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THINGS I HAVEN'T TOLD YOU

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Grace Bauer

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 2016

THINGS I HAVEN'T TOLD YOU

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University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Grace Bauer

Things I Haven't Told You is a three-part thesis that consists of a critical introduction, a creative sample of ten poems, and an essay on using the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley as a creative prompt.

A critical introduction to the creative sample discusses the contextualization of memory, the observation of the physical world, and the rare metaphysical moments that occur in an ordinary life. The genesis and evolution of the work is explored, as well as the poet's development during the course of graduate study.

The creative sample of ten poems includes poems that articulate the malleable relationship between the past and present, and how that relationship evolves during the writing process. The title poem, "Things I Haven't Told You," works from the remembered perspective of a twenty-four year old, at the same time narrating from the perspective of the mother of a twenty-four year old woman. In doing so, the poet moves beyond articulating identity into contextualizing her experience.

"Writing Next to Shelley" is an essay that includes four creative exercises composed using Kwame Dawes' generative writing exercise, "Writing Beside the Poet: An Exercise in Willful Influence" as a teaching tool and prompt. Several poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley are used as catalysts for generating new work. Shelley's form, syntax, subject matter and themes are brought into the author's current social context and personal life in order to learn from Shelley's poetics.

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Critical Introduction

The first lines of poetry that caught my attention were Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you - Nobody – too?" I was an odd, solitary child, and felt a great sense of relief when I recognized myself in those lines. I began to write poetry in my adolescence, as many people do, as an emotional outlet. As an undergraduate in college, I discovered contemporary poetry and the writing workshop. That was over thirty years ago, and even now, much of my love for reading and writing poetry is about locating myself in the world.

I undertook graduate study with a single goal: to become a better poet. As part of that, I became receptive to a broad range of influence, learned to generate more work, and sought to strengthen my technical skills. "Things I Haven't Told You" is an eclectic collection of poems that reflect my efforts to expand my range and improve my technique.

Working with Memory

As I grow older, I'm less concerned with exploring and articulating my identity in my poetry and more concerned with how I contextualize my experience. On the inside front cover of one of my journals I have handwritten a quote from the neurologist Oliver Sacks' *Hallucinations*:

We now know that memories are not fixed or frozen, like Proust's jars of preserves in a larder, but are transformed, disassembled, reassembled, and re-categorized with every act of recollection (152).

I am interested in the fluidity of memory and how it functions in poetry, not only in terms of subject matter, but also in the transformative act of remembering. I've acquired multiple perspectives from which to write. I am not the same woman I was twenty or thirty years ago, yet I remember some of my thinking from those times. I've lived as a daughter, mother and grandmother, and can remember and narrate from all of those perspectives. Now I work to move beyond retelling my story to consciously exploring the malleable relationship between the past and present.

I looked for techniques that other poets have used to approach memory. Denise Low's poem "Two Gates," which has been on my refrigerator door for years, provides one lens through which to view the past. In the poem, the speaker looks through a window and sees her twenty-year-old self. Describing the scene, including an object that connects the past to the present, she describes herself as "almost / a mother to that faint, distant woman." Imagining what I would say to my younger self has become a rich source of material.

I work towards moments of insight. These insights do not come to me before the poem is written; they come to light during the writing process. In writing "Twenty Years Later," I revived and added to a series I wrote in the 1990s about a passionate but doomed love affair. I did not realize, until after I had written several drafts, that the most important moment of the affair was not one that I shared with the lover, but one that happened when I was alone. That is what I call an earned insight, which is the personal reward for the effort spent drafting and revising. "Twenty Years Later," "Roomful of

Blues," "Photograph of the Lighthouse" and "Heart Attack" are all continuations of that series.

Often in my work, the process of gaining the insight is the real subject, one that I hope potentially benefits a reader. "Minnesota Green," "Gravel Road," "Tomato Roses" and "The Minnesota Folk Scene" are all attempts to adjust my narrative by transforming and contextualizing memory.

Writing About the World

While I focus on memory in much of my work, I also want to be present in the world. I don't want to write all of my poetry as if I'm looking in a rearview mirror. So I consciously work at generating poems of observation and engagement with the external world by responding to my life and environment. I also do this by writing haiku and ekphrastic poems. All of these shift my attention to the external.

This conscious engagement in the world helps me to become aware of what I often try to do in my poems, and that is to amplify the ordinary and seek moments of transcendence in everyday life. "Cat in Dim Light" describes the somewhat mystical moment when I made eye contact with one of my cats in the reflection of a reflection in a mirror. "Mammogram" not only describes the fear I feel when an abnormality appears on a routine mammogram, it attempts to express the sense of wonder I experience when I see an image of the interior of my breasts on a large screen. "The House Goes About Her Business" anthropomorphizes my home and expresses the affection and emotional safety I feel in it. And using a bit of Magical Realism in "On Hearing My Father's Voice," I am

convinced that I see and hear my father's ghost on 'O' Street, at the same time acknowledging that it can't be true.

