustav Klimt.

“*Semper Augustus*,” another poem from my manuscript, references another painting, this one unattributed and depicting the most expensive tulip sold during the “tulip mania” of the Dutch Golden Age, which some historians claim was sold for the price of a house. Beyond merely referencing the poem or exploring its landscape in the text, my “*Semper Augustus*” shows a nihilistic character study of the imagined persona of the tulip from the painting, the opening line “I’m an archive of the vestigial impulse” suggesting this painting serves as a reminder of the senselessness of human greed, the life and beauty of the tulip destroyed for the enjoyment of some collector. At the same time, the heavy metaphorization of the issues in the poem allows for the simultaneous consideration of this utterance as coming from a human speaker, who relates the

absurdity of this tulip craze to the difficulty of orienting oneself amongst the absurdities of modern life.

These poems rely heavily on the presence of the imagination to deliver their rhetorical and poetic effects while also utilizing signifiers with factual counterparts in terms of entities, actions, and states of mind, representing the spectrum of Hühn's fact-fiction ambiguity. I would argue that these poems call attention to the blurred boundaries of fictionality and factuality made possible by the genre of lyric poetry along the same lines of the selections from the body of this essay, in which the presence of fictional elements is highlighted to amplify the effects of the poem. And yet, the awareness of this fact-fiction ambiguity can be applied to other poems in the manuscript, just as it can be applied to less explicit examples from the body of poetry.

My poem "As a Kind of Premonition," as another example, explores the limits of intersubjectivity by juxtaposing stark images from the natural world with the unspoken tensions of a romantic relationship, where the descriptions of elements from the natural world are meant to inflect meaning upon the human relationship of the poem. Just as the examples of human intimacy and separation illustrate the impossibility of understanding another fully, the subjective descriptors of the nightjars "haunting" the trees before calling out to each other and "fading to their secret lives" are meant to represent the prevalence of missed connection, while the overripe pomegranates of the third stanza represent the relative desolation caused by these missed connections. This poem might not call upon the powers of imagination as explicitly as other poems I've talked about so

far, but the metaphorization of its natural elements speaks to a factual mind state through description outside of mere objectivity.

“Sketch on a Hotel Napkin,” another poem from my manuscript, can also be understood as illustrating the utilization of this fact-fiction ambiguity for effect, as the poem also fictionalizes the speaker into a character, just as several examples from the body of my essay, particularly Mary Jo Bang’s “And as in Alice,” do. While the first six lines are spoken from a first-person perspective, the remainder of the poem considers the self as a character in a narrative, constructed from the mind as “a magician that improvises its act as it goes on,” inserting the self as a “you” into the imagined narrative landscape of the mind. By viewing the speaker as a character, the poem is able to illustrate the absurdity of assigning concrete meaning to one’s life, as the question of interpreting the meaning of “the intersection of this and that” and “the coming tide of here and then” is met with the openness of “As if anyone could ever know.” Though I can imagine a version of this poem that maintains its first-person perspective throughout, that act of transforming the self into a character allows the speaker to view himself from a critical distance, which is vital to the effect of the poem.

As a final example, “Birdwatching / Melancholia” draws inspiration from Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore*, a novel featuring two separate protagonists who never meet or interact to deliver a coherent narrative, which would be incomplete without each half of its whole. This led me to write “Birdwatching / Melancholia” in a contrapuntal form, composed of lines and stanzas in two distinct columns, which can be read either separately or conjoined. My consideration of the simultaneous features of both

fictionality and factuality in lyric poetry is particularly relevant in this poem, which dedicates its lefthand column to the exploration of lived experiences, while the right column considers the implications of those experiences upon the speaker's mind. Just as Murakami's novel would not be complete without either half, "Birdwatching / Melancholy" relies on the slippage of comparison and contrast achieved through its alternating inspection of the real and the imagined, creating additional effect when considered together.

Though I was originally skeptical of the importance of concepts of factuality and fictionality in poetry, as I mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this essay, a further exploration of lyric poetry through Hühn's framework has illuminated both the presence and importance of these dueling categories within the greater context of poetry, serving as a useful tool to better understand my own work and the work of other poets. While the scope of this essay is relatively narrow, considering individual samples from six contemporary American poets and selections from my own work, further consideration of this topic could analyze movements of fictionality and factuality within the oeuvres of individual poets, across specific periods, within certain regions, and so on to better understand the workings of this phenomenon across different locations and times. The rise in popularity in recent years of hybridity in subgenres like autofiction and the lyric essay might also provide further avenues of consideration, especially as genres outside of poetry continue to experiment with the use of poetic elements in their texts.

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Hello Nothingness

Lest

after Rilke

Walking through shadows that night made, streetlights glancing at passersby,
I'm reminded of crumbling aqueducts I passed through in the Roman countryside
and wonder what else catches itself beguiled by dark— the eye rapt in a garden
that, too, has lost its war with time. The lake in the center of the garden is a moon
filled with swans, beaks resting on folded wings. What I'm saying is, some glow
is enough to draw one out of restlessness, lest you forget— I devour everything I can,
the mind defaced, a tattered gown, strawberry leaf, a statue, half-submerged.
Looked like you. Couldn't be you. I'm often betrayed by memory: you, bathing
in a pond or sitting on cathedral steps, image after image. Meaning is slippery;
the world gets smaller— You're trapped inside it, then you're not.

I'd Gone Missing and Wondered What the Implications Were

I'd gone missing from myself, is what I meant to say.
Or meant to believe. Before I got distracted thinking
how different everything looks when it's covered in snow.
A train drives by the cabin where I'm staying—a cloud
of birds flees the dead tree where they used to sleep.

Voices carry from the distance of a different life. As if
they're drifting between yesterday and tomorrow or toward
the depths of the self that conjures each lost minutiae:
standing by the Seine in silence and resting one's head
on another's shoulder or falling asleep in a field while
the other sketches a grist of bees before waking up to find
some part of this mysteriously gone.

And then one of them
says is that all that was? into the deepening hollow divide
between what's real and what one says is real. As if
there were a way to know. Water boils inside the refuge
I've built, looking back a moment before the steam fades off
in the breeze—*is that what that was? is this all there is?*

Aubade

If we didn't know the words for, say, a body uncoiling
the way a bouquet of herbs might after unfolding
inside a pair of hands before you or the scent of lavender
lingering in your hair from a night spent lost on sets
of cobblestone streets. As you rise in the morning, bare-bodied
beneath the blinds and their filtered light—

If we didn't question

the murmur a pattern of starlings makes as it flies across the meadow
you'd call affection— the envelope where each fraction I gave you
kept cloaked between your favorite books—

I'd still look for omens everywhere. Eventually the fog
would give way to a calm mist, the faint, chromatic reminder
that the palpable remains palpable even when it's gone.

Did you expect life to be kind to you? Did you expect fanfare
or laughter or comfortable solitude? I'll do everything I can
not to disturb you, later, when I come across you reading in the den.

Always a Game of You

I spent summer breeding lilacs out of a dead land—
past forgetful snow, sex and laughter, a doll
made out of smoke. Each night I hid between
the walls of my room— wasn't the last time
I saw you in a dream? Wasn't there an ivory door?
Don't you remember the way I named myself
after flowers? I only cared about specifics then:
ghost orchid, hyacinth, marigold. Everywhere
the boundary between. Sometimes the center
of the underworld is also a marsh— in some ways
I'm still bound to sleep. You said we couldn't
be more than ourselves—I grew into a moonflower,
other times erratic. I clothed myself in August,
which is to say there wasn't any more time to spend
drifting in the river nude, no time for forgetfulness—
sometimes I'm afraid of myself. Didn't you know?

*

Wasn't it the house within the dream, the last time
I saw you? (This time a different you). Outside,
I dropped my feet in the river so the fish could eat
the dead skin—I watched you from the window
to my room. You were more beautiful this time,
either more beautiful or more fierce, and also
a famous clairvoyant. You knew about
the library behind the mirror—I beckoned you
to carry me away. How did I end up like this,
a frame within a frame? Sometimes I forgot
your name and found a different one instead:
a thousand ships, scurrilous, a deciduous tree.
You were also flowering perennial, borrowed
from a forgotten tongue but also the Greek,
which borrowed itself from the Old Persian
(Avestan, Parthian, etc.). Sometimes an orchard,
other times a car all fogged up. You were a memory
I hadn't told anyone yet. I kept you, swimming
between the ghost of us as if it were a reflection of me.

*

Witch-hazel, lotus thief. I brewed a bitter drink.
This was after the suicide, of course, when one
of our friends died and I didn't talk to anyone.
This was after I left Manhattan, before you left
Shanghai, after coming back from Paris, when I thought
you were never leaving the garden in Beirut.
You came back when I asked you to and left
for windy streets (a pair of chrysanthemums pressed
between a frame). You're not the same person
every time I picture you in my head. Sometimes
you keep fennel in your hair and other times pitch pine,
three-faced, a blade and a key, all the knowledge
of good in the world. "My nerves are bad tonight.
Yes, bad. Stay with me." I keep waiting for you
to tell me everything's not at world's end. "I'm dying."
"Is it blissful?" All of the nymphs have hidden
in the wood. The wind plays out to a nocturne—
for once, I convince myself we're alone.

*

Tonight you're the philosopher: Two stories, hardwood,
a balcony overlooking the yard. I ask about the god
of unrequited love while you're carving a spear out of holly
then mistletoe. You don't seem surprised
when I tell you the basement's flooding—that's where
I keep all of my impure thoughts. When I return
we'll play a game of you, apple blossom, a different tongue.
You change behind a curtain, crack one of the dishes
in the sink. In a different life (my current one)
you were perfect. So perfect that my loneliness
became a gallery of trees, dryad, horned god,
fleet behind the scenes. Everything a fragment—
amaranth, green willow, a pear blossom wisp.

*

Each version of you begins to blur together. Today
you taste like plum, yesterday a wreck. Your ribs
become the laurel tree, and naiads cross the river
to our house. You're the one who knows the names of all
the nymphs— casually, I'm the one who waits for you
to tie a knot from the stem of a flower without thorns,
as if you were a magician. Maybe that's wrong—
I'll live my life again and again until I can erase
and start again. Isn't a love letter always a prelude?
And isn't a prelude the beginning to another way
of worry? Wednesday, yesterday, today. At night,
I sleep without the light, but that too could change.
Each day we'll drink, again and again (maybe from a river,
perhaps from a cup) and I'll ask when it was that you became
the astronomer, queen of coins or maybe even cups.
Either way I'll place the costumes in the corner,
so they can watch us while we sleep.

Phantasmagoric

Each time I kill one of my old selves—or more often let him loose
into the static—I stumble on his shade sometime later, often
when the seasons have changed and the lilacs have withered
so that they, too, no longer resemble their former selves—

*He was there, right there, standing in front of the meat market,
with a ring of brass keys in his hand, just watching
as the pedestrians idled by—*

and I start to ask if I would recognize myself if seen
from any real distance, or would it all just blur, terribly,
so that there could be no gesture, no omen or ominous figure
lurking in the corner of one's eye, and what

would I do then, what jar would I keep the days in, and how
would I order them or else unravel further into a blizzard of ideas,
and then what sense could I make of this before suddenly drifting away?

Tell Me Who I Am

Some days I don't recognize myself—when
I step from the shower and catch a glimpse
of my face clouded with steam

and all I have from all of my yesterdays is
a smudge on an old polaroid—as if a pair of bees
could remember themselves out of honeycomb,

having fallen to the ground—I don't know
who I am, not just the story of who I am—
the secrets I need answers to are watching

from the cedar-limbs by a pair of blackbirds
hidden in snow. Even the cupboards could hold
a gentle sheen or a soft glow, as if

a chain of memories could be mended, once
broken, when the moonlight pierces the reeds
and paints the sea the muddled green of grief.

If I chose to tread through this endlessness,
I'd start to imagine waves crashing and then
slowly molding a long white beach—

How do we hold ourselves against the abyss?