During my first year in graduate school, as an exercise in daily practice, I started writing a haiku a day during National Poetry Month. I then posted them, as they were written, to social media and invited others to do the same. This activity benefitted me beyond producing and sharing new work. Each day, aware that I had openly committed to producing a haiku, I was attentive to my surroundings and events in that I was always looking for my poem. In looking at the collection of over 100 haiku generated in three years, I am able to review snapshots of daily life and see recurring motifs in the observation of my immediate environment. Writing the haiku was also a way to connect to the natural world and get out of my own head. It not only put me on alert, it kept me grounded in the present. I found myself paying attention to things I might normally have overlooked by being preoccupied, for example, with the past.

In addition to actively seeking material in everyday life, as a visual artist I enjoy the alchemy of art and poetry in how one rendering can spark another. In creating a series of one thousand small paper collages several years ago, I created a series inspired by Emily Dickinson poems. Similarly, I enjoy writing ekphrastic poems. For me, a successful ekphrastic poem is more than a well-crafted description of the artwork that triggers it. The challenge is to create writing that can stand apart from the artwork. In reading ekphrastic poems, I look for an engagement with artwork that I wouldn't have on my own. In writing them, I look explore my perception and associations by way of the art.

"Cigar Ribbon Quilt," "Doll, 1949," and "Photograph of the Lighthouse" are all ekphrastic poems.

When I work with subject matter outside of myself, I am less focused on personal meaning and more focused on technique and language. I don't struggle to make meaning as much as I play with line length, image and sound. With "Cigar Ribbon Quilt," for example, I used a chunk of prose and research about a quilt I saw at an exhibit at the Sheldon Museum. I originally wanted to write a fairly dense, narrative poem about it. In researching silk production and the process of making ribbon and the use of that ribbon to tie cigars, however, I began to envision a poem that embodies the journey of the silk thread from being wrapped around a silkworm to becoming part of a quilt that is wrapped around a person. I created one long run-on sentence with enjambed lines with which I intended to give the sense of wrapping and unwrapping a long thread. To use an artistic simile, writing this poem was like sculpting lines from a solid block of words.

I've discovered that there are many ways into the material I want to write. Sometimes I don't know what I want to write about until after I start writing. The themes in my work aren't pre-meditated: they emerge as the work evolves.

The Graduate Workshop Experience

The workshop environment has been fruitful in that I was given the opportunity to practice applying poetic techniques and theoretical knowledge to my work and, I think more importantly, to critiquing the work of other graduate students. I was able to think in terms of how we experience poems by paying close attention to the feedback I gave to others, as well as the feedback I received from them. It was as much about learning how

other people process and read poetry as it was about the specific feedback I received on any individual poem.

My poems are always going to make sense to me. But if I want to share my work, it is important to note the questions I asked of other students' work, and to remember to ask them of myself. If I pay attention to how I decipher a fellow student's poem, I pay better attention to my own. This requires a layered perspective: I'm not only thinking, I'm thinking about how I'm thinking.

Until I participated in Grace Bauer's workshop on poetic form, I was in line with the idea that "form is an extension of content," an approach emphasized in my undergraduate workshops in the late 70s and early 80s. In the past, writing in form (other than haiku) was an exercise in technical skill and rarely resulted in what I considered to be a viable poem. The most pleasant surprise in attempting to work formally this time was in discovering that form can be a catalyst for content.

For one formal assignment, I attempted a poem in heroic couplets. I was drafting some lines when the phrases "it's time I tell you" and "maybe it's your time too" showed up. The rhythm of those lines became insistent, and the heroic couplets were abandoned as the poem "Things I Haven't Told You" emerged. In that case, working towards the form triggered the poem. This is often how a poem starts for me, with a phrase, rhythm, or something in the slurry of thought that catches my attention. But in this case, it was the effort to craft a piece that adhered to prescribed rhythm and sounds that triggered the poem.

I also began to think about applying form to better articulate existing content. The villanelle perfectly suited a letter from my grandfather to his sister during World War 1, in which he described of the flow of meat through an Army refrigeration plant in France. As I worked on an idea for a sestina, I realized that it was the perfect vehicle with which to write short meditations on a series of prayer flags I had sewn for my daughter. I created short vignettes that described each flag, its intent, and tied them together thematically with the repeated words in each stanza. In doing the litany, list and blues poem exercises, I became more aware of my creative process by focusing on syntax, rhythm and repetition. The most important thing that emerged from working with form, however, was not in what it produced, but in how it got me back in touch with playfulness and fun of writing poetry, which can sometimes be abandoned in order to meet the demands of academia.