A Pair of Silhouettes

Before I had a body I had nothing— I lean back and make a list
of everything that's ever been so I can decide which parts I'd like to eat:

I swallow birds, bees, blues, petals, seeds, and sometimes whispers
that wander down the street. Outside, my life becomes a thicket—

I prick my thumb, touch the wicked interior. What else could I love
except for the spider I find beneath Rose's waist? She tells me we can't

transcend ourselves, but that isn't true— Here, there is a place that doesn't
see you. Rose says its unsettling, but I call it "love as a dark hallway."

Sometimes the lights flicker. Rose takes a bath
when she doesn't want to talk to me. When I'm alone:
a skull or a ghost, a dagger floating through the hall.

The Clock Ticks Toward Ruin

We thought about naming this one-act *Nude Figures in an Imaginary Cage*.

“No, that isn’t it,”

Rose says. She’s placing petals from her garden on all of the furniture, saying she prefers it to wasting another afternoon.

Yesterday, she broke our last umbrella.

“What about *Notes on the Color Red?*,” I say. One way of thinking could easily lay waste to an entire architecture.

We look away from each other. “No, no,” she says.

“I can’t help but think about the mess you’ve made.”

I know some part of me has to die each time I start another day. That some lover’s wingspan can only take you so far. When it’s dark, I’ll idle off into the rain.

But I’d rather not think about that. Not yet.

“What about *Still Life with Sparrow Heart?*” Rose says. She stretches out.

Bits of sun peek through the blinds to touch her back.

I’m trying to find a place for the ghost in me. Another shadow of myself. No one says anything and for a moment

nothing is said.

But what could we know about the altar of this and whatever
comes next?

Left with nothing, I'd start to feel something again. Don't look for me inside the
wreckage.

Interrupted in the Night

We were balanced on a tight wire,
as if I'd called you from a séance

or a dream, where a spider

could be the afterbody to the part of oneself that tried to follow
the moon. Crawling across

the surface with a silver sheen.

You're there and then that, you said, motioning off

between me and the mechanical dark. Legs tangled

like clockwork. A pair

of dead lilies on the nightstand.

Just two. You, dressed as an acrobat in dim light.

We locked the window twice, then a third time for safe-

keeping. Inside,

the pattern we made with a dozen candles,

which was one way of trying to make sense of one's life. *It's lovely, isn't it?*

That's what they say,

huddled together in the night. They say,

There, there—isn't it lovely holding the whole world in glass?

I Mean for a Thing to Be Other

When I think of you, I think of you as you were, lying nude,
having kept nothing but your gloves, or wading through
a carpet of flowers, into the dull halo each sunset promises,
that I, mistakenly, might call oblivion, having lost your mastery
of surrender, of toil and covet, having knelt, at first to wash
the dirt from your arms, if only for the pleasure of kneeling—

I've lost until loss became a kind of metaphor, as gray scales
pooling in a jar, moth-torn from thumb-brushed wings until
the body begins to falter, erratically, out of sight, fading,
the way suffering fades in the face of further brutality—
there's tragedy, and then there's living, you'd tell me,
dappled and dust-specked, unbroken by the wind.

First, I Thought of You

I walked to the foot of a clock tower, lingering at the end
of a ghost town. Light filtered through dull windows,
crows turning their heads from their makeshift roosts.

A woman in a trench coat hurried to the top of the stairs,
hush, hush, her footsteps, the rain outside, a winter storm.
The blue made the birds seem breakable, the clock still—

everything else was darkness, not a click but a shudder,
which served as an explanation that *even the perceptible
needs to be reminded of itself*. The woman might have said

come with me, but I couldn't tell. Not that I would have known
what to say. Sometimes my eyes are more clever
than a turntable, like a voice at the top of a stairwell

which says *don't you remember what could've been?* as if it were
a tea cup still warm on the bedside table, as if memory could
collide back with me as a lone figure approaching from the outline

of a landscape. What I'm saying is, it doesn't matter
what happened next. What happens happens now.

Qualia

At night, over a dozen white moths flickering
against the screen porch, trapped on the long,
cold march to dark—

But in the quiet of an empty reflection, a trio
of candles burnt to the wick, one could
follow that call, from dreamscape to errant
quest, from the puzzle of meaning
to a wildflower you've never heard of,
resting in moonlight, waiting
for your triumphant return.

Melancholia

The pond behind the house where you grew up becomes a ghost town—
you're sunbathing in the backyard nude, trees warped, dock kissed with algae,
the whole world covered in weeds. Instead of kissing you, I pretend to sleep
while you tell me the history of everything that's ever been and then break
into the house with a rock, window shattered, dust on the floor. Even silence is fragile.
Light mottles in through pools of water sunk into the wood. You show me
where your room used to be, the attic, a wardrobe left behind. You open the doors
to find a part of yourself. You open them to find a dozen glass bells.

Each Object Seems to Appear on the Same Flat Surface

The doctor ordered a dozen Turing tests— One theory
of chaos was a system made by biomechanical machines:

The perennial longing we used to make meaning
was the swing of a pendulum, based, apparently, on a set

of random initial conditions, the automata agog, peering
at spectacle. When I told you I loved you, your response

was a deterministic method of philosophy, the totality of
cascading events. “When the present determines the future,

it’s impossible not to follow the paths of dying stars.”

A thought came to mind and then quietly left— There were

suspicious fires and deceitful looks. If you have ghosts,
their behavior can be studied by analyzing recurrent plots.

Even the world of rhododendrons is morphologically diverse,
their taxonomy desperately complex. I spent the evening

painting a predictive model of everywhere versus never.

The current kaleidoscope presented itself as a countryside

spotted with Queen Anne's lace. The caption read, "Each object seems to appear on the same flat surface." How droll.

Phenomenology

The lake inside the cream-colored egg of the moment

is flooded with red fish that swim in circles

while their scales shine like the skin of a pearl

or sequins that a mannequin might have worn

as it tried to give form to a model of desire not unlike

a long exposure, burning a spectacle of stars

into the artificial retina you hold in your hands,

meaning *that which appears* is subject to study.