As the result of a craft talk given by Kwame Dawes in his workshop, I began to think more consciously about the line. I have always had good intuition about line, but I haven't thought about it consciously when writing: I connected line with breath and phrasing. This new awareness was evident in the questions I asked about other students' work. For example, I was puzzled by one student's short, one or two word lines, and wanted to know his intention in using them. Similarly, I questioned another student's reasoning in her nearly non-lineated pieces. I paid closer attention to my own lines when drafting and revising my work, thinking more about each line as a discrete unit of language in relation to the whole, rather than orienting it to phrasing and breath. "On

"Hearing My Father's Voice" is an example of my paying close attention to line, particularly the final couplet.

While helping me to focus on the formal and technical aspects of my work, participating in workshops also forced me to be more productive. Several poems came about because I needed to submit something to workshop. "Gravel Road," for example, resulted from deadline pressure. It evolved from the simple prompt: "write about a gravel road." In response, I recalled an automobile accident that happened on a gravel road when I was a senior in high school. Knowing that I needed to write a poem about it, I contacted one of the friends involved, and asked for her recollections. She and I said to each other what you'd expect us to say: "I can't believe we survived that." That exchange became the culmination of the poem.

The one-on-one poetry tutorial with Ted Kooser was helpful on many levels. It allowed me to slow down and consider my work while in conversation with a master poet. I had to push myself to produce even more work than I would for a regular workshop. My poems were given more attention and care than they would get in a group. I was often reminded to keep a potential audience in mind when crafting my work. I was inspired and encouraged to keep writing even when I didn't think I had anything to say. In addition to being helpful to my poetics, our many conversations brought me back to one of the main reasons why I continue to read and write poetry: for the simple pleasure of talking about it with another person.

Conclusion

In the thirty or so years between my undergraduate and graduate work, I wrote when I was inspired, when I had a poem almost fully formed in my head. A phrase, an image, or a rhythm would ignite the process, and a poem would appear. I thrived on that sense of surprise. However, in committing to graduate study, I committed to producing more work than this type of creative activity alone would generate.

For me, the process of writing poetry has always been one of being able to arrive at a moment where I shift perspective, make connections, or earn an insight. Whether I'm working with memory, observation or the metaphysical, I always come back to those moments as the primary reward for my time and effort. Sharing the work, getting recognition and feedback, and even seeing my work in print are all important, but are secondary to experiencing that moment.

Although I've learned to consciously work on making poems produced from the raw material of daily practice, that moment in which a piece of writing becomes a poem remains a mystery to me. I can study poems and poets, I can read critical work and essays, I can write and write and revise and tinker, but that moment when what I'm working on becomes a poem is still magic. Whether it is arrived at by way of inspiration or conscious effort, I cannot will it into being. I can only work to make myself available to its arrival.

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Creative Sample: Ten Poems from *Things I Haven't Told You*

Things I Haven't Told You

For Anna at twenty-four

I haven't told you about Scott,
who I almost married at twenty-two,
how I walked to the restaurant
where we worked, dreamt the life
we'd live: in it, I'd drive a two-tone Aries
like the ones in the lot along the way.
Or that, one morning after a graveyard
shift, I pitched an empty vodka bottle
over a bridge onto some train tracks.

I've not told you about two wrecked cars, both Beetles:
one in a snowstorm when the dome collapsed,
the other smack into the same bridge as the vodka.
I lost Scott, who didn't want a drunk bearing his children.
I lost school. I lost my oboe and a cat named Sappho.
One loss was lost in the next, until all I had was a shit job
and some drinking buddies, and they were going too.

By twenty-four I'd had enough.
By twenty-four it was time.
Anna, whose name means Gracious,
At twenty-four, maybe it's time I tell you.
At twenty-four, maybe it's your time too.

Arson

1.

Don't kill the woman in the house.
Wait until she leaves then
pile her clothes on the bed.
soak them with gas and light them.
No one will connect your smirk
with the torch. No one will try
to rescue the dog hiding
under the bed or the soot-covered
cat in the attic. Don't kill the woman
in the house, burn the house. Leave her
without a place where her safety burned anyway.

2.

Daughter, things will burn.
First the eggs on the stove,
then the car. Then
the whole apartment
or at least the bedroom.
You burn too, lit from within.

3.

The cat knows things you don't.
She heard him walk into the house,
gather the clothes, heard
the pop and the hiss of the torch.
Saw smoke curl under the door
carrying eight of her nine lives.
With one life left, she gives it to you.

Because Counting is What We Do

Jacob was taken and we started to count.
The first twenty-four hours. Then days.
Anna was one. I was thirty. We were ninety
minutes away in Minneapolis. He was thirty
minutes away from my grandparents' farm
near Cold Spring. He was taken and his face
took up in our heads. We looked everywhere.
We kept counting. Weeks. Months. Years.
Then decades. A few years ago his mother said
she didn't want a twenty-fifth anniversary.
But we kept counting because that's what we do.
We remember his face, name, his parents' names.
That there were two other boys on bikes and
a man in a mask with a gun. Now we learn what
happened and start doing more math in our heads.
That man - fifty-three minus twenty-seven -
was twenty-six at the time. Jacob was eleven.
Anna, my baby, is twenty-eight. I am fifty-seven.
Jacob would have been thirty-eight but now
we know and stop counting at day one.

Twenty Years Later

I am back in the Midwest
(Nebraska of all places)
and you're in Connecticut
winning awards.

What could I have told myself
then, glazed with passion
the moon tagging me down the coast?
These days she creeps through my kitchen
shines the sink dry, a spirit in sensible shoes.

For years I swore I'd never return,
could not bear the ocean or scoot
the arch of the bridge, with Rose Island
flickering like an old movie between
the walkway rails.
But I could go back there now,
without regret, without my
suitcase of loss and pockets of need.

That night on the island, after dinner,
before you stepped from the lighthouse,
I stood alone, held the space between moments
loved what the water did to the darkness.
I will never love the prairie like that.

Not like I loved the wait, being alone in the fog.
Not like I loved the light from Rose Island,
the sounds of gulls, bells, foghorns
and bluefish feeding in the dark.

Cat in Dim Light

Tonight as I read, the cat stares into the mirror.
He is not watching himself, but my reflection
in another mirror. Suddenly there are three cats:
the real cat on the vanity, his reflection
there, and the reflection of that cat
in the tall mirror on the door. There,
in that third space, our eyes meet.
In the dimness the glass loses its surface,
ushers light through the room. The cat
holds watch over the threshold through which
we can see each other without looking.

Lesson

We chewed crackers
until our saliva broke
the starch down to sugar.
What started out salty
turned sweet. The lesson
was how our bodies can change
something as we taste it.
I would remember this
and think to tell my father,
as when he was alive and old
he looked and looked, but could
not find bread that was not
too sweet. That it was
not the bread but he
making his own sweetness.

For Jack

We clattered like plates do,
one dropped next to another
into the rack. One part dry,
the other just pulled from
the water. Steam rose. Booze
breathing into a land line, you asked,
how about you and me?
Then you dropped the phone.
China broke in the background.
After that, things got strange.
Nothing could fix them. But
I like to think I was important
at the time, someone who helped
you up from the floor, if for no other
reason than so you could walk away
into the arms of a good woman.

Wind Haiku

The loose gate rattles.
wind makes a fool of itself
April stumbles in.

*

The thing about wind:
I start in one direction,
end in another.

*

The next thing about
wind: it never seems to get
tired of itself.

Rubies

Among the things I save but never wear—
the wedding ring, lavalieres, white gold—
I keep your birthstone jewelry there
as if you'd given them to me to hold.
Set in gold, a pendant, earrings, tiny stones,
the things we wear to open the heart,
where sentiment is felt by she who owns
the memory. But in truth, we're far
apart in what we value. The chain is in a knot
impossible to undo, the earring wires
too small for a woman's ears — I thought
to give you something you'd admire.
I hold the rubies now, although you're grown,
because you have a daughter of your own.

The Sleep-Cat

The sun goes down, the moon beams,
the lights go out on your everyday street.
I am the keeper of your dreams.

In your darkened room where spirits gleam
I'll scrabble with ghosts, I'll play and I'll cheat.
When the sun goes down and the moonbeams

dance in the Dream Café with its Jungian themes,
I'll serve you starlight, hot and sweet.
I am the steward of your dreams.

You leave your body to swim in the streams
of landscapes where your departed ones meet,
When the sun goes down and the moon beams.

Day sneaks in on little white feet, then screams
in your ear when it wants to eat.
I am the hurdle to your dreams.

You wander into the night's slipstream
and mingle with the shadows you meet,
When the sun goes down, the moon beams.
I am the keeper of your dreams.

Writing Next to Shelley

Introduction

What would it be like to take a poetry workshop with Percy Bysshe Shelley? To have him as a mentor? If he were with us today, what would he write about?