Just as rustles of endless sprigs of evergreen

or dandelions covering a field on the city's brim

might lay the world to rest, two sets of antlers catch hold

of one another, leaving tufts of velvet in their wake.

Isn't that what you'd call it? The wolf on the road

to nowhere offers an expression not learned

in the mother tongue, the skeleton of a row of ginkgo trees,
losing their leaves as the seasons turn and the world
shows itself as a constantly changing topographical map,
a kind of metaphor for the slow practice of living—

Please, keep going, the wolf says, licking its blood
from the dirt. *Don't stop because of me.*

All Night I I I I
after Alejandra Pizarnik

All night I make night in me. I fugue.

I'm naked in the presence of Death.

Water howls violently outside,

a ribbon patterned from the sound of

someone sobbing

in the memory of

some halo, bitter bright, shrapnel of grief.

All night I spill questions. Death

breathes a nest of smoke through the nostrils

of its wolf mask— tapetum lucidum

leering out until night opens in me.

I lurch forward at its looking.

Roil

Being carousel, caught carnage and glint,

rope taut around the dumb mechanical neck,

reconstructed, found effigy or calculating clone

ripped from the feedback loop, being motion

and then motionless strife, bloodied, the violence

promised in being blooded, chaos cleaved

by reports of radio snow, a mouth moving elsewhere,

threatening the end of the anthropocene,

the eventual silence I suffer before turning out

and gnashing forward, ruminant, the animal

I am therefore cunning as a swarm of flies thinking

deeply about the difficulty of knowing,

the cup overflowing, coated with murder, cursed,

as one becomes after a period of living,

until fugue, a season of mists, tendrils spilling into

the sepulcher, dirt-drowned before waking,

being made predator, indicted by my own devices,

bewitched, waking past midnight, drawing

myself into fervor, then floating, being un-

enlightened, part-forgotten, the waves

of a blind sea curling in and encumbering back,
cloud-formed and listless.

Syzygy

1.

I was of over a dozen minds, as

2.

veins of copper leaf map the ever-wending

3.

path of the blackbird; I had lived for too

4.

long in someone else's story, traced my

5.

hands over the coarse road of another's

6.

verdigris— When I found the rhythms of

7.

the blackbird I couldn't look back. At the

8.

moment of precise alignment, what I

9.

found I couldn't say: inside the ghost of

10.

a memory, with past and present in

11.

retrograde, as ash covers surrounding

12.

landscapes in hope of mimicking fresh snow.

13.

Inside the black star, there was void, and there

14.

was void, and inside that void could be light.

[. . .]

And in a moment grief strikes, just
as each animal I've wanted to see in myself, whether the dead
leaf mantis or the common bat as it dives from cave to void of night
or the cat, who slips easily between our world of flame and the other
worlds of shadow, who sidles between one death and another—

*after each day another dreaded day where the snow clouds the sky
and the stags joust with their antlers, leaving the bark scarred
and blooded, as one finds oneself weeping, suddenly, openly...*

And at some point I return, as is, I suppose, my nature, to row
through a river I've learned to call forgetfulness, where the night-heron,
with its yellow crown, waits for the waters to still before deciding
when best to strike, to hold its beak to the water in search of prey,
to pounce, to escape into another moment, as I've so often
learned to, when to unravel (where it's safe, and for how long),
when to skulk through the mausoleums of memory, and how

to survive, when to drink, and when to rest upon
the muddied tongue of the river's shores...

The Eye Is an Amphitheatre

Black circles pattern across the ceiling of
a dark ballroom, a muffled silence,
paths of petrified branches hanging from
invisible string—when the eye opens,
it opens on a dozen hands smothering a body,
snaked across the torso and the mouth,
holding the shoulders in place. Appalled
by the fanfare of it all, I static: a ghost-
like lull. A man drinking campari and soda sneers
from the balustrade of conscious thought—
some echo rippling in a bathtub, the human figure
growing colder, holding its breath, half-
dressed. A French novel in the wardrobe warns
of a disappearance we've been unable
to perceive, as distant laughter slipping past
a pair of dispassionate hands. I'm ashamed
of my superstitions: pearls rolling on a tilted
wood floor, buttons broken, psychic babble:
a wild mare. The migraine specter of scrim:
an overpass turned garden, red poppies,

heads hanged: hush. When the eye opens, it opens
on some fray, some worry, some holding
its head in its hands. Glaring out into the mandelbulb.

Through Meadows

How must I ghost I wonder

across gravity wells of wonder—

how often I'm cursed to wander from one garden of numbers

to mosaic a meadow of meanings meaning each way of watching

the world is better than the last—

Now look disinterested upon

bleak stone streets, upon mazes of machines and gloss-black feathers,

struck from the necks of winnowing birds. Feel chill,

deep in the marrow. I ice when overwhelmed. Melancholy through

a dozen blue rooms.

One holds a painting of sails so smudged

they look like clouds. A swatch of blue in a sea of every other blue.

Now look bewildered at the baffling of things:

someone hung

a bright white sheet in the alley between two streets as if the secret

to being was to notice most things aren't always

what they seem—

Now look upon lengths of sun-washed

sunflowers, upon time-washed marble in the floors. Try counting

the voices that tell you not to sleep: whole kingdoms

of passerine, an earthquake on the other side of the world,
a restless querying mind.

Some days I lean forward to find
strings of confetti floating through the holes of each day—

Don't tell me I shouldn't question the film that lingers over
my everyday. I choose to believe the light on the side of an airplane
wing is more than it was meant to be. Through dark-bright clouds
to an undercurrent of reverie. Now look:

He Questioned Everything, Starting with the Pile of Balloons

left alone in a room for a scattered few days, the wallpaper
dulled to a dimension of color he hadn't lived through yet,
which made him reminisce, possibly for the first time,
over the tyranny of everyday life

and the rigid curve

each morning presented in front of him, his body lingering on
while his spirit stumbled a few paces in front of him,
as if guiding his limbs through the dark or some cruel
copy of it

while the foxes bloodied their teeth half-buried
in shades of ochre and rust as the leaves began to melt
and the entire world became an ocean of something new,
somehow less stable than it was before,

as if the earth

had turned itself from his modular way of thinking
and taking a moment to himself wherever he could find it,
as if the quiet were a nest he'd built only to have it
swept away when he least expected it,

as if this constantly

changing constellation could act as a kind of omen

facing out toward the depths of the horizon before
it softened into a column of waves that he couldn't quite see.

A Séance

I've heard it said that if you open
the door to your body from before your body
was a vessel for this melancholy or
if you believed, truly believed, that your
spirit lives on elsewhere, if you believed
that the notes that Siobhan called forth,
as if from a trance, when the two of you
were alone, just the two of you, in a great
auditorium you had never seen during the day,
if you believed that her harp could still speak
to you, or if you believed that the smoke
from the censers swung by the priests from
your mother's church could still strike
fear in you, or if you believed that
the maps between stars could hold
secrets that would still bewilder you—
if you could take back the days you lost,
before you had reason to lose them, before
you walked through flooded streets
and found peace in them, for once,

knowing that it would leave you, that
night would swallow you and you would
swallow your ghosts, only to neglect them
and then try to conjure them, desperately
wanting, no, needing to believe that
some child managed to survive inside of you,
someone to speak to or summon or at least
make contact with, some vision you'd once lost,
if only you could believe it, long enough to let
silhouettes of steam sing to you at sunrise, to rest
your head in wild grass as if you were
sleeping on rings of Saturn, to let yourself
sleep as if you could dare sleep to soothe you—

Sketch on a Hotel Napkin

I was stuck inside the second person
and didn't have time for anyone,

wandering through the intersection
of this and that, there and the other

way of saying the mind is a magician
that improvises its act as it goes on:

you, posing for a photograph to resist
the inevitable question of time and place,

you, opening a letter and pausing to contemplate
each possible outcome. You switch

to the present *sotto voce*, then board a ferry
to a city you've only read about in books

that have long since lost their battles
with cultural relevance. Amidst the feeling

that something is always watching you. *Where
are you going?* You brace yourself

against the coming tide of here and then.

As if anyone could ever know.

Encountering Judith and Holofernes
after Klimt

The artist had decided everything was an aesthetic choice:
pale chest exposed, the neck gold-collared, hand holding
a severed head that glances about its station with the derelict

nature of the muse, lip cocked, gown sheer, sword hanging offstage.
How a life could be condensed into a series of fragments
discarded and found by a pedestrian on their way to lunch.

Later I abandoned my fascination with the sensual and opted
to sit alone outside a bakery on an overcast street.

I could make a story out of anything, ask no one in particular
about the rules of composition and receive no reply.

An espresso cup rests on a table and waits for the rain

as if it were part of a mosaic depicting isolation and joy, its off-white
shining misdirection— I could disappear as well as anyone,
artifacts littering the scene. A self-portrait in the breeze.

Leaves that Have Never Seen the Light of Day

That's how I detach from the nest I made
out of yesterday: the white bowl I've washed
and cleaned of dirt will cook the other ingredients.

This way the morning remains clear and unassuming.
No one wants to be reminded of silt, a river full of
decomposing leaves.

It's better to be twelve slices of good bread,
marrow from a femur, a heart still red enough
to suggest warmth.

Turnips in the cellar twist in the darkness.
The heart grows quiet and still, the wood from
the cutting board smooth until scarred.

I saw the calf to dust, then make sure to reserve parts
of myself this time. Fold the raw heart to the marrow.
Grate the turnip without its yellow leaves,

and then step back, to try to maintain the illusion
that the body isn't breakable.

Pine Mushroom, Lamb's Kidney, Pickled Marigold

This time we'll use soft butter, three of everything else.

The mushrooms have to be perfect, about twelve centimeters,
peeled with the intimacy of a paring knife.

The rest is simple. The flowers and the buds pickled so
they'll always be less than fertile. Arrange the caps
into half-moons, the marigold into a kiss.

The lamb becomes another half-moon— closer,
now.

There is no one, the snow on the limbs
of the trees. Everything still. The morning won't bloom
until we look away. And so we look away.

As Seen from the Pleiades

When you asked me for tenderness, I counted seven roses and filled
the empty space with baby's breath. And when you asked for two hundred
thousand perfect mornings I held a crystal ball to my chest, softly, for fear
that it might shatter, that you might glimpse the world as I've so often
been cursed to: blossomed with blood, stars distorted to lure travelers
from their paths, caught between

this world of the living and the hidden one—

When I think about the lives I could've led, I'm confronted by the usual ghosts
of possibility, the faint murmur of an echo as the cloud cover buries its way
between my brows, and the satyr who lives in the cave beneath my temples,
bleats at the moon to complain about the noise.

I let the orchid you gave me
wither because I couldn't bear to keep anything else alive. And when the time
came to plant a forest with a sea of tourmaline trees, you lit a cherrywood pipe and
puffed until you ran out of glow. There are limits to what the imagination can grow.

By the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate

after Mary Jo Bang

When I was younger, I believed that possibility
could be limitless, as the flight of a bee might cut
into a cursive that one might figure into

the tender triangles of the whorl of a dahlia,
or the starts of sentences so breathtaking
one thought they could only be found in books.

Reality could be any number of things:

As a tiger leaping over one's sleeping body
as it springs from the maw of an overlarge
goldfish through an uptight ultramarine air

itself flowing forth from a crumbling of pomegranate seeds.

MY what little SENSE you make says the man
with a leather briefcase to the Young Eric sitting

quietly on a bench. But where could that bench be? Who
would watch from the ledge of catastrophe or spend
all afternoon arguing against ekphrasis as a silly term
for pathetic fallacy? What would the *Girl Looking out
the Window* think? and what would the *Birch Forest*
say if it knew its maker would keep drawing more than two?