Hoping to gain some insight into Shelley's practice, I read Shelley's "Defence of Poetry." Concerned in large part with the role of the poet in society through history, there wasn't much in that piece that was useful for learning about Shelley's writing process. There were, however, ideas about the subject and source of poetry that I found relevant to my project.

Shelley writes about why good poems can come from dark subjects: "tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure that exists in pain." He describes melancholy as "inseparable from the sweetest melody," adding that "the pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself" (Defence of Poetry, 33). This was useful when responding to "Stanzas Written in Dejection," when I struggle to find anything beautiful about feeling sorry for myself.

I appreciate that Shelley acknowledges that the act of writing poetry is not entirely controlled by our consciousness, that "this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure" (38). As a poet who attempts to write poetry every day, I have to agree that consciously setting out to write a poem doesn't necessarily result in a poem in the way that consciously setting out to write a business proposal does. My undertaking here, however, seems to defy Shelley's assertion that writing poetry "is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind,

and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connection with the consciousness or will” (45). For this project, I consciously set out to be willfully influenced by Shelley’s work by literally writing lines next to his.

Writing Beside the Poet: An Exercise in Willful Influence

In a poetry workshop led by Kwame Dawes, students are given an exercise called “Writing Beside the Poet: An Exercise in Willful Influence.” The idea is to physically write beside a poem, mirroring various elements: syntax, line length, and physical organization. One objective of the exercise is to imitate the “rhetorical patterns of the poem” in its argument, metaphor, simile, and organizing principle. The challenge is to avoid simply paraphrasing or slavishly imitating the source poem. Dawes instructs:

Always stay faithful to your own space, your physical world, your biography, your context as a grounding to ensure that you are constantly filtering the influence through the very real and recognizable prism or your own lived life.

I decided to use this exercise as the basis for this project, trusting that it is a fruitful approach to learning from Shelley. As Dawes points out, it is “a way to read and respond to the work of another poet, but also a way to try on the clothes of another poet and see how your body reshapes those clothes.”

Of course, the results of these exercises cannot be considered finished poems. The point is the process of reading and interpreting the work in such a way as to learn how to think about it, and to apply that thinking to one’s own writing. I have tried, in each of the poems and passages, to render something coherent in conversation with Shelley’s poetics and ideas.

I typed each passage into a Microsoft Word document. I set the line spacing at one and a half, printed it, and literally wrote in longhand next to the passage. Most of the time, I could produce lines that responded coherently to what I read. For the lines that I struggled to decipher, I did my best to respond to the spirit of the work, whether I grasped it literally or not.

I was able to roughly complete five of the six pieces I chose to write next to: a passage from “Alastor,” “Stanzas Written in Dejection,” “Two Spirits – An Allegory,” “England in 1819,” and “To a Skylark.” For each of these I have provided a brief discussion of my process of responding to the work. In the case of the failed attempt at writing in response to Asia’s final song in “Prometheus Unbound,” I discuss the problems I had.

Alastor (ll. 272-307)

I could have several conversations with “Alastor.” I found the visuals breathtaking, how Shelley worked almost as a painter with his use of light and dark imagery. Writing a passage describing panoramic views was an option. But as I thought more about the poem, I realized that the Poet in “Alastor” embarks on a journey that is similar to the Native American vision quest. In a vision quest, the young person, usually male, goes alone into the wilderness to encounter his spirit animal or guide. In “Alastor,” the poet goes on a quest to encounter his perfect counterpart. In the vision quest, this encounter often takes the form of a dream or hallucination, just as the Poet’s vision of the perfect woman appears to him.

However, in a successful Native American vision quest, the subject returns to the community to assume his or her place as an adult. If Shelley’s Poet is on a vision quest, it

is a failed one. He gets lost in his vision, and doesn't return to his community with any newly gained knowledge or status. He pursues his vision until the pursuit kills him.

I chose the passage in which the Poet pauses, sees a swan, contemplates suicide, then finds the small boat, deciding to journey into "the populous deep" (lines 272-307). If the Poet is seeking union with his ideal mate or female counterpart, then the Swan, who usually mates for life, could be akin to his animal totem or guide that embodies the knowledge that he seeks. In preparing to respond to this passage, I asked several questions. What would a 21st century poetic vision quest look like? If I were the poet on a vision quest, where would I go? On my journey, what animal would I encounter?

After some meandering internet research, I chose the cat as my Poet's animal totem (probably because I usually have three of them in close proximity). I also learned of the legend of the "ghost panther," sightings of which have been seen on Mount Diablo near the San Francisco Bay in California. The lure, for my poet, is not a vision of another person, but *vision* itself. The cat, a solitary animal that can see in the dark, has much to teach her. While my poet doesn't necessarily seek death or sleep, she does seek the ability to see beyond the veil of consciousness, or even beyond the veil between this world and the next.