Garden of Earthly Delights

Eventually I rolled up my sleeves— A young librarian ordered another round of sazeracs while a woman with the head of a gazelle tried to pull a pair of nudes from a sunflower the size of a couch. Everyone was up to no good in the dark. Some even tried to speak French: *Would you like? Perhaps.* Each passing detail cocooned with the difficulty of a tiger trapped in a ball gown. A reindeer in golden tiara. Waterfowl with long gloves. Overheard: *He spoke, and it was done* and then *No, thank you* followed by *Would you like some tea?* Chaos fascinates me—I've fallen in love with any number of uncertainty principles. We're all held back by what we perceive. And some months, when all I can see is each gloaming climbing over me, I remind myself that the gods therefore will neither visit our weddings nor let themselves shine by bright of day. Storms gather around each thought that one finds troubling. The inevitable always is.

The Next Painting Was Full of Dark Clouds
after Goya

Even the lady's parasol was dark. Painted light struck the blue on her blouse, the black dog on her lap. The wind suggested a half dozen or so voices bellowing in the dark—a soft shimmer, some pigment leaving the impression there's nothing else to see.

Then it's raining and you try to lie back down. *Don't cry out*, the lady says. She's speaking from the periphery of thought and trying to ask if you could remember her name. The dog pokes its nose over a dune, then rests its head on a patch of cool sand.

I didn't think the world could ever be that soft, the dog says.

Of course it can talk outside of the painting. You try to sleep through their bird-bright hum only to saunter back to this quiet, this solitude,

a pitch-black chamber where nothing can be touched..

Hello, nothingness, you start to say. *Hello, hello.*

Smoke from the Demolished Power Plant Forms a Humanoid Figure

Floating across the surface of a postcard before it decides to disperse—

who knew oblivion could be so blue, everything calm to the last of it,

each moment piled together until one forms anew. A pair of songbirds

drifts in front of the projector I've built inside the weather balloon

of the mind, false clouds casting shadow on a wandering heath, then

slowly giving way to a copse of trees. The price of discontent was

an obsession with the curve of an eggshell, an arithmetic attraction

to a certain kind of light, and a crown of herons yelling grief is a machine.

Some days I spend weeks trying to name the flowers that rose through

the fence that separates us from a lake called Human Suffering. Even

in effigy this shadow couldn't help but plume. I pluck the feathers

from my neck and bewilder a choir of frogs. One of them tenors

before bounding off toward the only thing that could break through the haze:

the high beams of a semitrailer, opalescent, signaling the end.

Semper Augustus

I'm an archive of the vestigial impulse,
a shadow cast on vellum, white streaks
on a red background. When I sleep, I dream
of the furnace turning inside me,
a catalog of 17th century watercolors depicting
the birth of some mania in the form
of the most expensive flowers in the world,
avaricious leaves and a long, brittle neck.
I'm loss. I'm marrow and splinter, fallen
in the underbelly of a soft, dark
birdcage. Gold bars suspended as if time
were a metronome trapped on the floor.
Uncanny, insignificant, and clever. Don't bother
asking what will become of us.

Dissolution

On the day we're absolved, we'll press flowers
into the bindings of our books: celosia for flame,
statice for prosperity, shrub roses to capture
the manifold self—

We'll kill some part
of what we call beauty to preserve as talisman,
phantom memory, totem of strife—

We'll crush pigment and bind it to medium
to paint our own skies: burnt sienna, golden
rays of wheat, a soft patina for the afternoon.

The truth is, we've spent most of our lives
not living, kept content with hints of lemon,
closely monitored one's empathy reserves—

On the day we're absolved,
we'll walk through warm rain untethered
to the constraints of this world, we'll cry

in disharmony; in uneven continuum
we'll choir our grief into pale smoke,
exhale mirrors of regret into young larks
without worry for their pinions
in sunward flight, with newfound abandon
for the angers of yestertempest, their sufferings
cooled by the promise to pardon themselves,
to unburden each other from this morbid
attachment to the idea of one's self.

Yield

We were told that the great groves
of good and evil had been buried long ago,
that the plots of road on which we'd grow
our stories had been settled in ages past:
Bones of pavement, mountains of error,
whole archives of ephemera kept alight
by the faint promise of eventual return—

The world itself is just silence,
punctuated by brief patches of wildflowers,
delphinium rising from cemeteries of sage,
red asters from the underbrush, blue stars
fallen in fields of green. You must
forget the false pattern of spirals
you've learned to call your life,
this insistence on making meaning
out of three charms of finches
rather than four, of horned lizards
waiting in the stillness of the night-crags
for some cricket song, some sound

to mark this moment as more significant
than the next. You must.

As If Yesterday Were Made of Silk

You meet Death for the first time at a dinner party in a colleague's apartment. There's a moment you'll recall several nights from now, where your eyes linger and you feel something intimate creep across your chest before looking away and forcing yourself to smile as you greet your host. You barely know anyone, so you hover around an oil painting of a woman walking out to a lighthouse, her pearl-gray dress trailing behind her as her bare feet leave spots on the beach. You imagine walking farther, deeper into the distance of anywhere but here. Behind you, someone startles you when they drop a glint of silver knives.

/

Later, you kiss Death in the bathroom, your back pressed against an embroidered hand towel that your host has carefully folded and placed on the sink. Death presses into you, and you push back into vertigo, hooking a hand into the back pocket of Death's jeans. You wonder if anyone will realize you've stepped away together—you've both disappeared as your host toasts another cocktail, and you feel a chill cross your fingertips as a pair of hands swathe over your skin.

/

You walk home and hold your breath as if Death is still

inside you, the streets parted with fog and idling leaves.

You've decided you're flawed and ordinary, some savage thing.

You've stopped trusting your body or at least the apparatus

directing the body, letting go of, abandoning the meaning of.

Of course, you can't sleep, the sun rising in a haze you don't

believe in anymore, as if yesterday were made of silk. When

the morning unravels, the bit of reason you bundled and

kept with you begins to shudder and curl into a warm fist.

You release it onto the cool white meadow of your sheets.

Volta

There comes a time when the voice you considered comfort lets go of your wrist
with nothing more than a bruise on the skin to remind of what was lost,

as any number of miseries might masquerade as props in the story of your life—

You close one window of possibility as the sound of the wind and the sound of

wandering leaves, calls out to you—But if your body were a mask

you could leave behind as it suits you, would you even know to hear that call,

to close your eyes to lurking threat and venture forward, to search for solace

amongst the ferns and the reeds? Or would you sink back into the body, tracing

the scars on your skin as a star map, leading inward, never to return?

Two Rabbits in a Snowstorm

If you look closely, you can almost see one, covered by a gloom
made entirely of snow. Layers of white against nothing
but different shades of white. The mind lingers on a landscape
it can't see, as if it were a passenger on a train made of nothing.

Some days I'm a cemetery cut dull by the sun. Bleached out

details for the scavenger of the discerning eye. I sigh. I'm too busy
meandering on the edge of the present and trying to cast aside some
thimbleful of doubt. As if doubt could explain the pair of barn owls
watching from a set of fallen reeds, pulled from some cloister
of the imagination. Scouring which part of the psyche they'd like to strike.

If It's True of Human Nature

Actually, I hate the flowers—

now that the birds have vanished, as the last clouds drain away
and a thin light winnows down where a grove of bees used to flourish—

and if you spoke to me of cruelty, I'd think about primrose
in winter, lying dormant in the dirt, holding itself frozen, while the leaves
left on the surface lose themselves to rot—

I've been bestial and cunning, the way
a troop of foxes conspires to survive the snow,
as winter moths lay havoc on landscapes of white trees—

and if you spoke softly, I might learn to trust you, even fold
as a feathered wing, knowing that you might hurt me

and that that hurt might be a kind of devotion
that we couldn't explain, as the roof dulls the raindrops above us
into something bearable,

as if we could know

the limits of what we could bear—

As a Kind of Premonition

Whether we watch the nightjars return to haunt the trees, or if we only
hear them calling out to one another, softly,
before fading to their secret lives—

When you press your hands to my chest, I catch you watching
us fuck in the mirror, a maze of candles stuttering out in the dining room
before you turn away, as if to keep this moment, somehow, for yourself—

Just as rows of pomegranates coat a dust-lined field, their fruits
having fallen over fullness or neglect,
sitting swollen in the dusk—

You dreamed, you'd told me, for the first time in weeks. I remember
washing the spoons as you slept, then the knives, and then a sense of stillness,
fleeting, as birds in winter, waiting prone amongst the ferns and their leaves.

Self-Portrait as Knife Cuts Through Honeycomb

and black amber wafts through the fleeting minutes of discarded
photographs

you standing in rückenfigur in ambient earth tones
in incorporeal nothing self-portrait as ephemera as loosely-
arranged documents on a dresser I've been accused of never
having done anything that wasn't logical as glowing chevrons
patterned in the distance

you asked me to excuse your overgrown
orchard self-portrait as abandonment as the summer the perennials died
as if dead nettles could speak of causality you were unadorned
half-naked draped in the gown of spring self-portrait as a pool of wax
self-portrait as a hint of fig

self-portrait as wounded predator self-portrait
as snow leopard hidden in slush self-portrait as random-access memory
ripple a pair of eidolons walking the beach

in the center of a dull storm
each character represents a variation on the theme of self-destruction
I drew you from negatives

I've lost whole years out of carelessness

until they came pouring back in my travels I lost myself into
iridescence self-portrait as the tattoo of a skeleton key as in constant
turmoil

as a whorl of blackbirds scans the earth for shelter, for glimmers
of sanctuary as if I could learn to find this beautiful.

Strained, as the Day Turns
after Edvard Munch

I'm not always like this—

Vultures dazzling the branches of trees, carrion sunk
out of orbit. Makeshift stars.

The world is a specter drawn from the mausoleum of the mind—

When I swim through this darkness I'm flooded with grief,

souvenirs or memento mori:

initials etched into the corner of tarot cards some fool

hanging upside down from a bannister brass coins flung

from a bridge and then pulled to the depths of this conjuring

jellyfish rising as braids into discord and then what's

the point of living caught in the looking glass face turned

from the oculus a photograph faded past recognition doors

and corridors leading nowhere an umbrella crushed beneath

a park bench thousands of buttons strewn about as if from

storm seething I echo endlessly this enveloped entropy

defanged while the steam kettle cries, as if we were never here.

At This Point, I'd Take Anything

A claw of thread's all it takes to follow one thought to the next—
when West killed himself I didn't say his name out loud for months,

though most days I still lean forward and pull my head back as if
some spectral hand pulls my chin taut and points my gaze to the life

he abandoned inside this house of chaos we call everyday or otherwise
inscrutable, my shoulders trembling like stained glass, the same way,

I imagine, Theseus trembled as his father threw himself to the rocks,
not long after he left Ariadne sleeping on a beach made of coral and grit,

the mind displaced while the body stays behind, the breath clipped short
and calcified, strung up in the overgrown garden Dante held back for suicides,

while, in some version of the myth, Ariadne became a god, goddess of serpents
and twine and everything tangled, winged beasts hovering on the fringe

of knowing one way or the other, gloating on the worn-out roots of the trees
we'll be burdened to, until I'm sitting on the floor in front of a coffee table

pleading first with myself and then everything else, this skeleton of history
and an infinity of arrangements of the stars for an answer of some kind—

at this point, I'd take anything that masquerades as understanding like a barrel
to my chest, something to cradle off into the murk and the shadows of the night.

missing a head,

a knight demanding virtue from a slovenly king.

I'm quiet in the castle I've made for myself. As a rook

crumbling under the weight of this mess.

Disenchantment

I'm looking up at the ceiling of the Hungarian State Opera House,

pondering the merits of non-existence. It's difficult to say what

the body would do after this unbearable afternoon, beholden,

not unlike the head of a gorgon. Having been found wanting—

Wisteria crawling up a white wall. A plastic snake covered in snow.

I'm feeling distance within myself. That's one way of saying that

no one else will sit in this chair, not like this. Is that what being alone

feels like? Or is it the image of an afterimage held firmly in the dark?