While most of the passage is relatively straightforward as far as Shelley goes, I have a great deal of difficulty parsing the following lines:

For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly
 Its previous charge, and silent death exposed,
 Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,
 With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms. (292-295)

Here I get lost in Shelley's syntax, losing track of the subject(s). Is it sleep or death that has the doubtful smile, what charms is it mocking? What does he mean by "faithless?" If I had to diagram this sentence for a final exam, I'd likely fail. I did get from the lines that sleep and death are seductive and dangerous, and brought that idea into my closing. The light that my poet seeks is so intense that to climb to the summit is to risk being blinded.

Incidentally, this passage concludes with my favorite lines from the poem: "For well he knew that might Shadow loves / the slimy caverns of the populous deep." Likely not the best lines in the poem, they make me smile. I like to imagine them as spoken by James Earl Jones.

Stanzas Written in Dejection

I loathe poetry about self-pity. Not that I haven't written it, but those pieces stay private. "Stanzas Written in Dejection," is saturated with self-pity. Unloved, unknown and lonely, the speaker of the poem is surrounded by beauty, and although he recognizes it, he is unmoved by it. Interestingly however, in the last stanza, the speaker acknowledges that his dejection is self-centered, and that it is his "lost heart" that insults the "sweet day" with his "untimely moan."

The challenge here is not to convey the melancholy, it is to express it without being self-indulgent. I've endured my share of depression, and fail to find anything interesting about it. But, as Shelley articulated in "A Defence of Poetry," there *is* pleasure in sadness.

My response to "Stanzas Written in Dejection" is a straightforward transference of the subject matter until the last few lines. There, I shifted the location of the speaker from the ocean to the prairie. Shelley's "sage in meditation" becomes the person who

unfailingly practices gratitude in spite of horrible circumstances. My speaker is surrounded by beauty and can see and describe it, but feels separate and disconnected from it. It is the noise in her head (her regrets), like Shelley's list of "I don't have," that prevents her from enjoying the beauty around her. And even if she were not full of regrets, she still wouldn't have anyone to enjoy the day with.

I had difficulty writing next to the closing lines, not because I missed the essential meaning, but because I again had difficulty untangling Shelley's syntax. I decided to depart from what Shelley seemed to be saying, and attempted my own version of the joy in the moment. For me, the prairie is a place that grows and is loved by others. My speaker looks forward in time rather than into the past.

Two Spirits – An Allegory

When I read this poem, a dialogue between the optimist and the pessimist (which I understand to be between Byron the pessimist and Shelley the optimist), I think of my vacillating views about the world, and how those manifest politically. I recalled a time in my twenties as an activist, and a continuous debate with a partner over whether a revolution to overthrow Capitalism is feasible. In that relationship, I was the pessimist and he was the optimist. These debates took place over several years, manifesting in different topics and venues, in much the same way I imagine that Shelley and Byron would have had an ongoing "debate" around their differing world views.

As I worked on the piece, the riots in Baltimore escalated, and the idea of "giving voice" in the form of protest was on my mind. I thought about how, despite its destructive nature, violence is, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "the voice of the unheard." I

translated “night” and “day” into “silence” and “voice,” recalling the songs, slogans, and protest chants of the protest movement.

England in 1819

Although this sonnet is straightforward, responding to it was the most intellectually challenging and fruitful. I thought in terms of a corrupt, destructive force that dominates, taints and steals our resources, and that brought to mind the oil industry. I thought of how we’re reliant on such a destructive and toxic machine. More specifically, I think of tar sands oil production and the resistance to the Keystone XL Pipeline in Nebraska. I transferred the metaphor of royalty to the industry, then the metaphor of “the people” to the earth, and the sonnet took up its subject in contemporary form. I purposefully (and somewhat awkwardly) adhered to the rhyme scheme. It’s not entirely graceful, but I like some of the moments I created.

To a Sky-Lark

For this piece I chose to write in opposition to the source poem. Since Skylarks are like rats, I immediately thought of the grackles that nest in the trees outside the window to my study. I decided to be playful with this, and write an anti-praise poem. I don’t care for grackles: they dive-bomb the cats, eat all the birdseed I put out for songbirds, and they sound terrible.

My challenge with this piece was to sustain the negativity. While Shelley can pull off going on and on in praise of the Skylark, I faltered and lost my taste for trashing grackles about half way through the exercise, but kept writing anyway. I used rhyme when I could, but I didn’t force it. For me this ended up being an exercise in stamina.

Prometheus Unbound, Act II.v, ll. 72-84

When Asia sings her final song in Act II of “Prometheus Unbound,” her boat-soul floats upon the river of music like a sleeping swan. Again, there is a swan and a boat. What are my metaphors for soul, spirit and guidance? Shelley’s boat, swan and water are so powerful that they are difficult to set aside and transpose into personal mythology. The panther and the walking stick metaphors used in response to the passage from “Alastor” did not work this time.

In reading secondary sources on this passage, I came across this passage by William Michael Rossett, given originally as an address and distributed privately in 1887:

“My soul is an enchanted boat,” has been read by many of us scores of times with scarcely a wish perhaps to trace out its intrinsic meaning, but with a keen delight in its ideal charm, its supersensual meander” (Rossett, 24-25).

This perfectly describes my response to the passage. Part of me doesn’t want to mess with what this means, I just want to enjoy it. It doesn’t ask for translation or explication.

Aware that the word “soul” is considered trite in contemporary poetry, and one that I consciously never use, my challenge was to find a way to respond to the essence of which Asia speaks. Is there contemporary way to express the idea of the soul and that which guides and feeds it? Is there something in my life with which I could respond to that?

After several frustrated attempts at constructing my own subject and metaphor in response (some of these were absolutely awful), I found that I could not. I obsessed over the line “My soul is an enchanted boat” for several days, and came to the conclusion that there is no appropriate way to respond to those lines, other than with reverent silence.

Response to "Alastor" (ll. 272-307)

Paused at the base of Mount Diablo
Ahead of her, a steep and perilous path
of rock and gravel. She collapsed
at a turn in the trail. There, a panther
crouched, and with claws and haunches
scaled the steep face, strode on its dark path
toward the mountain's haunted peak.
She watched its ascent. "You have a place
mythic beast; you track to your den,
where your spirit joins the mountain,
and it embraces you as its secret.
And who am I that I should witness this,
with only words to tell my story,
without your night vision, my body
tethered to the earth, who wastes the
moonlight on human love?" A prayer
for dreamtime escaped her lips:
To see with cat's eyes, to undo the darkness
where danger is comfort, fear a shield.

She emerged from her vision and saw
there was no predator near, not spirit
or flesh, but only her own dark mind.
A walking stick lay in the thicket
Dropped along the path,
its wood was splintered gray,
cradled by the craggy scrub.
She rose to climb the mountain
and meet the ghost-cat on the shrouded summit;
for she knew a blinding light thrives behind
the veil between this world and the next.

Response to “Stanzas Written in Dejection”**Stanzas Written on the Prairie**

Eighty degrees, full sun.
Budding trees stretch in the breeze,
The prairie holds the clear day close,
The earth settles under the
rugged grass. The wind,
the bugs, the birds:
a landscape hums in one voice.

I see the grass move in the wind.
I lay alone in the sun,
the heat of the mid-day field
shimmers around me, and
a note emerges in its sway,
and I am the only one to hear it.

I am heartsick, unsettled, undone.
Anxious, unlike those who study their breath,
grateful for what they lack.
I am unknown, unencumbered,
I will never know decades of love,
like couples who grow old together.
To me that gift was opened empty.

But sadness is a comfort
like the coming of spring rain.
I can rest like a cat in the sun
and empty my mind of the regrets
that I have made and carry
until weariness overcomes me,
and I feel, in the heat,
thought leave my body.

When I am gone no one will count
the regrets that outnumber my years.
I am alone, though in a place that
grows and is beloved by the world.

Response to “The Two Spirits – An Allegory”

Two Activists – An Allegory

First Spirit

You, who in your reckless passion
would raise your fist to lead the masses
are followed in your daily life.

Silence is coming.

The revolutionary spirit burns
and in times of peace
it's a pleasant way to warm your nights.

Silence is coming.

Second Spirit

The common is exceptional.
If I am led into the streets
my righteousness will feed me,
And that is voice.
And my fellows will hum a working song
into my ears when I falter.
The tune will echo in my mind.
And that is voice.

First Spirit

But if the powers sense a threat:
fire and club and heavy chain.
When the laws of the rich are broken,
Silence is coming.
The muscled voice of the criminal state
has shouted over your rallying cries,
the crush of metal drowns out your song.
Silence is coming.

Second Spirit

I know its power, I know its heft.
I'll march on burning streets
with purpose within and solidarity around,
Which gives us voice.
And though their force is unrelenting,
Look from your dull resignation

then witness my steady march
 Grounded, coming your way.

Some say there is a tipping point
where one visionary song sounds
over walks of sorrow and alleys of despair
on city streets, yes renewing
 the people's spirit.