At the Local Museum of Art

It's hard to remember that, most often,
no harm will come to you if you leave
your head uncovered in the rain—

It can be soothing at times
to imagine your life as symmetrical
as this miniature reproduction of a classic
American diner, cast entirely out of glass,
the little ketchup bottles glowing like rubies,
the seats at the counter perfectly arranged
between two tables small enough
to stake out a pleasant morning
of orange juice and distant headlines—

But you forget to name the servers,
and you never find the nerve to conjure
the line cooks from their cigarette breaks,
and the rain still patters against the museum
windows, until you realize you can't think
of anything more tedious than this quiet

Tuesday, that each day you grow older
and less charming, that your routine
prestidigitation has lost what you once
called magic—

And then the rain reminds you of wading
bare-chested through the rapids at
Strouds Run Park, in Missouri, in mid-
summer, of holding your pack above
your head to keep it dry, of feeling the first
trickles of rain on your shoulders, then
your back, your cheek, your brow, disappearing
and then reappearing from the wilderness
on the fringe of the river, to find the pools
between the crags overflowing with runoff,
just as a woman you've never met screams
for your safety, which you hadn't considered
until you heard her shrill, the friction
beneath your feet slipping through this brief
moment where you're grateful to be alive.

Birdwatching / Melancholia
for Haruki Murakami

When my roommate asks me to go looking
for his missing cat, I cross the east river
and follow a cloud to the park where I've heard

*some words drill burrows
in my head*

some wastrels have stumbled themselves in love

*the barn owl in me roosts
in an abandoned warehouse*

The magpie in me catches some glint
of dark

*what belongs to the world inside
the void to come and what lasts
beyond materia where the world
keeps its secrets and what essence
lingers inside them*

in the deep's slow shadow, as a thin mist

*what breaches this veil to the living
and what mercy could the world
spare*

rises from the waves' crests and crosses
from the shore to the concrete, past the dim-lit
jazz bar made famous by faceless passersby

*and if I were to ghost would I ghost
wisely or with purpose, would I take
form*

as the mist engulfs us, as the mouth
of the subway terminal swallows us whole
until we disappear for a moment—

*and in that moment hear the call of
horns
sounding beyond the tunnel to the
next train*

What will become of us? And when I

*resurface will anyone know to find
me*

or would I stagger further or

simply return to the stairs above
the dry cleaners with a ring of keys
one inexplicably missing would I

*find one of the last lost places
of the world before it, too, slithers off*

toward its call to dark

Hibernaculum

You are blind to the perils that surround you:

*

carved safe in the grotto of—
you cocoon through the winter you
remember yourself into the coat check
of a place called Elsewhere where

*

your friend, the novelist, lights a cigarette
my husband hates when I smoke, he says, he just—

*

speaking into the space between *what*
was and *what comes next*:

*

seafoam pooling in the jetty crevasse and a pair
of overlarge hands, as the cosmos holds your head
underwater you remember your rituals you

*

plant spinach in the garden, you dream of
radishes and beets, of the first woman who
loved you, as she took your wrist and then
your hand and guided you to the sound of
old rhythm & blues— *don't worry*, she said,
there's nothing to be afraid of, she said,
and for a moment, you believed her you

*

find one way of living in this world and then
set flame to the rest:

*

even if there were a glass key that led
to the heart at the center of the world,
would you even want to see it? Could you
pull your hand from cemetery ash and still
find some taste for living, for

*

walking along lengths of pier with an old friend
and finding pleasure in some spray of salt in your
hair later when searching for spots of gray you

*

pray for the first time in a dozen years
when you hear from another friend
who wants to give up living: she's tattooed
a dagger on her wrist to ward dark spirits,
a medieval hammer near the heart
for strength, a Glock .19 for the man
who assaulted her—

*

You are raw, crushed pigment.

You have eaten of the lotus.

You carve sigils when you run out of words.

You have formed your own homunculus.

You speak as if molded from clay.

*

Your body a vessel to hold

the lives you've learned to part with—

*

from stepping beneath the underpass

to admire the shift of shadow, as the wind

blows the streetlamps and causes the light

to shudder, to counting the snow crystals

on the pine-boughs blocking the skyline

at the High Knob Lookout as the morning haze

begins to rise around you, then driving back

through the ice and snow, knowing that you've

lost control, that the car would swerve and then
spin if you hit the brakes, knowing that you
don't love your passenger the way you thought
you did, that you would only lose control further
if you tried to slow down, and so you clench
your teeth and continue forward, cautiously,
the same way you did

*

when you saw him from the corner of your
eye, the man from the party with the soft
cheekbones and the dark green polo shirt
give it to me, man, he said, as he followed
you to the parking lot *give me all your
fucking money*, he said as he sauntered,
lingering, each of you pacing for the conflict
to come as you waited for his hand on
your shoulder— and then you were standing
over him, pulling your leg back to kick him
in the throat so he'd take his hands off you,
so he'd stop digging into his pocket long

enough for the breath of time it would take
to leave this night behind and disappear
into the next one, to search for safety
somewhere in the space between.

In a Moment

And then, as you stand up to leave the room
you're struck by an open window, dark brine
and white waves, the jetties jutting out into
an opaline sea—

In a moment, you realize
the clouds have been forming for who knows
how long, soft rays peeking out into the distance,
leading elsewhere where rain might have already
begun falling if only you could see—

If only you
could see into that elsewhere—

If only you could
make form out of this formlessness, as we've so often
been burdened to by the curse of human nature, by
some imagination you've never learned to keep quiet—

If you could soothe your mind back into the past,
to walking alone along the long stretch of beach,
sand dappled with tracks of rain—

and then scaling

the winding paths behind the cliff face, wild rye
and bushweed scattered throughout the scene,
peppered with perennial mugworts, the pastel purple
asters drawing whiteflies and leafhoppers,
weevils and thrips only to reach the top and look out
into the great expanse

of secluded beach on the other
side, only to find that it, too, was bare of conscious
meaning, held the answers to no great mysteries, no
riddle of human intellect—

And then you find yourself standing in the present,
awestruck, staring out into the emptiness until
a platter falls behind you, and the sounds of glass
shattering and metal ringing against metal are
almost enough to rouse you from the fog.



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