Some say that when the streets are calm
and the young linger on corners,
lyrics are heard by passers by
 that give them voice.

And a chant as rallying cry is sung
brought on by shattered bones,
And when we march through broken glass
 We find our voice.

Response to "England in 1819"**America in 2015**

A dark, filthy, foul and heavy sludge
tar sands oil, the dregs of that which lies
beneath once pristine land, -- the soil's drudge;
Barons who neither weep nor pray nor sow,
but serve like vultures as the planet's judge,
reap profit from the earth's blood, know
the landscape's scarred and tainted way
beyond what can be salvaged in the field;
and the water that could cleanse away
becomes poison to those who shield
our mother from those who steal and prey;
Fuel, priceless, ruthless – our fate unsealed;
profit, the revered idol, now revealed
as despot, whose demise our only hope may
rise to temper our voracious ways.

Response to "To A Sky-Lark"

To a Grackle

To hell with you, *graculus*,
 bird that barely is,
 That from your bowels
 comes the craggy call
 In rolling waves of premeditated barks.

Louder now and louder
 from the dirt you straggle
 Like a ball of dust
 in the gray sky you flap
 And flapping still you rise and rising ever yap.

In the pale pink stain
 of the fading day
 in which the clouds dwell,
 you swoop and dive
 Like a disembodied curse, spiteful and alive.

The new moon even
 darkens at your sight
 Like a death-star
 in the deepest night
 I can't see you, but I feel your fright.

Rough as the hail is
 that coarse ice
 whose cold heft barrels
 through the stormy air,
 your nest is tenacious, it can bear it.

All the tall pines in my yard
 shake with your coughing
 and when the sky is clear
 and the robins fly in
 You hound them and their food is gone.

We know what you are
 Is there anything worse?
 From the dregs of a swamp there isn't
 a sound more grating to hear
 As that from your purple throat.

Like a hack hidden
 in a fit of gloom
 Hawking rhymes until
 polite company retches
 And weeps with regret:

Like aging drunks
 in a corner bar
 drinking their boredom
 away for hours
 Singing love songs made by popular stars:

Like a chigger hidden
 in its nest of weeds
 Spreading its misery
 for no other reason
 than to ruin the season:

Like the dandelions stomping
 through garden beds
 Encouraged by sun
 until the shade they offer
 Steals light from other flowers:

The pounding of spring rains
 on the muddy grass
 Sink-holes swallowing the air,
 anything that ever was
 Dark and heavy and crass, your squawking surpasses.

Tell me, are you demon or bird?
 What are you thinking?
 I'll never know of
 a curse or a whine
 More miserable than your coarse chant.

Chorus Abysmal
 or defiant threat,
 next to your voice is
 an empty taunt,
 A thing from which no fear is felt.

What are the targets
 of your dissonant chords?

What squirrel, what cat?
 What insect hoard?
 What loathing? What reverence for pain?

With your bedraggled misery
 melody cannot blossom—
 the light of exuberance
 never graced you;
 You can disparage but not despair.

Flapping or perching
 You must think about life
 Things more shallow and mean
 than the earthbound can,
 How else could you loose your tirades from hell?

We look up and down,
 want to be where we are not—
 Our desperate searching
 is tempered by hope,
 Our ugliest gardens are the most alive.

But if we could set aside
 beauty and grace and love
 If we were not made
 to move in harmony,
 I know that we could be as miserable as you.

Worse than the mocking
 of nature's crude mistakes—
 Worse than all the horrors
 found in toxic waste,
 are your deft expletives, you contortionist of sound!

Relieve me of the madness
 that your small brain bears,
 Such cantankerous badness
 lives in me somewhere,
 That the world be silent, as I am silent now.

Conclusion

For this project, I had to read and understand Percy Shelley's work for purposes beyond aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and analysis. I not only had to understand it, but I had to ingest it as a nutrient for my own creative process.

In preparing my response to his work, I asked the same questions that we asked as we explored the literature of the Shelley and his circle. I thought about how their personal and social context shaped their work, and how those same issues shape mine. I thought about what I believe about myself and the world, and I thought about the community of writers that I am a part of. I found myself in conversation not only with Shelley, but with Native American mythology, depression, a former partner, the oil industry, and the flock of grackles in my backyard.

Writing next to Shelley forced me to be disciplined about everything: the line, the sound, the rhythm, and the rhetoric of my writing. I had to work simultaneously as a critical reader and as a creative writer, things I normally do separately. I don't know that I created any memorable material, I never know that about something at the time I create it. I do know that I exercised both intellectual and creative muscles in the process, and that can only serve my poetry well.

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